

The Shield

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER | ST. STEPHEN'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH |
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Holy Week Activities

Join Us for Holy Week: A Journey from the Table to the Cross

As we approach the heart of the Lenten season, we invite you to walk the sacred path of **Holy Week** with our church community. These services offer a profound opportunity to pause, reflect, and experience the depth of God's love through the story of Jesus' final days.

We have two primary evening services scheduled to help us enter into this mystery together:

The Maundy Thursday service is March 26 at 6:30 pm. Join us as we commemorate the **Last Supper**. This service focuses on the "New

Commandment" Jesus gave his disciples: to love one another as he has loved us. We will gather to reflect on the institution of Communion and the humble act of service Jesus demonstrated by washing his disciples' feet.

The Good Friday service is March 27 at 6:30 pm. On this solemn evening, we gather for a service of shadows and scripture. Through music and readings, we will remember the crucifixion of Christ. It is a powerful time of quiet contemplation as we wait in the darkness for the hope of Easter morning.

Contemplative Service

St. Stephen's is offering a Contemplative Service in the style of Taizé at 6:30 pm next Thursday, February 26, and continuing most Thursday evenings during Lent. It will be a meditative service without a sermon. Instead, for roughly 30 minutes, we will gather quietly to sing hymns, listen to scripture readings, and offer silent and spoken prayers, as we meditate powerfully together on Jesus' final journey leading to his cross in Jerusalem.

Church Events

- Mar 1st -Trustee's Meeting
- Mar 2nd – Lunch Bunch
- Mar 5th – Contemplative Service
- Mar 12th -Contemplative Service
- Mar 14th—Church Work Day
- Mar 17th—Lunch Bunch
- Mar 18th—Adult Ed Meeting
- Mar 19th-Contemplative Service
- Mar 19th – Spring Break Retreat

Christian Nationalism Peace Roundtable

This year's Peace Roundtable was rescheduled to Sunday March 22, 2026, 12:30-3:00pm. Due to a busy church calendar, we will try a lunch for this Roundtable and in Community Hall as usual. The food line will start at 12:30. The program will begin at 1:30.

The topic for this year's Peace Roundtable will be

"Christian Nationalism and the Role of the Church in Society Today". Our guest speaker will be OU sociology professor, Dr. Samuel Perry. Dr. Perry will explain the Christian Nationalist movement and its rise and influence in the religious and broader American society. From Dr. Perry, Christian Nationalism believes in a

"mythological narrative that America has this special relationship with God and it's holy and married together and this is how it should always be." He goes on to say, "The more you subscribe to this ideology, the more likely you are to hold certain values and beliefs that I think are quite concerning for anybody who values democracy."

One of the key questions is, how does a peace community respond to the strident and divisive views and claims of the Christian Nationalist? Our Fall Roundtable, the Civil

Dialogue Technique of CLARA, introduced a method of civil response to conflict and divisive belief systems. How can the CLARA method be applied in a civil conversation with a Christian Nationalist?

The Adult Education Committee established the annual Peace Roundtable to discuss peace initiatives and challenges to peace in American society in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King and his long march for civil rights. Civil rights affects us all and is a cornerstone of St. Stephen's support for social justice.

Animal Blessing

All Creatures Great and Small: Join Us for Our Animal Blessing

Gather your furry, feathered, and scaled friends! We are excited to announce a special **Blessing of the Animals** at St. Stephen's on **Sunday, April 12** at both services.

Whether they bark, meow, chirp, or crawl, our pets are beloved members of our

families and reminders of God's diverse and beautiful creation. This service is a time to celebrate the companionship they provide and to ask for God's protection and care over them.

We invite you to bring your pets to the service (please ensure they are safely on a leash or in a carrier). If your pet is unable to travel or prefers the comfort of home, you are more than welcome to bring a **photograph** of them to be blessed instead.

Women In Action

Women in Action has two meetings in March in the Fellowship Hall at St. Stephen's.

Monday, March 2, 6:30 pm—Women in Action for All (WIAA) hosts an Education Townhall open to the public with Craig McVay and Jacob Rosecrants

Monday, March 23, 6:30 pm—Women in Action for All (WIAA) Meeting on Legislative Advocacy

Need Male Volunteers!

Spring break retreat is approaching fast. Our dates are going to be Thursday March 19th through Sunday March 22nd. Alyssa will need two male sponsors for this trip, so if you are interested and have any questions, please reach out to her.



Pastor's Pen

If you've ever watched a waiter navigate a crowded room with a brimming cup of coffee, you'll notice they never look at the cup. If they stare at the liquid, watching it slosh against the rim, they'll inevitably wobble and spill. To stay steady, they look at the horizon. They look at where they are going.

For too long, the Church has taught us to spend the forty days of Lent staring at the "cup" of our own lives—obsessing over every ripple of personal failing, every "spill" of character, and every individual sin. But this year at Saint Stephens, we are trying something different.

We are looking at the horizon.

