

Growing Generations: 20 Devotions for 20 Years

ARCOLA CHURCH | 2025



Arcola Church Purpose and Vision Statement

Our Purpose: Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Our Vision: That all of God's people grow in wisdom and in wholeness.

Wisdom involves growing in loving relationship with God and neighbor. Wholeness means thriving mentally, physically, and spiritually. Our model for this growth is the person of Jesus Christ who, according to the gospel of Luke, "grew and became strong and filled with wisdom." In all His life, Jesus modeled a loving relationship with God and neighbor and worked to restore people to wholeness. Thus, our purpose as a church: We meet people where they are, to make disciples of Jesus Christ that all may grow in wisdom and wholeness.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we look to become more like Him every day, primarily using these practices:

Worship: Attend each weekend, in person or online.

Grow: Commit to personal spiritual growth and small group participation.

Serve: Work both inside and outside the walls of the church to care for others, using our spiritual gifts.

Give: Contribute financially, with the tithe being the goal.

Share: Bear witness to faith in Jesus Christ, through word and deed.

These Core Values shape our work:

Compassion: All people matter to God; therefore, all people matter to us.

Servanthood: God blesses each person with unique talents and gifts and calls us to love our neighbor; therefore, we use our gifts in service to all.

Excellence: We have received God's best in creation and in His Son; therefore, we offer our best in all we do.

**We invite you to worship and grow with us.
Learn more at ArcolaChurch.org**

Upon the death of Mr. Charles Lewis, ¾ of an acre known as the Schoolhouse Lot was given for the construction of a new church.

1832

The Gum Springs Methodist Episcopal Church, South opened its doors on the Schoolhouse Lot.

1853

The church did what Methodists do best: gathered for a picnic. (See bottom left photo.)

1888

Both the church and village adopted a new name — Arcola.

1900

The church built a Fellowship Hall, where for 40 years dinners were served to the Arcola Lions Club.

1960

The United Methodist Church invested in this community with financial support and staff to reach a growing population.

1995

Phase One of the Worship Center opened, along with the launch of Arcola Christian Preschool.

2005

Phase Three of the Worship Center was completed, and the original sanctuary and Fellowship Hall were fully renovated to expand the work of the Dulles South Food Pantry.

2020

Today we are Arcola United Methodist Church, inspired by this purpose: We meet people where they are, to make disciples of Jesus Christ that all may grow in wisdom and wholeness.

2025

Dear Arcola Church Family,

None of these moments happened by accident. They reflect God at work through ordinary women and men whose faithful responses have built a thriving community of faith.

This fall, we gather to honor that legacy and to commit ourselves to the future. We're launching a campaign to *raise roofs and grow generations*. Each household is invited to make a 15-month financial pledge to support this vital ministry. The funds raised will go into our capital reserve account to maintain our facilities for the next decade. This account is currently low due to the recent replacement of the Worship Center roof after 20 years of service.

Inside this devotional book, you'll find reflections written by members of Arcola Church — testimonies to the spirit and mission that have shaped us. I invite you to read them prayerfully as you consider how God might work through you in this campaign. Please plan to make your 15-month commitment on Sunday, September 28, 2025.

I look forward to standing with you as we continue the long tradition of raising roofs and growing generations.

Grace and peace,
Chris Riedel
Pastor, 1995–2025





Gerry Kent

When did you start coming to Arcola?

I started coming to Arcola Church in the late '60s–early '70s.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Each message I hear, I take personally and apply it to my life according to how I understand the message.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My hope is for the Church to always be a safe, warm, and welcoming place to all who come through our doors.

Different, Yet the Same

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.” — Luke 6:31

My thoughts today are on something we all should know — but maybe don't always acknowledge: We are all different, yet we are all the same.

We are all born of an earthly mother and father. We didn't get to choose who our parents were, the color of our eyes, our hair, our skin tone, or how tall we'd grow to be. We didn't choose the home we were raised in, what values we were taught, or the economic situation we were born into.

I'm always amazed by people who come from hard financial circumstances, who push through difficult upbringings, and still manage to finish school, attend college, and build a successful life. That resilience inspires me.

Not everyone grows up in the Church. Some only hear about it through classmates, relatives, friendships, marriages — or simply a chance invitation. Where and how we find faith is deeply personal. And whether or not someone walks into a church building doesn't make them any less worthy of compassion or understanding.

We are all so different, yet we are all the same.

Whether walking down the street, driving beside someone on the highway, or sitting next to a stranger on a bus or plane, every person you meet longs for the same things:

Recognition.

Acceptance.

Kindness.

Friendship.

Respect.

Imagine how different our homes, our communities, and our world could be if we truly embraced this simple yet powerful truth: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6:31)

Today, let's be mindful to see one another through this lens — not focusing on what separates us, but on the humanity that unites us. We all want to be treated with care. Let's be the ones who start by showing it.

Lord, help me to see others the way You see them. Remind me that behind every face is a story, a longing to be known and loved. Give me the grace to treat others with kindness, compassion, and respect — just as I hope to be treated. Let Your love guide my words and actions today. Amen.



Barbara Ladany

When did you start coming to Arcola?

I started attending Arcola UMC around February of 1996, when I was pregnant with my first child.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

I was raised in an active church family, so coming to Arcola built on that foundation. Over the years, this church has given me many opportunities to volunteer and serve, participate in worship and small groups, and lead various groups. Through that variety of experiences, I have continued to mature in my faith.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My dream for Arcola Church is that it continues to be a welcoming presence in this community and beyond, supporting those who want a safe place to explore and grow in their faith—whether through worship, Bible studies, or service opportunities. As the preschool director, I hope Arcola Christian Preschool continues to be a vital ministry in our church and community, welcoming new families to our building and activities year after year.

Come Like a Child

"Let the little children come to Me...for of such is the kingdom of God."

— Luke 18:16

I love children! That is not a surprise if you know me. I especially love young children. Their innocence and trusting nature give them big hearts. They also do not hesitate to say what they are thinking. I love how they *wonder*. If you've spent any time around young children, you know how much they question: *Why? Why? Why?*

The first thing I became involved in at Arcola Church outside of worship was teaching Sunday School. I did not feel equipped at first, but since I had not taught school in a couple of years and missed it, I agreed to try. I grew up in a church but hadn't memorized *Bible* verses or stories, so I wasn't sure how it was going to go. I quickly learned that teaching Sunday School was the best way to learn the stories and verses! Learning from the perspective of a child simplifies things. There's no pressure. Basic Bible stories include so much to explore. When you are sitting on the floor or at a table with children, those stories can come to life.

Years later, I moved on to participating in—and then leading—adult Bible studies. No matter what age level I was in a group with, exploring the Bible was interesting, and I enjoyed learning with people of all ages. I especially appreciate being in groups with those who want to explore and have questions—those who wonder and want to grow in their faith. Each age group I've worked with—preschool, middle school, or adult—provided an opportunity to explore the Bible from a unique perspective.

