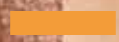


CONNECTIONS

Magazine

september - december, 2024 | issue no. 2



FIRST LUTHERAN
CHURCH

FIRST LUTHERAN

Your Connecting Church

CONNECT

701.235.7389
flcfargo.org
info@flcfargo.org
619 Broadway N, Fargo

Annual Meeting, Great Hall
September 8, 2024

 facebook.com/flcfargo

WORSHIP

Sundays

9 & 10:30 a.m., Celebration
9:30 a.m., Sanctuary

Wednesdays

1:30 p.m., Chapel
6 p.m., Celebration

IMPACT

Christian Education Classes

September - May, register online!

Kids@First (3 years old - Grade 4):

Sundays at 10:30 a.m. or
Wednesdays at 6 p.m.

56ers (Grades 5 and 6):

Wednesdays at 6 p.m.

Confirmation (Grades 7 and 8):

Wednesdays at 7 p.m.

Youth Group (Grades 9 - 12):

Wednesdays at 8 p.m.

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Happy fall from First Lutheran Church (FLC)!

I hope you've had a wonderful summer – full of sunshine and sweet memories that you'll savor all year long. Welcome to the next edition of Connections Magazine! It's been a great joy to put this magazine together alongside Travis Klath. I've loved gathering stories about how God is working in hearts and lives here at FLC and Travis has created brilliant designs – helping these stories come to life!

Pastor Marty kicks us off with a great lead article, laying out a roadmap of where he and Pastor Stephanie have discerned God is leading FLC for the next three years. The heart of it being for people to experience a living relationship with Jesus by connecting people to God and each other. Having a living relationship with Jesus is something we'll explore further as a church community through the "Witness" sermon series coming later this fall. Pastor Steph shares more in her piece, encouraging us to pay attention to the way God is working in our lives and share those stories with others.

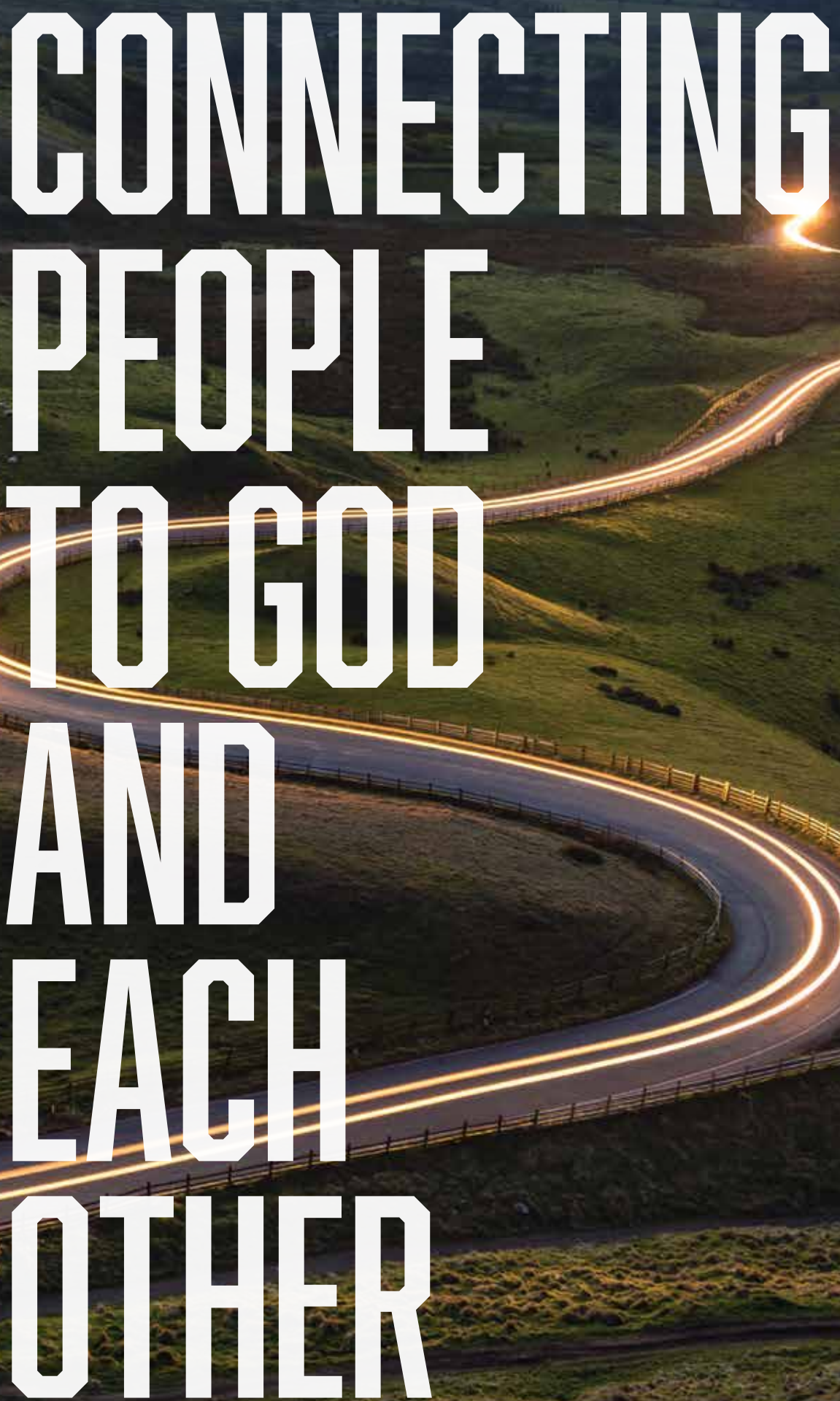
You'll find some of these inspiring stories throughout these pages! Craig shares his story of returning to church after 43 years away. Rachelle shares a story about her miracle baby girl. The Jennings Estévez family shares how they live out their lives as witnesses to Christ for those living on the margins in Ecuador.

I hope you enjoy these stories and grow excited about the updates and opportunities you'll find in this issue – God is alive in this place! Even more, I hope it'll spark something in you about the power of story. My prayer for you: May you be quick to listen to the stories of others. And may you be courageous enough to share the stories of how God is working in your own life. I'm certain both are needed. I'm certain there is wisdom and beauty in both!

