

# First Things

December 2023

## The Stars of Christmas

One of my most memorable Christmases took place just a few years ago, in 2012, our first Christmas living in India.

Religiously speaking, India is a dark country. Roughly 80% of the country – about a billion people – are Hindu. About 15% is Muslim. 2% of the population is Christian, about 26 million people.

Being such a minority, most Christians try to fly under the radar and not advertise that they are Christian. The one time that changes, however, is at Christmas. At Christmas Christians always decorate their homes with lighted stars. The stars in the picture about perhaps 2 feet by 2 feet in size. But many Christians construct and illuminate much bigger stars, 6 feet and even 10 feet high.



In 2012, I left for India in the fall, leaving Sue to tie up loose ends in the States. Sue along with two of our daughters arrived in India on Christmas Day. And that night we boarded an Indian Railways train – a very new experience - for the long nighttime trip to our home in Guntur.

In the dark, you couldn't see anything out the windows of the train. But every once in a while, you could see an illuminated star. And you knew that Christians lived at that spot. You didn't know what church they attended, but you knew that they were fellow believers. You knew that while you'd likely never cross paths with them here on earth, one day in heaven you would. And somehow, seeing that star in the darkness made India feel a lot more like home.

Sometimes we think too narrowly about Christmas, about how we celebrate it here or how our friends and family celebrate it in other parts of the country. But don't lose sight of the fact that there are two billion brothers and sisters around the world who are celebrating the birth of the Savior. And that's the way it should be. For the angel proclaimed, "I bring you good news of great joy that shall be for ALL PEOPLE."

*A blessed Advent and Christmas to you all,*

*Pastor Mark & Sue*

## Why I'm Retiring & What That Means for You & Me

At our congregational meeting on Sunday, October 29, I announced that **I intend to retire from the full-time ministry at the end of June of 2024**. Please allow me to anticipate and answer your questions:

### Why did I decide to announce my retirement when I did?

**I love what I do** – especially preaching and teaching – and I trust it shows. But I do feel that it is time for me to relinquish the responsibilities of leading a congregation. Also – I hope this makes sense – I want to retire *before* I need to retire. Or, putting that another way, I want to retire *before you think* I need to retire because what I do is deteriorating.

I chose to announce my retirement eight months in advance so that First Lutheran could begin **calling for a new pastor** well before I finish my service here at First Lutheran. My prayer is that someone will accept First Lutheran's call and be preparing to arrive before I leave.

### What's ahead for First Lutheran?

The Minnesota District President, Pastor Dennis Klatt, will be at First Lutheran to have a **pre-call meeting on Sunday, December 3**.

At that meeting, he'll talk about what Scripture says about calling a pastor – that **God calls** a pastor **through a congregation**. And he'll talk about the calling process that we use in the Wisconsin Synod.

On **Thursday, December 14** we will have a **call meeting** at 6:30 PM to choose the individual we want to call from a call list prepared by Pastor Klatt for us.

### What's ahead for Sue and me?

**God only knows** for sure, of course. If you re-read the first paragraph above, you will note that I said that I intend to *retire from the full-time ministry*. It is my hope that I can receive one or more **part-time retirement calls** early in the new year.

If I receive and accept such a call, Sue and I would be able to begin the process of finding a place to live near that congregation – wherever it is – while I finish my service here at First Lutheran.

It has been – and continues to be – both a privilege and a pleasure to serve as your pastor here at First.

And one other thing – in the next few years two other area pastors will also be retiring. That means that WELS congregations in this area will need to work together like never before – or at least since Pastor Hertler was racing between churches with his '57 Chevy!

### Holiday Worship

**Sunday, Dec 17 – The CrossTalk children**  
will be presenting elements of our 9:00  
worship service that day.

**Sunday, Dec 24 – 9:00 AM worship &  
Christmas Eve worship at 6:30 PM**

**Monday, Dec 25 – Christmas Day worship**  
at 9:00. Pastor Adam Lambrecht from  
Luther High School will be preaching

**Sunday, Dec 31 – 9:00 AM worship & New  
Year's Eve worship with Holy  
Communion at 6:30 PM**

## Board for Lay Ministry Update

The BLM will begin looking at other model **constitutions** which will hopefully serve First Lutheran and its needs better than the present.

As part of the **entryway refurbishment**, the existing coat rack will be removed and will be replaced by movable coat racks in the ELC hallway. After that, we plan to repaint the entryway. We are in need of volunteer **painters** for this. If you can help, please **contact Diana** at the church office (507-895-4775 or [ChurchOffice@KeepChristFirst.com](mailto:ChurchOffice@KeepChristFirst.com)).

