# Welcome Like Christ



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# A Message From Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Elizabeth Eaton

"More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord! Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore."

- Psalm 93:4-5



Dear friends in Christ,

All around us, we see signs of God's love and goodness. A person who has stepped away from church for many years steps back into a congregation, feeling the call of the Holy Spirit. Young adults feeling isolated in a digital-first world start gathering in person in a small group, enjoying the warmth of a hug and a new friend asking about their week. A mother plants a garden, and it yields fruits and vegetables, giving her nutritious food for her kids and extra produce to sell at the local market. Everywhere we look, we see signs of Christ's love. In Psalm 93, we read: "More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord! Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore" (4-5).

God's love is a majestic thing, and it moves us to share it in word and deed. The ministries of our congregations, our synods and the ELCA churchwide organization are all working together to share God's love with people in our neighborhoods, across our country and around the world.

I am so grateful for you, dear church. Your generosity to each of these three expressions of the church — your congregation, your synod and the churchwide organization — has bolstered the church's ability to share the message of God's love to people who are longing for it. Through your financial resources, your time volunteering and accompanying others, and your voices, you've helped carry this message of God's majestic love. Thank you, dear church. As we look ahead to the coming year, I encourage you to stand steadfast in God's promises, sure of God's love and goodness.

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton Presiding Bishop

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Through your generosity, God is at work across the ELCA. A portion of your offering, called Mission Support, advances the ministry of our church, helping the ELCA nurture Christian community, raise up leaders, serve our neighbors and strive for justice. Read stories and learn more at LivingLutheran.org



# Senior Pastor's Report the Rev. Dr. Steven J. Knudson

#### Welcome Like Christ

A key theme for First Lutheran in 2024 has been Welcome. The key verse for the Capital campaign focused on the welcome of God's grace for all: Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:7). Welcome like Christ is a door to a bigger picture of God's Mission through First Lutheran Church.

To welcome like Christ happens in three ways.

- 1. We welcome others, just like Jesus welcomed people in the Gospels.
- 2. We welcome God's grace with a trusting faith.
- 3. We welcome the invitation to follow Jesus, to become gracious disciples of Jesus.

We welcome like Christ through acts of faith, hope, love and thanks.

**Faith:** We welcome like Christ when we welcome God's love and grace into our lives. Just as God welcomes me into God's eternal embrace, so then I trust God's mercy and grace is for all people. God's welcome for all stretches my heart and imagination to welcome others into the body of Christ. Faith is the door to a generous welcome.

Hope: Hope and faith go together.
Hope is trusting that in a fallen world,
God's love and grace will win. Hope
is the courage to trust, love, and give
thanks in all the seasons of life,
both in times of plenty and in times of
challenge. Hope welcomes each day
as a gift from God.

**Love:** God puts skin on love in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus embodies God's love as he welcomes the stranger and spends time

with all kinds of people. Jesus embodies loving God as he welcomes the strength of God in his baptism and on the cross. In Jesus, we learn to welcome God's love for us, and to welcome others into the love of God.

Thanks. Giving thanks happens because we welcome what we have received from God. Sometimes our thanksgiving is simple. Sometimes it is complex, because we give thanks in times of challenge. Our thanks become an act of trust and hope in the goodness of God's love. When we give thanks to God, we can welcome others with a spirit of generosity.

# Serving God's Mission of Welcome

I invite you to explore this annual report and the various articles with this one question: How are we serving God's Mission of Welcome? There is much to celebrate; and yet more work to do.

We are blessed with a wonderful staff. Each staff member brings their best and is passionate about serving God's mission of welcome. Even so, ministry does not happen by staff alone. First Lutheran is the whole people of God working in partnership with staff serving our shared commitment to God's mission of welcome. Often, we are aware of the ministry we participate in and the people we work with, but we are not aware of what else is happening. There are stories of involvement and impact evident on every page, in every story, in every ministry area of this annual report.

There was one change in staffing in 2024 that I believe will be important for how this church serves God's mission. The council engaged in conversation with the pastors and came to a discernment regarding how the pastoral staff will be deployed. The result is a focus around the mission components of leadership, worship, outreach, and discipleship. The responsibilities for each of the pastors did not change so much as greater clarity and focus was achieved. The three pastoral roles are:

- Pastor Steve Knudson: Senior Lead Pastor,
  - with responsibilities for strategy, staff, and worship.
- Pastor Craig Brown: Lead Pastor for Outreach,
  - with responsibilities for evangelism, communication, and outreach.
- Pastor Katie Lowe Lancaster: Lead Pastor for Discipleship,
  - with responsibilities for children, families and congregation discipleship.

The use of the term "Lead Pastor" is to remind one another that pastors are not called to carry out the ministry, but to lead congregation teams and people to carry out the ministry. Ministry is what we do together.

#### **Partners in Welcome**

Let me offer a few words of appreciation for key partners in ministry that I am privileged to work with in serving God's mission of welcome.

- Church Council and Executive Team. I work with these people to set the course and policies to guide our shared work. I am grateful for their spirit. In 2024, Mark Scheumann served as council chair, and we met monthly to prepare and discuss.
- Pastor Craig Brown and Pastor Katie Lowe Lancaster. We meet together weekly as pastors and then again weekly with the whole staff. They are trusted colleagues, and I am privileged to work with them. I count on their strengths to balance my weaknesses, and they make ministry fun.
- Brett and Marita Wolgast. Every Sunday, I count it a joy to listen to the organ. The choice of hymns and music add depth of meaning. Up close, I continue to be amazed at Marita's musicianship on the piano.
- Joel Reeves is a humble servant leader of the contemporary worship and the ECHO praise team. Joel has led the eleven o'clock team to a fuller expression of praise.
- Michael Beckmann provides the teaching on Wednesday ECHO services. We are blessed with a youth leader who can connect with both youth and parents.

- Deborah Hanson serves as Director for Spiritual Formation. She leads midweek groups on prayer and spiritual practice. She offers a specialized ministry of grief support.
- Sheila Anderson serves as our Visitation Chaplain. She faithfully cares for those who are home based, making 489 home visits in 2024. She also serves as a leader for Stephen Ministry and provides staff support for our Senior Adult Ministry. I am thankful!
- We have an office team that includes Megan Roling as Office Administrator. She is amazing. She has mastered every new responsibility we have given her, and with a sense of calm and a can-do attitude.
- Will Mittelsteadt serves as Communications Director. He manages the complex flow of information to the congregation and the community, in a way that amazes me.
- Rose Gordon serves as receptionist with her gentle voice and caring way.
- Bob Koenig serves as Director of Support Services, which means he oversees the finances of the church and the building. Bob has been key in leading the building committee for Renewing for God's Mission. Bob makes my life go better.

- Maddy Newhouse joined the staff as volunteer
   coordinator. She helped us to imagine the Big
   Tent Event at the end of August. Great job!
- Thank you to Sarah Alterbahl, who comes to us from the ARC, for preparing the pencils and pew inserts each Thursday.
- Rich Hillyer serves as head custodian. He will be retiring in 2025. He cares about First Lutheran. Rich has brought special gifts for repair and maintenance, all the stuff behind the scenes that you don't know is there until it doesn't work. Thank you Rich.
- We have two part-time custodians. Ernie Decious cleans the building during the normal workweek and some evenings. Todd Cornell serves mostly on weekends. Todd is the face of hospitality for our SEMP guests and the one who is there Sunday mornings, supporting the serving teams.
- Our AV team supports the visuals and audio we experience in the building and the streaming of services out on the web. They are faithful servants. Thank you to Megan Fleming, who is our producer, Jacob Bartels who does live streaming and on-screen graphics, and is present on Saturdays, and Avery Karkosh who attends to the sound each weekend, and Kraig Wilford who serves on Wednesday fills in as needed.
- Daniel Luepke now serves as Intern at Ascension Lutheran in Marion. I meet with Daniel weekly as his supervisor. He is doing a great job.
- Ruth Ehrhardt feeds us all and the wider community. Thank you. Ruth, for the Wednesday meals. Thank you for the occasional lunch. Thank you on behalf of all who are food insecure, as you lead teams to provide meals through SEMP and every other day of the week.

### Looking to 2025

Building Renovation. We will enter the construction phase of renewing the building to serve God's mission of welcome. I anticipate the congregation meeting this spring to approve contracts with Rinderknecht Construction and subs to do the work we have been planning. My encouragement is that we get the job done.

**Sabbatical in 2025.** The church council has granted a sabbatical in accordance with church policy. It has been six years since the last one. I will be gone May 8 through August 18, including some personal time visiting family who live on both coasts. The theme for the sabbatical is Pilgrimage. The sabbatical will begin with a pilgrimage walk of 80 miles on the Camino de Santiago in Spain. It will end with an American pilgrimage to Holden Village in Washington and hiking in the mountains. These two experiences will help explore how the whole of life is a journey to God, and how each day is a spiritual pilgrimage.