Blessings,

Hailey C Brenden

Hailey Brenden, Editor
Communications Specialist



**CONNECTING
PEOPLE
TO GOD
AND
EACH
OTHER**

FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH 2027: CONNECTING PEOPLE TO GOD AND EACH OTHER

CONNECT - WORSHIP - IMPACT

Words by Pastor Marty Tollefson

Family trips, as a kid, did not happen a lot, but when they did I have memories of my parents getting lost on several occasions. My dad's preferred course of action was to keep driving, hoping to find the way. My mom, on the other hand, would always want to stop at the nearest gas station to ask for directions. It is always better to know the direction than to keep driving with the hope of finding the destination.

Pastor Steph and I believe that the windshield of the car is always bigger than the rearview mirror. We believe that God is calling us forward into what God is doing and what God wants to do. Yes, church life has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. We expected, looking in the rearview mirror, that people would just come to church, and people were simply loyal to institutions and civic organizations. That world seemingly exists only in the rearview mirror. To say the same thing differently, it is time to pull off the road and ask for direction – What is our mission? Where are we going? What is God doing and where is God calling us as a congregation?

The past few years, through prayer and much discernment, we have imagined and have fussed with how God might be leading First Lutheran Church forward. We kept coming back to what Pr. Steph and I want to call, the main thing. The main thing is this living relationship that we have in and through the person of Jesus. That's it, that's the main thing! We want people to know Jesus. Every time Jesus encountered someone, life was transformed. He connected with people as they are, where they are, being who they are. He spoke humanity's language. He died and rose, again. He multiplied his efforts with his 12 disciples. He sent them forth to all people, everywhere. The

church was his idea to reach out and connect with all people, everywhere.

There are many images of the church in scripture. The Apostle Paul spends a lot of time describing the functionality of church by using this image of the human body. Paul writes, "For as in one body, we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another (Romans 12:4-5). This image of body underscores that we are connected and related to each other. Our lives are graciously not our own. We belong to each other! So, we exist to connect people to God and to each other. It is about connection and relationships – really, that is all there is in life!

Our mission forward is to *Connect People to God and to each Other*. Our roadmap, over the course of the next three years, will be to Connect, Worship, and leave an Impact as we become a Connecting Church. Will the road ahead be straight? Probably not. Will there be twists and turns? For sure. Will the roadmap be adjusted along the way. Absolutely. Will the Holy Spirit re-route us? Maybe. This is a fluid plan where we constantly discern, ask questions, pray, and seek God's guidance as we serve as a Connecting Church.

CONNECT

Because we are a Connecting Church...

We will be a church of Small Groups of every kind, where relationships are created and people are connected. We believe small groups are one of the best ways to find community and where life is shared and nourished. Our goal is to double the number of people we have in small groups by 2027.

We will practice Impactful Acts of Service within our church, community, and the larger world. These acts of service will happen in our life together, as well as working alongside our local and global partners. Our goal, by 2027, is to have 1,200 people serving within the mission field of our church, community, and the larger world.

WORSHIP

Because we are a Connecting Church...

We want more people in the metro area to hear the message of Jesus.

We love to worship Jesus and we want more people to experience our relational God. More people in worship is simply more! We will, as Jesus followers, develop strategies around invitation and reaching out to our local mission field. Our goal is to see a 25% increase in worship attendance by 2027.

IMPACT

Because we are a Connecting Church...

We will model Generosity. Our God is generous, and we have been blessed to be a blessing to others. We will increase our financial donors by 15% and live as a tithing community with our mission partners. We want to help others grow in their spiritual formation and generosity is important in our discipleship understanding.

We know that it is important, in matters of faith, to get to the next generation early and often. Therefore, as a connecting church, we will give our best to the Next Generation.

- We will engage 500 young people at FLC each week.
- We will ensure that every middle/high school student will have no less than five people on their team.
- We will send 75% of our young people to bible camp, on a mission trip, to a retreat, or on an outdoor adventure.
- We will raise up 120 committed adult leaders invested in children, youth, and family.





This is our roadmap to 2027. We believe that this is where God is calling us into the future. We will continue to look through the windshield, stop and ask questions, pray and discern, and rely on you, people of FLC, as we travel this road together.

It is all about relationships – relationship with God and with others. We are here to Connect and Worship and make an Impact for Christ’s sake.

Only one question remains, “How do I help?”



FLC FOUNDATION: CARAMEL ROLLS AND CONNECTION



All are invited for your usual connection time from 9 - 11 a.m. on **Sunday September 29** in the Great Hall. Caramel rolls will be provided by First Lutheran Church (FLC) Foundation. There will be information available for you to learn more about how the FLC Foundation strengthens the mission of our church by meeting financial needs in our congregation, community, and around the world. The FLC Foundation would like to thank everyone in our congregation for their continued support!



WIT

LIAR

Words: Pastor Stephanie Tollefson

A friend of mine introduced me to a newer song from Passion City Church in Atlanta, Georgia. The song is called, “I’ve Witnessed it” and once I listened to the lyrics, I couldn’t stop hearing them. The song has been pinned on my playlist as a favorite ever since. It speaks directly to my soul; inviting me to wonder about the ways in which I have witnessed the power of God at work in my life.

In the book of Acts, Jesus says to his disciples, “To the ends of the earth, you will be my witnesses.” These words echo

something similar he said to them in the gospel of Matthew, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Jesus is inviting his disciples to give witness to the truth of God that they have seen, heard, and experienced. Today, Jesus continues to invite us into the practice of giving witness to the action of God among us. We are called as witnesses, and we are privileged to speak hope into people’s lives using the stories of our life and sharing how God shows up for us and the people we love.

The old hymn, “I Love to Tell the Story” is another song that reminds me of my call to

GIVING WITNESS TO YOUR LIFE OF FAITH

preaching and be encouraged by the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. The beauty of giving witness to your life of faith is that we don't need a theological degree to share it or an argument to win it. It is simply giving voice to how you see God's faithfulness in the highs and lows of your life. It is your word of God's strength and love and presence holding you in hope.

