

President's Annual Report

Feb 2025 – Feb 2026

Southern Illinois District – LCMS

Beloved in the Lord,

It's hard to believe that it's been a year since I was installed as District President for SID. Each day I have occasion to remember that I'm not worthy of this office – and to give thanks to God for the shared ministry of all SID congregations and schools. Everything we aim to do as a District via staff, officers, boards, and committees is aimed at supporting the front lines of ministry where the Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies" His Church.

With the first year of Triennium 2025-28 in the books, I thought it would be good to compile this *President's Annual Report* to provide a year-in-review and also lay out our plans for the future under the Lord's gracious Providence.

Boots on the Ground

President Harrison has been a big advocate of recovering visitation as the chief role of the District President in his service to the Church. This goes back to Luther's own visitation of the churches and schools of Saxony in 1528. In order to be of assistance to the churches, you've got to understand how things operate on the front lines of ministry.

From my personal vantage point, this has been the greatest blessing of this past year as well as the biggest change in the transition from parish pastor to the role of District President. Visiting our congregations is a joy that requires a rigorous pace of work. By the numbers:

Miles traveled in SID car:	21,678
Congregations worshiped in:	46
Total congregations visited:	70
School visits:	22
Sole Pastor Calls Filled:	12
New Parish Partnerships:	3
Winkels Visited:	11 (several meet together, of course)

It's impossible to enumerate the crises, phone calls, in person meetings, Council of President responsibilities, and all the other things that have gone into this year. Yet I can honestly say that it feels like I've done all of this on 365 vacation days: if you love your job, you'll never work a day in your life! It is energizing to see what God is accomplishing through the faithful service of our churches, schools, pastors, teachers, other commissioned ministers, and faithful laity! And it is rewarding to be able to bring assistance and support to all this ministry! Thank you for the honor of serving you and for welcoming me in my visits.

Receiving this frontline view of ministry via visitation has been vital to me as I've worked with the rest of the SID team to chart a course for our future together as an active, faithful District.

Before I get to those plans, I want to say thank you to the SID Team in detail - which will also give you a better perspective of just how the District operates.

The SID Team

I thank our gracious Lord for giving our District so many faithful servants. I've heard other District President's echo my own feelings over and over again: "I had no idea just how much the District did until I stepped into office!" The entire team listed below has my heartfelt thanks!

Professional Staff

Our schools executive, Mr. Jeff Fick, is on the move each and every week visiting schools, helping with accreditation, researching call lists, assisting with various boards and committees, going to administrators conferences, etc.

The DP's Administrative Assistant, Elsa Mort, never has a dull moment as she handles all official Synodical rostering paperwork, oversees our social media communication, acts as a liaison to other Districts (and CUS, and the seminaries, etc.), and performs all the other admin roles of a "normal" office on top of that.

We've gone from strength-to-strength in the Bookkeeper role. In 2025 Anna Rowden set herself an ambitious goal of bringing organization to our books by the end of the calendar year. When she reached that goal she triumphantly announced that she was heading back to expand her significant volunteer work at her home congregation - and no amount of persuasion could change her mind! We were very blessed to have a smooth transition in service in this important role as Kelly Albrecht brought her seven year's of experience with Trinity - Edwardsville to the SID office.

Our official ministry partners with LCMS Foundation (Scott Radden) and LCEF (Scott Roberts) provide advice, perspective, and support for SID.

Vice-Presidents & Circuit Visitors

Our Vice-Presidents and Circuit Visitors are all faithful, godly, hard-working pastors who have been entrusted by our District with the task of assisting, advising, and working with me for your service. I cherish our quarterly gatherings as the Board of Spiritual Care where we talk about the needs of the District, brainstorm ways to be of service, discuss important issues facing the Church, and study and pray. The VPs (Pastor Krenz and Pastor Surburg) have a special role to play in being my closest advisors for the most difficult issues. All of these men are dear brothers: there's no way I could fulfill the tasks given to me apart from their service.

Boards & Committees

The Board of Directors, Board of Mission, LWML, and the nine appointed District committees have done an absolutely incredible amount of work in the past year! We've seen new District events for junior and senior high youth, the kickoff year for Come Home for Christmas, two Lay Leader Workshops, the strengthening of popular events like the Golf Outing for church worker scholarships and the Older Adult Trips, Disaster Response training, etc, etc. We have so much talent in the SID! It's great to see so many people working together for the good of the Kingdom of God!