What's the Next Big Focus? As we enter the construction season later this year, I think now is an important time for a season of discernment. How is God calling us to serve God's mission next? We will continue the mission initiatives around Growing Young and live more into serving God's mission of welcome. At the same time, the council and staff will be doing some preliminary reading and discussion about how to engage in discernment. When I return from Sabbatical, we will be ready for congregation wide engagement. God has more for us to discover together.

Thank you! I am thankful for the life we share at First Lutheran Church. You are treasured people. Thank you for your prayers and support. Thank you for your partnership. I am thankful to God that we get to discover more together God's mission of welcome.

Pastor Steven Knudson

# Seminary Intern Daniel Luepke

This past year I have served as the Intern at Ascension Lutheran Church in Marion. Throughout each week, I continue to attend classes, while I lead worship, and help with pastoral care. This unique arrangement has given me a chance to grow in many different ways. I am continuing to learn in my classes and grow into the pastoral role that I feel called to. Preaching each week gives me an opportunity to dig into scripture and see how it can help guide, shape, and interact with the congregation. I continue to learn how God is calling me and the congregation into a deeper relationship with God.

This past year at Ascension we worked on updating job descriptions for the staff, and we have been working on updating the constitution. I have been able to take the things that I learned at First Lutheran and put them directly into use. I continue to work with the

internship team lead by Terry Shie with five other First Lutheran members. They walk with me as I continue to grow and learn each day. My call into pastoral ministry has only gotten stronger and I feel truly blessed to have two communities of faith walking with me on this journey.

Thank you for your prayers and your support during this time of my internship.

God's Peace, Intern Daniel Luepke



During worship in January 2024 we commissioned Daniel and sent him as a Pastoral Intern with the congregation of Acension Lutheran Church in Marion.



## Welcome is at the Heart of Worship.

First Lutheran practices the art of welcome in worship, so that welcome radiates into everything else that we do. God welcomes us in the Lord's Supper. We offer welcome to all who come. We practice welcome in acts of faith, hope, love, and gratitude. The worship themes this year explored the significance of welcome in all aspects.



God's welcome in the Lord's Supper, extended to all of us in worship.

Lent: Welcoming God's Love into our lives. What does it mean to be filled by God's love? What does life look like when our hearts are brimming with God's mercy and goodness? When Jesus said, "I came that you may have life and have it in full," what does fullness look like?

- Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind.
- Love the comfortable neighbor and Love the uncomfortable neighbor.

Summer: Turning Points. In the journey of life, the basic question is—how do we discern the presence and work of God in all the turning points of life, from joy at birth to grief in loss? We studied important turning points in the Bible. We asked the question: where am I in the journey of faith? How is God turning to me, getting my attention, and calling me to turn to God in faith? How shall I welcome God into the turning points of my life?

Fall: Holy Communion - Build a Bigger Table. We say, "Build a Bigger Table," because God's grace and welcome is for all. The church is meant to be a place of welcome for all into the grace of God. How might communion take a bigger role in my life? How might I be a person of God's grace for others? How might I build a bigger table of welcome and grace through my actions? Welcome to the table. Welcome as we discover more together.

Advent: The Jesse Tree. We welcomed the Old Testament stories as a pathway to the birth of Christ. We learned that the grace of God has been at work from the beginning. Each story gave us a new way to welcome the depth

of God's love and grace for us in Jesus Christ.



The Jesse Tree series brought us all together on one page each day as we learned God's story of love and grace that points us to the birth of the savior at Christmas.

#### Welcome different ways to worship.

All worship services share the same pattern of gathering, word, meal, and sending. Together we journey through the liturgical year, from the anticipations of Advent, to the preparations of Lent and the journey to the cross, to the Easter News, to the exploration of what it means to follow Jesus. Each weekend worship shares the same message, with an Echo of that message on Wednesdays. All worship services are grounded in a common witness to the welcome of God in Jesus Christ.

With all that is shared, each of the worship services offers a different expression that seeks to reach people in the community who inhabit different musical worlds in their lives. I believe the breadth and strength of participation in all the ministries of first Lutheran can be linked to the strength and variety of worship. Take one expression away, and we would be smaller as a congregation.

We offer a traditional service that stands out for its quality and character. The liturgical character of these services carries forward the long-practiced ways for how the liturgy itself forms us as disciples.

The contemporary worship team made some changes this fall to the sound, the instrumentation, and the flow of worship. The result is a worship experience that is fuller, richer, more vibrant, and truer to the character of contemporary worship. I invite you to try out the eleven o'clock service in person.

ECHO worship is a midweek worship service that is truly led by the youth of our congregation, whether leading the singing, ushering, reading the scriptures or serving communion. It is called ECHO, because the message is a new message that echoes the themes and scriptures from the previous weekend.

In 2024, we have been intentional in offering occasional services of prayer: Blue Christmas, Prayer Vigils, Healing Services. In a world caught up in war and loss and change, we do what the church has been called to do, we pray.

Pr. Steven Knudson, Lead Pastor for Worship



Youth have stepped into many worship-leading during our Wednesday Evening Echo services.





Unique elements give a breadth to our worship services offering intimate and meaningful opportunities like candle lighting at prayer vigils, or washing one another's hands on Maundy Thursday.

## Worship and Music in 2024

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?...One thing I ask of the Lord; one thing I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life; to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek God in the temple...Wait for the Lord and be strong. Take heart and wait for the Lord!" — Psalm 27:1, 4, 14

It is said that as we age, the years seem to fly by more quickly, and 2024 was no exception. Looking back in my datebook at all the scribbles from day-to-day, it seems that one can get caught up in all the little details-"one can't see the forest for all the trees". It is always good at least once a year to take some time to reflect, to see where we've been and where we are going.

2024 was another busy and successful year for the Musical Arts Series, welcoming many guests into our facility for concert performances. Events included the Spring Serenade concerts held after Lenten noon worship services. They were presented by Mt. Mercy University music faculty Lisa Wissenberg (clarinet), Jane Triplett (flute) and Stephanie Michalicek (voice). Sunday, April 28 was our annual Hymn Sing based on the hymns of Isaac Watts (350 anniversary of his birth) with participation by many of our vocal and handbell choirs. Pipes, Pedals and Pie continued to be a popular series in the summer with presentations by Abby Chen (June), Ted Cronbaugh (July), and Matthew Lang (August). And finally, it wouldn't be Advent without the Lunch in the Loft series, presented on Wednesdays at noon by Robin Wagner, Jacob Sprengeler, and Brett and Marita Wolgast.

Other highlights of the year include the Chapel and Cherub Choir musical on Mother's Day, when they presented "David and the Giants". Over the summer it was decided to tweak the youth choir schedule and to discontinue sponsoring a choir intern from Coe. And so the new scheduling (and naming) of the choirs is as follows: Junior Choir (Grades 1-4) meet from 5-5:30 and the Youth Choir (Grades 5-8) meet from 5:30-6:00. Tanya Malloy directs both groups.



Our newly-formed Junior Choir adding songs and joy in worship in the special way that only children can.



The final Lunch in the Loft concert was great to hear and watch with an inspiring performance from our own Brett & Marita, and a great picture-in-picture camera arrangement from AV team member Kraig Wilford.



The Adult Choir robed and ready to lead worship during their residency in the beautiful and historic Portsmouth Cathedral in Portsmouth, England.

Highlights for the Adult Choir include a group of 42 folks traveling to England for the choir to sing a choral residency at Portsmouth Cathedral, which included singing for one Sunday Eucharist and two Evensong services. What an incredible experience this was for the choir and those able to accompany us! We also were able to spend time in London and in Wales. After our return, Julie and Lou Banker put together a power point of pictures from the trip, which was shared among the travellers and presented at the monthly luncheon on November 14. Many thanks to the Bankers for doing this!

Another highlight was once again singing "Messiah" with the Cedar Rapids Concert Chorale. We sang two performances this year on December 15 (the December 14 evening performance had to be rescheduled due to the weather). It is always a privilege to sing this masterwork.

Other musical outreach opportunities included hosting community ensembles such as Red Cedar Chamber Music and Vocal Artists of Iowa. Much like our own concert series, hosting these events gives us a great opportunity to reach out and welcome in members of the public.

We continue to have a strong online worship presence. A number of people join us live for each Sunday morning worship service, and many people engage with worship throughout the week. This helps the congregation stay connected and engaged even when they cannot be physically present with us in the Nave; and serves as a welcome to those considering a visit to the church.

We are so grateful for the many volunteers who share their time and talent to enrich the worship and music at First Lutheran. May we all be blessed by the many and various ways we come together to form community and to support one another.

Blessings for another year of grace!

Respectfully submitted, Marita Wolgast Director of Traditional Worship

# Director of Contemporary Worship Music Joel Reeves

Looking back on the year 2024, as we all strived to welcome God's people at First Lutheran Church, there were so many great and exciting experiences.

First, we started the year with our amazing contemporary worship band aka (Praise & Joy Band) leading 11 a.m. worship with so much joy and positive energy. This group of so many talented musicians make every single contemporary worship service worth attending, in-person or online. The love of God, and the sharing of God's love to God's people through music is truly amazing.



