November 12, 2026

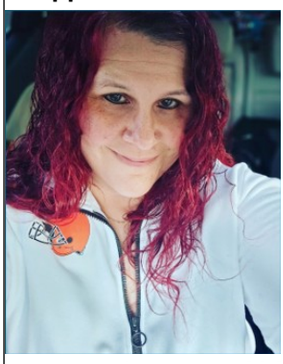
ST. STEPHEN THIS WEEK

St. Stephen Lutheran Church Newsletter

‘THIS PLACE IS SPECIAL’

Last Sunday’s Stewardship Talk from Jennifer Slusarz (slightly condensed)

My brother just asked me a few weeks ago what brought me back to church, because he too has been thinking about finding a church community, and he wanted to know if we had similar reasons. Our parents instilled in us a sense of civic duty, responsibility to our fellow man and woman, and genuine acceptance and celebration of diversity. I recall our father telling us all the time, “There but for the grace of God go I.” Our mother reminded us that “the greatest of God’s commandments is ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’” She brought us to volunteer to serve others from a young age. We went caroling in nursing homes, serving in food banks, and visiting neighbors and family who were unable to get out. My brother tells everyone he doesn’t have a traumatic coming-out story; when he told us he was gay, we said, “Yes, OK, and?” – and went about our day. I am grateful he felt supported and not traumatized.



As I grew older, those early messages from my parents conflicted with the reality of behavior within the Catholic Church. I drifted away from formal religion. Moving from Ohio to Georgia in 2000 and seeing the hypocrisy firsthand further solidified my thoughts; I saw people going to church and then living very different values. And when I moved to North Florida in 2007, things were even more intense. Colleagues who claimed to embrace Christian values made derogatory comments about women, brown and black people, the LGBTQ community, the mental-health patients we were treating, and literally anyone else who was not just like them. I was called names I’d never heard before because my partner is an African-American man. I thought: If this is Christianity in the South, I can’t be a part of it.

In August 2025, I lost my job with the state after 18 years of loyalty and service. I had lived on campus in a state house, so I lost not only my job but also my house, my security. I was angry, scared and stressed. It wasn’t easy to find a place to live since I had no “rental history.” I was worried about finding a job that fit with my passion and allowed me to live my values. In a moment of quiet desperation, as I begged my late parents to watch over me, I heard some of my Mom’s old words to me. And I thought maybe I could find some solace, some peace, in a church.

So I started my “Goldilocks” quest to find a “just right” church home. The first place I went was big, and a little grand, but nobody spoke to me at all the first time I went. I sat quietly to the side, and something didn’t seem to quite fit. But the psychologist in me knew I shouldn’t make any decision after just one data point, so I went back. The second time was much like the first. In addition, I saw a few people I knew from the community, people whose values didn’t align with my own. So my quest continued.

The second church was much smaller, and much less formal. People did seem genuinely friendly and open-minded. But the service was wildly different from anything I knew, and it felt very unfamiliar. There were no real readings, there was no communion, and a large portion of the service was spent celebrating everyone’s weekly accomplishments. That was nice, but not exactly what I was looking for. I went back a few times, but each time felt the same.

So I decided to seek one more place: St. Stephen. Immediately, it felt vastly different from the first two places. So many people greeted me, and it felt genuine and familiar. I sat back there at the end of the row, and saw Pastor Tom wearing rainbow-colored vestments, and I started to feel a calm come over me. As I flipped through the bulletin, I saw familiar aspects that I found comforting – including prayer requests for peace in the Middle East, for the immigrants being swept up by ICE, for the environment. As I listened to the

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

readings, and then Pastor Tom's words, tears came to my eyes. After months of dread and tension, I felt hopeful that this place knew and fully celebrated those familiar values instilled by my parents.