"Let the little children come to Me...for of such is the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:16) is the verse we chose for the preschool over 20 years ago. At the time, I'm sure I was just thinking about literal "little children." When I read this verse now, it means so much more! The fact that Jesus did not hesitate to welcome little children demonstrates that He welcomes everyone—even the youngest and most questioning. (*Why? Why? Why?*) He was not afraid of their wiggles or their questions. In fact, He welcomed that experience.

The little children wanted to be in His presence. I can picture Him patiently listening and then answering the children's endless questions—mesmerizing them with stories to which they could relate. He couldn't just tell children stories; He had to interact with them to get the message across. He worked to reach people where they were, according to their life experiences. (*Hello, parables!*)

When I hear this verse now, it reminds me that we should ALL come to Jesus just as a child does. In fact, maybe Jesus wasn't just referring to actual children; maybe He also meant those with childlike faith. The message I hear in those words is that we should be excited. We should wonder. We should ask questions. We should have an open heart! Jesus has room for ALL of us and our wondering. He is committed to our faith formation. He wants us to make good choices, have open hearts, forgive people. To do that, we often need to go back to the basics—back to the ways of little children.



Steve & Cindy Annino

When did you start coming to Arcola?

We have been going to Arcola UMC since shortly after Chris Riedel became our pastor almost 30 years ago. We have seen the church grow from a congregation of about 20 to what it is today.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

The church has supported our spiritual growth as well as the growth of our community of friends. We have been blessed to share in Bible studies, support groups, athletic teams, and the trusteeship of the church

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

I see the church continuing to grow in community outreach and discipleship, ever broadening its attempt to diversify and expand the role God has in shaping our lives.

The Journey Is the Treasure

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." — James 1:2-4

There is joy in challenges? That's not what I used to think. The challenges in life often initially bring hardship with them, and it was not easy to get past the hardship. I could not believe those things were heaven-sent or part of God's plan for my life. Gradually I began to see that life without challenge would only make for a lazy faith — shallow and weak. With challenge, I began to know a fuller strength that lifted my spirit past the pain and made me more ready to see the joy that can be found, and the good that can come, from facing that challenge. A faith refined by challenge is even more complete.

The Journey Is the Treasure

If I looked back on Blessed lane,
A path I walked in days long past,
I might have dreamed it free of pain,
A straight, safe road from first to last.

It led to a castle tall and grand,
A family perfect, pure, and true,
Untouched by time's unyielding hand,
No cracks in all I thought I knew.

The sun would shine, the rain would fall,
Just enough for gardens fair,
No hunger, loss, or grief at all,
No weight of life for us to bear.

Behind the walls of stone we'd stay,
Sheltered from the world outside,
No storms to face, no debts to pay,
No trials to meet or tears to hide.

But then I'd miss the treasure found
In rising strong through storm and strife,
The bonds of friends who gather round,
The light that guides a weary life.

I'd lose the joy of facing days
That test my will and shape my soul,
The strength that grows through winding ways,
The grace that makes the broken whole.

For faith is forged in trials faced,
Not carved from ease or gentle skies,
And trouble brings us an angel's grace
With wings to soar past where darkness lies.

Without the storms, I'd never see
The courage to seek the higher ground,
To climb the mountain peaks, to stand so free,
And hear only echoes of pain's resounding sound.

From there I'd see starlight on the castle below,
And the morning sun that lights my way,
A fortress where the blessings flow,
And gratitude that fills my every day.

For life is more than a comfortable rest,
It's knowing all — the joy, the pain,
The ebb and flow, the hard, the blessed,
The struggles fought, the love we gain.

Yes, challenges have marked my years,
But through the dark, a light has shone,
A path to heights that calm my fears,
And leads me to a brighter dawn.

Where a loving God will shape my soul
And lift me up, and help me stand
So I may be more than whole
When I reach the promised land.



Sue Bean Edwards

When did you start coming to Arcola?

I started attending Arcola in the spring of 1998. My daughter and Pastor Chris and Julia's youngest daughter were in kindergarten together. Emily had come to our house for a playdate. When Julia picked her up, I mentioned that I had to find a church for Easter because my mother (who was raised Catholic) was coming to visit, and if I didn't have a church for us to attend, it would be ugly. I asked Julia if she went to church, and she said she did — at Arcola Methodist. Having never even heard of Arcola, I asked why in the world she went there. I had no idea her husband was a minister!

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola has been at the center of my faith journey. It's been the place where I've developed and grown the most in my relationship — not only with God, but with my brothers and sisters. I look forward each week to the Wednesday morning Bible Study, where everyone's questions and perspectives are valued, regardless of where we are in our faith journey. It's encouraged me to delve deeper into my understanding, and I've learned so much being in community with others.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My dream for Arcola is that it continues to grow as a place for all people. Chris's words when he serves communion move me every Sunday: this isn't the table of Arcola Church; it's the table of Jesus Christ, and all are welcome. My dream is that Arcola grows and changes as needed, evolving with the people and community it serves.

Walking the Way of Christ

"By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." — 1 John 2:5-6

I was raised on the teachings of Jesus Christ. They were non-negotiable guiding principles my parents expected me to follow. Of course, I wasn't always successful — sometimes very unsuccessful, in fact — but I always believed in a higher power, something larger than me, guiding and watching over me.

The teachings of Jesus became core to me. They've guided me and brought comfort in times of trouble. Those teachings reflect how I believe we should treat one another.

As a young adult, I was blessed to discover Arcola Church. I felt it aligned with my values. The people I met seemed like kindred spirits, committed to loving and caring for all, no matter where they were on their faith journey.

I've always believed the Universe gives us what we need; we just have to be open to seeing it. As my faith grew, I came to see the Universe is God. God knows us deeply and gives us people and experiences that help us become our best selves.

When I returned to Virginia after living in Maine, I didn't immediately return to Arcola. Life had changed. I wasn't sure I still belonged. I was invited to a Bible study closer to home. I told the woman who invited me that I wasn't sure I was a good fit, but she insisted, saying everyone was welcome. What I heard that night, however, ran contrary to what I believe Jesus taught — starting with "love thy neighbor." It felt more like: love thy neighbor *if* they meet certain criteria.

That jarring experience sparked something. After reflecting, I reached out to Chris and knew I needed to return to Arcola. When I did, the love and warmth I remembered washed over me. In retrospect, I believe God put me at that Bible study — not because it was good, but because it was *exactly* what I needed.

I believe we are called to lift each other up. Jesus said what we do to the least of these, we do to Him. We fail each other when we are self-centered or self-righteous. Compassion is the heart of our humanity.

Like a garden, faith needs nurturing — or it becomes overrun with weeds. I feel God calling me. I've enjoyed the beauty of the garden for so long, but now I see the weeds — and God is asking me to put on my Sunday-best gardening gloves and help tend it.



Paul Hershey

When did you start coming to Arcola?