Then we have our awesome worship services on Wednesday evenings (Echo Worship) led by Pastor Katie Lancaster and Michael Beckmann. The worship service involves young people singing, playing musical instruments, reading scriptures, ushering, serving communion, and fellowshipping with not just their peer group, but with people of all ages. This community of believers has left many others excited to show up to worship every Wednesday evening. It is a testament to the church's mission of welcoming one another, just as Christ has welcomed us, for the glory of God.

In late August we had a joint worship Service/Celebration (Big Tent) event planned by Dr. Bret Wolgast, his wife Mrs. Marita Wolgast and the entire FLC staff which was another great highlight of the year. The music, the games after the service, the food, and the fellowship were all the

true expressions of how we welcome others in the love of God with joy, unity, and harmony. We are forever grateful to our AV team led by Megan Fleming, Avery Karkosh, Jacob Bartels, and Kraig Wilford, for the outstanding work they do to provide quality sound and visual support for the contemporary band.



Playing live music outdoors at the Big Tent Event with our Echo Worship youth leaders.

We also worked on reimagining the contemporary service in the fall. Thanks to Cindy Shadrick, Pastor Katie Lowe Lancaster, Pastor Steve Knudson, and Michael Beckmann, and again our awesome AV team as we enhanced the sound, made changes to the musical instruments, and brought the talented Jason Shadrick on board with the band. These adjustments greatly changed the vibe at the 11 o'clock worship, and renforced our commitment as a church to welcome others like Christ.

We closed the year with another wonderful Advent season of great music, great preaching, great teaching (especially the Jesse Tree series), and great sharing of God's love to one another, all put together by a wonder team of staff members, volunteers, congregants, and our greater community.

I am excited for what God has in store for us in 2025. May God continue to shower his blessings upon all of us as we all work together to discover more.

Blessings, Joel Reeves

# Pastor Katie Lowe Lancaster, Lead Pastor for Discipleship & Pastor for Children and Family Ministry

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you,for the glory of God. — Romans 15:7

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. — Matthew 10:40

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

-Matthew 18:5

If then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

- Philippians 2:1-5a

Welcoming with a sense of curiosity invites us to encounter and engage with one another with open hearts of compassion and open hands for service.

At some point in your own story of faith, whether just recently or a time long ago before you can even remember, you, longed to know – you belong here.

For that to happen, the people who gathered here before your arrival, needed to have a commitment to welcome one another, especially, the newcomer, to welcome one another as Christ welcomes you. Why? All to reveal who God is to God's people, loving and full of grace that goes beyond our imagination.

We are grounded in our faith, putting our hope in God's promise of love and grace that is for all people and we give thanks, we trust God ... to be God.

I want to thank the diverse community of members, together as First Lutheran, for loving me first, encouraging me as my faith grew, giving me strength in challenges and heartache, and laughing alongside of me turning moments of mistakes into moments of endearment.

Thank you to colleagues and team partners together in the many ministries we share it begins from a holy idea into a meaningful event, from humble conversations into a vibrant, God-size wow, and from whisper of prayer into life-changing moments of peace.

I am moved and inspired that I am trusted to proclaim the Good News in word and sacrament.

Blessings to you and your household, Pastor Katie



## Children & Family Ministry

#### **Pastor Katie Lowe Lancaster**

<sup>15</sup> People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them, and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. <sup>17</sup> Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Luke 18:15-17 NRSVue

"Welcome Like Christ" is clearly the mandate when Jesus welcomed the children – from infants and to adults in the final years of their earthly life. Jesus welcomed– and we are to welcome all children so all will know the love and forgiveness of Christ for them – always and forever. We demonstrate welcoming thru relationships, leadership, and environment.

#### **Welcoming Conversations**

Whether a child was attending on Sunday at First Lutheran Kids or on Wednesdays at Echo Kids, we began with a welcoming conversation. With small games and activities, the kids may immediately find a safe space. We put a big value on being relational and assuring children they are seen, heard, and valued. We shared our highs, lows, and our God sightings that happened in our everyday stories and lifted them up in prayer.

#### **Welcoming Leadership**

We simply had the most dedicated leadership team. Our adult small group leaders were always ready to jump in, lead, or simply sit beside one of the children. And our Youth Leaders continued to witness to our commitment to "Growing Young!" During the year we had over 30 youth volunteers either weekly or during the big week of Vacation Bible School and Day Camp. In turn we dedicated a full week in July to Youth Leadership on-site at FLC!

#### **Welcoming Space**

We all know that what your eyes, ears, and nose experience within the first minutes in a new space may help to determine what and how you will feel in the minutes following. We place a lot of value on being a safe space; spiritually, emotionally, and physically. We have enjoyed the space on the third level as we turned it into an underground ocean during Vacation Bible School/Day Camp, and posted our prayers and concerns on the walls during Advent. Though, we do look forward to a refresh and some creature comforts to go along with our vibrant themed decorations!



Pastor Katie
leading our
SCUBA-themed
VBS/Day Camp
in the Choral Reef
- also know as
our Choir Room.



#### **Highlights:**

- Launched weekly kids ministries on Sunday mornings and Wednesday Evenings
- Launched a new 5th Grade ministry The Bridge on Wednesday Evenings after Echo Worship
- Launched New PreK-Kindy Sunday Morning Ministry including music with our Children's Music Director, Tanya Malloy.
- Outfitted two welcoming spaces for Parents and Small Groups to meet.



- Launched our All-Church Advent Theme that included child-friendly devotions.
- Provided weekly lessons for children that directly aligned with key sermon themes throughout the year.



- Supported the fall church-wide Big Tent Event with family friendly activities.
- VBS/Day Camp 2024 65 children, 30 youth, 20 adults, and 6 college campers all under the sea at SCUBA 2024!
- Children's Christmas Presentation during 11 a.m. worship with Joel and the Praise Team.
- Created events to help children engage and understand the Capital Campaign: Open Chair Activity, Scavenger Hunt, Cleaning House Servant Project, and Prayer Place mats.
- Children participated in creating many themed Easter and Christmas decorations.
- Child Care Team provided care on Sundays, Wednesdays and during special events.
- Jenna Ackman expanded her role to provide general planning support for CFM.
- Special Thanks to Dee Anderson for on-going maintenance of all supplies/ storage!

It was a special highlight throughout the year to see our youth taking on servant roles throughout our church ministries as Team Leaders at VBS/Day Camp, in weekly ministry, during special events such as Meal Packing, and of course – as worship leaders, communion assistants, greeters, acolytes, and readers of scripture!

Thank you for the joy of sharing in the many on-going partnerships with the families, children, and the entire congregation to welcome one another as Christ welcomes Us.

Peace, Pastor Katie

# Annual Highlights from Youth & Family Ministry!

2024 was filled with faith, fun, and fellowship! Here's a look back at some of our favorite moments:



#### Wednesday Nights at **ECHO Worship**

Every week, we gathered for worship, community, and connection. So grateful for the volunteers and youth who make this time meaningful!



#### **High School Ministry** Sundays

From faith-filled conversations to pizza-fueled hangouts, our 9th–12th graders made Sunday nights a blast!

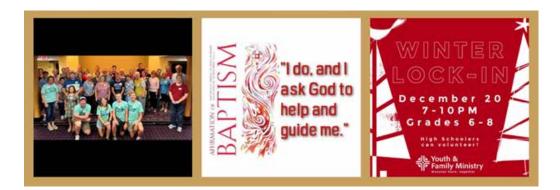
**Serving Together** Our youth showed up to make a difference, whether packing meals or helping others in creative ways. God's love in action!



**Graduation Weekend** Celebrating our seniors as they prepare for the next chapter. You are all so loved. and we can't wait to see how you shine!

**ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans** For the first time in six years, the ELCA Youth Gathering was BACK! Teaming up with Zion Lutheran from Iowa City, we enjoyed the culture of New Orleans and worshipping with over 15,000 youth, young adults and adults!





The Stock Sale Dinner was an opportunity to share about the ELCA Gathering experience with our supporters from the congregation

Affirmation of Baptism A time to say "I do, and I ask God to help and guide me" to God's call. We are proud of all who affirmed their baptismal promises!

Winter Lock-In
Games, laughter, and
plenty of energy! A huge shoutout to everyone who joined or
volunteered—we couldn't have
done it without you!

Thank you to everyone who made 2024 unforgettable.

Here's to another year of growing together in faith and love!

Other Highlights not shown- #wheresmichael gatherings throughout the year, Youth leaders at VBS, Moo Moo's Ice Cream Truck for last ECHO of the year, Mentor Ministry with the Congregation during Lent, College Age Care Packages, Youth Leading ECHO Worship- reading, singing, and ushering!

# Spiritual Direction Preparation Program Reflection

Enrolling in another year of the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program in La Crosse, WI has been an enriching journey of self-discovery, spiritual deepening, and continued learning. My retreat practicum in July 2024 provided a transformative opportunity to put theory into practice, allowing me to guide others in sacred spaces of reflection and growth while further developing my skills in spiritual direction. This experience, combined with ongoing coursework, has profoundly shaped my approach to active listening, discernment, and ministry with youth and families, making it more authentic, compassionate, and grounded.