Building on the Rock: A Plan for Mission, Ministry, and Mercy in SID

All of the folks above have contributed to laying out a plan for Mission, Ministry, and Mercy in the Southern Illinois District. This plan focuses on five Critical Initiatives:

- **Focused Outreach Activity**
- **Matrix of Support for Lutheran Schools**
- **Spiritual Care of Remote Congregations**
- **Expansion of Campus Ministry**
- **Extension of Current Ministry, Mission, and Mercy**

We have specific plans under each of these initiatives and the Board of Directors has tasked me to work with Paul Reaves (our former LCEF VP) in focused mission advancement work to support these specific goals.

Initiative #1 - Focused Outreach Activity

Our Lord Jesus has called us to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28). This hard work requires vision, leadership, training, and the calling of new "laborers for the Lord's harvest" (Matt. 9:38). We are pursuing this by:

- Developing plans and funds to call district missionaries in partnership with congregations/circuits (several profiles: circuit rider, church planter, outreach pastor, etc.)
- Utilizing the Synod's Church Planting office to assist us with research and planning
- Creating an ongoing, district-wide outreach program: Come Home for Christmas
- Issuing Outreach Grants to congregations to inspire and fund outreach efforts on the frontlines of ministry (applications for 2026 are now live for \$30k in grants!)

Initiative #2 - Matrix of Support for Lutheran Schools

With one school for every three parishes, the Southern Illinois District is at the forefront of LCMS Districts when it comes to Christian education. The LCMS operates the largest network of Protestant schools in America and the Southern Illinois District has more students in its schools (3600+) than many public school districts. Our schools today face numerous challenges and the Southern Illinois District is addressing these needs by:

- Developing training, support, and mentoring for teachers who need to step into the role of administrator (pilot program has already begun in one location!)
- Partnering with congregations and teachers to get more teachers trained and rostered as certified Lutheran Teachers through colloquy (five approved applications for colloquy grants already!)
- Ongoing support for accreditation procedures
- Assisting in debt relief for church workers
- Promoting competitive salaries and benefits for Lutheran school teachers
- Working with the Faith Coalition to advocate and lobby for Christian schools in Illinois
- Participating in Set Apart to Serve to recruit more teachers

Initiative #3 - Spiritual Care of Remote Congregations

All across the SID, and especially outside the Metro East, there are smaller congregations in need of full-time, ordained pastoral care. Many of these churches are in rural areas that have limited financial resources because they are small in size - but their love of God is anything but small. Indeed: they are on the forefront of mission precisely because they are located in areas without a large Lutheran presence. The Southern Illinois District is focused on providing these congregations with a dependable means of receiving Word and Sacrament ministry by:

- Walking alongside congregations as they explore forming multi-point parishes (3 new partnerships were piloted this year!)
- Establishing dedicated Circuit Riders to minister to truly remote congregations (working on funding and calling a District Circuit Rider/Church Planter by the end of 2027)
- Maintaining a list of emeritus pastors who can help across the district
- Supporting Circuit Visitors as they assist vacant congregations in their circuits

Initiative #4 - Expansion of Campus Ministry

The Southern Illinois District partners with two congregations to support successful campus ministries at the flagship universities within our geographical boundaries (SIU and SUIE). We can

and should multiply this ministry across the 30+ institutions of higher learning within Southern Illinois. We know that the transition from high school to whatever-comes-next (college, Armed Forces, trade school, workforce) is a critical time in a young person's journey of faith. The Southern Illinois District seeks to serve our members and reach out on campus by:

- Encouraging each congregation with a campus in their back yard to establish campus ministry (working on plans to use the same funding model we use so successfully for prison ministry)
- Gathering pastors and lay leaders to learn from our Flagship Campus Ministries at a Campus Ministry Summit
- Connecting pastors and lay leaders with LCMS-U
- Specifically targeting and prioritizing large community college campuses (SWIC, Lewis & Clark, Kaskaskia, etc.)
- Providing "connection to Church" assistance for students entering trade school, the work force, and the Armed Forces

