

FIRST STORIES



JANUARY-JUNE 2024



FIRST STORIES MAKES ITS GRAND DEBUT

by Kathleen Simley, Communications Director

Welcome to the inaugural edition of the “First Stories” newsletter! Each quarter, we will showcase the ministries and latest happenings at First Lutheran, along with a preview of upcoming exciting events. This debut issue of 2024 showcases our ministry activities from January to June. This content-rich 24-page edition is a must-read! Dive into the personal stories and testimonials of our members, savor the photos and explore the links for more. Witness the incredible work of the First community in just six months. After reading, you will likely concur - we are a dynamic faith community on the move!

“First Stories” will be distributed electronically via our weekly “First Things First” newsletter, on the

Resources page of our website and on the News Feed of Realm Connect, our new member management platform. Print editions will be placed on the counter in the Gathering Area near the Sanctuary.

We encourage you to share this newsletter with your friends and family, both near and far, to let them know what First Lutheran’s community is up to. You never know how the faithful work of First Lutheran might speak to the needs, desires and spirit of someone else. We hope the stories we share resonate with you, inspiring and comforting you of all the ways First Lutheran is at work in the lives of many - perhaps even your own!

Happy Reading!





STEPHEN MINISTERS: WALKING BESIDE OTHERS

“Being a Stephen Minister is both challenging and rewarding. It’s not always easy or comfortable to walk beside a person who is experiencing a crisis. But providing this caregiving ministry, together with God, the Cure Giver, healing begins, new pathways are clarified and confidence is regained. These are gifts from God and the Stephen Minister gets to be a part of the process.” ~First Lutheran Stephen Minister

“Through training, Stephen Ministers learn to enter each new situation without preconceptions. Listen and be present - this strategy is one that has served me well in my personal life. It’s not about “fixing” another person’s health, relationship or employment issue, but rather focus on the person’s emotions, perceptions and hopes in regard to the current situation. Most importantly, Christian care provided by a Stephen Minister offers the assurance that no matter the current concern, the care receiver remains a loved child of God and God wants the best for each of us.” ~ First Lutheran Stephen Minister

First Lutheran has been a Stephen Ministry congregation since 2008 with 40 trained Stephen Ministers and 10 currently active. Contact Amy Harrison (amyeharrison77@gmail.com) or Faye Doolittle (fdoolit@gmail.com) for details on the 2025 training class.

PRESERVING PANDEMIC STORIES: A DIGITAL BOOK OF YOUR STORY. OUR STORY. GOD'S STORY.

During Lent 2022, a call went out to the families of First Lutheran - an invitation to share your pandemic tales through art. 180+ pieces were lovingly created and together formed a poignant mosaic that adorned our Commons - each canvas a personal story, each tile a part of our communal testament to faith and endurance.

The following year, Easter 2023, marked a tender farewell to the physical mosaic display, but the spirit and stories live on. This Easter, 2024, we announced that these narratives have been preserved in a sacred digital space, accessible to all.

You're invited to explore the “My Story. Our Story. God's Story.” digital photo book by scanning the QR code below or visiting https://bit.ly/flc_my_story, a place where our shared experiences continue to inspire.

To those who added their voice to this tapestry, we're deeply thankful. May this collection of stories stand as a monument of God's ongoing work within us - a work of relentless love, grace and the infinite promise of new horizons.



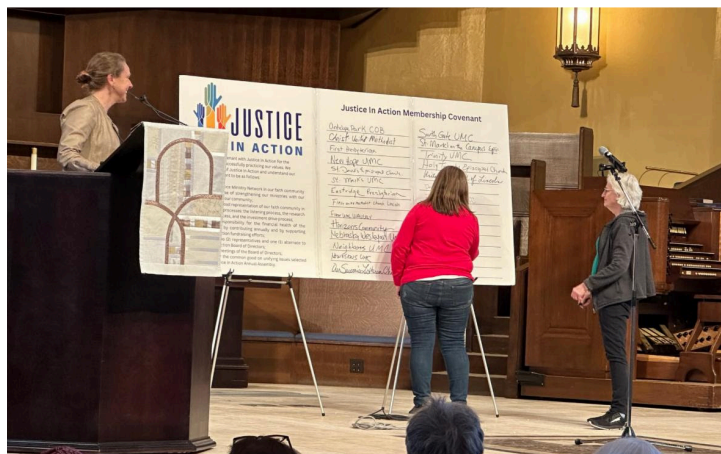
Scan the QR code with your camera phone to view the “My Story. Our Story. God's Story.” digital book!

FIRST LUTHERAN JOINS FORCES TO FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

First Lutheran Church recently joined the Justice in Action ministry, aligning perfectly with our mission to be a spiritual community that cares for one another in the community in which we live and work. Justice in Action embodies this mission by addressing issues of justice, a core value of our church.

In times when it's easy to feel powerless against vast systems and powerful interests, Justice in Action offers a beacon of hope. This ministry brings together over 23 interfaith congregations, engaging hundreds of community members to tackle the injustices that affect us all. Witnessing congregations living out the teachings of the Lord is inspiring and is evidence that story of Nehemiah is not just a story, but an example of God providing us guidance in how to peacefully and effectively make the change we are called to do.

Although Justice in Action is only in its second year, it has already significantly impacted our Lincoln community. Interfaith communities, guided by biblical principles, have come together in just one year to effect meaningful change. Numerous community stakeholders are collaborating to develop a mental health navigation platform to address this critical need. There has been attention in the media about the need to address the over population of our county jail, and a call to open up discussions on how this can be addressed in a manner safe for the community, as well as providing the services to those charged with non-violent crimes to help change. (continued on page 5)



Kari Hoeft, Council member and representative of First Lutheran Church, signs the Justice in Action Covenant



First Lutheran members attend the Nehemiah Gathering at St. Mark's Methodist Church on May 5

NOISY OFFERING BENEFITS OUR NEIGHBORS AROUND THE WORLD

Thanks to your generosity, our monthly Noisy Offering from January to June raised a total of \$2,585.65! Your contributions supported scholarships at the Las Abejitas Bilingual Education Center, nursing students in Tanzania, food for First Lutheran's BackPack Program, Houses for Health in Tanzania, ERIPOTO women and girls' empowerment initiatives in Tanzania and resources for the Border Servant Corps to assist asylum-seeking migrants at the US-México border. Your kindness makes a meaningful impact!





