

THE INTERPRETER

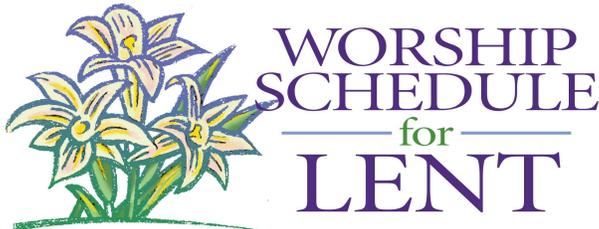
Church Office Hours: Mon-Wed 8-4:30 & Fri 8-3:30

Ministers: The Congregation

Minister to the Ministers: Rev. Michael Southcombe



No matter who you are . . .
. . . or where you are on life's journey,
YOU are welcome here.



Wednesdays, March 4, 11, 18 & 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.

High Church & Dedication of Gifts Service

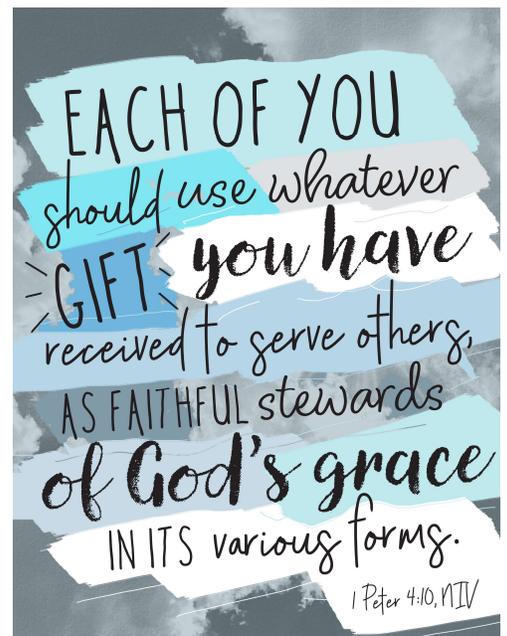
March 15

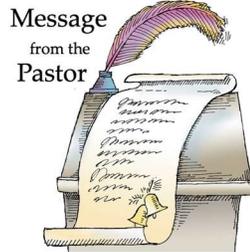
The service will include traditional elements of the liturgy, with songs and prayers from *The Hymnal* and other liturgical resources in the history of Saint Stephen's.

At this service, we will dedicate the new flat roofs and the stove in the Fellowship Hall kitchen. We will give thanks for the bequest to the Endowment and the Schmidt scholarship from the Faye Braatz Estate, as well as the gift towards the new roof in memory of Celina Schmidt. We will also acknowledge the support that FreMarq has provided for Dinner at 5 and the congregation's generosity over the years.

After worship, we will provide cake and other baked goods as a gesture of appreciation for all of our volunteers.

Saint Stephens UCC	
903 E. 2 nd St.	
Merrill, WI. 54452	
715-536-7322	
Emergency	
Pastoral Care Needs	
618-558-5014	
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Please note the change in the artwork. I am truly concerned about some of the studies coming out in the last few months about AI (Artificial Intelligence). And while I am not using a quill and parchment to write this missive, I am not using AI.

Full disclosure, we do use AI resources to edit *The Interpreter*. But checking for spelling and grammar is different than using it to generate “an article about Lent,” or any other topic. I do not use AI to edit my monthly epistles, I am still using my old copy of “Elements of Style Manual, by Strunk and White,” adhere to the Oxford comma much to the consternation of Microsoft’s Word editor and avoid using the semi-colon as much as possible.

And while these habits might cause you to be concerned about my mental health, consider these far more disturbing numbers:

- ◇ 19% of teens report having had a romantic relationship with an AI-created chat partner, while 42% have used AI for companionship.
- ◇ 42% of teens use an AI creation for emotional support, and 38% find it easier to talk to an AI chatbot than to their parents about important matters.
- ◇ A growing percentage of adults are forming or are open to romantic bonds with AI, with one study recently reporting 28% of adults engaging in or having had a romantic or intimate relationship with an AI chatbot.
- ◇ About the same percentage, depending on age breakdowns, report seeking relationship counsel with an AI chatbot. They talk to an artificial “other” rather than their real romantic partner about what’s troubling them in their relationship.
- ◇ About 53% of those in AI relationships are also in a committed human relationship but about 37% are not seeking or have been unsuccessful in finding human romantic partners.

