

CTSFW CELEBRATES GRADUATES AND HONOREES AT COMMENCEMENT

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (CTSFW), brought the 180th academic year to a close with Commencement in Kramer Chapel Friday, May 15, 2026. The ceremony recognized seventy-six graduates in eight degree programs and two certificate programs, along with eight special honorees.

The Rev. William Cwirla, a member of the CTSFW Board of Regents, served as the Commencement speaker. Cwirla read 2 Peter 1:5–8, which calls for supplementing faith with seven virtues, all of which “make faith effective and fruitful in lives of faithful service.”

“And that’s why we have a seminary,” said Cwirla, “not simply to impart academic knowledge, but to cultivate moral character, self-discipline, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love that make faith effective and fruitful as we serve the world in the name of Jesus Christ.”

The numbers below include degrees and certificates awarded or expected in the 2025–26 academic year, including those that will be conferred this summer pending completion of academic work.

✕ Master of Divinity	35
✕ Master of Arts	7
✕ Master of Arts in Diaconess Studies.	15
✕ Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies.	2
✕ Master of Sacred Theology	4
✕ Doctor of Ministry.	3
✕ Doctor of Philosophy in Missiology	5
✕ Doctor of Philosophy in Theological Studies	1
✕ Alternate Route Certification	3
✕ Diaconess Certification.	1

Earlier in the day, graduates and guests attended Baccalaureate Matins. The Rev. Paul Willweber, pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in San Diego, California, and father of MDiv graduate Cory Willweber, served as preacher.

To access recordings of Baccalaureate Matins and Commencement, visit our Chapel page at ctsfw.edu.

Honorary Doctorates

On the recommendation of the faculty, CTSFW awarded honorary doctorates to three recipients.

The Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Joseph Makala, bishop emeritus of the South East of Lake Victoria Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (SELVD-ELCT), was awarded a Doctor of Divinity, *honoris causa*, in absentia. During his ten-year tenure as the founding bishop of SELVD, Bishop Makala steadily moved the diocese in a confessional Lutheran direction and oversaw steady growth in the number of congregations and pastors.

Dr. Päivi Räsänen, a medical doctor and longstanding member of the Finnish Parliament, received a Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*, for her faithful public service and her courageous Christian witness in the face of opposition and adversity, including three court trials on “hate speech” charges stemming from a faith-based tweet and her 2004 booklet *Male and Female He Created Them*.

Professor and Kantor Emeritus Richard C. Resch, who served the Seminary from 1977 to 2014, was awarded a Doctor of Divinity, *honoris causa*, for his significant contributions to music and worship at the Seminary and in the Synod. Resch founded the Seminary Kantorei in 1978 and co-founded the Good Shepherd Institute in 2000. He served on the LCMS Commission on Worship (1992–2001) and the Hymnody Committee of *Lutheran Service Book* (1999–2006).

Alumnus of the Year

The Rev. Ernie Lassman (MDiv ’78) of Lake Forest Park, Washington, received the 2026 Alumnus of the Year Award. Lassman, who grew up in a strong Lutheran family, enrolled at CTSFW in 1974 after marrying the love of his life, Kathy. He served congregations in British Columbia, Canada, and Seattle, Washington, during more than thirty-eight years of parish ministry. He also supervised nine vicars, eight of whom were CTSFW students.



Lassman



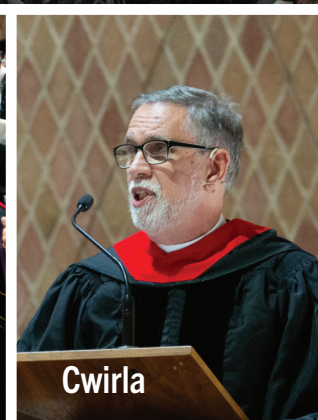
Räsänen



Resch



Willweber



Cwirla

Miles Christi Awards

The Miles Christi Award recognizes individuals who have distinguished themselves in a field of human endeavor and displayed the characteristics of a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3). Recipients of the 2026 Miles Christi Awards received their awards in absentia.

The Rev. Dr. David A. Bode of Perham, Minnesota, served five parishes during his ministry and was president of the LCMS Minnesota North District (1997–2003). He established an endowment at CTSFW in memory of his wife, Evonne, to support the formation of pastors who regard the Scriptures as the inerrant Word of God and emphasize being saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Joyce Kaldahl of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is a member of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Oklahoma City, which she joined in 1977 with her husband, Paul, and their two children. She directed the choir at Immanuel for forty years and has generously supported Christian education, benefiting schools from kindergarten to seminary.

Robert and Frances Ohm of Bel Aire, Kansas, both lifelong Lutherans, lived in Kansas and Fort Wayne when Bob worked for Magnavox and Boeing. While in Fort Wayne, Fran volunteered at CTSFW. Their familiarity and involvement with the Seminary led them to support the work of faithful formation. As Bob says, “The need is there, and we need to help others.”

David E. Schweinler of Tacoma, Washington, spent his working years as a lawyer, during which time he also served as a reservist at McCord Air Force Base. David was active in many boards, associations, and organizations, and he and his wife, Elizabeth, a pastor’s daughter, were generous supporters of both LCMS seminaries. 🏠



Räsänen Shares Story of Supreme Court Battle

Dr. Päivi Räsänen, in Fort Wayne to receive an honorary doctorate, made time for a Q & A with President Jon S. Bruss on May 15 and a presentation May 16 detailing her seven-year long battle to defend herself against “hate speech” charges in Finland. Räsänen, who was found guilty by the Supreme Court of incitement against a group for statements made in the booklet *Male and Female He Created Them*, plans to appeal the decision in the European Court of Human Rights, continuing her fight for freedom of speech and faith.

“Dr. Martin Luther handled the issue of consequences of faith aptly,” Räsänen said. “If you believe, you speak. If you speak, you must suffer, for faith, confession, and cross belong together and are part of being a Christian.”



Resch Honored with Portrait

On May 14, the day before Professor and Kantor Emeritus Richard Resch received an honorary doctorate at Commencement at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (CTSFW), he was surprised with a portrait, a gift from alumni of the Kantorei, the choir he founded in 1978.

“Richard Resch’s service to the seminary and the church continues to thrive in the Kantorei, in the vibrant musical life of our campus, and in faithful pastors who help their congregations sing the faith week in and week out,” said CTSFW Kantor Kevin Hildebrand. “This portrait helps us remember not only his faithful and humble service but the larger goal that he helps the church achieve.”