FEEDING OTHERS ONE BOX AT A TIME: HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

First members Tracy Way, Judy Batterman, Peggy Westerhold, Wendy Bonaiuto and Steve Lenzen pack food for the Lincoln Lutheran Food Pantry at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church every other Wednesday. Each week, they prepare 40 food boxes for families ranging from 1 to 6 members, along with an average of 15-20 emergency boxes for families of 2, 4 and 6 members each month.

During the pandemic, the Food Pantry faced challenges in sourcing food from the Lincoln Food Bank. To keep the pantry operational, First members organized weekly food drives. Since the end of 2021, the quantity of food the Pantry can "purchase" from the Food Bank has steadily decreased. As a result, St. Andrew's now purchases sale items from HyVee that are no longer available from the Food Bank. HyVee provides extra discounts and free delivery. To continue packing the same number of boxes each week, the Pantry has reduced the number of items included in each food box.

In addition to food donations, First Lutheran regularly provides toilet paper, apple juice, saltine crackers and noodles. We also purchase items like canned fruit, canned chicken and canned vegetables from Aldi or Sam's. (continued on page 5)

EMPOWERING OUR COMMUNITY: FIRST'S IMPACTFUL INITIATIVES

Over the past six months, members of First have generously dedicated their time and resources to support various organizations assisting residents in Lincoln facing challenges.

During our Souper Bowl of Caring event, where the Kansas City Chiefs faced off against the San Francisco 49ers, our community raised \$775.12 for the Lincoln Lutheran Food Pantry (with the Chiefs coming out victorious!).

Even during spring break, our middle and high school students remained dedicated to serving the community at the Center for People. They volunteered for food distribution, painted the new diaper room and organized the food storage for a fresh makeover.

In June, Bridges to Hope was the focus of our Summer of Serving initiative. We donated an SUV vehicle full of essential items like undergarments, belts, bath towels and personal care products to support individuals transitioning from incarceration. Our commitment to serving the community extended into July and August, with Lutheran Family Services and Cedars Home for Children being the beneficiaries.

Prepare for the Kicks for Kids campaign kickoff on September 22 when we collect shoes and socks for kids in need in Lincoln and the surrounding area.

A heartfelt thank you to all who have generously contributed their time and resources to support those in need! Your contributions truly make a significant impact!



First Lutheran members collecting food for the Lutheran Food Pantry during the pandemic. Donation of food since then has become even more important for the Pantry's survival.

FIRST LUTHERAN JOINS FORCES TO FIGHT FOR JUSTICE (CONT)

(continued from page 3) Justice in Action is also working to create mediation between landlords and tenants to reduce evictions through better communication.

Linda Maack, a member, was impressed by the Nehemiah event: "I attended the Justice in Action event at St. Mark's and was impressed with the speakers and their ideas to address Lincoln's challenges. It's vital for our church to support the community."

Kari Hoeft shared, "Attending the Nehemiah event was a great reminder of the power of God's love and guidance. It prompted me to look beyond other churches' "denominations" and focus on our shared mission to serve and love our neighbors. Justice in Action's grassroots movement has reignited my hope, helping me feel empowered rather than defeated by what can be an overwhelming political system. Through only 2 hours of my time, I was able to participate in not only an inspiring event but also participate in peaceful and meaningful change."

Community listening sessions, involving 6-8 individuals in our community, start in September. It's a time to discuss issues within our community that require more justice. If you would like to participate in or host a session, reach out to Kari Hoeft at karibrandt@hotmail.com.

FEEDING OTHERS ONE BOX AT A TIME: HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE (CONT)

(continued from page 4) These contributions are made possible through cash donations designated for the Food Pantry. Without these cash donations, First's contributions would be significantly smaller.

In the first six months of 2024 alone, 27,331 pounds of food were purchased from the Food Bank, in addition to 4,271 pounds donated by First Lutheran. Overall, \$17,428.52 has been spent to meet weekly needs. However, it's uncertain how long St. Andrew's and First can sustain this level of spending. Increased food and cash donations are crucial.

Agencies distributing food in Lincoln have a coordinated system to prevent people from obtaining food from multiple sources. There is a limit to how much food individuals can receive each month. However, rising costs for rent, utilities, vehicles and gas stretch food budgets thin. "Food inflation" impacts everyone, including the Lutheran Food Pantry.

How can you help?

- Donate food, especially tuna, which is in high demand right now.
- Donate cash to purchase food no longer available from the Food Bank.
- Volunteer your time, particularly if you are "young and strong," to help transport food from the Food Bank to the Food Pantry, helping older volunteers who have been doing this for years.

Ready to help? Contact Steve Lenzen at scenzen@outlook.com.



FIRST FRIDAY JAZZ WRAPS UP 12TH SEASON

by Lee Rockwell, First Lutheran Member

On October 4, First Lutheran's Activity Center will host over 250 individuals as our 2024-25 First Friday Jazz concerts kick off a new season of monthly performances from October through May. This marks the 13th season of our concerts which began in October 2011.

The idea originated from a discussion with Lead Pastor Brian Maas about a year earlier. I suggested securing local or regional jazz groups for monthly concerts, promoting them to individuals and groups, and providing a lunch opportunity in an informal atmosphere. Pastor Brian thought it was a good idea and said, "You know how this happens, don't you?" I replied, "Yes, I need to get to work." I let the concept percolate for about a year and finally decided to see if we could actually make it a reality.

I assembled a small group to refine our plan for success: Kathleen Simley, Steve Janssen, Steve Lenzen, and myself. Little did I know this core team would plan and implement for twelve years. Kathleen, well-versed in Lincoln's jazz scene, connected us with initial contacts and developed our publicity. Steve Janssen managed bookings, (continued on page 7)

FIRST LUTHERAN FUND AWARDS \$11,000 IN COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIPS

The Endowment Board announced in May the awarding of \$11,000 in college scholarships to First Lutheran members for the 2024-25 school year: Nicholas Bushard, Zachary Bushard, Aidan Cotter, Ethan Cotter, Grace Monson, Aiden Niebuhr, Will Niebuhr, Xander Niebuhr, Caden Peppmuller, Tyler Scheel, and Alexis Spicer (Sandman). Congratulations to all! The board members enjoyed learning about the educational aspirations of these young individuals and

how First Lutheran has impacted their lives during the application process, which included a meet and greet.