Throughout the series you will hear stories of God's people at First Lutheran and you will be encouraged to share your own. This doesn't come naturally for many of us. We live in a world that has ascribed witnesses to a courtroom standing before a judge and jury. The Christian witness is not that. It is a confession. A Christian witness confesses something about their faith. They own it and it is personal. A confession reveals what we know God has done and is doing in our lives, and so we share it with others that they too might recognize God at work in the world.

Our hope and prayer for this series is that you will be able to articulate where in your life you have witnessed the goodness of God, the strength of God, the love of God, the faithfulness of God, and the hope of God. You have a story; of this I am confident! The witness you give to how you have seen God come through in your life is a song of praise to the one who is worthy of all of it!

Let us together stand as witnesses, confessing the God who chose the cross and laid down his life to rescue us!



be a witness for Christ, to go and "tell the story of Jesus and his glory; of Jesus and his love." The command of Christ is to confess the mercies of God to one another and share the power of those mercies active and alive in us.

This fall at First Lutheran we will take up the practice of bearing witness to the power of God at work among us. We will study and proclaim the biblical witness of St. Matthew in our teaching and



Curious about the song? Scan the QR code to listen online or follow this link: bit.ly/flcwitness



In every
High *and every*
LOW
YOU NEVER LEFT ME WITHOUT HOPE

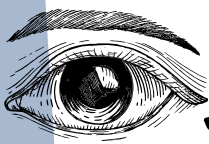


you were

GOOD



AND YOU'RE GOOD RIGHT NOW.



I've witnessed your

FAITHFULNESS

I'VE
SEEN
YOU

Breathe



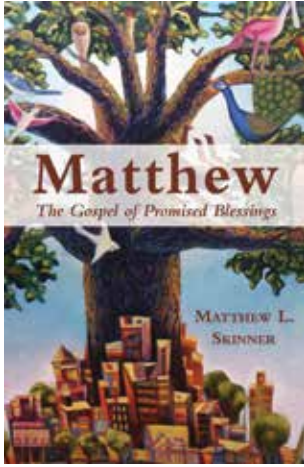
**LIFE
WITHIN**



SO I'LL POUR OUT MY PRAISE AGAIN
you're worthy, God,

YOU'RE WORTHY OF ALL OF IT.

BIBLE STUDY ON THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW THIS FALL



Join Pastor Steve Wold as he leads you through the first book of the New Testament. The class begins with an introduction to the Gospel with a focus on Matthew 4:18-25. After Jesus calls the first witnesses, we proceed to The Sermon on the Mount and make our way to the witnesses of healing, forgiveness, and the bombshell witness of Peter. The major themes include blessing and comfort, judgment and retribution, and a call to repentance with the promise of eternal life! The class includes major references to a new book titled, “The Gospel of Promised Blessings” by author Dr. Matthew Skinner, a New Testament professor at Luther Seminary. All are welcome to participate in this study which begins on **Sunday, September 29** at 10:35 a.m. in the Adult Education Room. The class continues Sundays through November 24.* Registration is not required, see you there!
**No class on November 10*

THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROSITY TO MISSION SOUP

We're grateful to everyone who volunteered making soups, serving, and giving to Mission Soup Sundays over the past year! Mission Soup happens once every third Sunday of the month from September – May. All are welcome to stop by the Great Hall after worship to enjoy delicious homemade soups and socialize or take soup to go! All free-will proceeds go to FLC mission partners. Here's a look back at our partners and funds raised in 2023 – 2024:

\$2,387.08 raised for Feed My Starving Children

\$3,510.54 raised for New Life Center

\$2,161.57 raised for Emergency Food Pantry

Thank you again – what a wonderful way for our church community to come together to serve, share a meal, and give back to our neighbors in need!

Interested in volunteering in 2024 – 25? If you are part of a small group at church that would be interested or would just like to join another group of volunteers, we'd love to have your help! Please contact Polly Kloster, Director of Mission at pkloster@flcfargo.org or 701.414.6716.

RETURNING HOME: CRAIG'S WITNESS STORY



Words: Hailey Brenden

After a 43-year hiatus, Craig Maas decided to return to First Lutheran Church (FLC) in 2021. Although he had a strong faith foundation that was laid by his parents and FLC and an overall positive experience, he had a curious spirit. At 18 years old, he decided to step away to explore other possibilities. Craig shares what he discovered during his time away, what drew him back to church, and how his faith has come alive as he witnesses for Christ today.

You might see me as a relatively new member of this church. But my time at First Lutheran started in 1960 when I was baptized by Pastor Quello and continued for 18 years. In between I enjoyed all the activities our church had to offer: playing in the nursery, learning about Jesus in Sunday School, making projects at vacation bible school, singing in Mrs. Piepkorn's choir, studying photography with Pastor Olson, memorizing my Catechism for Pastor Cole, hanging out with the high school students, and many hours building the foundation of my faith.

Yet I had more questions and wanted to explore other philosophies. I decided to take a break from First Lutheran. My parents Ray and Char Maas continued to attend. Their faith deepened and they found more and more ways to give back to First Lutheran. Over the years I gained more knowledge and more experience. I never turned my back on the church, but limited my involvement to



holidays and supporting the various church projects my parents were involved in. I remained an outside witness to the good works of the church.

My faith journey became more secular as I filled in holes in my knowledge. As years passed I found a scientific framework was valuable to understand the physical world, but not very useful when it came to the meaning of life and the real important questions of our existence.

My father and I were very close. We had worked together on a series of entrepreneurial endeavors that I found very rewarding. When he died in 2010 my interest in those endeavors waned. My sister and her family moved to Dickinson in 2016. I was very close with her entire family. My best friend, Bob Nelson died in 2017. I had met Bob at First Lutheran in 1974. I took care of my mother until she died in 2020. I found the grief material FLC sent me to be comforting.

Even before mom died, I wanted to expand my social network. First Lutheran would be a good place to start.

In September of 2021 I saw a new members class listing. So, after a mere 43 years, I returned to First Lutheran. Meeting new people and experiencing new situations can be rewarding, but also nerve-racking. It was all up to me. The congregation and staff couldn't have been better. I was in the right church. I was encouraged to try Rollie's group and soon I was looking forward to Tuesday night with the guys.

