

St. Stephen Lutheran Church Newsletter

After Sunday's congregational meeting, we have two new Church Council members, an official new name for our fellowship hall and a better grasp of our financial processes in the future. "I was very pleased with the spirit of the meeting," Pastor Tom said afterward. "There were a few concerns about the last few years' deficit, but all were given in the tone of hope, and people were free to express ideas. We implemented a 2-minute limit on using the microphone. It's a practice used at Synod Assemblies, and it gave people time to comment or ask questions without going off on tangents."

FINANCES IN GENERAL:

- We're not in dire financial straits, but we ended 2024 with having to draw over \$19,000 from savings to pay bills.
- The new accounting software, as well as Lori's input of past years' income and expenses, gives us a better understanding of trends.
- Pastor explained that the income generated by the capital campaign was collected in 2021 and 2022, whereas the invoices were paid in 2022 and 2023. That makes it look like we experienced huge expenses in those years for undesignated projects. While we did run a deficit, it was not a case of borrowing from savings, but that \$151,000 was collected for the project in 2021 but not paid out until 2022 and 2023. The confusion occurred because the capital campaign funds were mostly kept in the regular checking account.



TREASURER'S REPORT:

- Jen Drift reported that with Office Manager Lori Zengel doing the bookkeeping, reports and tracking transactions faster.
- Jen clarified that all bills have been paid, but that money was taken from the Wonderfund to meet obligations. Reminder: The Wonderfund was a designated financial gift given to St. Stephen to pay for Pastor Tom's seminary student loan. After Pastor's loan was forgiven by the federal government, the giver allowed the gift to remain at St. Stephen and be used as a designated fund for future ministry. (Its name comes as we "wonder" what new ministries God will use it for.) The congregation is working to repay the Wonderfund at \$200 per month.



- **Rudy Hehn calculated that we're running about 10% behind in giving-to-expense ratio for the past three years. If that rate continues, we'll eventually run out of money. Discussions resumed about ways to save.**

- Karen Olson recommended that a study be done of the past seven years, to investigate discrepancies. She doesn't want St. Stephen to be afraid about our finances.
- Sylvia Smith asked which bills still needed to be paid; Jen replied that all had been paid. Sylvia noted that, based on her experience with nonprofit work, financial gifts tied to a designated project make accounting much more difficult than when people simply give without designation. Removing the designation can allow other obligations to be met.
- Why were office expenses so high last year? Jen said the new accounting software and necessary training had not been included in the budget.
- Pledges for 2025 total \$191,930. The amount given regularly but not pledged is \$29,920. Vanco (the automated withdrawal system that some members like to give through) is \$3,480. That makes a total of \$225,330. We have about \$27,000 more in pledges this year than last.

- Chris Reece calculated that if the church could raise its collective giving \$857 per week, that would make up the deficit.
- All ideas and suggestions will be part of the finance team’s work.
- Later, Rudy moved to approve the creation of a Finance Committee and have an audit performed within the next six months. (He later clarified his motion to have that Finance Committee selected by the Council.) The motion passed.
- Pastor Tom noted that we met our benevolence commitment of 10% to the Synod.

BUDGET FOR 2025:

The budget proposed by the Church Council, giving Music Director Katharine Gossman a 10% salary raise, was adopted.

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

President Denise Bookwalter thanked outgoing Council members Beth Alexander, Jennifer Buchanan and Rita Ford for their service to the church. Denise was re-elected president, and Audrey Post was re-elected for Communications. Two new Council members were elected: Susan Hehn for Worship and Music, and Emily Stover for Education. (The seat for Mutual Ministry will go unfilled for now.) So here’s the new lineup for the Church Council:

- President: Denise Bookwalter
- Education & Discipleship: Emily Stover (succeeding Rita Ford)
- Treasurer: Jennifer Dritt
- Buildings: Sandy Lamb-Daniels
- Grounds: Rob Schiffer
- Mutual Ministry: Vacant (no successor yet to Jennifer Buchanan)
- Worship & Music: Susan Hehn (succeeding Beth Alexander)
- Outreach: Sharon Simmons
- Care & Hospitality: Lawana Lamb-Daniels
- Communications: Audrey Post
- Youth member: Graham Reece

HINGST HALL:

- Council member Graham Reece made a motion to rename the fellowship hall as the Rev. Emory Hingst Fellowship Hall, in memory of St. Stephen’s longtime pastor and pastor emeritus. The motion passed unanimously.

Rev. Emory A. Hingst
Fellowship Hall

Many thanks to the Council members and to all who participated in this important conversation.

ONWARD, CHRISTIAN CAMPERS

By Mark Greeley, First Gentleman

It’s once again time for the St. Stephen Annual Camping Trip! We have six sites reserved at St. Joseph Peninsula State Park for the weekend of April 25-27. Some of these sites are for tents, some are for RVs, and some extend beyond the weekend if you’re interested in a longer stay.



Loose schedule:
Arrive Friday night,
beach/hike during
the day Saturday,
worship on Saturday
night, pack up and
head out Sunday.
We have communal
meals and plenty
of experienced
campers to help set
up gear. It’s really a
big family when

we’re down there. And at all times there will be bacon. The sites are not all spoken for, so please get in touch with me (markhoffmangreeley@gmail.com) or Colin Hackley (colin@colinhackley.com) if you want to come.

HAVE A HIDDEN TALENT?

As you know, the annual St. Stephen Talent Show is coming up March 2. Between the end of the liturgy and the start of the show, there'll be a light lunch in the fellowship hall. Some of your favorite entertainers will be back ... but there are openings for new performers, too! If you'd like to find out more, talk to Master of Ceremonies Pastor Tom or show-biz veteran Rita Ford.