As I continue to work my way toward the final retreat in July 2025, I remain committed to embracing the learning and growth this journey offers. I am deeply grateful for the congregation's support and look forward to sharing the insights of this transformative experience with our congregation and beyond.

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Michael Beckmann, Director of Youth & Family Ministries

# **Spiritual Formation**

Spiritual formation is growing faith, hope, love and thanks in the hearts and lives of those who follow Jesus. Each of these are vital for a vibrant spiritual life, and each nurtures and supports the others. However, sometimes one of them needs a little bit more welcome into our lives. This past year spiritual formation welcomed hope, so that we could better grow our faith, love, and thanks.

We welcomed hope by reading Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, by moving from the darkness to the light with the book Ladder to the Light by Steven Charleston, and by growing our practices as Jesus' followers by reading Called on the Way by Kathleen Cahalan and Laura Fanucci.

In October FLC women welcomed hope by gathering at Prairiewoods for a retreat entitled, Seeds of Hope in Times of Change. We reflected on seeds like clarity, creativity, and community that we can plant in our lives to grow our hope.



"Seeds of Hope" Flower seeds from our 2024 Women's Retreat at Prairiewoods.

Two sessions of the Grief Circle met to welcome hope into our losses by growing our understanding of grief in a safe, supportive setting. The monthly Widows' Support Group welcomed hope through conversations, lunches out, and community sharing.

Contemplative Hands welcomed hope when we gathered to create with our hands through knitting, crocheting, and drawing as we prayed and shared with one another.

Everyday God welcomed hope with weekly reflections and monthly gatherings that opened our eyes and ears to God's presence in our daily lives.

Finally, monthly Prayer Vigils welcomed hope as we came together as individuals and a community to pray God's word into our struggles and fears, blessings and joys.

As we begin our journey through 2025, my prayer is that we are bearers of hope to each other and to our world. I pray that we are lights of hope, that we plant seeds of hope as we follow Jesus wherever he leads us in the coming days.

Peace and joy, Deborah Hansen Director of Spiritual Formation

#### **Visitation Ministries**



Visitation Chaplain Sheila Anderson makes home visits and shepherds our Senior Adult Ministry.

Sheila Anderson was installed as Visitation Chaplain for First Lutheran in 2022. In this role she visits older members extending our welcome beyond the building, whether they are active, homebound, or in care centers. She is honored and privileged with the opportunity to get to know members better and hear their life stories. She also takes communion to members as desired.

Her visits provide an opportunity for members to feel connected to the church and to learn more about what is going on with different ministries as well as sometimes have a discussion on the latest scripture reading and sermon. Some members she visits are faithful online worship participants, while others never miss the radio sermon. Almost all of them are faithful readers of *The Light* monthly newsletter. She also visits some members who attend regularly, but an in-home visit allows her to get to know members better than just speaking with them in the Narthex before or after service. For example, while

she sees Gene and June Ann Clark in church most every Sunday- she has thoroughly enjoyed visiting them in their home and learning about their life experiences and how they have faithfully walked with Jesus throughout. It is truly humbling to listen to members recount their faith walk over the years. No two journeys are the same, but they are all warm and inspiring. Some members journeys started in the Lutheran tradition while others found their way to our church because of a friend or a Pastor that spoke to their heart.

When Sheila learned our 108 year old member Don Johnson joined First Lutheran in 1947 she assumed he was the record holder for longest member, until Diane Jacobs corrected her. Ninety-one year old Diane was baptized at FLC and has been an active participant in the adult choir for over 70 years!

Some members welcome monthly visits from Sheila, while others are comfortable with once every two to three months. Rose Gordon is an integral part of this ministry as well. As she schedules the visits she gets to know the members and members remark to Sheila how warm and endearing Rose is to them. If you would like a visit from Sheila or one of the Pastors, please contact Rose Gordon.

Rose Gordon works to keep in touch with our many of our older adults and schedules visits for Sheila.

#### **Senior Adults**

Our monthly lunch group truly did Discover More Together in 2024. As the luncheons proved a great way to meet others many new friendships and bonds were forged. Ruth continued to impress us with her culinary skills and Becky Cram baked dozens of pies to our delight.

We ventured out to Decorah and Luther College and Spillville and the Clocks Museum. A good time was had by all. Our very own worship leader Joel Reeves touched our hearts with his story of his faith journey and his experiences in his early years in war torn Liberia.

We also met a local Afghan family and many hearts were touched by their story and the compassionate FLC couple that supports them in many ways. We learned of the great work done by Central Rescue Furniture for those transitioning from homelessness and the incredible ministry of Matthew 25, striving to improve lives here in Cedar Rapids. We were again entertained by Barefoot Becky in September. Many of us bought books from lowa's bestselling author Joseph LeValley who is also a great speaker. We thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to relive the First Lutheran choir trip to England and Wales last July.



Our Thursday morning Bible study group continues to learn and thrive with dear sister Anna Peck in the lead. Many in the group have become such good friends that they arrive early just to chat before the study.

# Stephen Ministry

Stephen Ministry is a one-to-one lay ministry, welcoming like Christ and walking alongside any adult who is experiencing a crisis or life changing event. We have a group of well-trained and supervised volunteers who provide confidential Christian care and a listening ear to those in need.

2024 found our Stephen Ministry group feeling like we are finding a new normal after the pandemic years. We were blessed to have Cindy Dunn, train six new Stephen Ministers. In mid-January we commissioned the FLC new Ministers, David Bemus, Suzi Cooper, Irene Kain, Bill Klein and Michelle Kline.

If you or someone you know would like more information, you may contact Sheila Anderson, Visitation Chaplain, Chris Maakestad, Leader or any of the Pastors for more information.



Recently-trained Stephen Ministers are ready to help you though whatever challenge life throws your way.

# **Comfort Makers Ministry**

The Comfort Makers share the love of Christ locally and globally creating quilts for comfort and warmth, and other items to aid people in their daily lives. This year we are grateful to have welcomed several new faces to our group. We also want to extend our welcome to anyone who maybe thinking about joining our mission to provide warmth and comfort to our community as well as world wide. You don't have to be an experienced sewer or

quilter, because we tie our blankets. So if you can tie a knot, you qualify! We meet on the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month at 9 a.m.. Just show up and we will find a job for you!

Also we welcomed an abundance of usable sheets, light weight blankets and lots of fabric. Thank you to all of our congregation who donated. In fact our donations were so abundant, we are now sharing some of our extra supplies with other churches quilting groups. Sharing our bounties is what God asks us to do. Blanket making supplies setting on our shelves do no good when the need is so great. In fact, relieving some of that space makes room for more.

We also welcome and appreciate memorial donations and Thrivent action team cards. Without those donations, we would struggle to keep going. With those we purchase other needed supplies like thread, batting and labels. Thank you to all.

Many times we are asked how many quilts we made this past year. Each session we complete varound a dozen, depending on the number of participants. That doesn't include the other quilts some of our members choose to make at home. Other home projects that we take credit for include walker bags, clothing protectors, dignity (catheter) bags, Baptism blankets and pillows to name a few.

So you can see, we were very busy. Again we would like to encourage anyone to join us who maybe experiencing the nudge to do something great by proving an individual with a blanket that provides warmth, comfort and security. Or perhaps you are looking to join a group of like minded ladies for fellowship. We can provide and welcome you to that possibility too.

In Christ Fellowship, Your First Lutheran Comfort Makers



Each year the Comfort Makers bless our Confirmation Youth with a quilt to remember their affirmation of Baptism.

# The Comfort Makers completed <u>numerous</u> projects in 2024:

- 101 quilts to Lutheran World Relief
- 99 quilts to Local needs (Willis Dady, Central Furniture Rescue, etc)
- 38 quilts to Child Protective Services
- 72 quilts to under-privileged Cedar Rapids school children – thank you Kathy Griffith!
- 20 quilts to Confirmation class
- 3 guilts to EWALU guilt auction
- 12 quilts to baptized individuals
- 14 lap robes
- 39 walker bags
- 12 clothing protectors
- 6 dignity bags
- 93 Christmas gift bags to SEMP guests thank you Pat Young

# **Equipping Ministry**

I would like to start by thanking the entire staff and congregation of First Lutheran for welcoming me with open arms to the church this year. It is hard to believe that it has already been almost a full year of serving and working alongside some of the best people I have had the pleasure of meeting. Thank you all for embracing me and being open to the new ideas I present.

2024 has been a year of many changes. One major change was transitioning our "Rally Day" Fall kickoff to a new weekend and expanding it into the new "Big Tent Event". 275 members and community members gathered in the FLC parking lot under a giant tent to kick of the new program year with food, games, music, and more supported by 65 volunteers! The event day concluded with Pastors Steve and Craig being pied in the face to celebrate the successful food drive.