A couple weeks later I got a call from my uncle, "I have a late appointment at Sanford. Could I stay overnight?"

I immediately said, "Yes." What happened next was all the Holy Spirit.

My uncle was estranged from our family. He had lived a hard life and rarely saw eye-to-eye with the rest of us. But thanks to what I was hearing and witnessing in Rollie's class, I welcomed my uncle into my home. I listened to his complaints and stories from his past. It took hours, but he unloaded all the pain and anger that had blocked any reconciliation. By the time he was done, we were hugging and crying. I had just witnessed my first miracle.

It wouldn't be the last. Week after week I've taken advantage of the opportunities that First Lutheran offers to study, practice, and strengthen my faith. Over the last two years I've noticed a mark decline in my anxiety levels, and so much personal growth. The grace I've received from the church follows me everywhere I go. This congregation has become my second family. I have a lot of work remaining, but with your help I know I'll get there.

"BUT AS FOR WHAT WAS SOWN ON GOOD SOIL, THIS IS THE ONE WHO HEARS THE WORD AND UNDERSTANDS IT, WHO INDEED BEARS FRUIT AND YIELDS IN ONE CASE A HUNDREDFOLD, IN ANOTHER SIXTY, AND IN ANOTHER THIRTY."

-MATTHEW 13:23

"THE CONGREGATION AND STAFF COULDN'T HAVE BEEN BETTER. I WAS IN THE RIGHT CHURCH."

Craig's story might have a common thread to Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus shares this story about a son who asks his father for half of the inheritance. His father grants his request, but when the son receives it things take a surprising turn. He leaves for a distant country, lives wildly, and loses all that he has been gifted. At the end of the story, the son returns home to his father and is full of shame. Yet there is another surprise. The son is met by a father that rejoices upon his return and is full of love and forgiveness.

The common thread here is going away and coming home.

Like the prodigal son, Craig had a time in his life where he went away to explore and see what else was out there in the world. Like the prodigal son, Craig returned "home". He returned to First Lutheran to find a community ready to welcome him with loving kindness and a place where his faith would grow.

Craig is a witness of Christ's unconditional love that always rejoices when we come home.



How would you encourage others to be a witness for Christ?

"The best way to be a witness is to talk about your own experiences – people appreciate that. Be a calming influence when people are struggling. We find peace by letting go and placing the burden on Jesus – as he asks us to do." -Craig

MIRACLE BABY GIRL: RACHELLE'S WITNESS STORY

Words: Hailey Brenden

Baby Arabella is a gift. Born on Christmas Eve in 2023, her name was intentionally chosen because it means “answered prayer”. Her name fits perfectly when you learn the story of how Arabella came into this world. Her mother, Rachelle, shares the journey – which includes IVF, medical challenges, a surrogate, learning to trust God in a deeper way, and more. You’ll want to read on to discover how this sweet miracle came to be.

Rachelle and her husband, Chad, have been attending First Lutheran Church (FLC) since 2015. When they first started dating, they tried out many churches, but connected the most with FLC. “Everyone was so friendly,” says Rachelle. “Every Sunday there was a great message that we would remember and apply to our week.”

Rachelle and Chad were married in 2015. Coming into the union, Rachelle was excited to gain a stepdaughter named Haley. Early on, the couple was eager to grow their family.

This dream of having more children proved to be a challenge and led them down the road of infertility. “It was really hard,” says Rachelle. “There were many struggles, but I think our faith really helped us through it.” Chad reminded her that God was in control and encouraged Rachelle to focus on that truth throughout the process.

After over a year of trying with no success, it was recommended that they try IVF and were referred to an IVF clinic in Minneapolis. This led to their first miracle when Rachelle became pregnant in January 2017.

Their first son, Owen, was born on October 16, 2017. Rachelle’s lifelong dream to become a mom had come true!

Rachelle and Chad were so grateful to have a healthy boy, but after the birth Rachelle faced health complications related to the pregnancy. Five weeks after Owen was born Rachelle was taken by ambulance to the hospital for postpartum hemorrhaging. The procedure that saved Rachelle also caused scarring that made getting pregnant again even more difficult. “That was stressful,” says Rachelle. “I felt so blessed that we were able to have a baby, but I also wanted Owen to have a sibling close in age.”

A procedure was done to repair the scarring and the couple was blessed with another miracle. Rachelle became pregnant with baby number two in 2019.

Rachelle had a healthy pregnancy until around 33 weeks when she started to feel unwell. One night, she decided to take her blood pressure and discovered it was extremely high. The next day she went to the hospital, was diagnosed with pre-eclampsia, and was told that she needed to deliver the baby early.

Their second son, Christian, made his way into the world early, but safely, that same week on November 12, 2019.

The couple was overjoyed to have two sons. Yet Rachelle faced more health challenges following baby number two. About a year after Christian’s birth, Rachelle started to experience lots of pain and was told she had a hernia likely brought on by her pregnancies. She had the hernia fixed but continued to be in chronic pain.

Despite these continued struggles, Rachelle and Chad



desired to try and have one more child. Doctors initially told them it would be safe, so they moved forward with their plans to implant their last embryo. During this process, they also consulted with Mayo Clinic about Rachelle's chronic pain and received some disheartening news. Rachelle had additional hernias. They told her due to the location of the hernias, getting pregnant could compromise the second repair of the hernias and she could face further complications.

Rachelle felt confused about what to do next but couldn't stop thinking about their last embryo. "I told my husband that it felt like somebody was missing," says Rachelle. "I was grateful for the family we already had, but I couldn't leave that baby behind." Chad agreed and told her that they would find a way and that God would show them what that way would be.

"The way" ended up being a road called surrogacy.

A road they knew nothing about. Some people expressed that it was quite an endeavor to go on for just one embryo, but they forged ahead. Hopeful.

Their journey led them to Midwest Surrogacy in Moorhead where they looked for a match. Both the couple and surrogate need to choose each other to proceed. Rachelle trusted God would guide them through this process.

