

## **Rev. Michael W. Newman**

*Texas District President*

Michael Newman has been a pastor since 1987 and currently serves as the President of the Texas District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

He served local congregations for over 20 years before spending 10 years helping to start new churches in the Texas District as a Mission Strategist.

Pastor Newman is the author of many books, journal articles, and Bible studies. His latest books are: “Getting Through Grief: Eight Biblical Gifts for Living with Loss,” “Hope When Your Heart Breaks: Navigating Grief and Loss” and “Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church.”

In 1983 Pastor Newman received his B.A. degree from Concordia University, Ann Arbor, Michigan, majoring in Philosophy and Biblical Languages. He received his Master of Divinity degree from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri in 1987.

He has been married to Cindy since 1983. They have been blessed with two wonderful daughters and their families.

In his spare time, you might catch him hanging out with his family, running a few miles on the Texas roads, or enjoying a good book.

## **Rev. Andy Jones**

Andrew R. Jones lives in the Bay Area of California where he enjoys writing, hiking, and adventures with his wife, Stephanie. He has served the church on three continents in varying roles including campus ministry, international mission work, professor of preaching, and parish pastor. He is the author of *Ten Questions to Ask Every Time You Read the Bible*, and his writings speak to the importance of spiritual formation in the midst of a hectic world.

### **On the Topic of Wellness:**

Rest is a good gift from God, one that many church workers ignore. Trends of overwork, poor physical health, high stress, and burnout persist among church workers. Church workers not only need rest for their own health, but we can also model rest as a spiritual formation for our congregations.

We live in a hectic, fast-paced world. In a 2020 study, Maryland was the third most overworked state. Virginia was seventh. Every state in the SED was in the top half. Rest is a counter-cultural practice, one that makes the church live into its distinctness, its holiness. It is a practice that Jesus invites us into so that we can be more like Him.

## **Rev. Dr. Matt Borrasso**

Matt Borrasso lives in southern Maryland with his wife and four children. He earned his PhD at the University of Birmingham (UK) where his research orbited around how Lutheran theological hermeneutics have been applied to biblical and cultural exegesis in the LCMS and ELCA. Presently, he serves as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Lexington Park and as an adjunct professor at Concordia University Texas and Concordia University, St. Paul.

### **On the topic of Wellness**

One of the old enduring Latin axioms is *credo ut intelligam* — I believe in order that I may understand. Too often faith is seen as the end of intellectual pursuits rather than as the place from which intellectual pursuits begin. Every church worker, and the church itself, does not find in faith the end of the discussion but rather the beginning. If St. Paul is right, namely that all things were created in and through Christ and in Him all things hold together, then there is no legitimate field of study that does not find its origin in the person and work of Christ. To enter into any field of study, then, is to enter into a place where Christ has already gone ahead of you. This is true for the intellectual pursuits of individuals and communities. Recognizing this truth and living in light of it, however, is not the same thing. The breakout sessions will provide opportunities to explore what intellectual wellness rooted in Christ means and looks like, both for individuals and communities. This includes cultivating curiosity and hospitality in our selves and in our relationships with others. We believe in order that we may understand where and who we are, where and who our neighbors are, and most importantly, where and who our Lord is, the one to whom we abide.

## **Meagan Miessler**

Megan is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Megan began working with children and youth as a DCE in the Lutheran Church. She received her MSW from the University of Central Florida and her DCE from Concordia St. Paul. Megan works with children and families and focuses on play therapy, depression, Anxiety, Crisis Intervention, School Counseling, and Marriage Therapy.

## **Rev. Dr. Travis Guse**

Rev. Dr. Travis Guse serves as the Executive Director of Wellness & Coaching for our Southeastern District, focusing on empowering church worker and congregational wellness. Travis also heads up the SED Coaching Network, focusing on training and supporting coaches throughout the district. He is also an ICF-certified professional coach (PCC) as well as a Gallup-certified Strengths Coach, and recently completed specialized training as a wellness

coach certified by the National Board for Health & Wellness Coaching (NBHWC). In 2022, Travis completed his doctorate in coaching from Western Seminary in Portland, OR, focusing on the intersection of Luther's teaching on vocation and the emerging field of coaching.

## **DCE Shawn Maassel**

Shawn, a graduate of Valparaiso University (IN), in 1986, and the University of Maryland at Baltimore, in 1988, followed an eleven-year career as a physical therapist with a move to full-time church work at First Lutheran, Huntingtown, MD in 1999. Shawn completed the LMCS' DCE colloquy program in 2007 through Concordia, St. Paul. She and her husband Paul live in St. Leonard, MD. They have three grown children (and three grandsons) across the country. In addition to her role at First Lutheran, she leads fitness classes with Body & Soul Fitness® and virtual Bible studies & wellness groups with First Place 4 Health.

Shawn feels that her efforts to maintain her health and wellness are acts of both stewardship and worship. Fitness has freed her to serve the Lord and others (her giving 'love language') in many ways and has opened numerous doors of opportunity to collaborate with other Christian outreach ministries.

## **Rev. Gary Pomrenke**

Pastor Gary is a lifelong Lutheran and he grew up in a small town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan known as Menominee. He graduated High School in 1986. It was after a year of college at Northern Michigan University that Pastor Gary enlisted in the United States Air Force. He served in numerous capacities throughout his twenty-five-year career. Most notably as a flying Crew Chief for the 201<sup>st</sup> AS. He retired from active duty as the unit's First Sergeant on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012.

He was urged to go into ministry throughout his entire life and walked a path that was parallel to God's but not on His path. It was then that God gave Pastor Gary a crippling case of gout that forced him to reside on the couch 24/7 for close to three months. After much prayer, they decided that the best thing for the family would be for Pastor Gary to pursue a ministry full-time. Within 36 hours of that decision, Pastor Gary was completely healed and miraculously was ready to pursue this ministry goal.

He enrolled in The American University where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Religious Studies in May of 2018. In January 2019, Pastor Gary was brought into the role of LCMS Specific Ministry Pastor via Colloquy and was ordained on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Pastor Gary has served the body of Christ at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Mechanicsville, MD which is a part of the Southeastern District from October 2016 to 3 March 2024. In December of 2023, Pastor Gary graduated from Liberty University with a Master of Arts in Pastoral Counseling. In January

of 2024, New Hope Lutheran Church issued a call to Pastor Gary for him to serve as their next Pastor.

Pastor Gary is married to his best friend Tracie (9 years) and they have 5 Children together and 4 grandchildren.

## **Rev. Andrew T. Okai**

Originally from Liberia, West Africa. Pastor Okai graduated from the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He has his bachelor's in biblical counseling from Masters International University of Divinity in Evansville, Indiana, and his Masters in Pastoral Ministry from Masters International University of Divinity, Evansville, Indiana.

Pastor Okai currently serves as Sole Pastor at Holy Nativity Lutheran Church in Baltimore, Maryland, and serves as the Circuit Visitor for Circuit 5 in the Southeastern District

He is Married to Precious Okai, and they are proud parents of 3 children: Andriel, Andrew, and Angel.

“I believe wellness is important because it involves our overall health and well-being, not only our physical health, but also our mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Focusing on our well-being can lead to a better life, increase our energy levels, improve productivity, better stress management, and boost resilience. By taking care of ourselves, we become better equipped to handle the challenges and demands of daily life, build stronger relationships, and achieve a sense of balance and fulfillment. Investing in our wellness is the way to enjoy the blessings that God has bestowed upon us.”