



ST. STEPHEN THIS WEEK

St. Stephen Lutheran Church Newsletter

DID YOU MISS THE MEETING? YOU CAN CATCH UP HERE

By Finance Committee Chair Rudy Hehn, whom we asked for a recap

Thank you for a great meeting on Sunday! The thoughtful questions, honest discussion and respect for each person's opinion reminded me that God is working in our congregation. Here's a bullet-list summary of our financial discussion:



- The Gift Policy was reviewed and approved. We discussed what occurs in the rare event when a designated gift cannot be used as intended. We voted to leave the language as written in the policy. Our goal is to always apply the full proceeds of a designated gift as defined by the donor.
- In 2023 and 2024, we had a combined deficit of \$7,000. We were able to use our savings to

overcome the shortfall.

- Last year, 2025, we received \$270,000 vs. a budget of \$276,000. We spent \$278,000 vs. a target of \$270,000. The \$8,000 shortfall was due to unexpected insurance-cost and office-technology expenses.
- Our goal for 2026 is to increase giving by 10% and keep our expenses to less than 3% over last year.
- Our pledges for 2026 total \$215,000. This is a 10% increase from 2025. YEA! Thank you, St. Stephen, for your dedication. We expect unpledged giving to increase as well.
- We carefully reviewed our expenses from last year. We found savings opportunities for this year in office expenses and software fees.
- Pastor Tom, Music Director Katharine Gossman and Treasurer Jen Dritt worked together to find health insurance that is safe and more cost-effective.
- We decreased our Synod contribution for 2026. We committed to a future increase if we can sustain a budget surplus.
- As this year begins, we have \$5,000 in undesignated funds available. This is a bare minimum, but our generous 2026 pledges are a good sign. We are hopeful for a good year ahead.
- Apart from financial matters, other news was discussed. Here are two items:
- Audrey Post is stepping down from the Church Council. President Denise Bookwalter asked for volunteers to replace her. No one came forward, so the decision was deferred. Many thanks for your service, Audrey.
- Susan Hehn announced that a congregational retreat is coming up April 11-12. Jacqueline Bussie will lead it. The location is being chosen this month, and there will be no cost to participants thanks to a generous donor. (See more below.)

In short, the meeting went really well.

WELCOME TO OUR POTLUCK, MR. COMMISSIONER

We're coming up on the last Sunday in January, which means it's Ministry of Reconciliation Sunday time. Every year Dave Suhrweir puts together an



inspiring program for what we call “a celebration of God’s inclusive love.” This year’s speaker is a local political celebrity: City Commissioner and mayoral candidate Jeremy Matlow. The title of his talk is “Love, Equality and Solidarity Start Locally.” Several speakers in the past have been affiliated with Equality Florida, and it was someone from Equality Florida who suggested Commissioner Matlow for our event.

When Dave asked the commissioner what Bible verse he’d like to include in the flyer, he chose

Hebrews 10:24: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” And when asked what organization he’d choose to receive charitable donations springing from our event, he designated Capital Tea. You’ll learn a little more about Capital Tea in the next item below, and even more about it this Sunday.

On Ministry of Reconciliation Sunday, as most of you know, first comes a special liturgy; then comes our speaker’s address in the sanctuary; and then comes a potluck lunch in Hingst Hall. Dave passes along these helpful reminders:

- Remember to bring food to the potluck. We’d like to include some items relating to food restrictions, such as gluten-free, vegetarian and vegan. It would be helpful to create a label to place by such items to identify them for our guests.
- We’re expecting a significantly larger attendance than usual. Those of us who are able should consider parking in the office lot behind the church. There’s a walking path to the back of the church, or you can walk down Pinewood Drive to St. Stephen.
- Remember that guests may not be familiar with our worship procedures. Reach out to those near you and guide them in the use of the bulletin, the hymnal and other St. Stephen customs that would help them feel more comfortable. Thank you!