Around Christmas of 2022 they were matched with a possible surrogate named Codi. Rachelle and Chad met Codi and her husband for



dinner. It was an instant connection! They talked for hours and felt like they were on a date night with the couple. Rachelle remembers being inspired by the couple's strong faith and the supportive relationship they had with each other. Rachelle also found comfort knowing Codi had carried one other surrogate baby, so she knew the process. "She was like an angel sent from God for us," says Rachelle.

It turned out feelings between the couples were mutual – they officially matched!

On the day of the embryo transfer Rachelle woke up feeling optimistic. She told Chad, "I feel like God's got this." Together they said a prayer: "God, let your will be done, whatever it is. Regardless, we know our baby will be in good hands."

Nine days later, the prayer was answered: they were pregnant!

Rachelle is grateful for the amazing experience they had with their surrogate and her family. Codi messaged Rachelle throughout the pregnancy to include her. "She'd tell me things like – oh, she loves blueberries, those really got her kicking, or



Pastor Steph connects with the family during Arabella's baptism.

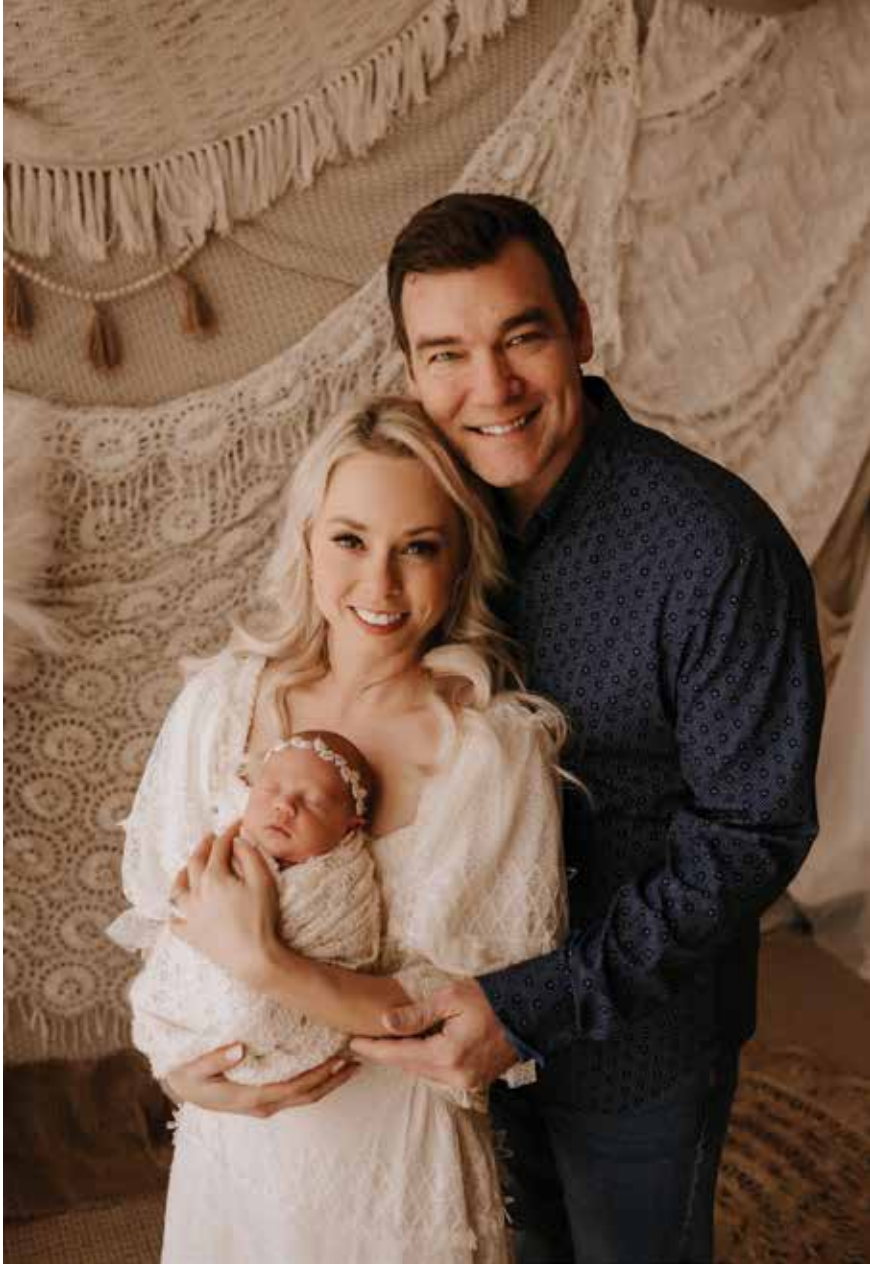
someone has hiccups in my belly today,” says Rachelle. “It made it so special for me.”

Arabella arrived on December 24, 2023 – the perfect gift for her family that Christmas. “I just look at her every day and I’m so thankful she’s here,” says Rachelle.

Her baptism was also a day full of gratitude. Prior to Codi becoming pregnant with Arabella, Rachelle remembers going to FLC services and watching baptisms. She would hope and pray that they’d be able to have one more child. “Her baptism was such a special day,” says Rachelle. “I cried so much because I was so thankful she was here.”

It’s been a difficult journey to build a family, but Rachelle believes there was a greater purpose, and her faith has been strengthened. “I learned to let Jesus and God take the wheel,” says Rachelle. “I wanted to be in control so much, but I realized sometimes when you let go, God will take you more beautiful places than you can imagine.” Today Rachelle and Chad are so thankful for all the prayers and support they received throughout their journey. They are even dreaming of ways they can use their story to help others – exploring the possibility of creating a nonprofit to make surrogacy and other fertility efforts more accessible.

A beautiful story. A beautiful answer to prayer: Arabella. A beautiful witness to what can happen when we choose to surrender our plans for our lives to God. He always knows the way.



Rachelle, Chad, and Arabella



Proud siblings with Arabella

THE JENNINGS ESTÉVEZ FAMILY: A Beacon of God's Light in Ecuador

Words: Polly Kloster, Director of Mission

“THE MISSION OF FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH GLOBAL MISSION COMMITTEE IS TO SHARE THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST WITH THE CULTURES AND PEOPLES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD FOLLOWING THE COMMAND OF JESUS TO “MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS.”