In 2000, so we have been attending Arcola UMC for 25 years.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola has provided an environment where we can share and grow our faith through worship, service, and fellowship. Worship at Arcola has helped us grow our faith through biblical lessons from Scripture readings, sermons, and music. Service opportunities such as Prayers and Squares, the Arcola Alleluia Choir, and adult musicals have helped us grow in our faith by allowing us to give back to the community some of the blessings we have received from God. Fellowship at Arcola has helped us grow our faith through developing friendships with whom we can share Christian values, joys, and concerns.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

Our dream for the future of Arcola is that it continues to be a place where everyone in the community feels welcome to come and increase their faith through learning about God, sharing and developing their talents in the service of God, and developing lasting friendships.

A Community Rich in Blessings and Responsibility

"But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." — Luke 12:48

This verse can be interpreted to mean that those who have been blessed with more resources, talents, and opportunities have a greater responsibility to use them wisely for the benefit of God and others. Many of us at Arcola are richly blessed; therefore, we bear the responsibility identified in this Bible verse.

With respect to resources, Arcola congregation members make generous donations toward church functions, mission trips, camps for children, the food pantry, and other programs that support the community. We also have a wonderful church facility that we share with organizations such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Alcoholics Anonymous. These examples suggest that we are fulfilling at least some of the resource-related responsibilities indicated by this Bible verse.

At Arcola, we also exhibit a wealth of talents — many of them artistic — including music, dance, and drama. The fact that we share these talents brings in additional opportunities for others to share their diverse gifts, such as directing, choreography, audio-visual support, costume creation, and stage design, construction, and management. Through programs offered at Arcola, such as Summer in the Arts, we can develop our talents further. For example, singers can learn to play an instrument, and instrumentalists can learn to sing.

As with our resources, we then have a responsibility to share these talents with others in the church and community — and we do. Our Joyful Noise, Alleluia, and bell choirs perform at retirement homes, community events, and even professional baseball games. These opportunities spread God's word and bring new members to our church along with their additional talents.

There are many other gifts beyond those in the arts: teaching Sunday School, counseling youth and adults, comforting the ill, sewing in Prayers and Squares, landscaping and decorating, and cooking for church and community events. These talents are spread among a diverse group of individuals who share them freely with others. Expressing these gifts brings joy both to those who receive and to those who serve.

We are especially blessed at Arcola to have the opportunities to exercise our gifts. Otherwise, they may go unused and eventually fade away. God gives us all different resources, talents, and opportunities that we bring together within the church to create an atmosphere where a Christian way of life can flourish. Through fulfilling these responsibilities, we satisfy God's expectations and assure God's continual support for growing new talents and realizing new opportunities.



Jerry & Paige Baigis

When did you start coming to Arcola?

We came to Arcola Church and attended our first Sunday service in the old chapel. I first met Chris when I found out he was reading to the kindergarten class at Arcola Elementary — my son Ross was in that very class.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

I became involved in small groups and met with the “little old ladies” of Arcola through the Wednesday Bible study with Chris. I came to love those ladies — Ruth Biggers, Ruth Dowden, and Joan Mabry (Julie Moore’s mother). Jerry joined the men’s group and participated in the middle school mission trips. And the Congregational Care Ministry with a focus on the incarcerated. Service and fellowship events at Camp Highroad were particularly impactful, especially for our sons, both of whom completed their Eagle Scout projects under the guidance of Rick Dawson. The church’s connection with Camp Highroad afforded all of us another venue for using our gifts. At the end of every small group meeting, in all these venues, we were always asked, “How can we pray for you?” What a blessing it was to be asked that from time to time.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

Our dream for the future of Arcola is that it continues to feel like a small church — a place where we truly know each other and remain welcoming to all. This may be challenging given the growth of the community and the desire to grow the community of the faithful. However, we think that feeling still exists through the 20+ years we have been members.

Gratitude in Christ

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” — John 3:16

I hope you have that same relationship with Jesus Christ and the confidence of knowing where you’ll spend eternity. Jesus loves each of us — sinners and all. We’re not guaranteed our next breath or the chance to finish whatever fun project or vacation we’re dreaming about. But the Bible promises everlasting life to those who believe in Jesus Christ and make Him Lord of their lives. If you haven’t done that, I encourage you to grow your faith, and to do it with gratitude!

“Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” — Ephesians 5:20

Gratitude is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. In Ephesians 5:20, Paul reminds us to “give thanks always and for everything.” Sometimes this feels impossible — especially during life’s hardships. Yet this verse shows us that gratitude is not just a feeling; it’s a choice. It’s an act of faith.

What is the importance of faithful gratitude? A thankful heart is a key characteristic of a Christian. We need to thank God in all circumstances, especially during the hard times, and to not let a day go by without thanking God for His mercy and grace. If we take the time — no matter how crazy or troubled we feel — we can find something to be thankful for.

Gratitude is our most direct line to God.

The more you give thanks in life for all your blessings, the more you are blessed, and you begin to be ever more grateful for all you have!



Tom Stephens

When did you start coming to Arcola?

My family started coming to Arcola in late 2003, a few months after we had moved to Aldie from Herndon. In those days, we met in the old chapel (now the Food Pantry) and sat on benches or folding chairs. Our children – Elisabeth and Peter – were in elementary school, and they quickly became involved in the Youth Ministry.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

While I have grown in my faith from church services and music, I think my faith journey was most impacted by my involvement with the Men's Ministry, which included Friday morning gatherings as well as weekend retreats and men's dinners. The different backgrounds and perspectives that the men of the church brought to these gatherings were enormously helpful in understanding my own faith background – what was missing, what needed improving. This experience has helped me become more tolerant of different views and to know that God meets us where we are as individuals. God understands that, for us as human beings, "one size does not fit all."

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

Many of us are saddened by the polarization that has enveloped not only our country's political and social fabric but also Christianity, including the Protestant denominations. My dream is that Arcola can be seen as a beacon of inclusion – welcoming and embracing all people, regardless of political or social persuasion. We grow by learning from different viewpoints, not by promoting conformity and agreement on all matters.

Conceptualizing God

"Moses said to God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.''" — Exodus 3:13-14

One of the great mysteries and challenges of our faith is trying to understand – or even conceptualize – who (or what) God is.

When I was growing up, I remember seeing pictures of Jesus on the wall of our Sunday school class – usually a blue-eyed, Scandinavian-looking Jesus. We imagined God as an old white man with a beard and flowing robe. As I grew older, I discarded those images, but I was still left with the dilemma of trying to describe the divinity that was prodding me – that was pulling on my soul.

Is God a noun – an entity? Is God a verb? Maybe even a gerund? Does God have a gender? Needless to say, trying to use grammatical or biological classifications is woefully inadequate to describe the nature of God.

Still, because of our limited understanding, we are left using metaphors to describe God – many of which come from Scripture: King of Kings, Eternal Father, Jehovah, Abba, Yahweh. (Interestingly, we don't use modern titles like President, CEO, or Supreme Leader.) We tend to place God within a political or patriarchal framework practiced more than 2,000 years ago – thus, "the Kingdom of God," with God ruling from a throne. But even that falls short of capturing the dimensionality of the Divine, which is not bound by any physical location or description.

So what are we to do to avoid paralysis by analysis?