Our parking lot turned into a street fair atmosphere with food, games, crafts live music, and a Big Tent.

The summer began with a ministry engagement survey that asked the congregation to indicate their interests in serving the church and greater community. Thank you to the 188 members that completed the survey! The results of this survey have helped to pair members with new ways to serve and helped to update our volunteer database. Weekend worship volunteers have been very active this year! 183 people (from 86 households) served as volunteers to support our three weekend worship services. Special thanks is due to Michael Sinnott Sr. who served at least 37 times throughout the year!

Thank you to everyone who has given their time to support the church in a multitude of ways throughout the year! We could not have had a successful year without all the hours that volunteers provide to support all of our ministry areas, special events, and church operations.



Pastor Steve getting to know a family at the January 2024 Newcomers Dinner.

First Lutheran hosted three "Newcomers Dinners" in the Winter, Spring, and Fall, to serve as a primer for those interested in becoming members of First Lutheran Church. As a result of those classes, we welcomed 55 new members this year! At a time when many churches are seeing a marked decline in membership, it is encouraging to see that our church is truly growing and thriving here in the heart of the city.



Maddy Newhouse, Ministry Engagement Coordinator

# **Support Staff Report**

The Support Staff fills the vital role of carrying out the day-to-day tasks of church operations. We see to the ordering of supplies, setting up and tearing down for events, keeping our calendars and room schedules in sync between ministries and outside organizations, and keeping the congregation informed about ongoing ministries and special events.

In 2024, the support staff worked at bringing many of these functions into the digital age. Working with the entire staff we are consolidating the coordination of worship, calendars, and communications into the Microsoft Teams environment to improve our collaboration. We can now more easily keep shared documents, reducing the chances of missing a draft or correction. This plays out every week as we bring together preaching, ministry, and music details to create the bulletins, leaders guides and slideshows that make worship flow smoothly. Having shared and collaborative resources was also crucial to creating clear communications for the teams of members working together on our *Renewing for God's Mission* capital campaign throughout the year.

Our facility is a hub for community activity and is used by many outside groups from Optimists and Lions Clubs, to community choirs, and ministry partners like Lutheran Services of lowa and His Hands Free Medical Clinic. The dedication of our support staff makes this

possible through Megan Roling who coordinates the room use, our custodians, Rich, Ernie, and Todd, who make sure everything is in place and ready for them, and Will Mittelsteadt who works with groups for any technology or presentation needs they may have. Rich Hillver also makes many repairs and improvements throughout the facility, and works with contractors to keep the lights on and the furnaces running. Bob Koenig serves both as the supervisor of this support staff, and works alongside the Council, Trust, Finance and Audit teams to keep the finances of the church in order.



The Noon Downtown Optimists who meet for lunch & presentations is just one of the many outside organizations we host each month.

There is a lot that goes into serving as a welcoming hub for the congregation and community. Our church offers this level of support for our ministries and nearly thirty community organizations through the collaborative work and willing spirits of our support staff!

Finally, we added a new part-time position to our Support Staff this year. In coordination with the Supported Employment program through The ARC of East Central Iowa, we have welcomed Ms. Sarah Alterbahl, a disabled woman who works two hours per week maintaining the writing instruments and connection cards in our worship space. Sarah has a diligent and willing attitude, and we are glad to help her meet goals by working as part of our team.

# Lead Pastor for Outreach, the Rev. Craig Brown



Sometimes in ministry you just have days you know are going to stick with you forever. Friday, Sept. 6, 2024 was one of those days. We had been collecting food all summer long as part of our Build a Bigger Table Food Drive to tie in with our fall worship series of the same name focused on Holy Communion. The Hunger & Hope Team's plan was to store all the donations in the church basement and then stack them in one big pile on our altar just before the opening weekend. Our hope was the visual would inspire all of us to serve and welcome others as we get started learning about this holy meal and Christ's sacrifice of his body on the cross for all of us to follow him.

As Hunger & Hope Team Members Angie & Doug Whitmore, Martha & John Bonte, their son, Ben, visiting town that day, and I piled can on top of can of peas and boxes of cereal it hit me. I had to stop for a moment and take it in. I thought to myself, what an incredible church I get to serve and to be a part of! I began to smile as I visualized the pastor who would try to preside over communion that weekend who would barely be able to see the people of God over this mountain of food! It wasn't just the number of cans in the pile, it was the generous spirit of so many of your hearts that it represented that stopped me in my tracks.

I am so aware and appreciative of the giving spirit of our congregation. *You. all. get. it.* When Jesus said to take care of the poor and the hungry, you knew he meant it, and to this day you take that message to heart. As you read through the following reports of all our various outreach teams remember our Savior's words to us that when you welcome the stranger and do something for the least of these, you welcome me. I see Christ in so many of these stories: a church that leads the community in volunteers and donations to the CROP walk, provides Christmas joy to hundreds of kids in need at Four Oaks, builds homes through Habitat for Humanity, improves homes partnering with Matthew 25, supports church ministries next door to us in our very neighborhoods, and reaches halfway across the globe to do the same. Thank you to 2024 Team Leaders Martha Bonte (H3GO) Angie

Whitmore (Hunger & Hope), Bruce Lindholm (Housing), Lou Banker (Global Outreach), and the hundreds more of you that make our church the special place it is. Thank you for building us into a church that provides a generous welcome like Christ to all we encounter.

In Christ,

— Pr. Craig Brown,
Lead Pastor for Outreach



Pastor Craig got a pie in the face delivered by his own son at the conclusion of our food drive during the Big Tent Event.

# Hunger and Hope, Housing, & Global Outreach - (H3GO)

Lord Jesus you shall be my song as I journey; I'll tell everybody about you wherever I go: you alone are our life and our peace and our love. Lord Jesus you shall be my song as I journey.

— ELW #808

As our congregation looks forward to 2025, we hear the encouraging themes: "Welcome like Christ" and "Follow Jesus Everywhere." Jesus welcomed all: we welcome also as we follow him. The journeys we each take are unique, and we follow Jesus in many ways. H3GO Teams will continue to "sing" as we do outreach again in a new year. As you will read in each of the team reports to follow, many in our congregation have participated in activities organized by our Hunger and Hope, Housing, and Global Outreach teams. We thank everyone who has joined together in outreach during the past year, proclaiming Jesus through word and deed. We are grateful to God for empowering us to do so. As I wrote last year, God has poured grace upon grace on us. We respond.

Verse 3 of the hymn above makes this request: "As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant." Being a servant follower of Jesus is a calling that resonates throughout the Gospels and Epistles. Throughout 2024, people in our immediate community and around the world have seen results of that servant role. H3GO teams initiate some ways that our congregation offers opportunities for members to serve during our journeys.

One way that H3GO helped our congregation's members to learn about ways to serve on our journeys was to organize a Ministry Partner Mission Fair in October. Seventeen ministry partners set up displays and talked with congregation members between worship services to tell the stories of how they offer ways that we can serve as we "Follow Jesus Everywhere."



Our Ministry Partner Fair highlighted key partners that help us connect as Christ hands and feet throughout the community and region.

These partners included a variety of types of mission: EWALU, Willis Dady, Lutheran Campus Ministry and others. Riders' Club is one of our Ministry Partners that is not used as much as it could be. We would like our members to be aware of the help it gives in providing transportation to worship services. Spread the word.

The "Renewing for God's Mission" appeal to the congregation was a major focus for 2024. As with our sanctuary renovation a few years ago, the plan for this phase of renewal included an outreach goal to help ministry partners with renewing facility needs as well.

H3GO held a special meeting in August and invited many who had been team members in the past in addition to current team members. We discussed options for including giving to others who are "following Jesus everywhere."

Continued -->

We decided to recommend that we plan to give globally to our Companion Synod congregations in Same, Tanzania, and locally to Wellington Heights Community Church. That recommendation became part of the Renewing for God's Mission plan. First Lutheran Church has shown that it thinks of others as we all journey. We have a vision to see beyond ourselves.

Another hymn about following Jesus has this refrain:

Sweet Lord, you have looked into my eyes; kindly smiling you've called out my name...

On the shore I have abandoned my small boat; now with you, I will seek other seas.

— ELW 817

Those seas can be near or far, calm or turbulent, narrow or wide, challenging or reassuring, lamenting or joy filled. H3GO will continue to provide opportunities for us all to follow Jesus and let him be our "song for our journey." We will "Welcome like Christ."

Martha Bonte.

Chairperson; Hunger, Housing, Hope, and Global Outreach

# Hunger and Hope 2024

Our Hope and Hunger team had a busy year filled with many opportunities to serve as Christ's hands to people in need throughout our community.

We started the year with the "Souper Bowl" food drive. We asked for pop-top or easy open canned soups that went to serve our homeless community.



FLC members planting at the Matthew 25 Urban Farm.

We also decided in the spring to participate in the Matthew 25 ministry's Urban Farm. Several members planted and maintained the raised bed gardens that community members can harvest and enjoy for free. To witness people who were picking and utilizing the fresh produce was especially fulfilling.