Through the financial generosity of the Lee Estate, Scheel Funds, and many members and friends of our congregation, the First Lutheran Church (FLC) Global Mission Committee (GMC) has been able to carry out its mission. This is being accomplished in a variety of ways, including financial support for FLC mission experiences, funding of life-sustaining and Christian-based projects in countries experiencing extreme poverty and barriers to sharing the Gospel, and financially and prayerfully supporting our missionaries and mission partners. One example of this partnership is the Jennings Estévez family who serve in Ecuador, through their outreach ministry, Second Chances. This is a glimpse of their powerful story; a story of God's guidance in the work they do to bring the people of Ecuador to Christ through love, mentorship, and His love.

Meet the Jennings Estévez Family



Jorge Estévez was born and raised in Quito, Ecuador. Laura Jennings was born and raised in South Carolina. Both had a heart for missions. Jorge's passion has always been in ministry with a desire to serve full-time in missions. Laura's path was different. Her

first visit to Ecuador was right after college in 2006 with intent to stay only one year. During that time, Cameron Graham Vivanco, Laura's youth director, encouraged her to begin an art program in the impoverished neighborhood of Carmen Bajo.

Jorge and Laura's lives, and God's plan, coincided in 2006, when Laura was leading mission teams to Casa Gabriel, a Christian youth residence for boys where Jorge was serving as a mentor. They married in 2009. Jorge continued to serve as a youth director at his home church in Ecuador and later become youth pastor in Carmen Bajo with Laura by his side.

In 2012, Jorge and Laura moved to South Carolina so Jorge could experience life in the US, where their two children, Samuel (9) and Karina (7), were born. The family returned to Ecuador in 2017 to serve at Casa Gabriel as house parents taking young men in off the streets to provide them a safe haven built on a sense of belonging, support, guidance, and the love of Jesus.

18 years later, the Jennings Estévez family continues to live and serve in Ecuador. In 2020, God put a new vision in their hearts to expand and help many more individuals in need of safety, love, and hope in Jesus. They established Second Chances Ecuador, which is a ministry that works to equip and transform generations in the name of Christ. Second Chances serves children, youth, and families in nine different communities. "We are so blessed to be able to serve God in such a special way that we are seeing lives transformed," says Laura.

Their work has transformed the lives of the people they serve. "It's impossible to



Ecuador Mission Team 2024

count the lives that have been part of our ministry,” says Laura. “We pray that we can be a beacon of God’s light wherever we go. Specifically, through Second Chances, where we are serving 300 individuals. There are also countless others we have been able to serve through youth ministry, art ministry, and workshops!”

During the challenging time of the pandemic in 2020, Jorge and Laura opened their first Hope Center, established as a safe place for many in the heart of a gang-infested neighborhood in Quito. Through this ministry, they met a young girl and her mother who had walked from Venezuela through Colombia to arrive in Ecuador. The young girl, Mary, began attending the Hope Center to have access to a computer and help with schoolwork. It was there she found not only academic support, but also spiritual and emotional help needed during this tough time. Jorge and Laura learned that her mother, Ysme, had been kidnapped in Venezuela by a gang and escaped only by the grace of God. When Ysme reunited with her daughter, she knew they had to flee Venezuela. Through the Hope Center program of Business for

Transformation, Ysme has been working for the past two years at their second-hand store. Mary is about to begin her last year of high school. “We are blessed to be part of their lives and story,” says Laura.

“IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO COUNT THE LIVES THAT HAVE BEEN PART OF OUR MINISTRY. WE PRAY THAT WE CAN BE A BEACON OF GOD’S LIGHT WHEREVER WE GO.”

Casa Gabriel, now part of Second Chances Ecuador, has been a blessing to so many young men over the years. Chris is one of the young men currently in their program. He doesn’t know his father.

His mother is an alcoholic and a prostitute. Chris arrived at Casa Gabriel asking for the opportunity to be part of the program. Laura shares that they had to enter into an incredibly challenging process of therapy with him to unpack years of trauma and abuse. However, Laura and Jorge could see beyond his past



experiences, noting, "God had a plan for his life." Through the ups and downs of the four years in the program of Casa Gabriel, Chris has graduated from high school, was recently baptized, and is now working with the Christian organization, Education Equals Hope, to lead mission teams.

Laura and Jorge have even bigger dreams for the future! They share their hopes to see communities that can realize their gifts and potential for making a change in the world, noting, "Restored communities transform countries, and we are now in nine communities working to help kids and families in holistic ways to see their own potential and how God can use that for his glory." Their goal is to reach 50 communities in Ecuador with a God-sized dream of not only opening centers, but truly creating opportunities for transformation by starting schools and hospitals in some of these desperate areas where there is no access to education or healthcare.

Without a doubt, the Jennings Estévez family is dreaming big. They wrote, "These stories are possible because of your help!" They are thankful to FLC for being such an incredible resource and such a healthy partner in their work.

Since 2006, when FLC members first met Laura and Jorge through a mission experience to Carmen Bajo, we have followed their journey. FLC mission groups have continued to visit and support the ministry of Carmen Bajo and now Laura and Jorge's expanding ministry. A tour of Casa Gabriel and its designated spaces for art and academic support; the well-stocked thrift store and its expansion to include a coffee shop; and one of the Hope Centers, with children, teens, parents, and grandparents all laughing and playing, provides just a bird's eye view of the incredible work being done in the midst of so much need. The impact of their work and vision truly exemplifies the FLC Global Mission Committee mission statement in action.

Jorge and Laura are so thankful for the great relationship we have grown over the years and the many ways we have supported them financially as they continue to expand their reach. Their ask of us is for, "Lots of prayers and continuing our wonderful partnership." To stay connected with Laura, Jorge, and their ministry, you are invited to sign up for their mailing list by emailing secondchancesecuador@gmail.com and/or following them on Instagram: [@secondchancesec](https://www.instagram.com/secondchancesec)



MEET THE JENNINGS ESTÉVEZ FAMILY IN FARGO

This fall, the FLC Global Mission Committee will host their 4th Annual Breakfast. The purpose of this event is to share the many ways this committee and our congregation are living out the GMC mission statement. Laura and Jorge will be present as our keynote speakers to share more about their incredible ministry in Ecuador!