In my view, God – the Great I Am – understands our human limitations and is perfectly content with our attempts to conceptualize the Divine using metaphor. What God truly desires is the nature and quality of our relationship. Therefore, whatever image or understanding draws us into authentic relationship with God becomes the linchpin of our faith journey.

Just as my perception of God has changed over time, I believe God meets us in whatever way we are able to experience the essence of "I AM WHO I AM." Ultimately, it is our ability to experience God's love for us that defines the depth and boundaries of that relationship.



Jenn Skinner

When did you start coming to Arcola?

We first attended Arcola in August of 2005 and joined shortly thereafter.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Our time at Arcola has been invaluable to my faith journey. God has placed the most amazing community of believers in my life here, who have been the hands and feet of Jesus to me for almost twenty years. The greatest impact on my faith has come from studying Scripture with these friends.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My hope for Arcola's future is that we will keep the words of Jesus from Matthew 22:37-39 as our first call to action: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."

Listening for the Still, Small Voice

"The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" — 1 Kings 19:11-13

I've prayed for a long time — as a young girl, as a confused teenager, and as an even more confused adult. I've begged for grace, pleaded for answers, and stormed heaven for healing. To this day, I haven't seen the clouds part or received a divine sign. I haven't had a prophetic dream or heard a booming voice in my ear.

We all want to hear from the Lord in some magnificent way. I still hope that might happen for me someday. I don't doubt that it can. It sure would be cool.

But even without a dramatic encounter, I know I have heard from Him. Every time, I would describe it as a gentle yet persistent nudging. I haven't received a loud declaration in an instant, but I have seen a pattern emerge in small, steady moments. Looking back on certain seasons, I realize He was there all along — offering direction, hope, clarity, and conviction. Sometimes it takes hours, sometimes days, even years, but eventually I gather all those nudges and recognize His voice.

That revelation only comes when I am intentional in my relationship with Him. When I'm multitasking, checking off to-do lists, scrolling social media, or consumed by my own schedule — even with a laundry list of prayer requests — He might be speaking, but I won't hear Him.

To hear someone whisper, we must be close. We aren't usually in whispering range with strangers. Whispering is reserved for those we know well. If we aren't willing to nurture a relationship with Jesus — if we won't quiet ourselves, turn off the noise, and open our hearts — we simply won't hear Him.

I've let that connection weaken more times than I can count. I've neglected it, and then grown frustrated when I couldn't feel His presence. But the Lord is patient. He is relentless in pursuing us.

Don't expect Him only in flashes of lightning or a roaring voice. He can whisper to you in the quiet of your home, at a ballgame, while drying your hair, or stuck in traffic. Be persistent in seeking Him, and lean in. Be patient. He will not disappoint.

Holy Lord, thank You for waiting for us. Help us to limit distractions so that we might build a relationship with You. Thank You for the privilege and honor to hear Your still, small voice meant specifically for us. Amen.



Kay Patterson

When did you start coming to Arcola?

We started attending Arcola in October 2006.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola has helped me grow in my faith journey in many ways—for example, attending Sunday church services regularly, participating in the Monday night women's Bible study small group, and leading the 11 a.m. Sunday school preschool class. In the small group, we read and discuss books of the Bible slowly and thoroughly, verse by verse. We also share our joys and concerns and occasionally have fun get-togethers. I have learned so much from this wonderful group of women and found so much community with them! I've also learned a lot from looking at Bible stories through preschoolers' eyes.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My dream for the future of Arcola is that we continue to reach out to our communities, near and far, to support a wide range of physical and spiritual needs; to show God's love in ways that meet people where they are, draw them to God, and give them hope; and to provide community and strength within Arcola Church so that those who are constantly giving their time and energy to others are also lifted up.

Better Days Ahead

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." — Jeremiah 29:11

This verse is one of my favorites, having brought me comfort countless times. It echoes something an older woman at my hometown church said to me years ago when I was an awkward teen. While in the church kitchen preparing for a potluck dinner (we called it a "Smorgasbord" because of our strong Swedish heritage), she chatted with me, and one sentence in particular struck a chord: "Kay, your best days are ahead of you." I've kept that statement close at hand over the decades, pulling it out—along with Jeremiah 29:11—when times are tough.

Until recently, I hadn't fully understood the verse's biblical context. In preparing to write this devotional, I read the entire Book of Jeremiah for the first time. In the first 28 chapters, the people of Jerusalem and Judah turn away from God—worshipping false gods and repeatedly disobeying Him. It goes on and on about their rebellion and the destruction God will bring. Then suddenly, in chapter 29, God offers restoration and hope at an appointed future time.

Taken alone, the verse is reassuring: God has a plan for me that includes a good and hopeful future! But reading it in context, I now see that the people to whom God was speaking had to endure deep suffering. It's tempting to ask: Why so much suffering? Why didn't God intervene sooner? Why do faithful people still suffer?

These questions could be debated endlessly. I have plenty of questions I'd like to ask God when I get to heaven. But maybe once I'm there, I'll finally understand that I don't need all the answers—I just need to trust in God's infinite wisdom and everlasting love.

I'm learning that I often don't know why I'm going through a hard season or what steps to take to find a way out—other than to pray, trust, and obey. I'm reminded to ground myself in God's promises, including Jeremiah 29:11. God never said life would be easy. But God does promise to protect us, give us hope, and love us always. After all, He sent Jesus as the ultimate restoration and hope.

There are indeed better days ahead! Trusting in that truth and seeking God in prayer can bring peace in the middle of pain—and joy in anticipating what God has in store next.



John & Anitha Manne

When did you start coming to Arcola?

John began attending in 2003, while Anitha started in 2005.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola has been an integral part of our lives for over 20 years, strengthening our spiritual foundation and keeping us rooted. We believe God guided us to Arcola Church and Pastor Chris through our neighbor back in 2003, and we have felt at home from day one. We feel truly blessed to have been married in this church in 2005, to have our kids baptized here, and to watch them grow in their faith. Pastor Chris's messages, along with the ample opportunities the church provides to serve God, have strengthened us, nurtured us, and blessed every aspect of our lives.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

We envision a more close-knit community of disciples who come together in Christ, embracing one another despite differences in thought or opinion. Our commitment is to grow and be ever more welcoming while remaining firmly grounded in the teachings of Jesus. We continue to explore opportunities to engage the multicultural, multiracial, multi-ideological community around us and to lay a stronger roadmap to bring people to Christ. Let love and grace be our guiding force in all that we do, just as we have received them in abundance.

God Always Has Our Back

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." — Psalm 46:1

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." — Psalm 91:1

One of the earliest truths we come to understand in life is that change is inevitable. Sometimes it brings joy and growth; other times, it shakes us to our core. We all long for seasons of peace and prosperity—those moments when life feels steady and secure. But inevitably, the winds shift, and we find ourselves navigating unexpected storms.

It's in those moments of upheaval—when grief, pain, or uncertainty cloud our hearts and minds—that we can feel truly lost. In 2023, our family walked through such a storm, losing two cherished loved ones within three months. The sorrow was deep, and the path forward felt blurred by heartache. The uncertainty of life became very real to us.

