

THE INTERPRETER

Church Office Hours: Mon-Wed 8-4:30 & Fri 8-3:30

Ministers: The Congregation Minister to the Ministers:

Rev. Michael Southcombe



Saint Stephens UCC

Where God is still speaking.

No matter who you are . . .

. . . or where you are on life's journey,
YOU are welcome here.

FEBRUARY

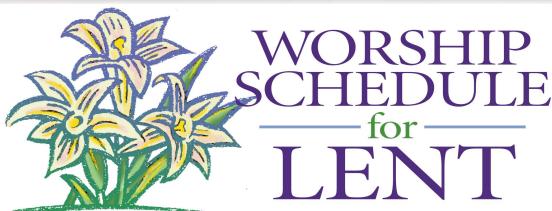


Staats and Sholund Scholarship Applications Available February 6!

The **Sholund Scholarship** is available to seniors graduating from high school who intend to pursue higher education next year. Applications for the Sholund Scholarship must be completed and submitted to Terra in the church office by **April 1, 2026, at 4:30 PM**. Please direct any questions about this scholarship to Terra.

The **Staats Scholarship** is available to any senior graduating from high school who intends to pursue higher education next year. If a student received a scholarship award once, they are eligible to apply for an award for an additional year. Applications for the Staats Scholarship must be completed and submitted to Terra in the church office **by April 1, 2026, at 4:30 PM**. Please direct any questions about this scholarship to Terra.

Both Scholarship Applications are available via the website or contact Terra to be emailed the application(s).



Ash Wednesday – February 18

Worship at 11 am at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church

Worship at 6 pm and Soup Supper at 5 pm at Saint Stephens

Every Wednesday in Lent Through March 25

Worship at 11 am at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church

Worship at 6 pm at Saint Stephens UCC

Soup Supper at 5 pm

We have partnered once again with Our Saviour's Lutheran Church and other members of the Merrill Ministerium to offer a morning service every Wednesday. Additionally, we will continue to hold our evening service and soup supper at St. Stephens.

Saint Stephens UCC
903 E. 2nd St.
Merrill, WI. 54452
715-536-7322

**Emergency
Pastoral Care Needs**
618-558-5014

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2026 BUDGET/ELECTION MEETING

February 8 after Worship

Annual meeting packets are available for pickup in the church office during office hours or at the scrip table on Sundays.



A few months ago the Council had a discussion about what it means to be a member of the church. As it happens, it is a discussion happening at a lot of churches. Similar conversations are happening in pastors' groups online.

What does membership mean at St. Stephens? It basically means responsibility. Members have the responsibility to be informed about issues such as the budget, who they will elect to Council, Endowment, and Staats Scholarship Committees, and support the church with time, talent, and treasure.

Benefits of membership include a discount on the use of facilities and the intangible benefit of being a part of the congregation, the Conference, and the wider UCC.

The obligation we have as members is to participate in the life of the church, to worship regularly, and to support the church financially. We do not set a minimum for any of those obligations.

We also promise to work on the relationship. If something starts causing us to question our place in the church, we promise to talk to someone: the pastor, a Council member, or a friend who will help us bring our concerns forward to someone. Our concern is that we all feel spiritually nourished at St. Stephens. We cannot, however, be all things to all people. And the trend is more and more for people who "surf" churches for various needs but who do not commit to any one church.

St. Stephens members have established 2 forms of membership, "active" and "inactive." The path to being an active member involves either Confirmation, a new member's class, or a transfer of membership from another church. If a person stops attending for more than 2 years, does not contribute to the church tangibly, or requests to be listed as "inactive," we move them to that list. If they then start attending regularly, contributing to the church, or request to be moved to the "active" list, we do so.

We pay a membership fee to the Wisconsin Conference for every active member. This fee supports the most basic work of the Conference.

As I noted above, people's attitudes about membership are more fluid than they were in the past. Church Councils and Boards are struggling with how to bring into membership people who attend church virtually, contribute to the church, feel connected to the church solely through online connections but who have no connection to the building or to other members. Should a person who never comes to the physical building of the church have a vote on maintaining the building? One of the responses I have seen to that question flips it. Should a person who only cares about the building have a vote on the programs and outreach of the church?

Then we have the question the hospitals ask when people are being admitted, "With what church or faith community are you affiliated?"

