Warm lights, fragrant mulled wine, and laughter float above our heads as we squeeze our way down the rows of wooden booths of Philadelphia's Christmas Village. Shoppers around us elbow us to get closer to the scarves and chocolates, sometimes stopping so abruptly that they force us into the oncoming stream of people.

It's a beautiful, crowded, meandering experience to navigate.

And it seems a fitting metaphor for the work of Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries: a lovely, perplexing maze of wandering people. I love my work because it's simultaneously exhilarating and incredibly humbling.

In August, I attended a funeral for a fellow pastor who died in his sleep on vacation with his family. He had served the same congregation for twenty-three years. In a wonderfully bewildering twist of events, only weeks later a young woman arrived in Philadelphia who had most likely been the first infant baptized by the same pastor—and her niece the last baby he baptized.

Although this young lady had attended the church during her early elementary years, she had never been confirmed. In recent years, a family member has reattached to the congregation and had been encouraging her to seek out church. She moved to Philadelphia to pursue a graduate degree and has been regularly attending services. I have been meeting with her to bring her to confirmation so that she might receive the Lord's Supper for the first time. I do this with exceedingly great joy, knowing that the work of baptism through one pastor more than two decades ago continues by someone else, all completed in Christ.

To us, the ways in which Christ builds his church seem like a twisting walkway among throngs of people moving in the opposite direction. It's easy to feel as though this crowded life elbows and jostles the church out of the way. But the Lord always works; he always accomplishes his purposes. He brings his sheep to the safe haven of the church, even after years of separation.

In this Christmas season, I pray that you would consider a year-end gift to support the work our Lord has given us to do with this place. Your support allows us to continue to reach out with the gospel, to teach, to distribute the Lord's glorious body and blood to the lips of those who need it sorely. Pray that we might be preserved for this life through its various challenges and difficulties, its exhilarating highs and its struggling lows. "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people*" (Luke 1:68).

Merry Christmas to you and a joyous Epiphany celebration in the new year!

Peace of Christ be with you,

Robert J Kieselowsky

Pastor Rob Kieselowsky
Executive Director

Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries

www.phillyministries.org

NEWSLETTER of
Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries
Proclaiming Liberty in Christ

REFORMATION 2025

Detroit to Philly and Back Again

By Rob Kieselowsky, Executive Director

People sometimes describe the unique culture of Philadelphia as 25% Manhattan and 75% Detroit: blue-collar grit intersects with business and art.

I saw these similarities firsthand when I visited our former vicar, Alexander Ogden, who has been called and ordained to serve in the heart of Detroit (*below*). His congregation, Family of God, is a tremendous outreach to the community with its focus on regular prayer, Bible Study and weekly Divine Service. I learned about the process of establishing a presence and acquiring a facility —it was a lot!

Detroit has seen many churches close, and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod presence has been dramatically pared back from even fifty years ago. So it was particularly gratifying to see Pastor Ogden engaged in this work, to see his love for the people of Detroit, and to hear his appreciation for the opportunity to serve.

This year, PLM welcomed its tenth vicar, Zigmas Kisielius, and I am very grateful that the Lord allows me to be a part of the formation of future pastors. I appreciate how the relationships continue as vicars return to the seminary and then are ordained to serve congregations. Former vicars also support our work in Philadelphia financially as they move into their first calls, giving for years in appreciation of their time in Philly. It's a joy to watch these seminarians become pastors who serve faithfully and a delight to be a part of the Lord accomplishing his purposes and building his church.

(above) Pastor Kieselowsky visits Family of God with a former vicar, Rev Alexander Ogden. The mural reads, "I am crucified with Christ / Estoy crucificado con Christo."

Whiteboard Questions

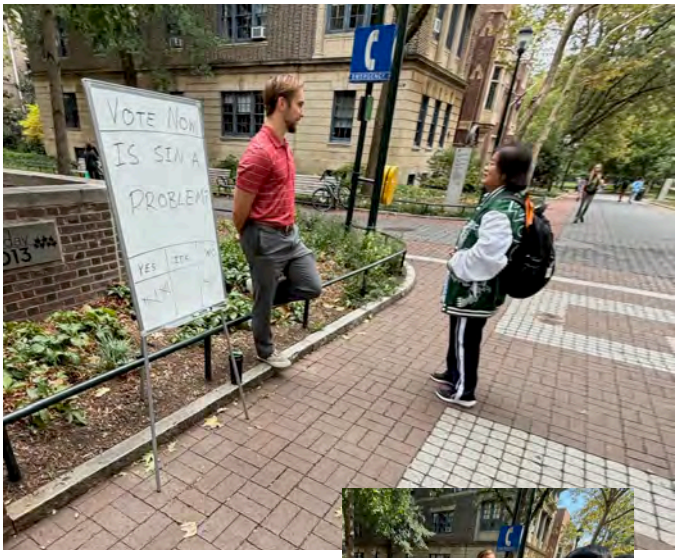
By Rev Kieselowsky

"Do Christians rely upon blind faith? Yes or No?"