Yet even in the midst of that pain, God's Word became our anchor. Psalm 46 and Psalm 91 reminded us that God is not distant in our suffering. He is our refuge. He is our strength. He is with us—not just in the calm, but especially in the chaos.

God doesn't promise that life will be free of hardship. But He does promise that we will never face it alone. His love is unwavering. His presence is constant. And even when the outcome isn't what we hoped for, we can trust that He is working all things together for a greater purpose.

Psalm 91 speaks of dwelling in the shelter of the Most High. This isn't just poetic language—it's an invitation to live in God's presence daily, to walk in His ways, and to rest in His protection. When we do, we are shielded—not from every trial, but from despair. We are given courage—not to avoid change, but to face it with faith.

So today, if you're walking through uncertainty, remember this: God has your back. He sees you. He loves you. And He will never let you go.

Lord, thank You for being my refuge in every season. When life changes and I feel overwhelmed, help me to cling to You. Strengthen my faith, and remind me that Your love never fails. I trust in Your plan, even when I cannot see it. Amen.



Greg Mathurin

When did you start coming to Arcola?

My family and I began attending Arcola United Methodist shortly after moving to the area in 2012. What drew us most to the church was that it welcomed us, but was not dependent upon us. We were greeted warmly, seated among a healthy sized congregation, and promptly encouraged to seek ways we can be a part of the church. But this church also already knew exactly who and what it was. I liked that.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola has helped me define what my modern faith really is. It was where I settled down with my wife, raised my kids, and grew my faith for the last 13 years. This church seemed different. There was something about the way in which the pastors spoke from the heart, people mercilessly volunteered their time, and I felt like I should have paid admission to watch their music. Arcola truly began to shape my thinking about what it is to be a Christian, redefining my faith as a relationship with God and not just rules and doctrine. It taught me your personal journey can be different from your neighbor's.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

If there's a dream I have for the future of AUMC, it's that it continues to adapt to the times and not remain stagnant. I recall a time when we did Communion just once a month and when "Joys and Concerns" was an open forum for people to stand up and share publicly. I didn't crave a change then, but I also didn't realize back then the benefits of breaking bread every Sunday, and how not everyone would want to ask for prayers in front of an entire congregation. My wish is for the church to continue their trend of finding those ways of improving their reach, impact, and inclusion.

Stranger Danger

"When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.'"
— John 4: 7-10

Outside of church, most people aren't thrilled when strangers start talking to them. It feels invasive and rarely leads to anything beneficial — usually just a sales pitch. I must have that kind of face.

In this passage, Jesus speaks to a stranger in a way that defied all social norms. He approached a Samaritan woman for water, which shocked her. He was Jewish. He was a man. But he responded that the water he offered — the Living Water — was meant for everyone.

Then he did something bold. He told her to go get her husband, knowing she didn't have one. He revealed he knew she had five ex-husbands and was living with a man not her husband. Suddenly, she knew this wasn't just a man — he knew her. And yet he didn't shame her. He engaged her in deep conversation about truth, spirit, and salvation.

She was transformed — and became a witness to others.

Today, we often talk about acceptance from a distance. This story challenges us to truly connect. Loving our neighbor is hard. But Jesus didn't just preach love — he lived it in proximity.

The woman heard exactly what she needed. And Jesus met her there — not for his gain, but for her healing. That's not salesmanship. That's grace.



Rev. Tianna Durbin

When did you start coming to Arcola?

My family visited Arcola Church for the first time on Memorial Day Weekend 2014. We met Pastor Chris at the bridge after worship, and he spoke to each one of us. It was shortly after this that I began my work in worship and arts for Arcola Church, and all four Durbins began attending regularly. I give thanks for how God moves us and shapes us with new things!

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola has been a pillar of support and strength to us. Kayla and Jake have been confirmed at Arcola and have grown tremendously in their faith walk. They have listened intently to sermons and their meanings, and we will often have discussions afterward. Chris and I both have various groups we attend regularly that grow us and hold us faithfully accountable.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My hopes and dreams for Arcola Church would be to continue our fervor of support for all ministry and to welcome new ministry as it comes, just as Arcola has always done. I love the excitement in the congregation when we share growth in a ministry area, and there is an overwhelming sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit at work. It begins in worship and spills out into our communities. My dream is that this sense of awe and wonder at what God is up to will remain strong in this holy and sacred space called Arcola Church.

Worship the Lord with Gladness

*"Worship the Lord with gladness; come before the Lord with joyful songs."
— Psalm 100:2*

I hope it's no surprise to anyone that the scripture I share with you has something to do with worship! Since I came to know Jesus personally (in second grade!), I have loved Sundays and worship. And I very rarely miss a Sunday — because I don't want to miss a Sunday! I've had this zeal for worship all my life, and I still do. It is within the scope of worship that I have felt God's call upon my life.

We are in the midst of celebrating 20 years of ministry and worship in Arcola's "worship center," and we have much to be grateful for. In this sacred space, we've witnessed baptisms, experienced transformed lives, formed deep friendships, and watched faith take root and grow — thanks to God's *grace*, which abounds! Through all of this, week after week, there has been worship.

This scripture reminds us to "worship the Lord with gladness" because worship is not just something we do — it is who we are. Worship isn't about tradition or trend but about bringing our hearts before God. Worship reminds us that we are not the center — *God* is. God is a faithful and loving God who stands ready to speak into our hearts and lives through our worship.

I believe that when we come together in worship, God is present with us. I also believe the heavenly host of angels joins us in lifting our songs — songs of faith and lament, of hope and praise. And I believe that when we leave the worship space, we leave changed — with more courage, more hope, and a deeper trust in resurrection victory.

Our world needs hope, and worship reminds us that hope has a name — JESUS. The Church holds the tremendous honor and privilege to carry that hope into every broken and hurting place. Let us never lose sight of the power of our worship together. It has shaped our past, it inspires our present, and may it ignite our future.

May worship here always be vibrant, Spirit-filled, and relevant to every generation who walks through our doors. May our worship move us to serve boldly, to give generously, to sing passionately, to pray fervently, and to live faithfully.

Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of worship. Thank You for the ways You've met us in song, silence, Word, and Sacrament over these years. Continue to shape us by Your Spirit, and send us out from worship to be a witness of Your unending love. Amen.



Ben Roberts

When did you start coming to Arcola?

2015

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola constantly challenges — and then gives opportunity — to advance my faith.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

As a community, we boldly walk into eternity.

Grin and Bear It

"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

— Galatians 6:2

Ten years ago, when our family needed a new church home, my wife suggested we try Arcola. In the interest of marital harmony, the decision was made to attend — just once. But in my mind, it was a hard no. Having driven past the church many times, it looked like a tiny building in the middle of nowhere. The old trope came to mind: "Small churches are small for a reason." While neither fair nor true, the thought was firmly lodged in the brain. The plan was simple — grin and bear it for one Sunday and move on.