I have often met people who still considered themselves members because they were confirmed in the church 40 years ago. This belief is not unique to St. Stephens. I have seen this belief in every church I've served. And I have visited and provided pastoral care regardless of membership, attendance, support, or connection.

I will tell people it does not matter; I will be their pastor even after decades of inactivity. We know that people who are more active members of faith communities tend to be healthier physically and mentally, have wider support networks, and report feeling lonely far less than people who are not affiliated with a church or other faith community. People who have a healthier spiritual life are better able to process grief and other major life changes.

All of these questions lead to the questions we need to discuss and answer from time to time. What does membership require at St. Stephens? Are "active" and "inactive" appropriate categories or should we have others? Should we invite people who worship regularly and support the church financially to vote on matters before the church? Do we need a "membership committee" to call on people who have changed their attendance patterns or reach out to prospective members?

What does membership mean to you, and how do you wish others would think about membership? Something to think about on these cold winter nights.

Pastor Mike



February 4 – UCC History Class 5 – 7:30 PM
February 6 – The Vibe @ St. Stephens 5:30 PM
February 8 – Budget/Elections Meeting
February 18 – Soup Supper 5 PM
February 18 – Ash Wednesday Service 6 PM
February 22 – Nature Church @ Agra Pavilion
Chime Choir – Every Thursday at 6 PM
Confirmation - Every Wed. 5 – 7:30 PM



FEBRUARY LECTORYN READINGS

February 1, Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
 Mic 6:1-8 Ps 15
 1 Cor 1:18-31 Matt. 5:1-12

February 8, Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
 Isa 58:1-9a Ps 112:1-9
 1 Cor 2:1-12 Matt 5:13-20

February 15, Transfiguration Sunday
 Ex 24:12-18 Ps 2
 2 Peter 1:16-21 Matt 17:1-9

February 22, First Sunday in Lent
 Gen 2:15-17, 3:1-7 Ps 32
 Rom 5:12-19 Matt 4:1-11

+ These are the lectionary readings for Sundays. Not all readings will be used every Sunday. These are provided for your study and devotion.



FEBRUARY RADIO BROADCASTS

February 8 – In memory of our dad, William Johnson, for his birthday on February 8, from his family.

Open Radio Ministry Dates:
February 1, 15, 22



February Livestream is sponsored by David & Cheryl Buck.

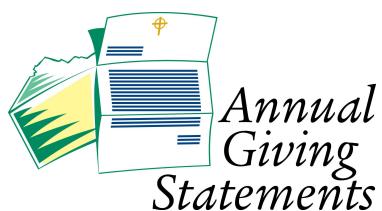
February 1: In memory of brothers David and Lloyd Jr.

February 8: In honor of David's birthday on February 8

February 15: In memory of Cheryl's parents, Alvin & Yvonne Lazotte

February 22: In memory of David's parents, Lloyd Sr. and Ruth Buck

*Livestream sponsorships are available for 2026!



Giving Statements were mailed out at the end of January. As a friendly reminder, if you sign up for a Realm account, you can easily track your giving throughout the year, update your personal information, and print your own statement for tax purposes.

Starting next year, we'll be sending statements electronically to the email addresses we have on file. If we don't have your email, please reach out to Terra to update your information.

If you prefer not to receive your statement by email, just let Terra know, and a printed copy will be available for pick-up in the church office.



FEBRUARY MISSION



HAVEN has been supporting survivors of interpersonal abuse in Lincoln County for over 35 years, adapting our advocacy to meet the needs of those affected by generational trauma. Many individuals seek our services wanting the abuse to stop, while still hoping to maintain relationships. We recognize that aggressors may also be survivors of trauma, though this doesn't excuse their actions.

We listen to and validate our clients, helping them understand their experiences and explore available resources. Safety and insight are crucial for initiating healing, and it's important for survivors to feel supported as they reclaim their lives. The community's belief in and support of survivors strengthens everyone.

HAVEN offers free community education on recognizing, addressing, and preventing interpersonal abuse and violence. We also highlight the qualities of healthy relationships and the effects of childhood adversity on well-being. Each presentation is tailored to the audience's needs.

Interpersonal abuse affects us all—statistically, one in five people will be impacted during their lifetime. Being aware of this issue and accessing available help is vital for fostering healthier relationships for future generations.