Please join us on **Sunday, November 10**, for a breakfast catered by Heart-n-Soul Community Café, a local organization that provides healthy, hearty meals for those in need. The cost of the event is \$5. Pre-registration is required. Registration will open October 6, with a registration deadline of November 1. Look for additional events focused on global mission throughout the week of November 10-17.

GO TO ECUADOR FOR A MISSION EXPERIENCE IN JULY 2025

You're also invited to engage with Laura and Jorge through an FLC mission to Ecuador, **July 5-13, 2025**. This mission experience is open to families and adults of all ages. Serving through their organization at Second Chances and a Hope Center as well as spending time with our other Ecuadorian mission partners at Carmen Bajo and El Refugio are part of a full agenda focused on worship, connection, and impact. More information to come!

Questions? Contact Polly Kloster at pkloster@flcfargo.org for more information about these opportunities.

ALONE,
TOGETHER on the
MAAAR
DAAAH
HEEY





“I WILL LEAD YOU TO THE DESERT AND THERE SPEAK TO YOUR HEART.”

-HOSEA 2:14

Words: Rollie Johnson

Most of us are long overdue. Our souls are crying out and in desperate need of a tune up. For most of us our lives are filled with too much. Too much busyness, too much TV, too much social media, too many calories, too many texts, too many activities, too much commotion, and too much stress. Maybe it is your time to say “Yes!” to God’s calling to separate, retreat, withdraw, and simplify. Maybe its time to come and walk with Jesus, alone...together on the Maah Daah Hey.



For the past six years we’ve taken a bus load of folks from 11-79 years old and everything in between. We split up into two to four trail groups and head out for a three-night, four-day backpacking trip in the wild, mysterious, and mind-bogglingly scenic badlands of western North Dakota.

Often when we say “yes” to one of God’s invitations to step out of our comfort zone, to get outside of our normal routines, or step outside our box of habitual ways He gifts us with additional blessings and bonus surprises! When we finally say “yes” he pours out his blessings and treasures in great abundance! Often in ways or forms that we had never anticipated or expected. We get the privilege of experiencing healthy physical exercise, fresh clean air, phenomenal scenery, tremendous comradery, deepened friendships, solitude, stillness, serenity for quiet time and reflection, and a sense of accomplishment and an “I did it!” feeling. Many of us experienced a deepening of our relationship with Jesus.

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness...”
-Matthew 4:1

In addition to the vigorous hiking, we take daily quiet times with our devotional books to be still, silent, and wait for God to speak in our hearts. Our 30-minute quiet times become a favorite and cherished time as most of us don't take enough time for reflection and prayer in our daily lives. Reading scriptures, contemplation, journaling, praying, and pondering our lives becomes a blessing that most of us don't experience in ordinary life. Each evening upon returning from our private quiet times we gather for a group time around the fire. We each share something from our devotional books that resonated with our own lives. By sharing more deeply, and becoming vulnerable, we develop better connections with one another. God uses both our time alone, and our time together, to bless us and draw us into deeper relationship with Himself and with others.

Please understand that hiking the Maah Daah Hey comes with a price and sacrifice. You'll definitely feel it in sore muscles and tiredness from long days of hiking the dragon's spine trail. You'll also have to give up your cell phone for five days! No electronics are allowed! Like tearing away a child's teddy bear or "binky" security blanket, most participants fight this – both young and old. We help free you from the addiction of beeps, buzzes, and constant stimuli so you can hear God. Time to let nature, silence, and our Creator speak into our hearts and minds. If we want to communicate and connect on deeper levels with others, it will be with our faces and voices, not our thumbs.

There are many reasons to say "yes" to hiking the Maah Daah Hey. Some come to test their mettle, to find out what they're made of. Some come to explore. Some come to step away from their routines, to break away from their cell phones and experience nature on her own terms. Some of us come to walk and talk with our Creator, to immerse ourselves in the solitude and quiet of His Creation. Some just come for the pure fun and adventure of it all and spectacular scenery. Some come to build better connections and friendships. Some come to dance with buffaloes.

One of the paradoxes you may experience is that you will be emptied and then be filled. You may experience being emptied of all the worldly junk, angst, drama, worry, fear, and negativity that you had unintentionally carried in your backpack, only then to be filled with a much Godlier peace, contentment, calm, reassurance, and sense of well-being living in the moment of now. God will use silence, stillness, and solitude to restore your soul. All in the natural world of creation in the wilderness of the badlands. How ironic, that these bad lands, are...ohhh so good.

Maybe it's your time to say "yes" to God's calling and to the challenge of the Maah Daah Hey!



Check out a video
from Rollie's 2023
Maah Daah Hey Trip





*Sign up for the next
Maah Daah Hey
Backpack Trip this fall!*

Are you're looking for a faith-based trip that will challenge you and lead you into a deeper faith with Jesus and strengthen relationships with others? This is the trip for you! Join us as we hike a segment of the rugged, isolated, and beautiful Maah Daah Hey Trail in western North Dakota on **October 10-14, 2024**. The trip is open to men and women ages high school and up and the cost is \$325 (scholarships available if needed.). A required informational meeting will be held on **Sunday, September 22 at 11:30 a.m.** in First Lutheran's Chapel. You can sign up in person at the Welcome Desk or online by following the QR code. Payment can be submitted at the Welcome Desk. Hope to see you there!



Questions? Contact Rollie at rjohnson@flcfargo.org or 701.235.7389.



FURNITURE FOR FAMILIES IN NEED: LOOKING AHEAD TO ADVENT



Words: Hailey Brenden

The special season of Advent might seem far away, but it's never too early to start preparing our hearts and minds for this time when we remember and celebrate the arrival of Jesus on Earth. As we think about Jesus' arrival, we picture a humble beginning and those familiar lyrics from "Away in a Manger" – *No crib for a bed*. What a paradox that Christ our King would enter the world in such a vulnerable state and place? It stirs us to think of the most vulnerable in our own community and think of how we can help.