Upon arriving, the first surprise came in the parking lot. A whole complex was hidden behind that small façade. (*Maybe this wouldn't be as bad as expected.*)

Warm greetings followed upon entering. (*OK, maybe keeping an open mind was warranted after all.*) As the service began, a sense of welcome settled in quickly. About 20 minutes in, Barbi Shire either led prayers or read the scripture — it's hard to recall exactly. What stood out, however, was the way she made everyone feel. Some folks exude kindness. Barbi is more of a *nuclear-blast front* of kindness. Then the Holy Spirit got to work. As John Wesley once put it, "my heart was strangely warmed."

Before the service was even halfway through, the decision was clear. Unless the pastor was a total disaster, I was in. Pastor Chris began his sermon, and halfway through, a knowing glance was exchanged between Jenn and me — one that said it all:

1. *I am an idiot.*
2. *There would be no more church hunting.*

Few verses capture the mission and spirit of the Church Universal — and Arcola specifically — more clearly than Galatians 6:2.

Over the years, countless acts of kindness and charity have been witnessed here. It's woven into the DNA of the community. Whether facing a medical crisis, job loss, or the passing of a parent, our Arcola family has always shown up. This community encourages spiritual growth and a deeper commitment to Christ every step of the way.

There is now a spiritual debt of kindness that can never be repaid — but there's joy in trying, and great hope for what the next ten years may bring.



Scott Rosner

When did you start coming to Arcola?

My family and I started coming to Arcola in May of 2015.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola has played a significant role in my and my family's faith journey by providing a supportive and nurturing environment where we can grow in grace. The music ministry, in particular, has been a significant source of inspiration and connection, deepening my faith through worship and song. Additionally, a recent men's discipleship group has provided valuable support and guidance, further strengthening my spiritual journey.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My dream is for Arcola to keep expanding its ministries—music, grow, serve, and congregational care—and to afford me the opportunity to contribute to expanding the recovery ministry.

The God Who Comes After You

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" — Luke 15:4-7

Jesus once told a simple story: Imagine a shepherd has 100 sheep, but one wanders off. He leaves the 99 in the open field and goes after the one that's lost until he finds it. And when he does, he puts it on his shoulders, carries it home, and calls his friends to celebrate. That's how God feels about one sinner who turns back—there's more joy in heaven over that one than over 99 who never wandered.

It was July of 2015 when I first heard these words—sitting in the congregation, hiding an alcohol and addiction pamphlet in my church program, and realizing that I was that lost sheep. For years, I wandered far from God. Drugs and alcohol had me trapped. I didn't just make "bad choices"—I was lost. I couldn't find my way back, and honestly, I didn't think God would even want me back. I had taken for granted all of God's gifts and mercy. Through the power of this scripture, I had my last drink that day. God removed the obsession to drink and use drugs, and started my path to recovery.

For me, part of God's search party was Arcola United Methodist Church. I didn't stumble in there by accident—God, through my loving and patient wife, led me and showed me the prevenient grace of Jesus Christ. Arcola became part of the arms of Jesus, helping carry me back when I was too weak to walk.

In recovery, there are moments you feel like giving up. The pull of old habits, the weight of regrets, the fear of failure—they can make you want to slip away again. But this parable reminds us: God is relentless in His love. Even if you wander off tomorrow, He'll still come after you. That's grace. Recovery is a lot like being carried—sometimes you can't take the next step on your own, but God and the people He sends will hold you up until your legs work again.

This was the start of my journey. Through the years and the support of Arcola, I have grown in my faith, my discipleship, and my love of Jesus Christ. My family has found a home where they can grow and serve, and in 2017 we were all baptized together. Arcola has also offered me a chance to carry the message of faith and recovery to other suffering addicts and alcoholics—to let them know God hasn't stopped looking for them. Stay close to the Shepherd. Let Him lead you, feed you, and keep you safe with the flock.

No matter how I am feeling when I walk through the doors of Arcola, everything gets better. Since I heard this parable, everything has gotten better. I am no longer sick and stuck, waiting for everything to fall apart. I am now useful and can walk humbly in the grace of God.



Rachel Kane

When did you start coming to Arcola?

I started coming to Arcola in 2018 when I was in 7th grade.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola has helped me grow in my faith journey by introducing me to leaders who have guided and encouraged me throughout my high school years. I have also grown in my faith by being surrounded by others on different parts of their journey and being uplifted by youth and adults in the church. The mission trips to Mexico have allowed me to see the fruits of God's work in other people's lives and have strengthened my connection with God.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

I dream that Arcola Church will continue to grow in its outreach by encouraging fellowship and reaching out to the community around us. I hope Arcola continues to collect donations for food drives, the hygiene pantry, and other necessities all year round. I also dream that the future will bring a youth group that continues to thrive in a supportive and nurturing environment that helps the youth grow in their faith more and more each day.

Seated with Christ

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. — Ephesians 2:4–10

Before my first semester in college, I was anxious about making friends and afraid of failure. I was also worried about what I was going to do after I graduated. But after spending time with God, I became more secure in who I am and more open to the plan that God has for me. The book *Seated with Christ* by Heather Holleman, which focuses on Ephesians 2:6, helped me grow in my faith and realize that God provides me with all I need to succeed.

Sometimes, I act ashamed and believe that I am unworthy of God's love because of something I did or didn't do. I try to prove myself to God by acting arrogantly and self-righteously—trying to show Him that I am loved by others. But verses 4 and 5 tell us that because of God's great love for us, we are saved by grace and not by anything we have done. I don't have to prove my worth to God—He has gifted me a seat in heaven with Jesus.

Before understanding that, I would chase seats at other tables in my life—trying to fit in with the smartest, prettiest, funniest, most successful people. But now that I know I am seated at Jesus's table, I don't have to strive to sit at other worldly tables. I went from chasing the perfect appearance to accepting myself for who I am—knowing that my body is made perfectly for dancing to worship songs and that my hands can create beautiful and thoughtful gifts for people. Instead of comparing myself to others, I know that He seated all of us together and equally at His table. I no longer feel the need to compete with my classmates or friends because God has a seat just for them too.

Verse 10 also tells us that God prepared works for us in advance. God created all of us in His image with unique talents and strengths—perfectly suited for the work He planned for each of us to do. He has a separate plan for that person we're always comparing ourselves to—and He's prepared something special just for you too.

Because I am seated in Christ, I can stop comparing myself to others. I can feel accepted for who I am, and I can love others as Jesus calls us to. I often hyper-fixate on tables where I've never sat—the cool table at school, the athletic table, the flawless and beautiful table. But these worldly tables will never provide what Jesus can: healing and everlasting love.

Instead of striving for secular fame and success, a seated life in Christ allows us to experience adoration by abiding in Him. Now that we know we have a seat with Christ in the heavens, we are sent to do the good works God prepared for us.



Cale Pritchett

When did you start coming to Arcola?

We (my wife, Christina, and our two daughters, Peyton and Anna) started attending Arcola in 2018 and joined formally in the spring of 2019. We had been seeking a church for our kids to grow up in, and Arcola checked all the boxes for us — thriving programs for kids and families, a nonjudgmental and welcoming environment, and freshly made communion bread!