The scholarships are funded by donations to the Endowment Fund and its growth through investments. Per the bylaws, a minimum of 10% of the fund's annual income is dedicated to education, outreach and mission. In 2023, the Endowment Fund disbursed \$18,250 in these areas. Your support of the First Lutheran Endowment Fund makes this happen! Thank you!



FIRST FRIDAY JAZZ WRAPS UP 12TH SEASON (CONT)

(continued from page 6) Steve Lenzen took charge of lunch preparation and serving and I oversaw publicity and unexpected details.

Understanding the importance of compensating musicians at Lincoln's professional rate, we opted to request donations rather than set an admission fee. The Congregational Council generously provided \$1,000 as seed money. Initially, we handled lunch through a fast-food restaurant nearby.

For our inaugural concert, we booked well-known Lincoln trumpet player Mac McCune and his group. Anticipating an audience of 50, I was stunned when approximately 250 attendees arrived, mostly retirees. The lunch arrangement was a fiasco; neither I nor the restaurant manager had anticipated such a large turnout. Orders were taken upon arrival, called into the restaurant, and delivered 15 minutes later. We quickly learned the necessity of having food on-site, ready to serve. Subsequent concerts saw improved lunch arrangements with other restaurants.

Eventually, we decided to have volunteers cook and prepare food in our church kitchen, suggesting a reasonable meal price. About half our audience participates, while others bring their own lunch. Through trial and error, we found a successful

formula. Excess lunch revenue and cash donations made us self-supporting. Musicians receive fair fees, we employ a professional sound engineer, cover marketing costs, and reimburse the church for supplies. We never tapped into the \$1,000 seed money from the Church Council. Moreover, we contributed to the church by installing sound-absorbing panels and audio equipment to enhance audio quality in the Activity Center.

The ultimate testament to First Friday Jazz's success is that every concert plays to a full house as we embark on our 13th year. We attract an enthusiastic daytime audience with many regular attendees. Musicians eagerly perform for our appreciative crowd. Each year, we bring back favorite groups and occasionally introduce new ones. The beginning of each year feels like a new school year for our audience—old friends reunite, delighted to catch up and share their lives since the last concert in May.

I believe the greatest benefit of First Friday Jazz to First Lutheran is that it serves as our gift to the residents of Lincoln. We provide an East Lincoln venue for jazz performances, attracting audiences from across the city and beyond to our church.



MUTUAL BENEFITS: PARTNERING WITH LAS ABEJITAS BILINGUAL EDUCATION CENTER

The Las Abejitas Bilingual Education Center is thriving and growing at First Lutheran Church! The Center currently has 95 children enrolled and 10 on a waiting list!

Providing quality early childhood education is getting to be increasingly difficult in today's economy with expenses rising faster than incomes for most families. While other businesses, such as grocery stores and car dealerships, are able to follow along with inflation, child care centers need to find creative ways to keep tuition as affordable as possible for families while balancing paying a livable wage to teachers. This has made finding commercial locations for child care centers nearly impossible. Many centers are forced to close or pay their employees minimum wage to keep up with the skyrocketing cost of rent. Partnerships like First Lutheran and Las Abejitas will likely be one of the only solutions for maintaining sustainable child care in the near future.

Not only does Las Abejitas value their partnership with First Lutheran for sustainability, they feel they have benefited in so many other ways, too. Center Director and Owner, Kayla Munoz, shared, "When we have had a family in need, church members rallied and were able to provide aid. We've also had donations of paper, books, art supplies, toys, and baby equipment, some of which was used in our center, and some donated to our families in need. We are also so grateful for our volunteer readers, who added so much enrichment and love for our littles. We also appreciate the time and energy the church preschool committee spends in meeting with us and helping us navigate any situation that may arise. Our partnership goes beyond that of landlord and tenant, and for that we are so grateful!"

Kayla goes on to share, "We are thrilled to announce we have officially signed the lease for our second location at First Plymouth Church located at 20th & D Street. We look forward to our partnership with them and being able to provide high quality care for children in central Lincoln. Enrollment opened to the public on Monday, July 22, for children 6 weeks to preschool. We are hoping to open mid September early October."

We deeply appreciate Las Abejitas at First Lutheran and are excited for the Center's opportunity to provide loving care and quality education to even more children and families in Lincoln! Their presence infuses our building with vibrancy and energy every day. Witnessing the staff's loving care and compassion towards the children exemplifies God's boundless love for all his children.

YOUTH & FAMILY MINISTRY

Our Youth & Family Ministry has been buzzing with activity in the last six months. From Sunday morning FaithTrek and Wednesday night Confirmation to milestone events, Vacation Bible School, summer camps and mission trips, our youth from preschool to high school have been busy!



On March 17 we witnessed Sofia Long and Sabrina Andersen partake in their first Holy Communion.

JOURNEYING WITH THE WISEMEN AND OTHERS

When Christmas break ends and you feel a bit blue yet grateful, recall Jesus' words in Matthew 25: "...feed, clothe, visit the least of these." First Lutheran members did so from January 2-4 at "Traveling with the Wisemen" God's Work Our Hands Mini Cross Generational VBS. The Epiphany story and the wise men's journey following the star to see the newborn King was a central theme as everyone served:

- Sorting lemons and distributing enough food at the Center for People for over 350 people
- Preparing cold weather kits for Matt Talbot Kitchen & Outreach
- Baking "star" cookies for a dinner they served at Matt Talbot Kitchen
- Packing food boxes at the Lincoln Lutheran Food Pantry

Thanks to all who joined in God's work by feeding and clothing others!



We celebrated 10 high school graduates during worship on May 19. Congratulations, Will Niebuhr, Xander Niebuhr, Aden Niebuhr, Abigail Yates, Mal Wal, Nicholas Bushard, Liz Scharton, Deng Geit, Nicky Heidelberger and Daria Knezevic!



Our new Lego Room is bringing delight to kids and adults of all ages! Visit it in the lower level - the door is always open!





WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR: SUMMER VBS

For five days in June, nearly 50 children from preschool through 5th grade engaged in learning about their neighbors in Malawi, Japan, the Central African Republic, Rwanda, the United States and Colombia. Our 2024 Vacation Bible School program, themed "Who Is My Neighbor", was hosted by our partner, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church. The children explored foods, listened to stories, created crafts and sang songs from each featured country. Each day was guided by a Bible verse, including Romans 15:2, "Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor," teaching the children the importance of welcoming all neighbors. Additionally, the kids and their families generously collected over 300 food and personal care items for the Lincoln Lutheran Food Pantry. Thank you to all the volunteers who helped make VBS 2024 a meaningful and memorable experience for the kids!

DAILY BLOGS CAPTURE SUMMER MEMORIES

Explore our News blog (www.flclincoln.org/news) for daily updates, reflections, testimonies and photos capturing the memorable experiences of our youth, from VBS to travels to KY and New Orleans.

FAITHTREK (AKA "SUNDAY SCHOOL")

by Ms. Laura Gaulty, FaithTrek Coordinator

I had a conversation recently with a cherub as to why we don't call Sunday morning learning time "Sunday School" anymore. Do you know the reason?

We want the cherubs to know that faith development is all week long, not just one day, and it is never-ending. Right? FaithTrek offers a way to honor our baptismal commitment of nurturing children in the church, fostering their spiritual growth and infusing some fun along the way.

A typical FaithTrek Sunday morning features 20 minutes of music, followed by a 40-minute biblical lesson. Our curriculum aligns with the lectionary, expanding on the day's lesson or Gospel. Cherubs take home lesson ideas; I follow up with parents via my "Weekly Blast" newsletter for home reinforcement.

Young people are crucial to our church's health and future. That's why I'm passionate about FaithTrek. In my early months, I visited many children's homes to connect faces with names. I discovered amazing kids at First! Most all attend FaithTrek and our numbers are growing! Our 3-5th grade class has 14 enrolled! I'll need teachers for this school year, so expect me to ask for your help in supporting FaithTrek's growth!

Finally, I asked some cherubs about their favorite FaithTrek memories. Singing "This Little Light of Mine" with glow sticks for the congregation was a highlight, as was wrapping up Miss Elsa in toilet paper to show Lazarus breaking free at Jesus' call. My heart warming moments? Every Sunday when cherubs run and hug me before and after FaithTrek. Seriously! Best Job Ever.

MIDDLE SCHOOL YOUTH SERVE IN LOUISVILLE

For five days, from June 23-28, six middle school youth and four adults from First Lutheran engaged in various activities in the Louisville, KY area.

Here's a recap of how they spent their time: They weeded trees for mulch at Yew Dell Botanical Garden. Packed 3,500 meals for children at Love the Hungry. Built picnic tables, set up tents and staffed a t-shirt table for Community Gardens at a farmers market. Picked up trash and weeded at Catholic Charities. Enjoyed a cookout with community members at the Salvation Army. Painted picnic tables and cleared storm debris at Louisville parks. Served 724 meals to community members at Franciscan Kitchen. Toured Churchill Downs and watched a race. Played games with retirement center residents.

Maxx Clark shared, "What I liked about this trip is the feeling of helping people and seeing what types of situations people are in. It also just feels good to help those in need. I also liked that we were able to worship God in our devotions and evening worship time through prayer practices, reading bible verses, singing and dancing."

The last night was spent in worship with a foot washing and tears as they prayed and said goodbye to new friends.

Thank you, First Lutheran members, for helping our youth and families raise \$5,747.28 for their summer trips through events like the Waffleman dinner, Spaghetti Feed, Mother's Day Brunch, Dine Out at Don & Millies and lunch at First Friday Jazz.



FIRST LUTHERAN YOUTH EXPERIENCE THE ELCA YOUTH GATHERING IN NEW ORLEANS

The alarms blared early on July 15 as 13 youth and adults boarded a 5:30 AM flight from Omaha to New Orleans for the ELCA Youth Gathering! They explored New Orleans, strolling through the French Quarter and attending a cooking demo with Chef Eric. They enjoyed a swamp tour, Captain Jason showing them the bayou that inspired "The Princess and the Frog." A visit to Oak Alley Plantation and Café Du Monde for beignets were highlights! They found that numerous New Orleans neighborhoods beyond downtown lack attention and resources compared to tourist spots. Their project included cleaning up trash in one such area, a former strip mall site turned dumping ground due to insufficient sanitation services. The Gathering featured many inspiring speakers and musical groups. Michael Chan reminded them that "they were precious before they could prove it." Bishop Susan Candea encouraged them to be beautiful, strong and kind in a challenging world while Bishop Eaton challenged them to be brave, authentic and work for freedom and justice. A highlight was when the group performed on stage at a mass gathering! The Gathering in New Orleans was a memorable experience filled with learning, service and fun. Plans are already underway for the 2027 ELCA Gathering in Minneapolis!

DISCIPLESHIP UNIVERSITY OFFERS FLEXIBILITY FOR YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Discipleship University (also known as Confirmation) was a new ministry for youth in 7th and 8th grade last school year (September-May) and consisted of core courses and electives. Students earned credits for participating in each. Students begin Discipleship University in 7th grade and continue until reaching the suggested number of credits to affirm their baptism. Discipleship University encourages families to attend courses and electives as it fits their schedules.

Discipleship University gathered 10 middle school youth and their families the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of each month last school year. The evenings featured dinner and fellowship time, learning, conversation and reflection. Pastors Erin and Andrew led the sessions, centering discussions around Joe Davis' "Remind Me Again" poems, connecting them to the Small Catechism. One session delved into the poem "Good and Worthy of Love," sparking a dialogue on body image and societal messages. They explored three healing stories from the Bible revealing Jesus' teachings on bodies. These reflections were related with the Apostles Creed's first article. Gratitude to Jenna and Maya Troutman for helping with sessions and to Linda Bogenrief, Michalla Schartz, Donice Kaspar and Laura Grauly for their help in dinner preparations.

Discipleship University will kick off a new year on September 4!



Youth and families gather together for Discipleship University as they prepare for affirmation of baptism.

SUMMER CAMP CREATES MEMORIES FOR 16 YOUTH

This summer, 16 youth from First Lutheran, ranging from elementary to high school, had faith-filled adventures and made new friends at Camp Carol Joy Holling near Ashland. Some of them shared their camping highlights and they all plan to return next year!

"The zipline, water slide and ropes course were my favorite things at camp!"

"The hardest things at camp were the mosquitoes, ropes course and finding snail shells."