A few months ago, a former vicar, Adam Thiel (*right*), and I posed that whiteboard question to college students on the University of Pennsylvania campus, encouraging students to vote and engaging them in conversation. We had one conversation after another. We spoke with Christians, with non-Christians, with Hindus, with Muslims and even with a mother who was on a campus tour with her daughter who just wanted to express her appreciation that we would spend time on campus talking about Jesus with students.

We have tried various means of reaching out and evangelizing people in Philadelphia over the years, but the whiteboard idea began with an email thread among congregations involved in campus ministry. A professor in Texas wrote about use of a whiteboard and a simple yes or no question. They ask the students to vote and then have a conversation about their vote. I immediately thought that would be an interesting thing to try in our context. The vicars are on campuses regularly, offering to pray with students and to encourage them. But often the students are so busy and preoccupied that they don't make use of the interaction. So we made it part of the regular routine. We hope that by standing at the same spot throughout the semester we will have substantial conversations with students about Jesus Christ dying on the cross for their sins.

One of our gracious supporters has agreed to pray for us at lunchtime on Thursdays when we try to be there —perhaps you could also make it a point to pray for us and the university students at that time.



(*top*) Former vicar, Adam Thiel, shows the initial votes on the whiteboard. (*middle, right*) Vicar Zigmas Kisielius converses with students about the questions "*Is sin a problem?*" and "*Does death bother you?*"

Jesus said, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.*" Luke 4:18

Meet Vicar Zigmas Kisielius

Zigmas Stasys Kisielius grew up in the western suburbs of Chicago. Both sets of grandparents migrated from Lithuania to the Chicago suburbs when the invading communists threatened their property and lives. His family emphasizes their Lithuanian heritage, honoring his great-grandfather, who died in the Siberian gulags, and his great-uncle, who served with the "forest-brothers," Lithuanians who retreated into the forests to fight as guerrilla soldiers against the Soviets. To maintain culture and language, Zigmas attended Lithuanian Saturday school through the 10th grade.

Zigmas was baptized and raised in the Roman Catholic Church, attending mass at a Lithuanian Roman Catholic mission in the suburbs. His road from a Catholic upbringing to the Lutheran faith twisted and at times faltered, especially during his two years studying Actuarial Science at Butler University. During a time of questioning, he returned home to study at a local community college, began reading the Holy Bible, and soon returned to the Roman Catholic mass.

In 2019, he transferred into Hillsdale College and earned a bachelors in Mathematics. During his two years at Hillsdale, Zigmas began to question the papacy and to wrestle with questions about tradition. An RA faithfully defended the true doctrine of the Christian faith with Scriptures, and eventually Zigmas was confirmed into the LCMS in the winter of 2021.

In a broken and chaotic world, he found that the Word of God is the only sure foundation for man to find rest, stability, and salvation.

Zigmas rejoices in the Lutheran tradition because it submits its doctrine, confession, and life to the solid ground of the Holy Bible.

Zigmas looks forward to enjoying the Philadelphia Museum of Art, exploring the city's cafes, and meeting all walks of life with the love and light of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Dominican Republic

In September, Pastor Kieselowsky traveled to the Dominican Republic to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Lutheran mission there.

Pastor Kieselowsky, who was recently elected 2nd Vice President for the English District for the eastern region, represented Bishop Miskus at the festivities. Rev Ted Krey, an English District pastor, serves as regional director for Latin America and has labored in the mission field for years alongside the Rev Dr Jonathan Nauman, chaplain to the missionaries.

While there, Pastor Kieselowsky had the opportunity to encourage them in their work and learn about efforts to reach people with the gospel over two decades, some of which parallels the work of PLM in Philadelphia.

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Please Pray For . . .

- **The people of Philadelphia**
- **Thursday whiteboard conversations** with university students
- **Vicar Zigmas Kisielius**
- **Pastor Kieselowsky** and his family

Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries

Proclaiming Liberty in Christ in the City

NEWSLETTER | EASTER 2025

Generosity in the Face of Judgment

By Rob Kieselowsky, Executive Director

Last Advent, I was surprised by a visit from a Navy serviceman on leave who attended services with his wife and son. He had been traveling long distances in order to be catechized and confirmed by the LCMS missionary in Tokyo, Rev. Daniel Jastram, while serving in Japan.

His visit brought to mind the LCMS missionary in Rome, Rev. Tyler McMiller, whom I met when I and two of my daughters attended an Epiphany service at his mission church in 2024. I was able to encourage Pastor McMiller who is just beginning his work in Rome surrounded by so many Catholic churches with those who have lived their lives under the judgment of Catholic teaching.