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola provides ministries that are very approachable. No “tests” required, with options to go at your own pace. This non-pushy approach has given us a safe space to explore our faith and what it means, while also being fully loved by those around us.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

We want to see Arcola continue to thrive and be a standard-bearer for “loving neighbor” in our local communities. Our hope is for it to touch the hearts and minds of Fairfax and Loudoun County and offer a safe place for families and individuals to develop a meaningful relationship with our Creator.

With All Your Heart

*“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”
— Jeremiah 29:13*

In the early 7th century BCE, many of the “well-to-do” families from Jerusalem and Judah — what is southern Israel today — were struggling to understand God. These were people who thought they had figured life out. They’d lived comfortably, but suddenly, the Babylonian Empire invaded, exiled them to Babylon, and stripped away their old sense of identity. Far from home, vulnerable and disoriented, they began to question God. False prophets and false idols promised easy answers, but they led the people even further astray.

It was to this audience that the prophet Jeremiah wrote his letter in chapter 29, urging them not to give up hope and reminding them that if they sought God with all their hearts, they would find Him.

I can relate. In my early 20s, I began asking, “Who or what is God?” As a data analyst, logic was the lens through which I viewed the world. If something couldn’t be explained, I assumed it wasn’t worth my time. And God? God is hard to explain. Where is God? What does God look like? If God created everything, where did God come from? Those questions consumed me and, eventually, pushed me into a long sabbatical from faith.

I wasn’t exiled to Babylon, but I was living under the sway of a different kind of idol — my own knowledge and pride. Like Judah, I wasn’t seeking God with all my heart. I was only seeking Him in places that fit neatly into my logic. And when I couldn’t find answers, I stopped looking altogether.

Jeremiah’s words remind me that God isn’t found through partial, distracted seeking. The key is the heart. What God desires is not just our questions, but our willingness to trust and follow — even when we don’t have all the answers.

What I should have been asking all along wasn’t “Who or what is God?” but “What does God desire for this world — and what is my role in serving that?” When I shifted my focus to that question, I found my heart more open to God’s presence, even in the mysteries I couldn’t solve.

I am grateful that Arcola has given me space to wrestle with my faith — and even more grateful for the reminder that seeking God means pursuing Him fully, not half-heartedly. My encouragement to you is this: bring your whole heart — questions, doubts, and all — before God. Seek Him not just with the part of you that demands answers, but with the part *that* is willing to trust Him in the unknown. When you do, He promises you will find Him.



Joy McLaughlin

When did you start coming to Arcola?

Our family started coming to Arcola in November of 2019. We had visited several churches and were in search of a home where our then-teen daughter would grow. Darren and I visited Arcola several Sundays and were greeted warmly by so many. We then brought our daughter—coincidentally on Youth Worship Sunday. She asked if we could go to Arcola and if she could join the Youth Praise Team. She met Giao Brewer, who introduced her to Tianna Durbin, and we have been here faithfully since that day.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola has given us so many opportunities for spiritual and personal growth. The worship team welcomed me and gave me a sense of belonging. It has challenged me musically as well as spiritually. In learning the songs of praise—often drawn from scripture—I carry the words with me all week. In singing, I feel deeply connected to our Heavenly Father. I was also delighted to discover Arcola's Health and Wellness Ministry. Through it, I've been able to contribute my professional experience as a physical therapist to serve both church and community. It's a beautiful bridge between my career and my faith—allowing God to use the gift He gave me.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My dream is for Arcola's small groups to connect across ministries—paired for service or fellowship. For example, the Launch group with the Youth Praise Team, or the Alleluia Choir with moms of teens and tweens. These shared experiences could build new friendships and expand the impact of our ministry. I also hope these teams continue to grow in love and service for our community.

Pray Continually

"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." — 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

My friend, you are loved and valued by an unfathomable, gracious God—one who knew you in your mother's womb (Ps. 139:13), who knows the number of hairs on your head (Luke 12:7), and who has plans to prosper you, not harm you (Jer. 29:11). This same God who sent His Son to die for you, and His Spirit to remain with you (John 14:26), wants to be welcomed into your life so you can experience unimaginable joy (John 15:11).

Prayer is an imperative part of maintaining a relationship with God. Prayer is worship—and it's two-way communication. It's more than asking God to bless your family or your food. It should be a heartfelt, regular invitation for God to enter every part of your life: home, work, school. It is praise: "God, You are holy." It is confession: "God, I have made mistakes." It is thanksgiving: "God, thank You for Your peace." It's a cry for help—for your friends, your family, yourself, your country, your church.

Paul urges us to pray continually. That might seem impossible. How can we pray constantly with so much happening in our lives? Not all of us are called to sit in silent prayer all day. But we are called to stay in tune with God. It's not about speaking nonstop—it's about choosing to invite Him in. We ask for wisdom in our work, grace in our relationships, and strength in our decisions. We reflect Christ in how we treat others.

Just like any human relationship, communication with God is essential. If we don't talk to our spouse or friend, the relationship becomes strained. The same is true with God. Though He never leaves us (Heb. 13:5), we can feel distant if we don't include Him in our days. But when we do, He is with us—even when we don't fully realize it.

When we say, "Thy will be done" (Matt. 6:10), we express trust. We trust Him with our families, our careers, our hopes. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust God with all your heart"—not some of it. All of it. And when we do, He will guide us, provide for us (Phil. 4:19), and walk with us every day.



Sarah Jones

When did you start coming to Arcola?

I came to a service at Arcola for the first time in August 2023 after Katherine had an incredibly positive experience at Summer in the Arts. One at a time, family members started to join me, and by the Christmas season, we were often attending as a family of five.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

The mission of community outreach was instrumental in our family finding Arcola, and it is also what has encouraged us to join in the practice of offering our own gifts as an expression of faith. I continue to watch my daughters grow in confidence and love because of the incredible commitment of the entire team of youth leaders. I joined the impressively talented Alleluia Choir last fall when the congregation was invited for a “Sing with the Choir” Sunday and felt so welcomed that I decided to try it for the year. That step was a true illustration of a faith community at work, for it is because of the examples I see around me that I feel compelled to place myself and my gifts before God so that they may be used toward the very outreach that brought us here.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My dream for the future of Arcola is that the members of the congregation continue to look for more ways to spread light into communities, near and far. I pray that we are always inspired to offer our gifts and grow our faith so that we can gather and feed God’s people.

Casting the Net in Faith

“As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ At once they left their nets and followed him.”

— Matthew 4:18-20

As we read scripture, we often try to understand it by placing ourselves in the story. I’ve always thought Jesus’ words here applied to me as much as to Peter or Andrew: follow where He leads, even if it’s difficult or unfamiliar. Serving others isn’t about staying comfortable—it’s about going where we are needed. That call spoke to me clearly as a young teacher and later as an Army spouse, but when we relocated to Northern Virginia and I was struggling to find my purpose, I learned that I might not always be the fisher, but that I could also be a fish.