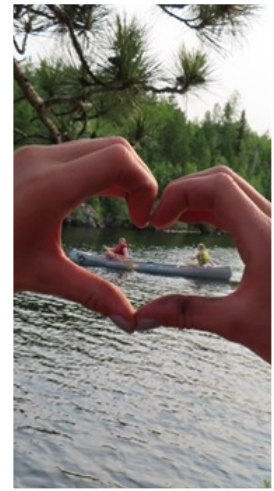
"I saw God when I was having fun, worshiping and when we were all together."

"I got to make some new friends and a few other friends from church were there and I got a new experience with new people."

"Some girls were being mean to me last year and that time I couldn't push through it, but this time I could push through it."

"I felt God when we were at morning service, night service and when I was scared."

"My favorite thing about camp was the high ropes. It was fun. The hardest thing about camp was getting to know new people."



CAITLIN BUCKWALTER'S TRANSFORMATIVE SUMMER ADVENTURE AT WILDERNESS CANOE BASE CAMP

For two adventurous weeks this summer, Caitlin Buckwalter, a high school sophomore, embraced the life of a “Swamper” at Wilderness Canoe Base Camp near Grand Marais, MN. Joining forces with up to 80 youth from nine different churches, Caitlin navigated the boundary waters and northern wilderness. Selected through an application process, Caitlin's willingness to help others and deepen her faith stood out. But what truly set her apart was her history with the camp, having attended last summer with First Lutheran's youth group.

“It was something so different than anything else I have done and I wanted to try it,” Caitlin said, reflecting on her decision to apply as a staffer. Unlike many summer jobs, this wasn't a paid position. In fact, Caitlin invested \$300 of her own money to cover meals and amenities.

During her first ten days, Caitlin remained at the base camp, preparing and packing meals for campers. The real challenge began in the last four days, as she ventured out into the boundary waters, serving as a co-guide with one of the church groups.

“It was one of the most physically difficult things I've ever done,” she shared. Each day involved canoeing

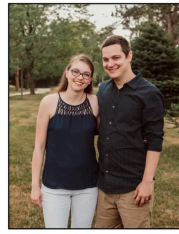
to a new campground, portaging heavy camping gear for up to 1 1/2 miles, setting up camp, preparing food, gathering water and repeating the process the next day - completing a grueling 30-mile loop back to base camp.

Each morning included silent reflection, prayer, and sharing daily experiences and faith connections. Sundays were for worship and Wednesdays for vespers at the base camp.

At first, Caitlin anticipated more Swampers but was surprised to see just one other girl with her. Yet, this twist of events became a positive experience. The two grew close and still keep in touch often after going back home.

Caitlin highlighted numerous benefits from her time at Wilderness Canoe Base, but the most significant takeaway was understanding the value of pushing oneself through challenges. “It reaps positive outcomes!” she emphasized. During challenging times, she sensed the presence and support of God, reinforcing her faith in her abilities and deepening her connection and trust in him. This spiritual growth likely influenced her enthusiastic “Yes!” when asked about returning to camp next year.

Caitlin's summer at Wilderness Canoe Base Camp was more than an outdoor adventure; it was a transformative experience that pushed her limits, strengthened her faith and forged lifelong friendships.



WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST MEMBERS!



ADULT FORUM: YOUR WINDOW INTO THE WORLD'S ISSUES

Every month, on the second Wednesday at 7:00 AM, a group of First members gathers at the local Village Inn for breakfast. Their mission? To plan the Sunday morning Adult Forum sessions, a window into the world's issues and concerns from local to global levels. From exploring mindfulness to delving into historical narratives like Martin Luther and Nazi propaganda, or pondering the nuances between visible and invisible disabilities, the Adult Forum offers a rich tapestry of insights and discussions.

These weekly sessions are informative, enlightening and even fun. They provide an opportunity to deepen knowledge and engage in thoughtful conversation. After hosting a weekly summer adult bible study, the Adult Forum will resume on Sunday, August 25. Drop by the Chapel from 9:30-10:30 AM on a Sunday morning to join in the conversation. You might be pleasantly surprised by the speaker and the topics discussed.

If you have ideas for speakers or topics, Patrick Hayden-Roy (phr@nebrwesleyan.edu) is the person to connect with. Your suggestions are always welcome!

NEWEST MEMBERS SHARE WHY THEY FOUND FIRST LUTHERAN TO BE THEIR CHURCH HOME

Nguyet and I joined First Lutheran March 3, 2024.

We had been searching for a home church for many, many months. The first time we stepped through the door of First Lutheran, people greeted us, then another person was at the Sanctuary door with a bulletin, then Pastor Erin welcomed all the newcomers!! The mission statement caught our attention; inclusivity, supporting each other to grow in faith together. And, of course, the music adds so much to our worship. Thanks be to God for this church community.

~Nguyet Ho & Chris Wilhelm

After moving multiple times over the course of a few years, it was hard to find a church home. Once we settled in Lincoln, we knew it was time to find our new church family. Megan had attended First Lutheran while she was in college and absolutely loved it because of the strong music program and how welcoming the community was! Megan really enjoyed contributing to worship through musical performances on her clarinet when she attended First during college and continues to do so now that we are back in Lincoln. We attended a couple services once we moved and it was clear that First Lutheran was the place to be.

~Ricky and Megan Hulse

Visit http://bit.ly/new_members_march_2024 to meet our newest members at First Lutheran Church!





WORSHIPING THROUGH THE CHURCH SEASONS

During the first half of the year, our calendar was packed with meaningful worship services - starting with Christmas, flowing into Epiphany, Lent, Easter and culminating in the extended church season of Pentecost. In addition to our regular weekend worship schedule of three services - Saturday at 5:30 PM and Sunday at 8:15 and 10:45 AM - we also observed Ash Wednesday and held mid-week Lenten services at noon and 6:30 PM. This period was followed by Holy Week, featuring a total of eight worship services within four days.

Our Lenten focus on "The Seed of Joy" guided us through the season, urging us to embrace joy even when it seemed elusive, reminding us that joy endures through all circumstances and assuring us that God's resurrection will ultimately restore our joy. It was a joy-filled Lenten season at First!

The Lenten theme struck a chord with many and our mid-week services echoed this sentiment as our average attendance remained steady from week to week, even showing an uptick by the 5th week in contrast to the initial two weeks. This trend is uncommon since attendance typically wanes as the season progresses.