Initiative #5 - Extension of Current Ministry, Mission, and Mercy

To one extent or another, all of the above initiatives represent newly developed or developing work. The Southern Illinois District has other long-standing, vital, and successful efforts that remain as touchstones of our shared Ministry, Mission, and Mercy. We will continue to support and extend these efforts by:

- Providing funding, assistance, and coordination with our District mission school at Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School in East St Louis.
- Supporting Prison Ministry across Southern Illinois
- Working with our foreign mission partner, Seminario Concordia El Reformador in the Dominican Republic
- Directing efforts in Youth Ministry, Older Adult Ministry, and Church Worker Scholarships
- Serving congregations, schools, and workers with the professional services, organization, leadership, and support expected of all Districts

Financial Snapshot

The entire SID Team is working together to reach the goals laid out in this plan for Mission, Ministry, and Mercy. Such an ambitious plan can only go forward by the generosity of the people of God. Your congregation can have confidence that the contributions you send on to our District are being wisely directed toward furthering this plan.

Having a plan for our work is an important part of building trust and encouraging generosity. Financial transparency and responsibility is just as important. Coming in to 2025 the SID faced significant challenges in this regard: our books had not been audited since 2018, the balancing of our budget was only possible by drawing down on net assets, and we had even incurred some penalties for the late payment of payroll taxes. I'm happy and thankful to report that the entire team has come together to fix these issues.

- Within a week of taking office, I brought in experts from the MO District to meet with our team and teach us proper financial control policies which were immediately implemented.
- Our Treasurer, Mr. Gary Hemmer, has worked with the Synod's audit department and their work continues apace.
- We have secured the services of the Synod's audit team going forward and are working hand-in-hand with them to ensure we remain faithful stewards of all that is entrusted to us.
- The budget building process for 2026 was completely revamped based on my 12 years of experience with the Synod's Office of National Mission.
- The Board of Directors brought our giving to national Synod in line with our goals for Mission, Ministry, and Mercy work right here in Southern Illinois.

In 2024 the congregations of SID supported the joint work of their District at a rate of about \$44/communicant member. The average support across the Synod is about \$88. Only six of our 90 congregations give at or above the Synod average. It's easy to see how this can become a vicious cycle: little activity leads to less giving, which leads to even less activity, etc.

I'm thankful to say that we are already beginning to see this cycle reverse. In 2025 congregational giving is already up as leaders across the SID see our focus on financial responsibility and our vigorous plan for Mission, Ministry, and Mercy. In addition to increased giving, market performance buoyed our bottom line, so that while some savings were utilized in 2025 to cover Ministry, Mission, and Mercy in our District, at the end of the year our *net assets had increased by \$90,000*. In addition to this, our mission advancement team encounters excitement and enthusiasm each time we share the District's vision for church planting, campus ministry, revitalization, etc.

In short: in just a year's time we are seeing much more District activity, a solid plan for the future, increased net assets, and excitement from congregations and individual donors for what lies ahead!

Synod Convention 2026 and SID Convention 2028

This July delegates from across SID will head out to Phoenix for the Synod Convention. The planning and preparation for this important gathering is already in full swing. Some of the

decisions which will be made this summer in Phoenix will directly affect our work in SID. For example, the Secretary of Synod has informed the Council of Presidents that a proposal will come before the Convention (and will almost certainly be approved) which will rewrite the rules for circuit formation. Other topics will include how we train pastors, dealing with fellowship with other international Lutheran church bodies, and a host of business matters. Please pray for everyone involved!

Once the Synod acts in Convention this summer, the planning for the SID's next Convention in 2028 will begin in a serious way. Our Life Together as District Committee is already doing some of the preparatory work for two big issues: the Synod's expected change to circuit formation and Mr. Fick's retirement at the end of this triennium. Both of these changes present us with challenges that are also opportunities. Again: I ask for your prayers for wisdom for all involved! And stay tuned for word on a retirement celebration in thanksgiving for the 40+ years of service of Mr. Fick!

Our Future under God's Grace

This report is probably already a little on the long side...and yet as I review it, I see so much more that I could talk about! There is so much happening in our churches, schools, District Boards, committees, and mission partners! I hope I have laid out enough in these few pages to get you as excited as I am to see what the Lord has in store for us under His grace here in the SID! I'll close with these words from Philippians which are always on my mind as I think of you all:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:3-6

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Pastor A.R. Curtis". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

+President Curtis