Moving Beyond the "Sin Model"

In a world currently beset by systemic hate—from the highest levels of government down to our own social media feeds—staring at our own feet isn't just unhelpful; it's a distraction. When we focus exclusively on personal piety, we risk becoming blind to the systemic injustices that require our collective resistance.

This Lent, we aren't focusing on "sin and forgiveness" as a way to feel bad about ourselves. Instead, we are viewing Lent as a **training ground**. Much like a superhero montage where the protagonist learns to harness their power, we are using these forty days to discern how to respond faithfully to a world that feels increasingly like a wilderness.

Individual Action, Corporate Resistance

Jesus didn't avoid temptation in the desert just to stay "pure"; he did it to stay **focused**. He refused to turn stones into bread or leap from temples because he knew his power was meant for something greater than his own ego or comfort.

We are inviting you to do the same through both individual and corporate disciplines:

- **Individual Redirection:** If you are "giving something up," don't let it end with self-denial. If you skip your morning latte, move that money to a local mutual aid fund. If you step back from social media, use that time to call a friend or a neighbor who is isolated.

- **Individual & Corporate Reflection:** Join us each Thursday evening



at 6:30 for our Contemplative service in the style of Taizé.

- **Corporate Advocacy:** As a church, we are looking at how our collective voice can interrupt the rhetoric of exclusion. Join us on March 22nd for our Roundtable on how to confront White Christian Nationalism.

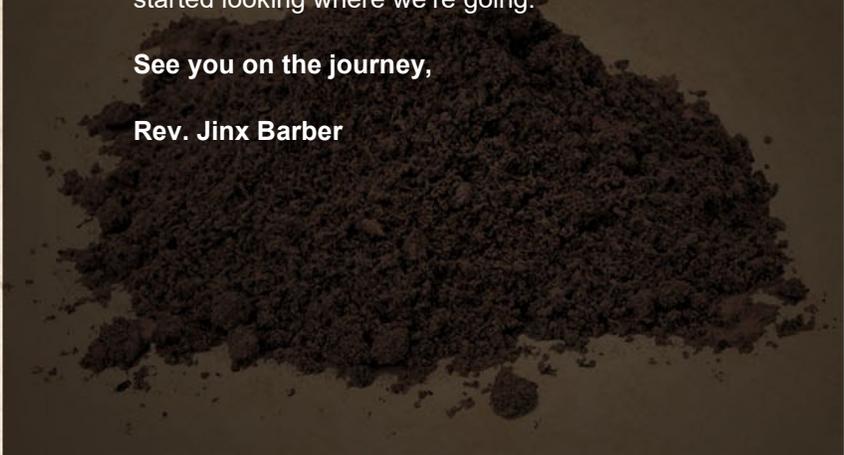
Dust that Creates Worlds

On Ash Wednesday, we heard the ancient words: **"Remember that you are dust."** But we must also remember that **dust is what God uses to create worlds**. Our Lenten journey isn't a march toward a funeral; it is a trek toward the revolutionary hope of Easter. We give up the "leaven" of apathy so that we can be filled with the courage to protect our immigrant neighbors, advocate for our children, and defend the dignity of every human being.

Be gentle with yourselves this season. Be fierce for each other. The horizon is calling, and it's time we started looking where we're going.

See you on the journey,

Rev. Jinx Barber



Music Ministry

Your St. Stephen's choirs and bell choirs are busy at work preparing all sorts of meaningful and beautiful music for the season of Lent that has now begun! Both bell choirs will ring on March 8th and the choir will combine with the children's choir to sing an anthem together on Palm Sunday, March 29th. Looking just a little further ahead, the choir is also preparing music for the Good Friday service on April 3rd and the choir and bell choirs are also working on their Easter music!

It's been pretty awesome to watch the new Sunday Night Live format take shape and swing into full gear! Jenn and Morgan have been doing a great job preparing programming for children that is fun, educational and engaging. Jenn has enlisted the help of our talented congregation members to deliver discovery time activities that have the children excited to come back week after week! Many thanks to the adult volunteers who have stepped in to help make the launch of our new SNL a huge success!

As always, please feel free to contact me if you have any questions - music@ststephensnorman.org or catch me or Julie at the church on Sunday!



Church Work Day

We need your help for small building repairs and church yard cleanup.

On Saturday, March 14 we will have a Church Work Day from 9 am to 1 pm.

Building Repairs in the Children's wing

- Trustees will provide materials needed to repair or replace skylight, ceiling tiles, hallway lights, Bridge Kids check-in desk, leaky sink in Room 8, plastic gutters, and seal leaks and repair parquet floor in Room 2. Trustees will welcome a few extra hands.

AND

Church Yard Cleanup: Bring rakes, garbage bags, and garden loppers

- Loggia Garden - clean up leaves & pine needles, clean drain
- Outside areas around the building (outside choir doors, by church sign, east & west side of building, and south side under trees - pick up trash, tree branches, rake leaves, and cut wisteria bushes (north side bordering along neighbors fence line).

The Trustees appreciate your help!