One of those ways is coming alongside great organizations that are already doing this kind of work. Furniture Mission of the Red River Valley (FMRRV) is one of those places. This year during Advent, we'll do a special offering to raise money for their work. We sat down with our very own Jordan McCormick, Executive Director of FMRRV, to find out more about their mission and learn additional ways First Lutheran Church (FLC) can support them!

How did you get connected to FLC?

My wife Katie and I first came to FLC when we were engaged and were looking for a church – First Lutheran checked all the boxes of what we were looking for. I love playing bass in the worship band when I'm able!

Can you tell us more about Furniture Mission?

We're a Christian non-profit who accepts gently used furniture and re-gifts it to people coming out of crisis. We serve individuals and families in the Fargo-Moorhead area from all backgrounds, faiths, and circumstances with dignity and respect. Since 2020, we've served over 2,000 families and gifted over 25,000 pieces of furniture.

How did Furniture Mission begin?

It started with our primary founder, Evert. In 2019, he volunteered with the Red Cross and was dispatched to support a family recovering from a fire in South Dakota. While there, he learned about an organization that connected the family to a furniture bank

in Sioux Falls. He saw the impact of what having access to furniture meant to this family and came back to our community so inspired. He asked the question, "Who is doing this here?" He called up some of his lifelong friends, told them about his idea, and asked them to be part of it. People said yes! In 2019 the organization was officially established and in 2020 they started serving families. I came aboard to join them as Executive Director in 2022! I'm the only paid staff person, otherwise our organization functions primarily on volunteers.

What was something that excited you about joining Furniture Mission?

One thing that was important to me in my next professional step was having a workplace with a faith component. Furniture Mission is all about taking faith and turning it into action. We serve people from all backgrounds and we want to let that service do our talking by showing up in a tangible way.

How do you decide who is eligible to receive furniture?

All clients we serve come by way of referral. We work with over 40 local organizations that support people in crisis or critical transition – such as the YWCA, Churches United, Jail Chaplains, and more. They know our expectations and we trust they're going to fulfill what we're looking for in supporting a client. As the client passes through their office, we know they're making other resources available to them too. We recognize that furniture is only a piece to helping people get back on their feet.

After we receive their referral, we'll set up an appointment with them to come to Furniture Mission. We meet and review what they're looking for. We pair them with a volunteer who specializes in supporting them as they pick out furniture!

How does it work to donate furniture?

You can drop it off or schedule a pick-up. We accept drop offs without appointment on Wednesdays between 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. or you can schedule a drop off or pick up appointment online.

What kind of furniture do you need?

Couches, tables, chairs, dressers, lamps, beds, box springs, wall art, and more. Find the full list online!

What's your favorite part of your job?

The direct impact. I know the amount of sweat that I pour in goes right into supporting families getting back on their feet. One of the things that struck me right away was how local the impact is. These are our people. Families we serve have kids that go to the same schools that my kids are in, and our kids are in. These are our people and what better way to show up for our neighbors.

Do you have any stories you can share of families you've helped?

Many! However, we do take a lot of pride in not asking people what happened. We don't want to ask, "How'd you get here?" We ask, "How can we help?" But sometimes people just share as we're working alongside them. One of the first families I worked with was a mom and her two daughters. Their case worker shared that they were working through some feelings during the process of picking out furniture because they had been homeless for two years. They were nervous



about having permanent housing. It hit me that we're here for people who are in the thick of it.

What are some additional ways outside of financial gifts that our church can support your work?

Donating furniture, volunteering, and prayers! Volunteering is huge – everything we do happens because of volunteers. You can help clients pick out furniture, drive truck, and more! If interested, I'd love to have a conversation and find a good fit for you. Prayers are always welcome too. We need to lift up the clients we're serving, volunteers, and our community. Pray that our community continues to rally around solutions to community-wide problems so we can make it a better place for all!



We're looking forward to uplifting Furniture Mission during Advent. What better way to get in the Christmas spirit than to support an organization that's all about helping the most vulnerable in our community get back on their feet. To find out more about Furniture Mission, visit their website: furnituremissionrrv.org.

Stay tuned – more details to come! 



JOY & GENEROSITY AT THE SUMMER CONCERT SERIES

Thank you to everyone who came out to our Summer Concert Series over the summer! The First Lutheran Church (FLC) Foundation sponsored another fun summer series that brought our church community and downtown neighbors together. We had a blast on Wednesday nights in June and July gathering for delicious food and great concerts in the summer sun! Food proceeds went to a different FLC mission partner each week. Here's a recap of that generosity:

- June 12 - **\$633** raised for Churches United
- June 19 - **\$1,762** raised for FLC Global Missions
- June 26 - **\$1,121** raised for Teach Haiti
- July 10 - **\$3,300** raised for FMSC FargoPack
- July 17 - **\$1,575.01** raised for Emergency Food Pantry
- July 24 - **\$1,495.86** raised for New Life Center
- July 31 - **\$1,800** raised for FMSC FargoPack

We are so grateful for your support! Thank you to the volunteers who made food, served food, greeted guests, and helped in countless other ways behind the scenes. Thank you to everyone who came to the concerts to purchase a meal and give to a good cause. We appreciate the variety of ways you give back to reflect Christ's love and make our community stronger!





OVER \$7,000 RAISED FOR FEED MY STARVING CHILDREN FARGOPACK IN JULY

Thank you to everyone who came out to volunteer as a parking lot attendant during the Street Fair in July and to those of you who paid to park in our lot to support FMSC. We were able to raise an incredible **\$7,274** for our mission partner! Proceeds will go to help feed hungry children around the world. We want to extend a massive thank you to the 50+ volunteers we had over just three days. This wouldn't have been possible without your support!





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NEW WORSHIP SCHEDULE

Beginning September 8

SUNDAYS (starts Sept. 8)

9 a.m. - Celebration

9:30 a.m. - Sanctuary*

10:30 a.m. - Celebration

10:30-11:30 a.m. - Adult Education Hour
and Kids@First

WEDNESDAYS (starts Sept. 11)

6 p.m. - Celebration

6 p.m. - Kids@First

7 p.m. - Confirmation

*The FLC radio broadcast will move to
KFGO AM790 and **FM104.7** at 9:30 a.m.