In May, we learned that the First Avenue Hy-Vee grocery store was closing, and we made a statement of support for those in our community who would be left without the resource of a nearby grocery store and pharmacy.

In response, we extended our summer food drive and collected food July — September supporting meal programs and food pantries though HACAP, and directly to our homeless community though Willis Dady Homeless Services. We had monetary collected over \$2,000 that also went to the HACAP Food Reservoir.

Throughout the year on a bimonthly basis, we coordinated volunteers to serve at the HACAP Food Reservoir to pack bags for the Food Backpack program. This serves children who need meals on the weekends when they aren't at school. This is a direct support to families in our community who rely on the food pantries to help make ends meet.

His Hands Free Clinic held a shoe drive in June, and the congregation collected hundreds of pairs! Many churches and community partners participated in this event, and First Lutheran was recognized as the church that donated the most shoes.

In June, we also had guest Nelly Morrow from Fresh Start Prison Ministry speak to our group on the opportunities available to mentor newly released inmates from prison. These individuals are evaluated through the Fresh Start program and matched with individual volunteers or a circle of support. We invited them back in September to host an informational meeting and had no interest from the congregation. We tried one last time and invited them to the ministry fair in October. They stated that it is extremely hard to get volunteers for this as it is a long-term commitment, and many people do not feel comfortable enough to volunteer.

In the fall we supported FLC member Jasmine Wu and her team who coordinated the ecumenical CROP Walk in October. Hunger & Hope team members volunteered to be at the registration table to



First Lutheran members at the CROP walk.

assist with the sign-up process, and we had 29 members join in on the walk. First Lutheran alone raised over \$8,600, setting us among the top CROP Walk supporting congregations in the nation.

On November 20 we kicked off our annual Four Oaks Christmas giving project. Confirmation youth joined in with adults and decorated the Narthex and hung the gift tags on the tree and garland.

We served seventy-five youth this year, with over 150 gifts donated and \$900 in gift cards. This is a wonderful way to wrap up our year and feels so rewarding to reach out to support youth who are away from their families during the holidays. You are a generous congregation reaching out with the love of Christ to our community.



FLC members delivering hope with hundreds of gifts and gift cards for children living at Four Oaks.

It has been a wonderful year of opportunities to help those in need. I have enjoyed my time as chair and am grateful to have met some new friends along the way!

Blessings, Angie Whitmore Hunger & Hope Team Chair

# 2024 Housing Team Report



Yard work is hard work; but this group of young men stayed strong through the finish working on a property in coordination with Matthew 25.

Another effort of the Housing Team during 2024 was to act as compassionate Christian advocates for improvements to the Cedar Rapids Winter Overflow Homeless Shelter. Linn County supervisors have indicated appreciation for information about serious issues that need to be addressed at the shelter. This effort will continue through these cold months and into 2025.

The main emphasis of the Housing Team in 2024 was to work with Matthew 25 during their *Transform Week* initiative, June 24 – 28. Transform Week is a concentrated effort to help improve homes and neighborhoods for people who cannot physically or financially do it alone. First Lutheran members helped in two ways. On Tuesday, June 25, Carol Lakin-Vecellio and Ruth Ehrhardt led a team that fed lunch to about 140 volunteers. On Thursday, June 27, the Housing Team organized people to work on the yard of an elderly, disabled woman. Those helping the effort included Linn Mar High School students recruited by First Lutheran youth member, Alex Chavez.



Volunteers from throughout the city descended on Groundswell Café the day we served lunch.

#### Global Outreach in 2024

The purpose of our group is to help our congregation connect with global outreach opportunities within the ELCA or through other organizations. At this time, our main partnership has been with the Samé Lutheran parishes in Northern Tanzania.

This past year has been spent working to strengthen our ties with our Tanzania partners. This is done through our pen-pal exchange program, live zoom meetings and monthly prayer exchanges with each other. We are continuing to expand our pen-pal program with more interested members of our congregation. (Visit firstlutherancr.org/penpal to learn more!) This has been a great way for our partnership to exchange our different cultures with each other. We are looking forward to working with them on their future projects for their community as well as plans for future travels to visit each other.

We have also given support this year to Jamil Zoughbi and Claudine Faltas, a Palistinian Christian couple whip are now both preparing for pastoral roles in the ELCA Wartburg Seminary in Dubuqe.

Respectfully submitted, Lou Banker Global Outreach Team Chair

# Meals from the Heartland Packing Event

Pastor Katie and Michelle Kline

He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?"

And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

— John 21:17

We are called to welcome one another by loving one another. We are grounded in the commitment to do so by feeding the hungry, clothing those who are in need, and being a voice of advocacy for all people.

This year church member Michelle Kline brought forward and provided key leader-ship for the Meals from the Heartland Meal Packing Event. Pastor Katie served as the point-person for the staff, helping the church reach out and bring in community involvement through the MedQuarter.



Prior to packing, volunteers met in the Youth Room for briefing on the packing process, sanitation, and to hear about the impact that these meals will provide.

Using the resources from the non-profit company, Meals from the Heartland, teams of 10 with over 150 volunteers took to packing dry ingredients into small bags to be shipped overseas to people who are desperately longing for a hot meal.



Kids, youth, and adults all worked side-by-side throughout the day and into the evening to reach our goal.

Volunteers came as a part of many ministries and organizations. The choir, grief support groups, youth teams, and Sunday School classes, worked alongside neighbors, coworker groups, local health professionals, and other people with a passion to feed those left vulnerable in regions of famine. In the final hours of the evening the First Lutheran youth teams were even joined by the youth group from St. Stephens.

This project was a testament to what we can achieve, and the love of Christ we can represent, when people from all ages and walks of life come together in ministry with a common goal. Together we packed over 40,000 emergency meals in one day.

Although there was a bit of chaos at times, no one will forget the first year of many to come when we fed God's Children – who live far away – whom we will never meet – because they were hungry – and God said love them by feeding my sheep.

# Wider Christian Community - Doing God's Work in the World

As you've read through these reports, this church gives generously of our time and finances to act as Christ's hands supporting local community and world-wide needs. Financially, your contributions in 2024 totaled \$216,309 as follows:

- (1) This giving starts with our annual operating fund budget where we contribute 8% of our total income for the year to the Southeastern lowa Synod and greater ELCA. For 2024 this Synod Benevolence was \$127,901.
- (2) The operating fund budget also allocates approximately 1.8% of our total income for the year to the Hunger, Housing, Hope and Global Outreach Team (H3GO) who partner with organizations around the Cedar Rapids Metro area which provide services directly to local residents in need. In 2024, H3GO contributed \$26,848 to these partners in ministry.
- (3) Freedom from Hunger Food Drive -With the closing of a neigborhood grocery, our church helped respond to increased needs for neigborhood meal programs and food pantries, contributing hundreds of food items and \$2,105.
- (4) Meals from the Heartland was a new partnership for us this year, though the purpose was familiar. We worked with the community to fund and package emergency meals for people facing famine around the world. Members and friends donated \$13,387 to purchase the food and supplies for over 40,000 emergency meals were packed in one day.
  - Our first Annual meal packing with Meals from the Heartland was a great opportunity to partner with our community.

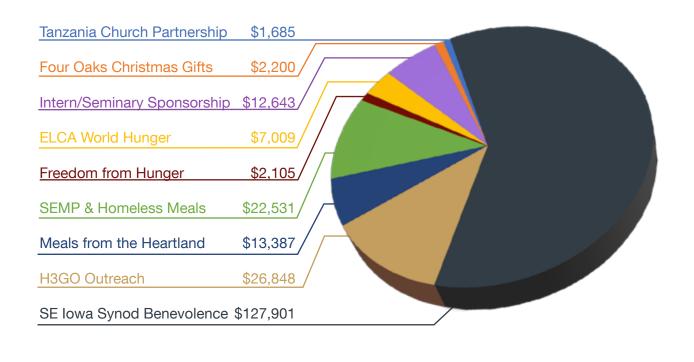
- (5) Samé, Tanzania Churches First Lutheran Church has had a long-standing companion relationship with the Lutheran congregations in and around Samé, Tanzania. In 2024 we added \$1,685 to their support fund which will be transferred when projects are identified.
- (6) Our Saturday Evening Meals Program (SEMP), began 36 years ago to help feed the Cedar Rapids community. Our meal ministry has greatly expanded beyond our in-house Saturday meals in recent years. Over 40,000 meals came through our kitchen and went out to our community in 2024. A large portion of the operating expenses for SEMP come from grants made by local agencies and foundations. The remainder of SEMP's funding is contributed by FLC members and friends which in 2024 totaled \$22.531.



- (7) Additionally, members make envelope contributions and place coins in weekly offering basket to send to the ELCA World Hunger relief fund. In 2024, these World Hunger offerings totaled \$7,009.
- (8) FLC has a strong tradition of providing financial support and practical real-world experience to ELCA seminary students through full year paid internships at our Church. This year we continued to sponsor Seminary Intern Daniel Luepke during his seminary training and Part-Time Pastoral ministry at Ascension Lutheran Church in Marion. The total sponsorship for Daniel in 2024 was \$12,643.
- (9) Four Oaks Christmas Gifts We supported 125 kids at Four Oaks with our annual collection of Christmas presents, gift cards and cash donations. In 2024 our contribution was \$2,200.