AI creations learn and adapt the more people use them. They constantly learn how to reinforce the user’s feelings and fears. Tragically, there have been incidents of teens talking about suicide to these chatbots and the AI tells them something along the lines of, “That sounds hard, but I’m sure you’d be successful at it if you tried.” Parents are grieving the deaths of their children because of this reinforcement loop programmed into the system.

The response to these disturbing numbers is to offer alternatives to the loneliness that is enveloping our youth and so many of us adults today. Social media sees all of us as a commodity, clicks on posts lead to higher incomes for those who sell advertising on their Posts and Reels. AI is one more way we are being pandered to through false relationships and led into a deeper and deeper loneliness and disconnection from real and life-giving relationships. Every time we click on something, we are being used, our choices are being tabulated and sold to others who will pander and market to us. Deep down we know we are being used by hucksters masquerading as friends.

Lent is a good time to take stock of our relationships, human relationships, and how we tend them. If we are going to fast from something this Lent, let it be from the false sense of friendship AI and social media give us and go out and strike up conversations with real people. Let us listen actively and intently. Check out Lydia McIntyre’s article for the WISE team in these pages about active listening and responding to people with mental health issues and realize her words guide us in how to respond to everyone who wants to share something with us or who wants to form a relationship.

Let us talk to our youth and listen to them. If you are a parent or a grandparent, show them this article and ask them if they have friends or if they have used AI to fill an emptiness inside them—or to just spend some time talking to something that they wish was a someone.

(Lydia is a previous recipient of the Staats Scholarship, is graduating this Spring with a degree in Social Work and starts work on her Masters this summer)

Come to soup on Wednesdays and talk to real people. What are some other ways the church can help us build stronger relationships? Let us know. Those who watch such things are telling us more and more that the central task of the church in the next 20 years, beyond sharing the Good News, will be to reclaim a sense of community, to help people make real, human connections in a world that is dividing us, creating a sense of otherness and fear of “the other,” and reducing our need for relationships to a commodity to be exploited. We are beloved children, not data points.

On Easter morning we celebrate a risen Savior who came to us in the flesh. Let’s keep Jesus real and not just an algorithm in our lives.

In anticipation of Easter Joy,
Pastor Mike



CHURCH COUNCIL

Congratulations to our new Church Council Members Candy Hinner, Marge Roggenbuck, and Nancy Reinhardt-Porath!

Your 2026 Church Council Members

Jody Meyer
Marcus Reinhardt

President
Vice President
Secretary
Treasurer

Todd Frederick

Jim Bjorklund
Jerry Burrnett
Emma Golisch
Cathy Dornbrack
Nancy Reinhardt-Porath

Darryl Frick
Stan Seeger
Candy Hinner
Marge Roggenbuck

Messy Church is canceled for March. Pastor Mike and Kari will be attending Faith Formation Camp at the Daycholah Center with our Confirmation students. We look forward to their growth in faith!





- March 4** – Evening Lent Service 6 PM
Soup Supper 5 PM
 - March 11** – Evening Lent Service 6 PM
Soup Supper 5 PM
 - March 15** – High Church Service
 - March 18** – Evening Lent Service 6 PM
Soup Supper 5 PM
 - March 25** – Evening Lent Service 6 PM
Soup Supper 5 PM
 - March 29** – Noisy Offering Camp Scholarships
- Chime Choir – Every Thursday at 6 PM**



MARCH LECTIONARY READINGS

- March 1, Second Sunday in Lent**
Gen 12:1-4a Ps 121
Rom 4:1-5, 13-17 John 3:1-17
- March 8, Third Sunday in Lent**
Ex 17:1-7 Ps 95
Rom 5:1-11 John 4:5-42
- March 15, Fourth Sunday in Lent**
1 Sam 16:1-13 Ps 23
Eph 5:8-14 John 9:1-41
- March 22, Fifth Sunday in Lent**
Ezek 37:1-14 Ps 130
Rom 8:6-11 John 11:1-45
- March 29, Sixth Sunday in Lent**
Liturgy of the Palms *Liturgy of the Passion*
Ps 118:1-2, 19-29 Isa 50:4-9a
Matt 21:1-11 Ps 31:9-16
 Phil 2:5-11
 Matt 26:14-27:66

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

MARCH RADIO BROADCASTS

March 22: In memory of my son Scott Berndt and daughter Lisa Berndt-Fisher from Eunice Berndt



We have several available dates for radio ministry this month!