For details, please click on the link to Dave’s Ministry of Reconciliation flyer, which (God willing) should be attached to the email that delivered this newsletter.

NOW, ABOUT CAPITAL TEA...

Here is a condensed version of Executive Director Janel Diaz’s introduction to the charitable organization that will receive our donations from this year’s Ministry of Reconciliation event.

Capital Tea is a transgender-led nonprofit based in Tallahassee, created out of necessity, love and survival. We exist because too many transgender and gender-diverse people are forced to navigate the world without safety, stability, or support — and because our community deserves so much more than that. At Capital Tea, we believe that trans people shouldn’t

have to choose between being themselves and being safe. Our work is rooted in community care — showing up for one another when systems fail us. Through monthly support groups, education, advocacy and mutual aid, we create spaces where trans people are not just tolerated but truly seen, affirmed and valued. For more information, visit www.capitaltea.org.



WAIT – DID SOMEONE MENTION A RETREAT?

That’s right. At the top of the newsletter you saw a brief reference to a congregational retreat. Some of the details are still being worked out, but it sounds pretty terrific. On Saturday, April 11, we’ll gather at a local venue (to be determined) for a gathering led by Jacqueline Bussie. Some of you know her already. If you search online, you’ll see her described as “an award-winning author, professor, public theologian, and student of life in all its messy beauty.” Among the books she has written are “Outlaw Christian: Finding Authentic Faith by Breaking the ‘Rules’” and “Love Without Limits: Jesus’ Radical Vision for Love With No Exceptions.”



And that’s not all. The next day, April 12, Jacqueline Bussie will be the guest preacher at our liturgy!

Registration will come soon. Right now, all you need to do is turn to April 11 on your calendar and write down “Church retreat.”

TOILETRIES, PLEASE

By Sharon Simmons, outreach coordinator

Our annual TNT (Toiletries and Toilet Paper) collection in collaboration with New Mt. Zion AME Church, to benefit the Kearney Center, has begun. Bring toilet paper, toiletries (body wash, shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste, toothbrushes, bar soap, lotion) and place them in the designated tub in Hingst Hall. We’ll collect until the end of January.

A CAR STILL IN NEED OF REPAIR

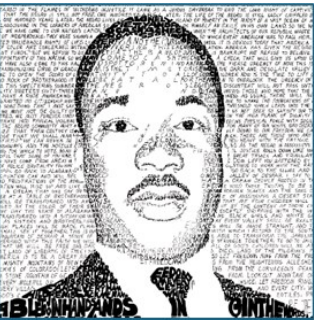
By Pastor Tom

Here’s an update: We have collected \$3,500 for the car repair you’ve been reading about in the newsletter. That leaves us \$500 short. The car is currently in the shop and should be done by the first part of next week. If you’re able, please consider giving to the Pastor’s Justice and Mercy Discretionary Account so we can close that gap even more. Thank you for considering it.



‘WHAT WE DO ONCE GOD HAS FOUND US’: EXCERPT FROM PASTOR TOM’S SERMON

It is not lost on us that tomorrow we celebrate the birth of Martin Luther King Jr. It is also not lost on us that he wrote, on the night before he was murdered, these words: “Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will.”



The battle then is our battle now. The battle going on today and the battle that went on during the Sixties is for the soul of America. The lifeblood of our nation is at stake, and the lifeblood of people is still being spilled in the streets.

What will the response be from the body of Christ, the church? Will the church jump into the breach or passively stand silent?

... Last week, in Matthew’s Gospel, we learned about what God does. Today is about what we do once God has found us. What we do is find others and invite them to “Come and see.”

ENCOURAGING NEWS

The newsletter hasn't passed along excerpts from Fix the News lately. Sorry. We find them encouraging, and we hope you do, too. Here's a reminder from the publishers about what Fix the News is all about. If you'd like to subscribe, visit <https://fixthenews.com>.