Indeed, I felt like a fish out of water here, swimming in unfamiliar seas, searching for answers to whatever worried me: a family dentist, activities for my kids. After two years and no real sense of belonging, my youngest attended Summer in the Arts at the invitation of her music teacher. The week was so remarkable that I took a chance and attended a Sunday service that August. I thought I’d just sneak in without anyone noticing, but Tim greeted me at the entrance and insisted that I should have a name tag. I entered just as the choir started singing, “There’s Joy in the House of the Lord.” The words settled in my soul, and I remember standing in the back row with tears streaming down my face and a deep, wonderful sense of relief.

I returned the next week and, to my surprise, Tim remembered me—not just my face, but my name—and in a place where I knew no one, that felt like an act of love. Tim did not know me. Joyful Noise did not know me. The people who organized Summer in the Arts did not know me. None of them knew how they could make a difference, but because they followed their callings, I was found, I was fed, and I was led to a place I belonged. Fishing for God’s people with the gifts He has given: what a simple, yet profound demonstration of God at work.

This is the power of faith in action—not just through individuals, but through community. The impact of that service wasn’t because of the actions of one person, but what many created together. None of them knew who would be reached, but they offered their time and talents anyway without details or guarantees. They cast their net in faith.

“Gather Us In” is one of my favorite hymns, and it reminds me of what Arcola does best: building ministries that reach beyond its walls. From Christmas Fest to the Mexico mission trip, this congregation embodies what it means to follow Jesus—not by staying in the boat, but by going to where the fish are. Sometimes it involves sacrifice to share our gifts with all God’s people... “the lost and forsaken... the rich and the haughty... the proud and the strong.”

And sometimes, for a fish like me, it only takes an invitation.



Bryan & Lisa Talbot

When did you start coming to Arcola?

Four years ago, we felt called by God to adopt a teenager. We were empty nesters with a grown son and wanted to help a youth. We went through a two-year adoption application and search process. The United Methodist church we were attending at the time had a declining youth group, so we visited many churches looking for a strong youth program, strong adult programs, and active Bible studies. When we visited Arcola Church in 2023, we instantly believed God had guided us to it.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

Arcola Church surrounded our family with love and support. When our teen arrived two years ago, Arcola immediately invited him to help with Vacation Bible School and participate in the Summer-in-the-Arts musical. Our teen was absorbed into the vibrant youth program. We enjoyed assisting as youth leaders. Our friends and extended family also supported us in amazing ways. It was beautiful to see God at work through this new community nurturing our teen. At home, God somehow gave us the commitment to read the Bible every night as a family and share our insights with each other.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

Our vision for Arcola Church is an extension of our experience — a place where people care about each other, love God, and continually grow in faith.

The Strength to Keep Offering

"Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.' But I said, 'I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God.'" — Isaiah 49:1-4

Sadly, after two years in our home, our teen recently decided to return to his biological family and the adoption failed. After four years of intense sacrifice, we are heartbroken.

For months, we have sought meaning in the ashes of our experience. Are we sure that God called us? Yes. We also believe God equipped us by giving us the unwavering commitment to pursue such an effort. God gave us a mission by sending this child to our home. Still, we were left with a deep heartache and questions.

During this time, we happened to start reading the New Testament, looking for times when Jesus quoted Old Testament scriptures referring to Himself. Many quotes were from Isaiah, who prophesied about the coming Messiah before Jesus was born. We stumbled across Isaiah 49:1-4 and were startled to find Jesus describing His own feelings of failure:

*"I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all.
Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God."*

We were astonished — and comforted — to realize that Jesus, too, felt like His work had failed. Jesus said that God called Him, equipped Him, and gave Him a mission. But then the people Jesus loved rejected Him. His words echo the sorrow we feel.

Jesus' response to His disappointments helps us process our own. He says, "Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand," meaning that God is the judge, not the outcome. He also says, "My reward is with my God," meaning that God Himself is the reward. It is not the results but rather the relationship with God that mattered most to Christ. We trust God to make something of our offering — even if we never see the fruit.

Isaiah 49 gives us comfort and strength to praise God. Even though we are disappointed in the outcome, we repeatedly felt God's presence and support during those years, often through Arcola Church. We are grateful to be reminded by Jesus that even in deep failure, it is our relationship with God — not the results — that matters most.

Lord, please accept our offerings given with a pure heart and help us remember that You are our judge and our reward, no matter what the outcome. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.



Lisa Fife

When did you start coming to Arcola?

Spring of 2024.

How has Arcola helped you grow in your faith journey?

I see all the believers living their faith and working in the community, and it inspires me to study Scripture and to get deeper in my faith.

What is your dream for the future of Arcola?

My dream is that Arcola Church could become the hub for a community network—helping our neighbors by giving of our time and resources. Perhaps we could join with other networks for larger missions and relief efforts.

Faithfulness in the Fatigue

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." —Galatians 6:9

For most of my adult life, I've had a chronic illness that leaves me very fatigued. I wake up tired and need to decide every day which activities are the priority for my limited energy budget. Exercise, housekeeping, family obligations, medical appointments—all stack up. Even socializing can be a drain.

Sometimes, late in the day, I hear, *"I can't do it,"* going through my head. But I've found it helpful to repeat this Scripture in answer to that voice—especially when the next activity is a volunteering opportunity or doing a favor for a friend.

Lately, I've been thinking about this verse in response to other weaknesses. This Christian life isn't easy. God gives us lots of guidance in Scripture on the proper way to live in relationship with Him and with our neighbors. And I find myself confessing and requesting forgiveness multiple times a day.

My daily temptations are anger, resentment, ingratitude, a bad temper, and being judgmental of others. And if I'm tired and hungry and stuck in traffic, it's the occasional bad language directed at other drivers. My sinful nature is like a snake curled up inside me, waiting for a moment of weakness—when it leaps up to the surface of my mind and makes a mockery of my love for Christ. And then I feel sick about it. Because I love the Lord. And I know He loves me. And I want to grow closer to Him.

It takes strength to fight those temptations. And I'm developing a toolkit to help. Prayers, Scriptures, breathing exercises, and mantras (my favorite is "Come, Holy Spirit, come!") help dissipate my anger or anxiety. Being around other believers, Christian podcasts, and just spending time in Scripture all help build up our foundation. Focusing on encouraging and noticing others helps keep my energy on them instead of myself. And I hold close the promise of Philippians 4:13: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

God promises there will be a reward for our efforts—but He doesn't promise when. Even if we have to wait for a harvest, I believe our faithfulness brings a kind of serenity—a peacefulness to our hearts—when we live the way Christ modeled for us. We can't be happy if we are angry. It's easy to get discouraged and give up on doing good. But I pray for endurance and perseverance—and most of all, to serve as a reflection of the light of Christ.



"I ask that God will strengthen you in your inner selves from the riches of his glory through the Spirit. I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God. Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us; glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and always. Amen." — Ephesians 3:16-21



Arcola Church

ArcolaChurch.org