We will be collecting monetary donations for Haven. Please use your "Special Offering Envelope," or you can also contribute through our online giving platform on our website <https://ststephensucc.net/donate>. Additionally, you can text "SAINTSTEPHENS" to 73256 to donate via your mobile device. Thank you for your generosity.

Thank you
VOLUNTEERS!

The Usher's Club would like to thank the faithful volunteers who showed up to undecorate and clean after Christmas. Your efforts are greatly appreciated, and we look forward to your help next year. If you have never joined us in decorating, please consider coming in November to help and get to know some fantastic members of our congregation as well. God's blessings to all in 2026!



TEND & TABLE

If you haven't had the chance to try Tend and Table yet, you're missing out! Each box is filled with delicious items from local Wisconsin farmers. This farmer-led subscription service connects Wisconsin farmers with our community, making fresh food more accessible and supporting our local agricultural producers.

To make your first purchase or to learn more, please visit the provided link or scan the QR Code. It's important to complete your purchase through the Saint Stephens link so that we receive credit. Subscription boxes will be available for pickup on Fridays from 4 PM to 6 PM.

[Click Here for Link](#)



Orders must be placed by previous Friday
Pick-ups Start Dec 5
Fridays weekly 4p-6p
903 E 2nd St, Merrill, WI 54452




<https://tendandtable.com/pages/saint-stephens-ucc-fundraiser>

STEWARSHIP CORNER

New Year, New Goals: A Perfect Time to Set Up Online Giving

The start of a new year presents fresh opportunities for growth, generosity, and making a difference. It's an ideal time to set meaningful goals, both personal and collective, and to create systems that facilitate consistent and easy acts of generosity.

Establishing online giving is one of the best ways to begin the year on a strong note. It enables church members to contribute anytime and anywhere, while also helping the church plan for the future with steady, predictable donations. Online giving simplifies the process of being generous and empowers individuals to stay engaged with our missions throughout the year.

As you set your goals for the year, consider how digital tools can assist you in achieving them—starting with a straightforward, secure, and accessible method for giving.

To Donate Online

1. Go to the church's website and click the "donate" link
2. Click "Make a Donation"
3. Enter the amount you want to donate
4. Select the fund you want to contribute to
5. Choose how often you want to donate
6. Enter your email address
7. Enter your payment information
8. Click the blue button to submit your payment

Text Giving

Text "SAINTSTEPHENS" to 73256 to give using your mobile device. This number will never send unsolicited texts to you. To cancel further messages, text STOP. If you need assistance with text giving, text HELP. Standard text message and data rates may apply.

If you need assistance setting up online giving, contact Terra in the church office

WISE TEAM

Why Talk About Mental Health? By Frank Van Alstine

A little over two years ago I sought help for my intense anxiety. I met with a counselor on three different occasions, and it was determined that I have Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). My last question for my counselor was, now that I know what I have, do I tell others about it, or should I keep it to myself? Her response was that I should only share what I was comfortable sharing, but in my case, she felt I should tell my story. I agree with her, so I have chosen to be very open about it, hoping that my story might help others understand more about GAD.

Why talk about mental health? It can reduce stigma and misconceptions. Sharing experiences creates communities where people feel understood. Talking about it can encourage people to seek help and prevent conditions from worsening.

I haven't seen my counselor in over two years, but I know I can see her again if I feel I need to. I still check in with my behavioral health team twice a year to make sure the plan we have come up with is still working. I consider these appointments like going in for my annual physical. Talking about it was the first step to living a better life.



The WISE team is sponsoring Nature Church on Sunday, February 22, 2026, from 4:00-5:30 PM at the Agra Pavillion. We have reserved the pavilion, so we have a place to stay warm. Please join us for a brief service focused on the sounds of nature. Afterward, enjoy a bowl of chili, a cup of hot cocoa, and fellowship!