As the box containing the church finances shows, the congregation is running a **\$27,000 deficit** through October of this year. The church expenses for this period are actually \$8,000 less than what was budgeted. The reason for this deficit is that the offerings have been \$25,000 less than were anticipated. And this, in all likelihood, is due primarily to active members who transferred to other WELS congregations in 2022.

The situation is NOT dire. We still have \$81,000 in the church checking account (due to various dedicated accounts, most notably the building fund). And offerings for October were \$6,000 more than they were in September.

This month is another **good time for each of us to remember** how the Lord has blessed us and to consider how we can thank him for all that he has given us.

### Finances through October

Church Expenses	\$203,461
Church Offerings/Income	\$176,025
<b>Deficit</b>	<b>-\$27,436</b>
ELC Expenses	\$366,763
ELC Income	\$378,663
Mortgage Balance	\$286,749

## Nodine Update

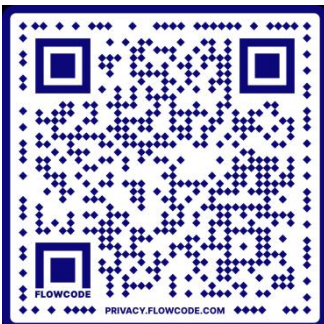
After Pastor Klatt finishes his pre-call meeting here at First Lutheran, he'll be off to Nodine where they will place their first call for a new pastor.

## Live Nativity & Rotary Lights

The Live Nativity takes place **four weekends before Christmas** in Riverside Park in La Crosse in connection with Rotary Lights. This is a great way to reach thousands of people with the good news of Christ's birth and to help people focus on the true meaning of Christmas.

### Characters are needed

for December weekend evenings – Call the church office for more information or scan the QR code.



## December Events

Saturday, Dec 2

St. John's (Nodine) Ladies' Christmas Party – noon

Saturday, Dec 9

St. John's (Caledonia) Ladies' Aid Christmas Gala – 6:00 PM

Sunday, Dec 10

Luther High School Christmas Concert – 2:00 PM

Thursday, Dec 14

First Steps ELC Christmas Program – 5:30 PM

Saturday, Dec 16

KOINÉ Christmas Concert at Luther High School – 7:00 PM



First Steps, our ELC or Early Learning Center, is completing its 5<sup>th</sup> full year in our new facility.

At the present time we care for:

- 8 infants (children 3-16 months)
- 13 toddlers (children 16-33 months) and
- 19 preschoolers (33+ months)

Carol Schroeder has been serving as the director of our ELC for three and a half years and has been a great blessing.

- She hires, trains, and schedules our staff of 15 full- and part-time lead teachers, assistant teachers, and aides.
- She manages our “student body,” calculating over a year in advance when children will transition from infants to toddlers, and toddlers to preschoolers; when and where there will be openings for new children.
- She makes sure we comply with the challenging regulations of the State of Minnesota
- She oversees the budget income and expenditures – over \$400,000 per year.
- And so much more!



*ELC Director Carol Schroeder with her husband Pastor Win Schroeder*

There are two areas where **we need your help**:

1. We order meals every day from the La Crosse School District and those meals need to be picked up from Logan Middle School (on the North Side) each morning. It’s not real difficult and it can be done in half an hour easy. If you can **help pick up meals**, please contact Carol at 507-895-5704, [director@keepchristfirst.com](mailto:director@keepchristfirst.com) OR Diana Holub 507-895-4775, [ChurchOffice@KeepChristFirst.com](mailto:ChurchOffice@KeepChristFirst.com).
2. The ELC is always in need of staff. If you know **someone who is interested in working at our ELC**, Carol would love to hear from you.

## **Minnesota District President, Pastor Dennis Klatt**

Pastor Dennis Klatt will be with us this month both for our **pre-call meeting** on December 3 and our **call meeting** on December 14. WELS district presidents are elected every four years, with the pastors, male teachers, and delegates from each congregation voting. One of the unique things about



the WELS is that none of the district presidents are full-time administrators. Rather, each of them serves a congregation of their own. Pastor Klatt’s congregation is Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in New Hope, Minnesota. For the past two years Pastor Klatt has prepared call lists which the Administrative Committee for Africa has used to call missionaries to the One Africa Team. In November Pastor Klatt travelled to Tanzania to teach a week of classes with One Africa Team Missionary Ben Foxen.