I feel a connection to these international missions. Philadelphia often has more in common with overseas mission work than other mission work here in America, especially other urban centers with millions of souls for whom Christ died. It's not simply the number of people living in close quarters; it's the mindset of secular urban centers. Many urban elites, usually those with money to spend, hold to a sense of rigid justice. They judge others not against God's law but against their harsh standards of social equity and modern ideals. To the spirit of the age, forgiveness seems like a backward idea that has no place in its worldview.

Our society embraces judgment and wrath. Christ offers the opposite. In Matthew 20:1-16, he tells the parable in which a landowner hires day workers to work in his vineyard. When the landowner pays the workers at the end of the day, he pays them all a full day's wage, even those who worked only one hour. His graciousness does not go over well with workers who had put in more time, and they grumble, "you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day" (Matt 20:12). The landowner responds, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? . . . I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you . . . Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matt 20:13-14). Like the landowner, Christ gladly gives his gifts to anyone who comes to him in repentance.

Unbelievers struggle to accept that someone who has done terrible things could repent at the last hour and be forgiven. They cannot extend mercy to any group they believe has oppressed another group and condemn anyone individual associated with that group. They echo the accusations of the devil himself who loves law, death and judgment. Like the evil one, they cannot even comprehend forgiveness, restoration and substitutionary sacrifice.

(continued on page 3)

Marriage Blessing

In February, Pastor Kieselowsky had the honor of blessing the marriage of a member of the church whom Pastor had catechized and confirmed last year (*below*). Donald and his wife were married in Indonesia in traditional and church ceremonies, but Pastor performed the Lutheran marriage rite as their American wedding.

Generosity (*continued from page 1***)**

We need the grace of the Holy Spirit to understand the Gospel, a message so countercultural that people scoff at it. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8) sounds weak and utterly ridiculous, and mission pastors find themselves proclaiming forgiveness to those who want to cultivate judgment.

Easter reminds us that our Lord's victory over death is for all, regardless of socioeconomic status, zip code or pedigree. We are equally humbled and equally forgiven. We forgive because we recognize the great magnitude that we have been forgiven. Who are we to resent the fact that God took his wrath out on his Son in order to generously offer forgiveness to even the most wretched?

Ash Wednesday

On Ash Wednesday, Pastor Kieselowsky had the privilege to provide a brief Ash Wednesday service for two basketball players and their assistant coach (*below*) who were in Philadelphia for a basketball game.

Please remember Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries in your annual giving! Your generosity allows PLM to welcome all who seek God's gifts.

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Visitation

By Vicar Adam Thiel

Growing up, I would watch my dad head out every Tuesday for visitations. Sometimes, he would get called for emergency trips, driving many miles to the nearest hospitals. And on occasion, I would join him and witness first hand the delivery of God's most precious gifts to us this side of heaven: the preaching of the Word and the Holy Supper.

However, I didn't fully appreciate one aspect of visitation until now: getting to know the people. God's gifts are the most important, but one can't apply the Word without knowing the people. I wouldn't be able to appreciate this without the experience of making visits on my own. My vicarage placement with Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries, whose primary ministry is to the students of Philadelphia, affords little opportunity for visitations. Vicars, though, learn the value of visitation through the partnership between PLM and St. John Lutheran in Springfield, PA. Whenever a member of St John needs spiritual care at home or in a facility, vicars visit as part of their training. I have had the opportunity to read Scripture to members, pray with them, say the creed, and let them know we are thinking of them. I remind them that the Lord remembers them even on their loneliest days.

God created us as relational beings: "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." (Gen. 2:18). Our relationships are not exclusively with each other but are also with God, who walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). Sin, of course, comes in and wreaks havoc on our relationships with each other and most importantly with God. What was once natural must now be a command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31).

Visitation is an act of love and a reflection of Christ himself. Our Lord says to the sheep, "I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me . . . Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matt 25:36, 40). Even more, when Christians visit the sick, our Lord also visits them, for wherever two are gathered in his name, there he is also (Matt. 18:20). When the pastor brings them the Supper, Christ is there in flesh and blood, in, with, and under the bread and wine.

Christ remembers his sheep in their need. Jesus became man to come to humans who cannot come to him. In his death and resurrection, our Lord's visitation becomes the greatest act of love toward the lowly who are sick with sin. He comes to us with his life-giving body and blood to heal us and grant us forgiveness.

Super Bowl Celebrations

Logos held its regular Super Bowl party at the Kieselowsky home in February and enjoyed the extra celebrations as the Eagles won a decisive victory.

It was wonderful to see some friends who returned to Philly to join the city in cheering for the home team. Some of us even had time to watch the victory parade as it wove down Benjamin Franklin Parkway (*right*).

Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries

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Please Pray For . . .

- **The people of Philadelphia**
- **Logos Lutheran** members, leaders, and university students
- **Vicar Adam Thiel** and his wife, who are expecting their first child
- **Pastor Kieselowsky** and his family