GREEN TEAM

Going Solar

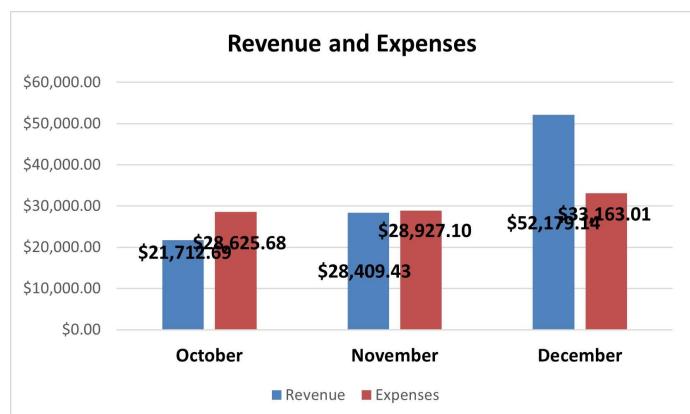
Churches Can No Longer Afford to NOT Go Solar

Many congregations that own their own building can no longer afford to not go solar for five reasons:

1. The federal government will pay for at least 30% of the cost of a solar installation, if not 40 to 50%, depending upon where a church is located and whether domestically produced materials are used. (Technically, one could have 80% of a solar installation covered, if one additionally received funds through competitive processes.)
2. Solar will reduce one's electrical bill. This is especially true when a church maximizes the environmental and financial impact of going solar by increasing its energy efficiency and conservation.
3. Even if a congregation does not have the funds to pay for the upfront costs of going solar, the Cornerstone Fund can provide financing that will enable a congregation to reduce its overall costs. (The Creation Care Loan currently has a reduced interest rate of 5%).
4. Even if a congregation does not want to purchase or finance a solar system, it can still go solar by partnering with an investor who pays for the system and gives the congregation (and possibly low-income neighbors as well) a discount on electricity—typically around 10-20% off one's monthly bill.
5. Finally, even if a congregation has absolutely no interest in saving money on electricity, so that more money can be spent on ministry, going solar is one important way to reduce pollution and live out our first calling as Christians: to care for God's creation.

Source: <https://www.ucc.org/goingsolar/>

CHURCH FINANCIAL REPORT



December Revenue and Expenses

Revenue \$52,179.14

Expenses \$33163.01

Net Gain: \$19,016.13

The congregation raised \$3,025 for the Christmas Fund.

Help Us Strengthen Our Church!

Our church home is full of life and activity, but it requires ongoing care. We recently replaced the roofs over the Sunday School building and offices to prevent further damage. To expedite this, we took out a loan against the parsonage, and while our members have been incredibly generous, we still owe \$51,150.14 at a 7% interest rate.

Currently, our roof fund covers just under a year of minimum payments (\$585/month). Extra contributions allow us to make additional payments, reduce interest costs, and free up resources for future improvements.

Every gift makes a difference, whether one-time or ongoing. Thank you to everyone who has contributed. Together, we can keep our church strong and ready to serve for years to come!



YEAR IN REVIEW

January – December 2025

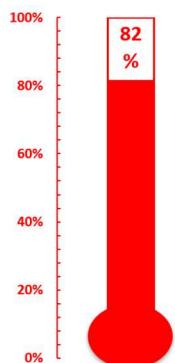
Financial Comparison to Prior Years

Income	2022	2023	2024	2025
Offerings	\$325,027	\$302,310	\$288,232	\$292,540
Scrip	\$6,500	\$3,000	\$3,000	\$9,525
Memorials	\$7,155	\$18,625	\$16,139	\$12,225
Other	\$8,707	\$13,408	\$8,692	\$8,515
ERC – IRS Refund	-	-	-	\$15,392
Unrealized Gains	-	-	\$44,935	\$47,808
Expenses	\$355,910	\$364,424	\$362,332	\$390,317
Net Profit (Loss)	\$33,579	(\$27,080)	(\$1,334)	(\$4,311)