In the announcements the following week, I learned that a guest speaker from Capital Tea, the transgender safe house, was coming soon. "Wow," I thought. I called my brother and told him how different St. Stephen seemed to be, and how centered I felt after just one service. And I continued to come back, week after week. The same sense of calm came over me each time. I met new people, made friends, felt included. When the time came to officially join the church, it felt natural. I joined committees, helped put on events and attended training opportunities. I still sit in the back, but now with people I know and love. Sometimes I still feel moved to tears, a combination of joy, relief and peace coming over me. This place is special. I feel better every time I leave. Together, we must ensure St. Stephen continues to thrive so we can show the Tallahassee community anything is possible through God's love.

This Sunday's Stewardship Talk will be presented by Jacob Nallapu. On the following Sundays we'll hear from Jen Dritt, Colin Hackley and Rudy Hehn. Great lineup, eh?

TIME FOR CLIPPERS, GLOVES, ETC.



Rob Schiffer has invited us to gather at the church Saturday morning (8 a.m. or later) to continue the yardwork we started some months ago. At that previous workday, one of our concerns was steamy weather. This time, not a problem. See you there?

SMILE FOR THE CAMERA ON SUNDAY



Please remember: Bennett and Courtney Zerbe are offering family, group or individual photo portraits this Sunday after the 10 a.m. service. Sessions are still available. If you're interested, please text Bennett at 303-883-7447 to confirm your time.

Something else to remember: The Zerbes are not charging for this service, but they do suggest at least a $50 donation to the church, if you're able. Images will be sent to the email address you provide them in advance of your session.

REACHING OUT

By Andrea Notley

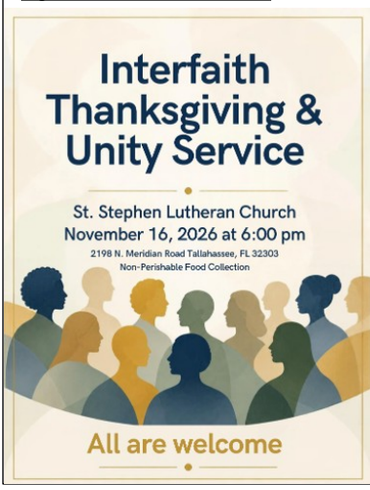
The Outreach Committee extended the Spice It Up Sunday deadline. Please remember to bring spices this Sunday for our friends at the Seminole Manor Neighborhood Food Pantry.

Also, the Giving Tree is coming back! I just got the names and will be ready this weekend. Anyone who's interested in helping families in need this Christmas can reach out to me. To "adopt" a family member, contact me and I'll send you information on their wants and needs. Or, if you want to participate but don't like to shop, you may donate money by placing it in the offering plate or Venmo and putting "Giving Tree" on the memo line.



GIVING THANKS TOGETHER

By Colleen Holdcraft



St. Stephen is hosting an Interfaith Thanksgiving and Prayer Service at 6 p.m. Monday. We are thankful to have Jewish, Muslim and Christian sacred texts and reflections. Following the service, there will be a reception in Hingst Hall. Please join us on the 16th!

REST IN PEACE, MARGARET BERTOLAMI

Margaret H. Bertolami passed away Sept. 27. She was born Jan. 2, 1928, in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She married Joseph G. Bertolami, and together they had two sons, Robert and our St. Stephen brother Mark. Among her proudest accomplishments was putting both sons through college.

Margaret enjoyed a lengthy career as an executive secretary at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami. As a nontraditional adult student, she earned an Associate of Arts degree from Miami Dade Community College. After she retired, Margaret remained in Miami for approximately 10 years, volunteering with several organizations, including Zoo Miami. She later moved to Tallahassee to be closer to Mark, making it her home for approximately 25 years and continuing to volunteer with local community groups and organizations.

Above all, Margaret was a good and generous person and a devoted mother. Even when she had little to spare, she gave generously to others. Raised in the Lutheran faith, she believed in God and passed along to her sons the values and experiences that helped shape the people they became. She had a wonderful sense of humor, and laughter was a familiar part of family life. She had an eye for design, a love of architecture and a particular pleasure in gardening. Strong-willed and outspoken at times, Margaret was very much her own person.