- March 1, 8, 15, 29**
- April 5, 12, 19, 26**

Your sponsorships enable us to spread the Gospel, encourage believers, and reach souls in need of hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Together, we can ensure that God’s Word continues to flow through the airwaves and into the hearts of people everywhere. Join us in making a difference—sponsor a broadcast today and help us reach our community!



Livestream sponsorships open for the entire year. For \$200 you can sponsor an entire month in memory or honor of someone. Call the church office to sponsor your preferred month.



Don’t forget your change on **March 29** for our NOISY OFFERING to benefit Camp Scholarships!!!



MARCH MISSION

One Great HOUR OF SHARING

One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS) is a vital special mission offering of the United Church of Christ. It

connects you to disaster relief, refugee assistance, and development efforts around the globe. When disasters strike, or when individuals are displaced due to violence or poverty, OGHS ensures immediate response and ongoing recovery.

Through your support, OGHS funds comprehensive development programs in areas such as healthcare, education, agriculture, food security, microfinancing, and women's empowerment. By partnering with Global Ministries and international response networks, OGHS maximizes its impact. Your contributions help meet urgent needs while addressing the root causes of vulnerability, ensuring long-term, sustainable solutions for affected communities.

We will be collecting monetary donations for One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS). Please use your "Special Offering Envelope" or the OGHS envelopes provided on the tables as you enter the sanctuary. You can also contribute to One Great Hour of Sharing through our online giving platform on our website. Additionally, you can text "SAINTSTEPHENS" to 73256 to make a donation via your mobile device. Thank you for your generosity!



SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS



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).



TEND & TABLE

Tend and Table unfortunately, did not receive the participation it was hoping for. While they initially allowed our church to use the program as a fundraiser, low turnout has led them to discontinue this fundraising aspect. However, you can still order farm-fresh Wisconsin boxes from tendandtable.com and have them shipped directly to your home.

If you haven't had a chance to order a box yet, please visit the Tend and Table website and consider placing an order. Every purchase supports our local farmers!



STEWARDSHIP CORNER

A Lasting Legacy of Kindness

*from Andrew Warner, President,
Wisconsin Foundation UCC*

As people of faith, we know that no act of kindness is random. Every loving gesture reflects our desire to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Random Acts of Kindness Week and Valentine's Day are perfect reminders to put our love into action! Caring for your loved ones, loving your neighbor, and uplifting our community are all powerful ways to make this time of year meaningful.

One thoughtful way to express that love is by creating your estate plan. An estate plan helps ensure your wishes are honored, provides clarity for those you love, and reflects your values of compassion and stewardship.

Through our partner FreeWill, you can create or update your will in about 20 minutes, completely free and fully secure. You'll also have the option to include a Legacy gift to your congregation, Wisconsin Conference UCC, United Church Camps, Inc., or another charity close to your heart. A gift in a will is a lasting act of love that ensures your faith continues to shape lives long after your lifetime. Your gift costs nothing today, but creates a legacy of compassion, justice, and hope for future generations.

Put your love into action with a plan that reflects your values and your faith.

Cheryl Buck
Stewardship Committee chair



WISE TEAM

Let's talk about mental health: The realities of intimidating conversation (Part 1)

By Lydia McIntyre

Someone is talking to me about their mental health; what do I do?