The trend continued into Holy Week as we reached pre-pandemic numbers for attendance at all worship services.

The addition of a family-friendly Good Friday worship service at noon was a delightful surprise for all who attended. The experience guided kids and families through the Holy Week timeline with interactive stations in various areas. Activities included making playdough bread, washing feet, reflecting on Jesus' crucifixion, and learning about his resurrection. Themes of love, compassion and transformation were highlighted, with a joyful conclusion of Resurrection Rolls symbolizing Easter's joy.

And what a joyous celebration Easter Sunday was! Marking Christ's victory over death, the day resonated with Easter music, fragrant lilies, Holy Communion and a delicious Easter breakfast!

A heartfelt appreciation goes out to the Fellowship Committee for their dedication in providing Wednesday soup lunches and suppers throughout Lent, organizing the Easter morning breakfast and hosting the annual Easter Egg Hunt.



WORSHIP VOLUNTEERS MAKE WORSHIP MEANINGFUL

Hundreds of members offered their time to serve as worship assistants during one of the busiest times of the church year.

Whether it was serving as a communion assistant, Bible Bearer, crucifer, reader, usher, greeter or part of the Altar Guild - every role was crucial in creating a warm and meaningful worship experience for all!

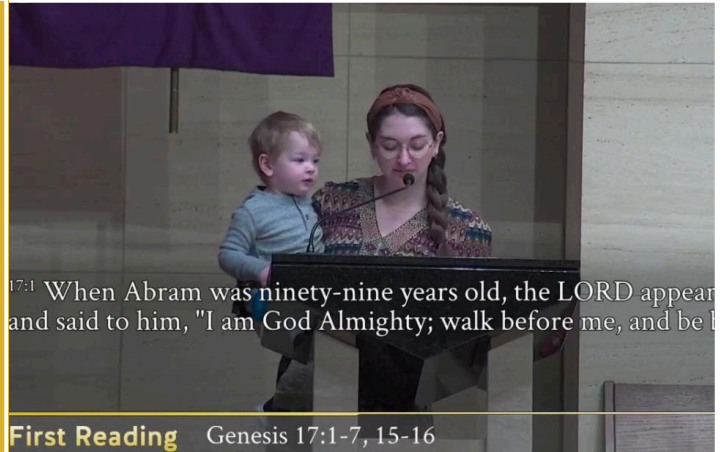
Worship volunteers also provided pastoral and music ministry staff the opportunity to focus on doing what they know and do best without having to worry about last-minute volunteer shortages that are important for worship to run smoothly.

Sign up as a volunteer for worship in September if you haven't already! Numerous slots are still open. Don't hesitate to join, thinking others will step in or do better. There are roles for everyone - young and old, experienced and newbies, singles, couples and families. Training is available for those looking to try something new. Join the worship team by registering online now at www.flclincoln.org/volunteer.

Thank you to all who serve!



Thank you to Kayla Peters and Jenna Troutman for stepping in as assisting ministers during the summer while the pastoral staff enjoyed vacation time!



First Reading Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

You're never too young to serve as a worship assistant! Don't let having little ones hold you back either. First member, Kim Cordonier, didn't as she included her two-year-old son with her when she volunteered to serve as a reader!



WORSHIP VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Sunday morning at 7:30 AM, Jim Overcash, a dedicated member, climbs the stairs to the balcony to ensure everything is set for the 8:15 AM livestream. Jim not only manages the livestream most Sundays but also sets it up on Thursdays. His role on the Communications Team at First is invaluable and is greatly appreciated by our online worship viewers. When asked about his service, Jim shared, "I volunteer because I like working on a team and volunteering for worship is one way to be connected to the worship service. This connection has always been fulfilling for me." We extend our gratitude to Jim for his commitment and dedication.



MUSIC MINISTRY ENGAGES OVER 126 MEMBERS OF ALL AGES

Our church is graced with a multitude of talented musicians. Each person's gift holds deep value for both God and our congregation. Our musicians span from 3 years old to their mid-90s, totaling around 126 individuals from January through June, with many serving across various groups and functions.

The Adult Choir and Spirit Ringers meet weekly, enriching our worship experiences. These groups not only minister during worship but also support one another. During high Sundays, the Brass Ensemble leads us into festive worship experiences. The Jazz Team has evolved from a big band to a small combo, transitioning from seasoned musicians to a youthful group. The String Ensemble has welcomed new members and witnessed the growth of young players.

Collaborating with the Children & Youth Education team, Jan Modica, Erin Niebuhr and Erin Pfister lead FaithTrek children in active worship involvement. Youth are encouraged

MUSIC MINISTRY WRAPS UP THE SUMMER

Sunday, August 25 - Men's Choir (10:45 AM)

Wednesday, August 28 - Adult Choir Kick-Off

Thursday, August 29 - Spirit Ringers Kick-Off

DID YOU KNOW?

You can watch and listen to a lot of the worship music online at www.vimeo.com/flclincoln. Download music performances that are meaningful to you right to your own computer! You can also discover a huge collection of hundreds of recent and archival videos featuring weekly sermons, special events and so much more!

to showcase their talents, with some forming small ensembles or performing as cantors/soloists.

If you have a musical talent, at any experience level, join us. Your contribution can enhance our worship. To participate, contact Masako Bacon. Let's make joyful music together, honoring God with every note.

(Visit www.flclincoln.org/news/126_musicians to view the list of members involved in music ministry since January.)



Cultivating LOVE

REFLECTIONS FROM THE NEBRASKA SYNOD ASSEMBLY

The Nebraska Synod Assembly on June 1 and 2 in Kearney was a moving experience for First Lutheran's Voting Delegates - filled with inspiring talks, informative workshops and growth opportunities. Several of the delegates shared their highlights and takeaways, clearly indicating that the event left a lasting impact.

REV. JEFF CHU'S CAPTIVATING KEYNOTE

A highlight of the event was Rev. Jeff Chu's keynote addresses, which resonated deeply with attendees. Joan Johnson praised Chu's storytelling: "Rev. Jeff Chu left a lasting impression on me. We were fortunate to hear him speak three times. Through his personal narratives, he shows how love can thrive even amidst divides."