While these financial records say a lot about the care and support we offer our community, they pale in comparison to the *thousands of hours volunteered* by the congregation doing God's work with their hands.

Thank you all for your amazing contributions!





#### **Building & Capital Campaign Committees**

We accomplished a great goal when we remodeled our worship space in 2019. Back then we knew that there was more to do, because while the mission of God finds its center in worship, the mission of God also happens in other ways. How people experience a sense of welcome coming into the building sets the stage for how they experience God's welcome in worship. We renew for the sake of others; for the sake of God's mission.

In June the congregation approved launching a fund-raising campaign during the fall of 2024 to raise pledges for both the 2025 annual operating budget and a three-year capital fund. The campaign was called *Renewing for God's Mission*. This campaign ended successfully on December 31, 2024. The Results: 268 households pledged increased giving for the 2025 annual operating budget *AND* pledged \$3,048,199 for our three-year capital campaign goal. We are so richly blessed by the generosity and commitment of our faithful congregation – Thank You First Lutheran members!

Our goals for this phase of the renewal project are established:

- To complete payment for the sanctuary work balance of \$545,000.
- To renew key ministry spaces and provide a clear welcome into the building for all people that says, "we are ready for you, and we are glad you have come."
- To repair or replace necessary building infrastructure so we continue as a vital center for carrying out God's mission.

The Building Committee, working with Locus Architects and Rinderknecht Construction, developed a meticulous list of the scope of work, from which Locus Architects is creating updated renderings (coming in early 2025), and detailed construction drawings needed by Rinderknecht to solicit bids from sub-contractors.

Following are our first set of early concept drawings from 2024 along withe summaries of the scope of work being planned.





Around the exterior of the building: This project will include re-grading and resurfacing the parking lot, and new approach walkways to the existing entrances. Maintenance of brick and mortar, repairs of leaking windows, and replacing the north-side flat roof and wind-damaged doors.

Coming inside, we will replace aging air conditioners, refurbish the elevator, and refresh our main coffee and gathering area outside the worship space, known as the narthex.

Paint, stain, trim, and new floor coverings throughout the building will provide a feeling of continuity with our bright, welcoming, and modern worship space.

We will also renew our Children's areas on the third floor, and Youth space on first floor to be more suited to the needs of today's children and youth as envisioned in our congregation goals for "Growing Young."



God's mission is never just about us, but also invites us to look beyond ourselves. We included two mission outreach goals in this project: \$50,000 support to our Tanzanian Partner Congregation of Samé, Tanzania, and \$50,000 to Wellington Heights Community Church in Cedar Rapids.

We are thankful for the faithful work of the Building Committee and our key partners: Wynne Yelland with Locus Architects, and John Baker with Rinderknecht Construction.

Appreciation is also given to the RGM Campaign Co-chairs, Lois Buntz and Tom Schamberger who worked with John Clark of the James Company to develop the plan.

Finally, and most especially, thanks go out to the members serving on our Building Committee and the *Renewing for God's Mission* Leadership Team and all those who came on board to make visits and help where needed.

#### **Members of the Building Committee:**

Randy Bishop Rich Hillyer Pr. Steve Knudson Bob Koenig Pr. Katie Lowe Lancaster Bruce Lindholm Pat Marshall David Selk Jorie Shire

#### The Renewing for God's Mission Leadership Team:

Rachael Cogdill Bill Klein Edna Mator Chris Ackmann Bruce Barnes Ruth Ehrhardt Linda Klein Will Mittelsteadt Judy Barnes Mark Fersdahl Michelle Kline Matt Moore Dan Baty **Brent Foss** Pr. Steven Knudson Maddy Newhouse Suah Borsay Dawn Foss Bob Koenia Doug Pauls Deborah Hansen Pr. Katie Lowe Lancaster Tom Schamberger Jenny Bosking Pr. Craig Brown Mary Van Houten Mark Marz Kristen Wagner Lois Buntz Marti Marz Devin Wagner Nicole Keating Thomas Wolle









# **Congregational Council Report**

Members of First Lutheran Church, it's been my privilege to serve as Council Chair during 2024, a great time in the life of FLC! Much of the 2024 council focus has been on the preparation for the *Renewing for God's Mission* capital campaign. Thank you for your prayers and generous response! The Congregational Council provides focus and direction for the ministries of FLC.

The council establishes policies, goals, objective and serves as the board of oversight for the staff and ministries of the congregation. We have a council of ten people in different phases of life, who are active in various ministries and are willing to share their time and talents. We're a large, active church and as a council, we rely on each other to share opinions on how we see our ministries serving God's greater mission at FLC.

#### The following people served on the Congregational Council in 2024:

Mark Scheumann, Chair Keith Abkes, Chair Elect Jana Grimm, Council Treasurer Jim Jahnke, Council Secretary Kari Bruns Suah Borsay Sally Sklarsky Tonya Trudo Doug Pauls Josh Hetrick

#### The following council members and officers will serve for 2025:

Keith Abkes, Chair (2nd term, 2025-2027)
Josh Hetrick Chair-Elect (1st Term, 2024-2026)
Jana Grimm, Treasurer (2nd term, 2023-2025)
Doug Pauls, Secratary (2nd term, 2024-2026)
Suah Borsay (2nd term, 2025-2027)

Kari Bruns (2nd term, 2025-2027) Tonya Trudo (2nd term, 2023-2025) Sally Sklarsky (2nd term, 2024-2026) Mark Scheumann, (1st term, 2023-2025) Eric Kline (1st term, 2025-2027)

#### 2024 Highlights and Accomplishments:

#### **Pastoral Title Changes**

Pastor Steve Knudson,
Senior Lead Pastor
Pastor Katie Lowe Lancaster,
Lead Pastor for Discipleship
Pastor Craig Brown,
Lead Pastor for Outreach

These new titles recognize that our pastors provide leadership, clarity and focus for the teams and individuals in four key areas of ministry: Leadership, Worship, Outreach and Discipleship. Their titles now reflect how our church serves God's mission. I offer my thanks to the council for their discernment and prayer during this important process.

#### **Renewing for God's Mission**

We as a congregation all learned the importance of keeping God's house current and welcoming for visitors to our congregation. We celebrated during our church-wide dinner at Kirkwood and have now generously responded.

#### **Growing Young Initiative**

Echo Service, VBS, Sunday school, youth choirs, confirmation and high school ministries all continue evolve. Watch for more to come on this important work in 2025!

#### **Echo Worship**

Our Wednesday service gives our youth confidence to be worship leaders, grow their spirituality and helps give our busy families the opportunity to worship together.

#### **Welcoming Worship**

Our online services and podcasts allow anyone to worship with our in person congregation or at times when they feel God's call.

#### **Music Ministry**

Music is an integral part of our worship and outreach to all of Cedar Rapids. Our own musicians and choirs inspire our worship and outside choirs and organ concerts draw our own members as well as welcoming people from our community and beyond.

#### **Contemporary Worship**

Changing the band location, adding members, and installing a newdrum kit have improved the worship experience for the congregation.

#### **FLC support for Future Leaders**

We provided financial aid to two college students who are FLC members. One is attending a Lutheran college discerning her future in ministry, and another traveled to the 2024 ELCA National Youth Gathering to be a small group leader for high school students.

#### **FLC** support for Intern Daniel Lupke

FLC continues to provide financial support to Daniel and his seminary journey toward becoming an ordained pastor.

#### **Maintaining Connections**

Our visitation chaplain made 489 home visits in 2024, cultivating personal connections and spiritual support to many older members.

#### **Keeping Up God's House**

The council approved \$36,500 for various property repairs and upgrades allocated from our FLC Trust Fund. We keep God's house in working order, all to serve the mission of the church.

#### **Serving our Neighbors**

Led by Ruth Ehrhardt, 15,000 Saturday Evening Meals were prepared and served at FLC, plus an additional 25,000 meals were delivered outside in our community. We feed our neighbors in need. 40,000 meals! We are very proud of the work Ruth does, and the teams she leads; as is our community. Ruth was recognized as one of the 2024 "9 Who Care" community award winners.

We also provide financial support for, and members volunteer for many ministries outside of FLC via the Hunger, Housing and Hope teams.

Each month we host approximately 30 community group meetings at FLC. We welcome our neighbors to use our building as a part of God's mission to serve our community.

Finally, we give thanks that First Lutheran was fully staffed in 2024 making the ministries and business of the church work to its full potential. We are glad to have an extremely talented staff shepherding our flock.