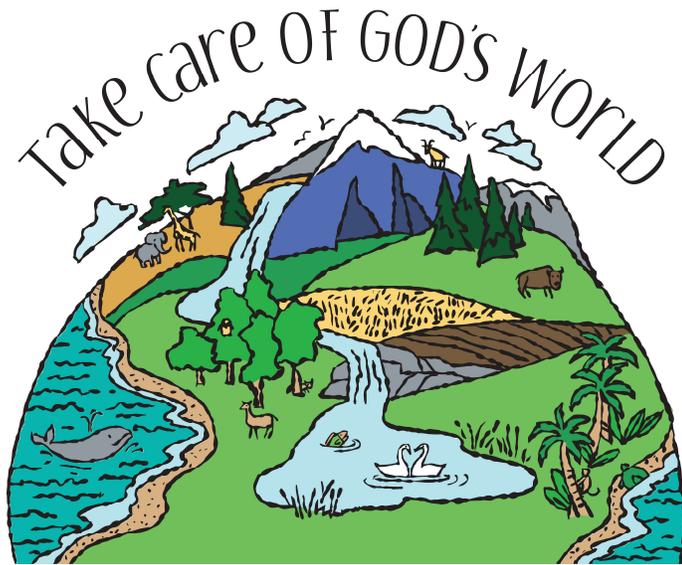
When confronted with someone else's mental health concerns, the most important variable that often goes forgotten is active and compassionate listening. It is important we demonstrate the value of what the other person is saying: let them finish their thoughts without interruption, don't jump to offer them a solution, ask what they need from you to feel supported, be conscious of your body language and facial expressions. Validate their feelings using empathy, not sympathy. Instead of saying "it's okay," reflect back to them your understanding of what they are saying, perhaps, "it sounds like you are feeling very overwhelmed and sad, your feelings make sense."

You don't need to have answers or solutions. Often, if someone approaches you regarding their mental health it is because they trust and value you. Make yourself available for further conversation if you are comfortable doing so. If you have experienced something similar, let them know they aren't alone, but be careful not to compare your experiences, this can be invalidating. If you have minimal understanding of their situation or struggles, do research! It is perfectly acceptable to educate yourself to feel more confident when someone asks you for help.

If someone expresses suicidal thoughts or actions to you, it is important you act fast and be direct. Ask them, "Are you thinking about suicide?" Do not walk around the topic. Practice active listening skills. If they answered yes to thinking about suicide, ask "have you ever tried to kill yourself before?" or "do you have a plan in place?" Connect the person with community resources and the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Keep in contact with the individual and let them know you care.

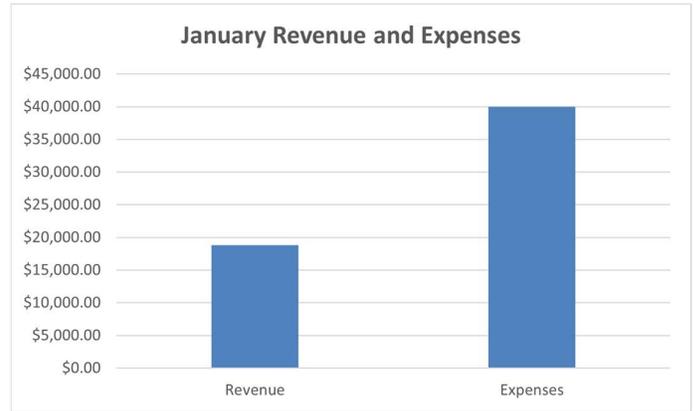
GREEN TEAM

In the coming months, the Green Team plans to host "Creation Conversations." These discussions will explore new concepts about Creation, incorporating insights from various religious sources, including the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. The meetings will be open to the congregation, and specific dates and times will be announced as the details are finalized. Please stay tuned here for updates on meeting times and details.



"The Vibe" Open Mic Night will be canceled from March and April due to conflicting events. "The Vibe" will be back on May 1. Location is to be determined so watch the April Interpreter for more details!

CHURCH FINANCIAL REPORT



January Revenue and Expenses

Revenue \$18,806.93

Expenses \$40,014.62

Net Loss: \$21,207.69

The congregation raised \$855 for MAC Home in January!

Roof Loan Balance \$51,150.14 as of January 31, 2026.

Sanctuary Updates Fund has a balance of \$26,758.48 as of January 31, 2026.



NURSERY VOLUNTEERS NEEDED



Wanted: Two nursery superheroes to swoop in and save the day on the first Sunday of each month! By lending a hand, you'll be giving our congregation's parents a worry-free worship experience while their tiny tots are in good hands.