Rev. Chu's compelling words inspired Joan to read Rachel Held Evans' book, "Wholehearted Faith", which Chu completed at the request of Held Evans' husband after her unexpected death. "This book served as a morning meditation for me," Joan shared, expressing excitement for Chu's upcoming book, which she plans to include in her meditation routine.

The impact of Rev. Chu's speeches extended beyond Joan. Carol Olson was struck by his perspective on The Parable of the Sower. "Rev. Chu describes this

parable as a transformational narrative often seen as a judgment on those who follow Christ: if you're not the 'good soil,' then you're not a 'good Christian,'" Carol recalled. While this interpretation can be discouraging, Rev. Chu offers a refreshing view.

He suggests that in God's economy, nothing is wasted. Even seeds sown on rocky ground may briefly sprout before wilting, ultimately enriching new soil. He encourages us to engage in "spiritual composting"—identifying aspects of our lives that lead to stagnation. By letting go of these elements, we recognize their potential to transform into fertile ground for growth.

"I found this message incredibly refreshing," Carol reflected. "We often think that when a plan doesn't unfold as we envisioned, it signifies our shortcomings. Instead, it can be an invitation for the Spirit to work in new ways."

This perspective encourages us to embrace abundance over scarcity. Acknowledging that even our perceived failures contribute to the greater good opens us to new possibilities and reminds us that God's grace touches every part of our lives, even the messy ones.

(continued on page 19)



First Lutheran members unite with Synod Assembly delegates for the closing worship on June 2

REFLECTIONS FROM THE NEBRASKA SYNOD ASSEMBLY (CONT)

PRE-ASSEMBLY WORKSHOP TOUCHES THE DELEGATES

(continued from page 18) Carol Olson and Tony Anderson attended the pre-assembly workshop "Cultivating Joy and Exploration through Music," a day-long training for Music that Makes Community (MMC). MMC promotes communal song sharing that fosters spiritual connections, encourages shared leadership and sparks transformation. Participants quickly engaged as leaders sang parts of songs and used gestures to guide call-and-response, rounds and harmony adjustments. They learned to involve others by teaching songs similarly, promoting exploration, creativity and curiosity.

Carol shared, "We all became 'brave leaders.' Our breakout group even wrote a song together and taught it to the larger group, with time to start crafting our own song based on scripture." She added, "What touched me was how connected I felt to others in my breakout group, most of whom I didn't know before the workshop, and how my voice contributed to the joy-filled day. I was surprised by my emotions and found tears welling up at times, feeling deep gratitude

for sharing my voice." Carol's words reflect MMC's mission - to create a space where everyone's voice is heard, fostering a strong sense of community and belonging. "I see this as a great opportunity to make worship more community-oriented and personal, bringing fresh energy and connections among worshipers."

Tony noted, "Being pushed out of my comfort zone made me realize how music serves as a universal language for everyone, regardless of experience or talent. The shared worship moments were particularly meaningful. I felt a deep sense of purpose and truly sensed the Holy Spirit uniting us."

Joan Johnson attended the "Cultivating Love through Stewardship" pre-assembly workshop which deepened her understanding of stewardship. Keynote speaker Pastor Chick Lane encouraged delegates to view God as the owner and ourselves as stewards. One quote that resonated with Joan was, "Stewardship is not just about money; it's about managing everything God has given us—our time, talents, and relationships." Joan believes First Lutheran already embraces many of the principles Lane discussed in our stewardship approach. (continued on page 20)



Karen Peppmuller



Bev White



Erin Niebuhr

REFLECTIONS FROM THE NEBRASKA SYNOD ASSEMBLY (CONT)

BENEFITS OF BEING A SYNOD DELEGATE

(continued from page 19) Tony believes it's important for First members to know that we are part of a much larger community than just our membership at First and the Synod Assembly is one way to experience this. He reflected, "It was great to see and renew acquaintances with former members and pastors with connections to First, as well as making new connections. It was inspiring for me to serve and worship with members of the greater Nebraska ELCA as a voting member of the Assembly."

This year's delegates encourage everyone to consider the call to be a nominee for next year's Synod Assembly. You don't need to be an 'expert' on church matters; this is a short-term commitment, as the Assembly only lasts a few days. Participating in the larger church community is a rewarding and meaningful experience that offers a unique perspective on its workings and mission. It's essential for the Assembly to reflect the diverse voices of all church members - including yours! They even invite you to volunteer for nomination!

ELECTED LEADERS SHARE HOW THEY OVERCAME THEIR HESITATION TO SERVE

The 154th Annual Congregational Meeting of First Lutheran Church took place on January 28. Alongside voting on the 2024 budget and other matters, members were elected to leadership roles. The Nominating Committee presented a slate of highly qualified candidates. It's common for members to hesitate when asked to serve by the committee. However, those who were initially reluctant to be on the ballot often find serving enriching. As Karen Peppmuller expressed, "It's not just about 'giving back'; in truth, serving brings me more than I give."

"I agreed to run for the Endowment Board because I wanted to use my experience as a CPA. This was an opportunity to contribute my own skills. I had some concerns—was I really qualified for this role? Being on the Endowment Board has shown me that I do have the background to contribute meaningfully. There are many ways to get involved at First Lutheran and serving in an elected role is particularly rewarding. You'll learn a lot about the church and meet members you might not know well. It's a wonderful way to share your gifts."

~ Karen Peppmuller, Endowment Board

"Initially, I felt apprehensive when asked to run for the Church Council, as I tend to be a quiet person in a group of unfamiliar faces—I usually prefer listening until I feel at ease. Being relatively new to First Lutheran, I was uncertain about what was expected of me or whether I would be welcomed on the Council."

(continued on page 21)





VITALITY INITIATIVE TEAM DELVES INTO BIG QUESTIONS

Earlier this year, First Lutheran was chosen to participate in the Nebraska Synod's Vitality Initiative. This initiative is not merely a project to be developed or a step-by-step program to be followed; rather, it is an organic and intentional process aimed at deepening our faith, nurturing discipleship and embracing the cultural shifts that God is inviting us to explore. This journey will help our congregation more effectively engage with its identity and respond to the broader community.

Our First Lutheran Vitality Initiative Team includes Amy Harrison, Steve and Tiffany Henn, Doug Lind-Olson, Ben and Leah Middendorf, Natalie Peters, Dara Troutman, Faye Doolittle and Pastor Erin Heidelberger. They are supported by our coach, Deacon Sunni Richardson, the Synod Director for Leadership Development.