MONTY'S SHORT-RIB CHILI

At the most recent church potluck, St. Stephen's chili-masters duked it out. Ultimately, Monty Mortensen managed to withstand a strong challenge from Barbara Sullivan to emerge as champion. We were planning to share his recipe in the newsletter, until we realized it would take up three whole pages. But Margaret Bowers says copies will be available at church Sunday. Here's the first paragraph:



Slow-braised beef short ribs, smoky chipotle, warm spices and dark red kidney beans. This hearty chili replaces ground beef with tender, shredded short ribs. Coffee, chipotle, cocoa and warm spices provide deep, smoky flavor. This recipe comes from a couple family variations and my own. I was organizing it in ChatGPT and I was saying to make it with "2 cans of beans, yada, yada" and it said: "There's even a little Reformation joke hiding in here: Reforming chili one kidney bean at a time. Martin Luther might have had something to say about that, though I wouldn't presume to put it in his 95 Theses."

WATERS OF JUSTICE: EXCERPT FROM PASTOR TOM'S SERMON

"Let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." In the past, I've considered this to be only something we can strive to do, but there's ambiguity here that could lead us to be reminded that God also sends forth justice to flow down upon our heads like waters, and sends forth righteousness upon us like an ever-flowing stream. The waters of justice and righteousness both flow out of us and flow upon us.

BEFORE YOU GO…

- **Have any words of thanks you'd like to pass along in the next newsletter? Send them to rrhartung1@gmail.com.**
- **Many thanks to Alison Haney for allowing her cello to partner with Katharine's piano in "The Swan," the memorable Saint-Saens prelude from last Sunday. Gorgeous!**
- **If you've arrived at church at the last minute on any recent Sunday morning, you know that our parking lot is packed. That's a good thing, right? Well, yes – but it might scare away first-time visitors who think there's no room for them. So some of us have begun parking up the hill, in the spaces by the small office complex on Pinewood. If you're able-bodied and up for a short stroll, maybe you can park there too.**



- **And pictured here is the newsletter editor's latest suggestion, in case the Church Council votes to provide him with a company car. It's a 1941 Lincoln, in an ad filled with love letters from Lincoln fans. It'd look good in that parking lot up the hill, don't you think? God, watch over us as we drive through life.**

COMING UP

Today:
Noon - Al-Anon meets in Pastor Emory Hingst Memorial Fellowship Hall, aka Hingst Hall (HH)
7 p.m. - AA meets in HH

This Friday:
9:30 a.m. - TOPS meets in HH

This Sunday:
9:00 a.m. - Bible study
9:30 a.m. - Choir rehearsal
10 a.m. – Worship, Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Monday, November 16:
5 p.m. - TIMA meets in HH
6p.m. - Interfaith Thanksgiving Unity Service
Tuesday, November 17:
6 p.m. - NA meets in HH

Wednesday, November 18:
5 p.m. - TIMA meets in HH
6 p.m. - Confirmation for adults
7 p.m. - Choir rehearsal

Thursday, November 19:
10 a.m. - Bible study

SERVING THIS SUNDAY

Pastor Tom Holdcraft, Preaching and Presiding; **Beth Alexander,** Assisting Minister; **Susan Warren,** Cup Minister; **Jennifer Buchanan,** Lector; **Susan Hehn,** Cantor; **Ben Bush and Mark Greeley,** Tech Team; **Anita Sawh and Rita Ford,** Altar Guild; **Janet Barber and Susan Warren**, Counters; **Ann DelRossi and Bob Eshleman,** Ushers; **Denise Bookwalter,** Announcements.



UPCOMING BIRTHDAYS

Mark Warren – 11/13
Cheryl Stuart – 11/14
Elliot Reece – 11/14
Marda Messick – 11/20
Cindy Suhrweir – 11/21
Sue Canning – 11/25
Marley Bonfanti – 11/26
Michael Bonfanti – 11/27
Phil Williams - 11/29





If you have news or photos to share, please send them to Rita at sslc@ststephenlutherantally.com.

Don't forget our Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/ststephentallahassee.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, ELCA

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