Youth Shenanigans

February was a pretty normal time for us. We are quickly approaching our Spring Break Retreat time at Camp Egan in NE Oklahoma. We are planning on leaving on the evening of Thursday, March 19th and will return on March 22nd by noon-ish. If you have a student who is wanting to attend the retreat, please get with Alyssa or Grace.

I have finalized our mission trip location for the summer, and will announce that a little closer to Easter. I'm excited for what this trip will bring and the connections we will make.

We finished our first 4-week Holy Disruptions curriculum. I'm excited for the Lenten studies we started this past Sunday. For Sunday School we will be doing a study called Lament & Holy Week, and in evening youth time we will be doing a 6 week series called Breaking Free - A Lenten Series. Below you will find a quick synopsis for each.

Lament & Holy Week: Every person in life faces situations where what we believe about our life is altered, fractured, and ruptured and we must sit in our disappointment. Many young people face disappointment and don't know how to navigate through their disappointments. Lent calls us to reflect on our individual and collective role in breaking our vows, commitments, and the hearts of others. This Lenten series will focus on different disappointments of life and the resiliency that is found in faith.

Breaking Free - A Lenten Series: In this Lenten series, participants will explore three sessions of Freedom FROM (Sin, Guilt, Fear) and three sessions of Freedom TO (Resist, Transform, Co-Create). In Freedom FROM, participants reflect on the things that God calls us away from, helping us strive to live a life free from burdens, fears, and the pain sin causes us and others. In Freedom TO, participants reflect on the things that God calls us towards, things that bring life and transformation in us, others, and our world. Throughout this series, participants will be invited to reimagine how Jesus' life, death, and

resurrection change how we experience Freedom in our everyday lives.



Hello everyone!

Lent has begun and things are in full swing for ShineKids. As the rest of the world turns attention to March Madness, our children will begin a series that we are calling Lent Madness! In Sunday School, they are learning about the "saints" of the church and each week will be eliminated in a "Lent Madness" bracket. The children will learn the names St Francis of Assisi, Mr. Fred Rogers, Rabbi Danya Rothenberg, Rumi, Alice Paul and Gustavo Gutierrez. They will choose three of these to advance to a second bracket. Six more will be introduced next week, and the following week will have the three winners from each group face each other! On Palm Sunday, we will be down to two saints and the winner of the Golden Halo will be announced on Easter Sunday! Our hope is that the children (and those who interact with them) will be inspired by these people who dedicated their lives to living for God. The "Lent Madness" brackets will be posted for you to see on the ShineKids' bulletin board. As the "madness" progresses, there will be opportunities for families and the congregation to vote!

We will not have Sunday Night Live on March 15th due to Spring Break or March 29th due to Palm Sunday but will meet the other Sundays from 4:30-6:00! Remember this is also the time when our children practice for choir and they will be singing with the adult choir on Palm Sunday.

Hope to see your children soon and praying for blessings for you and your family this Lenten Season.

Ms. Jenn



Norman Coalition for Refugee Support

Meet Our NCRS Refugee Families, March 28, 5:00-7:00pm, Save The Date!

On March 28 in Community Hall, join us for a meal with our refugee families. There will be a short program and an opportunity to eat dishes from the home country of our refugee families. The event is still being organized and more info will be in worship bulletins. Meanwhile, Save The Date!

Refugee and immigrant rights are in peril and immigrant families are in danger of deportation without legal review. Due process and the ability to be heard in a proper U.S. court of law is a fundamental right for all persons under the U.S. Constitution. However, this right is regularly violated by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). All expectations are that ICE will have an increased and noticeable presence in Norman in 2026. The Norman Coalition for Refugee Support (NCRS) has developed emergency procedures with guidance from immigration attorneys on how best to protect the refugee families our "Coalition" of churches has resettled in Norman over the past many years. Some of our refugee families have limited protection with their green cards, Many others do not have that protection. Many church members from our Coalition are joining advocacy organizations on behalf of our immigrant neighbors to advocate for their right to due process and the dignity they were promised when we first welcomed them into our Norman community.

Recent recipients of the City of Norman Human Rights Award were the NCRS for 2021 and Women In Action for All for 2025. It's important to mention this to remind us that we are in good company in our endeavor to uphold the right of all God's peoples, many who may not look like us, to a life of dignity and the right of refugees to petition a government for a path to citizenship. This award is, and so are we, part of a long tradition in Norman that was first sanctioned long ago in the passage by the United Nations of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This year, we stand with millions of supporters for immigrant rights. May the force grow!

Our personal faith and civic duty as U.S. citizens compel us to examine how best to protect the

constitutional rights of NCRS refugee family members. The prospect of detention and deportation against their will is a personal and sensitive issue for our families. The concern for how best to protect them in this disturbing, political environment that threatens their safety and well-being is a heavy lift. We are preparing for various outcomes and adding to our emergency preparedness plan. Please pray for immigrant families and all who stand for immigrant rights. You are encouraged to participate in the ways you are able.

We draw strength from each other in action on the ground, as well as in fellowship with each other.

Please join us on March 28 as we share a meal with our NCRS families and the St. Stephen's community.