2025 Missions

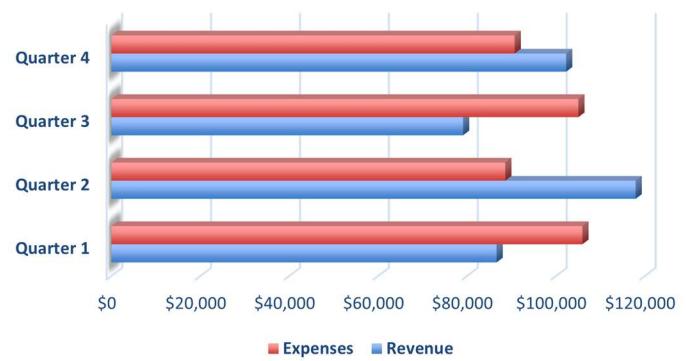
January	MAC Home	\$2,035.00
February	Food Pantry	\$3,780.00
March	One Great Hour of Sharing	\$5,295.00
April	Haven	\$1,710.00
May	NAMI	\$1,225.00
June	Strengthen the Church	\$1,499.61
July	Mission Trip	\$1,655.00
August	Bluejay Aid/Nest	\$1,765.00
September	Neighbors in Need	\$1,030.00
October	St. Vincent De Paul	\$1,180.00
November	Food Pantry	\$3,090.00
December	Christmas Fund	\$3,025.00
Mission Totals		\$27,289.61

OCWM Goal 2025	
Quarter	Amount
QRT 1	\$1,655.00
QRT 2	\$1,465.00
QRT 3	\$1,355.00
QRT 4	\$1,250.00
Total	\$5,725.00
Goal	\$7,000.00
Amount Short	\$1,275.00
Achieved %	82%
Target %	100%



Thank you to our amazing congregation for your incredible support of our local community and to the wider church!!!

Quarterly Revenue & Expenses



United Church Camps

Registration is open for both Camp Daycholah and Moon Beach! Visit ucci.org for more information and to register! The church has scholarships available!

2026 Summer Camp Schedule



Select your session by grade completed or age shown.

Arrival time on Sunday is 4:00 pm
*Me Camp arrival time is 4:30 pm

Departure time on Wednesday is 11:00 am
Departure time on Friday is 11:00 am

Family Camp! (aka Mega Me's)

June 28-July 1

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
June 28	29	30	July 1	2	3	4
	New! Family Camp... aka Mega Me Camp					4th of July
	CIT- Counselor In Training Camp					
July 5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	4th of July					
	Middle School Adventure Camp- Grades 5-8					
	MADD Camp – Grades 5-12					
	CON Camp – Grades 9-12					
	And Me's – Grades K-2, Ages 4-6					
	Tenderfoot- Grades 2-4					
July 12	13	14	15	16	17	18
	Middle School Adventure Camp- Grades 5-8					
	High School Adventure Camp- Grades 9-12					
	And Me's- Grades K-2, Ages 4-6					
	Tenderfoot- Grades 2-4					
July 19	20	21	22	23	24	25
	Night Owl – Grades 9-12					
	NIGHTHAWK – GRADES					
	Nightingale - Grades 3-5					
July 26	27	28	29	30	31	Aug. 1
	Middle School Adventure Camp- Grades 5-8					
	Sail Camp – Grades 9-12					
	And Me Adventure - Grades K-2, Ages 4-6					
	Tenderfoot Adventure- Grades 2-4					
Aug. 2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	New! Camp Rewind! Adult Summer Camp Week!- Millennial, Gen X and Senior Camps!					

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU! FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS

We want to acknowledge and celebrate your special birthdays!
Send your church friends birthday wishes, whether in person, via
email, or by sending one of those wonderful cards you can hold
in your hands by mail!

Feb 1	Luann Grefe	Feb 16	Tammi Rodemeier	Feb 26	Brooklyn Oestreich
Feb 1	Ryder Depies	Feb 19	Patricia Schulz	Feb 26	Wyatt Lyon
Feb 3	Kathy Anderson	Feb 19	Alexis Elsholtz	Feb 26	Joseph Barkley
Feb 5	Robert Russell	Feb 20	Todd Schmeltzer	Feb 24	Timothy Moser
Feb 6	Debbie Mathis	Feb 20	Joanne Krause	Feb 27	Renee Williams
Feb 8	David Buck	Feb 21	Al Sholund	Feb 27	Raymond Woller
Feb 10	Liz Krueger	Feb 21	Gary Sholund	Feb 27	Greg Davenport
Feb 10	Andrew Plamann	Feb 21	Leah Hanson	Feb 29	John Heckendorf
Feb 10	Sally Woller	Feb 22	Tanner Depies		
Feb 11	Jacob Walsh	Feb 22	Milo Gremler		
Feb 11	Dana Klug	Feb 23	Darryl Frick		
Feb 11	Amanda Barkley	Feb 23	Ryleigh Golisch		
Feb 11	Amaya Peterson	Feb 23	Janet Schaefer		
Feb 11	Alyvia Peterson	Feb 23	Diana Catlin		
Feb 12	Debbie Seeger	Feb 24	Jeff Eisner		
Feb 13	Sandra Mootz	Feb 24	Carl Hass		
Feb 13	Ellie Schwartz	Feb 26	Kim Voigt		