God's Blessings, Mark Scheumann Council Chair

Baptized Members January 1, 2024	1,851	Communicant members January 1, 2024	1,403
Increases		Increases	
Baptism: Child	12	Baptized Members Confirmed	19
Baptism: Adult	0	Baptized Adult	0
Affirmation of Faith	34	Affirmation of Faith	17
Transfer from other ELCA	1	Transfer from other ELCA	0
Other/Reinstated	1	Other/Reinstated	1
Total Increases	48	Total Increases	36
Decreases		Decreases	
Death	16	Death	16
Inactivity	0	Inactivity	14
Transfers: other ELCA	1	Transfers: other ELCA	1
Other reason/Own reques	t 4	Other reason/Own request	4
Total Decreases net change	21 27	Total Decreases net change	35 1
	1,877	Membership as of Dec. 31	1,404

#### **Trust Committee**

The First Lutheran Church Trust Fund is a permanent endowment fund used to assist with financing certain expenses outside of the annual operating budget. Within the Trust, major subcategories exist for funding these expenses: 1) Property, 2) Mission and Ministry, and 3) Donor-designated specific purposes.

The Trust Fund investment assets increased in value during the year due to overall market conditions and prudent investing, ending at \$1,257,094 on December 31, 2024. This growth enabled the Trustees to fund all distribution requests submitted by the Church Council as follows:

Description	Disbursement
Replace and rewire two Sanctuary light fixtures	\$ 1,858.57
Fund Intern Daniel Luepke for the Year 2024	\$ 11,203.00
Fix communion rail instability issues	\$ 5,211.20
Improve wayfinding at 3rd Ave and Portico entrances	\$ 2,541.25
Replace 20 light fixtures in the Choir Room with LED cans & dimmers	\$ 5,879.00
Replace carpet mats and broken tiles in Portico entrance floor	\$ 2,708.00
Purchase inventory of supplies for RGM volunteer projects	\$ 5,000.00
Install new water cooler fountain in Level 3 hallway	\$ 2,813.00
Install new 30-amp breaker and wiring for exterior sign at 3rd & 10th	\$ 795.53
Replace worn/soiled walk-off mats at 3rd Ave entrance	\$ 1,158.00
Upgrade the ballasts and bulbs throughout the Church with LED	\$ 8,845.00
Fund Intern Daniel Luepke for the Year 2025	\$ 9,708.00
Total 2024 Trust Fund Distributions	\$ 57,720.75

An ongoing objective of the Trust Committee is to improve communication and education for members of the congregation. Monthly articles written by Trust committee members have been featured in the Light and Spotlight. These articles focused on wills, projects funded, different ways to make a legacy gift and year- end giving. Additional articles and outreach are planned for 2025.

This year we bid a sad farewell to long-time Trust Committee member Don Grimm, who passed away in October. Don was a dedicated supporter of the Trust and a legacy giving member.

We encourage individuals considering a legacy gift to the First Lutheran Trust Fund to contact Bob Koenig or members of the Trust Committee - Lois Buntz, Mark Fersdahl, John Swenson, Tom Wolle, and Alison Urbina.

Please Note, the reports of the Audit Committee and Finance Committee are found in the 2024 Financial Report.

# Minutes from the Annual Meeting of the Congregation February 4, 2024

The meeting was called to order at 1:11 p.m. by Pastor Steve Knudson with about 134 members in attendance.

Opening devotions led by Pastor Katie Lowe Lancaster. A fun pipe cleaner craft project was enjoyed by all.

Pastor Steve presented the proposed agenda for the annual meeting. This was moved by Gordon Epping. Motion seconded by Martin Wissenberg. Agenda approved. There was no discussion.

Pastor Steve presented the February 5, 2023 Annual Meeting minutes for approval. There were no changes to the 2023 Annual Meeting minutes by Council Secretary Jim Jahnke. Approved as circulated.

Doug Pauls, 2023 Council Chair, provided a summary of the 2023 Annual Report, including a thank you to the staff for their hard work in 2023. Items of note in 2023 were "Jump In Day" to kick off the fall programming schedule for the youth, the beginning of the youth led ECHO midweek worship service, an amazing Out of this World VBS program, visitors to and from Tanzania, FLC weekly podcasts, and an awesome open baptism weekend. We also served over 40,000 meals out of the FLC kitchen in 2023! It was a fantastic year.

Strategic Goals for 2024 – Renewing the Building for God's Mission; Growing Young, Fresh Statement of Mission Values.

Pastor Steve Knudson presented the delegates to represent First Lutheran at the Synod Assembly being held in May. Doug Pauls, Mark and Nancy Scheumann, and John and Martha Bonte have agreed to attend. A motion was made by Dan Musil to approve the recommended delegates and to authorize Council to approve replacements in the event any of the delegates are not able to attend. The motion was seconded by Doug Grimm. Motion passed. There was no discussion.

Jana Grimm, Council Treasurer, presented the 2023 Treasurer's Report. FLC ended the 2023 year with a surplus of \$33,222. Of this amount, \$32,000 will be deferred to the 2024 Mission and Ministry Income for 2024. A motion to accept the treasurer's report was made by Fred Stieglitz and seconded by John Lancaster. There was no discussion. Motion passed.

Lois Buntz presented the Trust Report. Trust Fund Assets increased to \$1,234,036. New gift of \$35,000 to endow the Musical Arts Program. Motion to approve the 2023 FLC Trust Report was made by Doug Grimm. Seconded by Jim Gruettner. Motion passed.

Continued ---

# Annual Meeting Minutes, cont'd

Bob Koenig presented for the Building Committee – Renewing for God's Mission. Bob provided a summary of Renewing God's House (Phase I). Pastor Steve Knudson provided an overview of Renewing for God's Mission (Phase II). The meeting was paused and those gathered were broken down into small groups to gather feedback from the attendees on their ideas and priorities which will be reviewed by the building committee to air in further planning for the timing and scope of the building project.

Jana Grimm presented the Stewardship Report and the proposed 2024 Operating Fund Budget for 2024 budget as \$1,574,900. There is an estimated deficit of \$11,216 for the year. Council will review the budget mid-year and make adjustments as necessary. A motion was made by Jana Grimm to approve the proposed 2024 operating fund budget. Seconded by Gordan Epping. Discussion included questions about wage increases for staff and benefits and if the raises could be increased. Motion passed.

Doug Pauls, 2023 Council Chair, opened the floor for any old or new business but none was presented.

Closing prayer by Pastor Craig Brown. Meeting adjourned at 2:42 p.m.

# Congregation Meeting to Enter into a Capital Campaign

**Sunday, June 9, 2024** 

Pastor Steve Knudson called the meeting to order at 10:13 a.m.

Number of FLC members in attendance: 116

Pastor Steve presented the following motion (as proposed by the FLC Council) to the congregation:

The Congregation authorizes the Church Council to contract with the James Company to conduct a capital campaign to raise funds for the following:

- 1. To pay off the remaining balance from the sanctuary project of \$545,000 and any additional interest.
- 2. To address necessary repairs and maintenance including:
  - a. Replace the flat roof facing the parking lot.
  - b. Replace aged out AC units and necessary HVAC work.
  - c. Repair brick and mortar at bell tower and exterior of sanctuary.
  - d. Repair rust damage on exterior surfaces and replace leaking window seals.
  - e. Replace wind damaged entrance doors at 3rd Avenue and Drive through.
  - f. Refurbish the elevator.
  - g. Replace worn floor coverings on all three building levels.
  - h. Paint walls and stain doors / trim woodwork to match new sanctuary décor.

- 3. To renew Key Ministry Areas
  - a. Parking lot
  - b. Narthex / Welcome areas
  - c. Third floor Ministry area for kids
  - d. First floor Youth Room
  - e. Main Entry into the building
- 4. To provide a defined portion of funds raised to designated ministry partners in accordance with Christ's mission.

Furthermore: Final determination of what will be accomplished within the project plan will be based on the total amount pledged by the Congregation. A final plan and budget will be presented to the Congregation for approval after the campaign and before contracts are signed.

Table discussions were held amongst the members in attendance prior to a larger formal discussion.

#### Open discussion:

- A couple of tables recommended moving the third floor ministry area for children and the first floor youth room up in priority in section three.
- Comments were made complimenting the building committee and leadership in reviewing the need for the new entrance and if it should be part of the project depending on funding.
- Concerns were brought up concerning how do you fund the up-front costs of a project that are incurred at the front end of the project before all the income from the three-year building campaign have been received.
  - o After the campaign has been completed and we understand the funds available, a second meeting will be held to approve the scope of the project.
- Will there be any thing done to the small kitchen with this project?
  - o If the new entrance is not included, the small kitchen will not be changed.
- What would be the timing of the payoff of the existing debt?
  - o Initial money that has come in have been put towards initial planning expenses and not towards the debt payoff. Cash flow needs to be addressed for the overall project to look for the best way to manage overall project costs. The debt will be paid off by the end for the project to be made whole.

Mark Scheumann (FLC Council President) made the request for a motion to approve the motion above. Randy Hinrichs made the motion for approval. Seconded by Dennis Krall. Voting is by ballot.

**Ballot Results:** 

Yes: 113 No: 1 Abstain: 2

Pastor Steve adjourned the meeting at 10:52 a.m.

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