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

NEW!
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!

MARCH 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!

Mar 2	Mary Maluegge	Mar 8	Gloria Schenzel	Mar 20	Ken Gehrt
Mar 3	Maria Godleske	Mar 9	Gail Scantlin	Mar 20	Darlene Johnson
Mar 3	Gerald Oestreich	Mar 9	Mitchell Badeau	Mar 20	Brittany Bloch
Mar 3	Mia Hanson	Mar 10	Lisa Gebert	Mar 22	Steven Hanson
Mar 3	Mark Gebert	Mar 11	Nancy Reinhardt-Porath	Mar 22	Lou Reinicke
Mar 4	Sarah Rust	Mar 12	Paula McIntyre	Mar 22	Joanne Wengeler
Mar 5	Beth Badeau	Mar 15	Bud Kanitz	Mar 23	Lola Klug
Mar 5	Mary Ann Forster	Mar 15	Sydney Brandenburg	Mar 25	Randy Schlueter
Mar 6	Mark Heckendorf	Mar 16	Keary Hanig	Mar 26	Scott Wallace
Mar 6	Dennis Koehler	Mar 16	Braiden Nelson	Mar 26	Sue Southcombe
Mar 6	Eunice Schubert	Mar 16	Ava Salter	Mar 27	Hope Golisch
Mar 6	Alice Ziemke	Mar 17	Judy Heath	Mar 28	Lisa Sturm
Mar 7	Jolene Plautz	Mar 19	Diane Wolff	Mar 28	Hunter Leistikow
Mar 7	Marilyn Rathke	Mar 19	Aaron Schnabl	Mar 29	Avery Frisch
Mar 7	Susan Swanson	Mar 19	Connor Stender	Mar 29	Todd Frederick
Mar 8	Mark Gano	Mar 19	Justin Pyan		
Mar 8	Kelly Natzke	Mar 20	Eunice Berndt		

Happy Birthday

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

Rev. Mike Southcombe
 Terra Holdridge
 Kimberly McCaskill
 Kari Weiland

Senior Minister
 Administrative Director
 Administrative Assistant
 Christian Ed Director

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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 February 22
Dedicated to the glory of God and...



Radio Ministry

\$190.00

in memory of my son Scott Berndt and daughter Lisa Berndt-Fisher from Eunice Berndt

New Roof Fund

\$30.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from Tricia Lazare

\$50.00

in memory of Barb Golisch from Kristine Smith

\$20.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from Rozanne Bergman

\$20.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from Elaine Bergman

\$20.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from Carol Holz

\$10.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from Dorothy Johnson

\$25.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from James & Paula Koppelman

\$500.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from family and friends

\$30.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from Tricia Lazare

\$10.00

in memory of dad, Albert Ziemke, for his March birthday from Alice Ziemke

\$100.00

in memory of Norm Ziemke on his passing on March 26, 2020 from his wife Alice Ziemke

Sanctuary Updates

\$50.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from Bill & Joanne Wengeler

\$25.00

in memory of Cynthia Melton from Barbara Powers

Memorial

\$20.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from Dixie Oberg

\$20.00

in memory of Sally Oberg from Deanna Dotter

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!**

Informed. Inspired. Involved.

Wisconsin Northwoods Senior Empowerment Project

Senior Breakfast



- **Date:** Saturday, March 28, 2026, 10:00 AM – Noon
- **Location:** Eagles Club, 1205 Lake Street, Merrill
- **Cost:** Suggested \$1 Donation
- (Proceeds will go to the Merrill Food Pantry)



Connect with your neighbors to discuss issues and opportunities that matter most to all of us.

With guest speakers Jessica Mudgett of the **Merrill Housing Authority**, researcher and journalist Addie Costello, representatives from the ADRC, and more.



Space is Limited to 100 Participants. RSVP by March 22. Must Register to Attend. RSVP Today.

<https://actionnetwork.org/events/northwoods-senior-breakfast>



RSVP HERE

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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Pastoral Care Telephone Number 618-558-5014



&



facebook.com/
ststephensunitedchurchofchrist/

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>