BISHOP SUAREZ'S THOUGHTS ON BALANCING SECURITY AND COMPASSION

Among the groups caught in the recent blizzard of unfounded accusations from Elon Musk and his allies were various local chapters of Lutheran Social Service. Without citing evidence, one former Trump adviser accused those and other Lutheran groups — which have longstanding funding agreements with the government — of “money laundering,” a federal crime. Across the country, commentators and Lutheran representatives strenuously objected. Here in Florida, Bishop Pedro Suarez gave this brief, measured video response.

Our nation faces complex challenges as we strive to uphold both security and compassion. We recognize the fundamental responsibility of government to protect our citizens, maintain the rule of law and secure the borders. This includes ensuring public safety and addressing the criminal activity that threatens our communities. At the same time, we are called to show compassion to those that are in need – a value deeply rooted in American tradition and Christian teaching.... History shows us that balancing security and compassion is possible....

Organizations like Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, now Global Refuge, have served vulnerable populations since 1939, partnering with government agencies to ensure both orderly processes and humanitarian care. Lutheran Services Florida, established in 1982, exemplifies this



Global Refuge

formerly known as
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

balanced approach. Their work addresses critical community needs for reducing substance abuse and suicide rates, to supporting families in crisis and providing educational opportunities. They serve our communities while operating within established systems and accountability measures.... We should pray for wisdom for leaders as they

EXCERPTS FROM PASTOR TOM'S SERMON

... What sort of new ministries might God be calling us into? The unused Sunday School building ... what if that were turned into a ministry for St. Stephen? Converting the building, or building a new one, to create efficiency space for people in the congregation facing shelter challenges? Making it into a multi-purpose room for youth to hang out?

We can be talking about the many groups who utilize our fellowship hall room. It's also a space that needs renovation as we do outreach with others. How might we open our wallets and give the resources God has blessed us with to embrace those new ministries? What sort of response would we have when God whispers into our ears, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you to deliver you”?

Last week, we celebrated Ministry of Reconciliation Sunday and enjoyed a message from Jonathan Webber from the Southern Poverty Law Center. We heard a passionate advocate and were inspired by his message of hope and presence. How showing up is important and how advocacy – that is, speaking up in objection to lawmakers' unjust policies and/or speaking in support of those who are oppressed and locked in the cycles of poverty – makes positive differences.

“Do not be afraid. You are capable,” God said. And you and I are capable. We simply need to not be afraid, because that's what they want us to be. Hopeless and afraid....

FIX THE NEWS

I recently subscribed to Fix the News, recommended by Pastor Tom, who learned about it from Sylvia Smith. Fix the News describes itself with this statement: “We report stories of progress.” There’s a lot to worry about these days, and I still read “legacy media” stories about Trumpian carnage, but this is a welcome, hopeful addition to that diet. Here are a few excerpts from the latest edition.



DONALD TRUMP VERSUS MARKET FORCES



pollution.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration expects solar power to provide the majority of new capacity built through 2026, oil companies have no extra plans to drill baby drill, American automakers are plowing forward with electrification, and a coalition of two dozen US governors, representing nearly 55% of the US population, are redoubling commitments to slash planet-warming

NINE NEW PROTECTED AREAS ACROSS SOUTH AMERICA

The Andes Amazon Fund is possibly the world's most effective conservation initiative almost nobody has ever heard about. In the past month, it's posted nine stories about new protected areas in Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil and Colombia, totaling almost 10,000 km². That is not a typo. Some of these areas are crucial biodiversity hotspots, home to hundreds of species of unique fauna and flora.



RECYCLING PLANT USES SUPER-HOT WATER TO BREAK DOWN PLASTIC



A UK company has launched a first-of-its-kind facility that uses high-pressure superheated water to break down mixed and contaminated plastics. The process, more efficient than conventional methods, transforms previously un-recyclable waste into raw materials for new plastics, producing half the carbon emissions of incineration. *Nature*

Want to know more? Visit <https://fixthenews.com> .

BEFORE YOU GO...

- As Cassandra White announced last Sunday, Honest Living Tea House is having a book exchange this Sunday from noon to 3 p.m. Honest Living is at 1351 Thomasville Road.
- The Cannings are giving away three Christmas lawn ornaments that light up. If you’re interested, email susan.canning49@gmail.com
- You can pick up your 2024 statement of giving in the narthex this Sunday. Any remaining on Feb. 10 will be mailed out.



- If you have an anniversary, birthday, special memory or special St. Stephen person or program you’d like to honor, celebrate by sponsoring the altar flowers for our service. Sign up on the flower chart, out by the nametags, or ask Lori to sign you up. Include the \$40 with your regular offering. And then take the flowers home!



UPCOMING BIRTHDAYS

Chris Reece - 02/15
Patrick Kennell - 02/18
Lisa Medley - 02/25
Jackie Mustian - 02/25
Judi Duffy - 02/27
Rob Schiffer - 02/28

COMING UP

Today:

Noon - Al-Anon meets in fellowship hall (FH)
7 p.m. - AA meets in FH

This Friday:

9:30 a.m. - TOPS meets in FH

This Saturday:

11 a.m. - Al-Anon meets in FH

This Sunday:

9 a.m. - Book study
10 a.m. - Worship, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
4 p.m. - Congolese Christian worship in FH



Monday, February 10:

5 p.m. - TIMA meets in FH
7 p.m. - TIMA meets in FH

Tuesday, February 11:

5 p.m. - NA meets in FH

Wednesday, February 12:

10 a.m. - Friendship Star Quilting Group meets in FH
5 p.m. - TIMA meets in FH
7 p.m. - Choir practice



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

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

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The Rev. Tom Holdcraft, Pastor