As part of this initiative, the team will delve into significant questions, including:

- Who are we? Discerning congregational identity.

(continued on page 22)

ELECTED LEADERS SHARE HOW THEY OVERCAME THEIR HESITATION TO SERVE (CONT)

(continued from page 20)

However, I chose to have my name on the ballot out of a sense of responsibility as a member of First Lutheran. After being elected, my apprehension quickly faded, thanks to the warmth and openness of the other Council members.

The benefits include bringing new ideas to the council, being more involved in decision-making, feeling more integrated into First, and getting to know more people and their backgrounds, strengths and talents. While I'm not sure of my impact, I've been invited to join more activities and now feel more a part of this congregation rather than an outsider."

~ Bev White, Church Council

"At first, I was hesitant to agree to serve on the Nominating Committee as it had been 10+ years since I last served. After being asked to be on the ballot, I took a few days to prayerfully think it over and decided that, yes, I should put my name out there and be willing to serve. Having been a member of First Lutheran for over 20 years and being involved in so many facets of worship, education and fellowship within the church, I felt I could use my connections to help create a robust and exciting slate of candidates for next year's elections.

I would ask that if you are approached by a Nominating Committee member in the next few months that you seriously consider giving your time and talents and serve by running for an elected role. We are in a transitional time in the church and we need new and varied people to bring their voices, experiences and opinions to the table. Everyone has something wonderful to give and I encourage you to step forward and serve!"

~ Erin Niebuhr, Nominating Committee

MEET OUR NEW FACILITIES MANAGER

If you haven't yet had the pleasure of meeting Janis Strautkalns, the new Facilities Manager at First Lutheran, now's the time to do so! Janis joined our team this May. Beyond work, he finds joy in the great outdoors, traveling - particularly to sunny beaches. Originally from Michigan, Janis has made Lincoln, NE his home for the majority of his life. A committed member of The United Lincoln Latvian Ev. Lutheran Church, he serves as the Church Council's Secretary. Janis is excited to be a part of the First Lutheran Church team. Let's extend a warm welcome to Janis!



VITALITY INITIATIVE TEAM DELVES INTO BIG QUESTIONS (CONT)

(continued from page 21)

- Who are our neighbors? Discerning context and the surrounding community in which the congregation is a part.
- What is God inviting? Discerning the next most faithful step and lean into God's invitation to come and see, follow, experiment and serve.

In recent months, the team has focused on the first essential question: Who are we? Rather than asking, "What do we do?" they sought to uncover the very essence of First Lutheran. Reflecting on our congregation's history, they aimed to identify the threads that have woven through our community over time. After conducting numerous interviews with members, analyzing historical documents and engaging in meaningful conversations, the VI Team has crafted a video that answers this pivotal question. We invite you to take a moment to watch it, as it is prominently featured on our website's homepage (www.flclincoln.org) for all visitors to discover "Who First Lutheran is!"

REALM: CONNECTING OUR COMMUNITY

First Lutheran Church is transitioning to Realm Connect - an online member management platform with benefits for staff and members. Access Realm Connect on any device from anywhere! Stay updated on meetings, events, message staff, committee chairs, or groups easily, volunteer, register for events, track donations, maintain a profile and access a photo directory.

During the week of September 2, check your Inbox for an invitation to activate your Realm account. If not found, check your spam or junk folders. Email invitations expire after 72 hours. For a new email invitation, contact mandy@flclincoln.org.

Visit https://bit.ly/realm_guide for the Realm Guide on setting up your account. Need help? Members will be available in the Gathering Area on September 8, 15, 22 and 29 from 9:30-10:30 AM. Stop by! We can also take your profile photo if needed. Welcome to Realm!



LOOKING AHEAD

- SEPT 15** LEARNING YEAR BEGINS / 9:30-10:30 AM
- SEPT 15 & 22** FLC 101 NEW MEMBER CLASS / 9:30-10:30 AM
- SEPT 15** 2025 STEWARDSHIP CAMPAIGN KICKS OFF
- SEPT 21** ALL-CHURCH RETREAT / CAMP CAROL JOY HOLLING
- SEPT 22** KICKS FOR KIDS CAMPAIGN BEGINS
- SEPT 29** REALM MEMBER SUPPORT SESSION / 9:30-10:30 AM
- OCT 4** 2024-25 FIRST FRIDAY JAZZ SEASON BEGINS
- OCT 6** COMMITMENT SUNDAY & FALL FESTIVAL (NOON-3:00)
- OCT 27** REFORMATION SUNDAY (NO 8:15 AM WORSHIP)
- OCT 27** TOWN HALL AND POTLUCK LUNCH / NOON
- NOV 3** AFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM & BREAKFAST / 9:30 AM
- NOV 3** ALL SAINTS SUNDAY
- DEC 1** ADVENT BEGINS
- DEC 4, 11 & 18** MIDWEEK ADVENT WORSHIP / NOON & 6:30 PM
- DEC 7 & 8** GIFTS OF HOPE ONLINE & IN-PERSON MARKET



CONNECT WITH US



www.flclincoln.org



www.flclincoln.org/calendar



First Lutheran Church -
Lincoln, NE



@flclincoln



Worship - Saturday 5:30 PM and
Sunday 8:15 & 10:45 AM



402-488-0919



1551 S. 70th Street, Lincoln,
NE 68506



Sign Up for the "First Things
First" weekly e-newsletter to
stay updated on events and
ministry opportunities!



Request pastoral care or send a
prayer request.

ONLINE GIVING



Operating Budget
Building Fund
Endowment Fund
ELCA World Hunger
Flower Fund
Pastor's Discretionary Fund
Food Pantry



Pastor Erin Heidelberger
Lead Pastor
pastorerin@flclincoln.org



Pastor Andrew Kitzing
Associate Pastor
pastorandrew@flclincoln.org



Sharon Hardel
Director of Youth & Family
sharon@flclincoln.org



Boyd & Masako Bacon
Directors of Music Ministry
musicflclincoln@gmail.com



Laura Grauly
FaithTrek Coordinator
laura@flclincoln.org



Kathleen Simley
Communications Director
kathleen@flclincoln.org



Wyatt Swanson
Church Accountant
wyatt@flclincoln.org



Mandy West
Parish Coordinator
mandy@flclincoln.org