Saint Stephens UCC
715-536-7322 903 E. 2nd St., Merrill, Wisconsin 54452 ststephensucc.net

Rev. Mike Southcombe	Senior Minister	mike@ststephensucc.net
Terra Holdridge	Administrative Director	terra@ststephensucc.net
Kimberly McCaskill	Administrative Assistant	kimberly@ststephensucc.net
Kari Weiland	Christian Ed Director	kari@ststephensucc.net

Some stock photographs in this issue are courtesy of ChurchArt, Clip Art, Pixabay, and Unsplash. www.pixabay.com
www.unsplash.com www.clipart-library.com www.churchart.com

GIFTS & MEMORIALS

Received through January 18
Dedicated to the glory of God and...

New Roof Fund

\$50.00	in memory of Joanne Johnson from Kristine Smith
\$20.00	in memory of Ruth Buck from George Henrich
\$20.00	in memory of Dick Bettin from George Henrich
\$20.00	in memory of Walter Berndt for his birthday from Jill Mosser

Sanctuary Updates

\$50.00	in memory of Cynthia Melton from Bill & Joanne Wengeler
\$10.00	in memory of Joan Johnson from Kathy Case

Memorials

\$100.00	Thank you for the baptism of Hayden Hommerding from Penny & Michael Hommerding
\$50.00	in memory of my mother, Judith Rowe, from her daughter Janie Rowe
\$50.00	in memory of my brother, Timothy Rowe, from his sister Janie Rowe
\$50.00	in memory of my father, Eugene Rowe, from his sister Janie Rowe
\$xx.xx	in memory of Carlen & Venita Stevens, Matt & Lena Jirovec, and Johann Boettcher from Nancy Lohrbach
\$50.00	in memory of Barbara Golisch from Dennis & Dawn Gourlie
\$50.00	in memory of our mom Joan Johnson at Christmas from Todd & Angie Johnson
\$20.00	in loving memory of Bernice Perry at Christmas with love from her daughter Tonia Hoffman
\$100.00	in memory of Joan J Johnson from Kristin Kanitz

Brewers Bus Trip



BREWERS VS. CARDINALS
MAY 27 - 12:40 PM GAME
\$80/PERSON



**CONTACT TERRA IN THE CHURCH OFFICE TO SIGN UP. WE WILL
 OPEN THE BUS TRIP TO THE COMMUNITY IN MID-MARCH,
 SO SIGN UP NOW TO SECURE A SEAT!**

PUZZLE

MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE

It's time to tune up your Bible brain!
Decode the notes to discover a verse that sings with joy.

Using the musical note code, write the words of Psalm 100:2 (NIV) in the correct order below.

CODE: before come gladness him joyful LORD songs the with Worship

_____ the _____ ;

_____ .

_____ .



Although the apostle Paul is credited with writing the letter to the Romans, he dictated the message while another believer served as the scribe. Near the end of the letter, that writer briefly identifies himself. Who was it?

A. Tertius
B. Timothy
C. Lucius
D. Aquila

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&



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Worship with us Sunday mornings
at 9:00 AM ...

Listen on the Radio or Join us for our
Livestream on Facebook!

"WE ARE THE CHURCH"

SAINT STEPHENS UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

OUR VISION

We are a Christian community called by God's Love to be a force for good in our neighborhood and our world.

OUR PURPOSE

We seek to tell stories of God that challenge our assumptions, to open our doors wide with radical hospitality, and to use our own hands and feet to change the world.

SUBSCRIBE TO THE INTERPRETER

If you don't already receive The Interpreter, please let us know if you are interested in receiving it. We will be happy to send it to you by email or mail, whichever you prefer!

"But wait! There's more!"

Email recipients also receive our weekly updates between the monthly editions. Call Terra in the office (715-536-7322) or sign up and subscribe yourself here:

<https://ststephensucc.net/resources/newsletters>