While we [at *Fix the News*] started the year slowly, the same is not true of the news. Things feel insane. A reminder – while we've been following all that stuff too, you won't find any coverage of it here, because you're already drowning in it. Both legacy and social media are explicitly designed to show you what's breaking, what's terrifying, what's going wrong. We're trying to offer a correction to the distortion.

The stories you're about to read are just as important, if not more so, than the chaos currently dominating your feed, but they're invisible because they don't generate the emotional charge required to break through. Progress doesn't spike cortisol. Disease elimination doesn't trigger shares. That doesn't stop them from happening, though.

This week: Iraq offers a counterpoint in the Middle East, trachoma exposure falls below 100 million worldwide (down from 1.5 billion in 2002), coal power drops simultaneously in India and China for the first time since 1973, astonishing progress in the fight against cancer, and how conservation-ists saved one of the world's most beautiful species of antelope.

Our version of the news isn't more true than the one you're seeing everywhere else, but it is a lot harder to find. If it helps, please share it!

Below is one example of the encouraging news in the latest Fix the News:



Science [magazine] named renewable energy its Breakthrough of the Year for 2025. [As it reported:] “In 2004, it took the world a full year to install 1 gigawatt of solar power capacity. Today, twice that amount goes online each day. Back then renewables had an aura of virtue: Buyers paid a premium [for] fossil energy because of climate concerns. Now, the real driver is self-interest: lower cost and greater energy security. That change in motivation may be the most important breakthrough of all, ensuring that this year's inflection points are just the beginning.”

BEFORE YOU GO...

- At the moment, it appears there won't be a talent show this year, St. Stephen. We'll let you know if that changes.
- Need the contact information for a St. Stephen member? Use your digital directory. Don't have it on your phone? Office Manager Rita can fix you up.
- Please remember that you can look up past sermons or newsletters that you missed. Visit our website: <https://ststephenlutherantally.com/>.
- 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 name tags, or ask Rita to sign you up. Include the \$40 with your regular offering. And then take the flowers home!



CLASSIC CAR AD OF THE WEEK

This is a '56 Dodge Royal. As the ad states: “The Magic Touch of Tomorrow! The *look* of success! The *feel* of success! The *power* of success!” Not sure what any of that means but, man, it's a two-tone beauty of a car. If you zoom in, you'll see that the woman is showing off the dress code that St. Stephen may soon be considering. Well, maybe.



SERVING THIS WEEK

Pastor Tom Holdcraft, Preaching and Presiding; **Jen Dritt**, Assisting Minister; **Rita Ford**, Cup Minister; **Jennifer Buchanan**, Lector; **Audrey Post and Loraine Sundberg**, Tech Team; **Linda Eshleman and Barbara Sullivan**, Altar Guild; **Loraine Sundberg and Marilyn Larson**, Counters; **Karl Barton**, Cantor; **Denise Bookwalter**, Announcements

COMING UP

Today:

10:00 a.m. - Bible study

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 a.m. - Bible study

9:30 a.m. - Choir

10 a.m. - Worship: RIC Sunday

11:30 a.m. - Keynote - Jeremy Matlow/Pot Luck

Monday, January 26:

5:00 p.m. - TIMA meets in HH

Tuesday, January 27:

5:00 p.m. - NA meets in HH

Wednesday, January 28:

5:00 p.m. - TIMA meets in HH

7:00 p.m. - Choir

Thursday, January 29:

10:00 a.m. - Bible study

UPCOMING BIRTHDAYS



Denise Bookwalter - 1/22

Stephen Barton - 1/22

James Gunderson - 1/24

Sandy Ness - 1/24

Gladys Kane - 1/28

Jennifer Buchanan - 1/29

Graham Hackley - 1/30

Jayden Schiffer - 1/31

Gabbi Oates - 2/2

Barb Odonnell - 2/5

Ben Bush - 2/11



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