

Church Together

We are Church Together, each
members of one body “given
the manifestation of the
Spirit for the common good”
1 Corinthians 12:7

CONNECTIONS
GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Volume 6
June/July 2025

Graduation Parties to God's Grace: Why Church Community Matters

By Pastor Joanna Mitchell



Our family has been busy with graduation and graduation parties for our youngest daughter. Hosting parties like these are not my favorite, but now that I am on the other side of the event, I am filled with gratitude.



I have been a pastor at three congregations over the past 20 years. When we gathered on Saturday to celebrate Lily, we were greeted by people from all these stages of our life. People who remembered when she was a toddler running around the church while mom preached, or as a 5-year-old playing hide-and-seek, or getting stuck in the elevator. They marveled at how this little girl had grown into the beautiful young woman that she is today. I marveled at how blessed we have been to have such a wonderful community of people who have molded and shaped our family with their love and faithfulness.

When you become a pastor, they prepare you to preach, teach and care for your community. What they don't prepare you for is what a gift it is to grow alongside such wonderful people and how they will affect your whole life. They are the people who will bring you meals when you have a baby, send you cards, and make quilts when your mom is sick. They are the people who will hug you and remind you that it is okay when you are grieving and cry after a sermon.

It is not an assumption anymore that people belong to a church. As my own kids leave our house and enter adulthood, I don't know if they will choose to belong to or be active in a church. I hope they do. Because the church, this community of people, knows how to live life together. There really is no community that I have ever belonged to that has been there through the ups and downs of life in the same way as the church.

This experience reminded me of what makes church community so special and why Paul's words about the body of Christ ring so true. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to a community experiencing division and inviting them to remember the virtue of being brought together as a diverse body of people to be the church. He writes: *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."*

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Paul goes on to say: *"Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand; I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye; I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose."* (1 Corinthians 12:14-18)

I am grateful that our own community is not caught up in the division. We have a very healthy church, and we are a diverse church as well—especially in age, background, and political affiliation. Nevertheless, God has brought us together to use our gifts for the greater good of our community and world.



**Grace Lutheran is
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Grace Lutheran is the community that it is because it is made of all of you. You each have unique gifts, and you give them generously. From counting offering or stocking our food shelf, to mowing the grass or taking down trees, you show up and serve. Some of you possess the gifts of baking bars and cakes, some possess the gift of prayer and writing cards and calling others, some possess the gift of organizing and helping sort and put together bulletins, or you give the gift of music.

Thank you for the ways you have not only shaped and cared for me and my family over these past 6 years, but more importantly how you continue to care for each person who comes through the door. You know how to be the church, called together, uniquely to share your faith and share God's love.

This summer, I hope you will take the time to call someone or send a note to another in this community and share how being the church together has impacted you. Let me know what you've experienced—I'd love to hear how you have experienced God through this place and through the ways God has brought us together in love.

Blessings,
Pastor Joanna Mitchell



Children, Youth, and Family Ministry is Church Together

By Pastor Maria Markman

The connections newsletter this month is about “church together.” I find that our children and our youth are do this already! Whether it is our partnership with Lord of Life (LOL) for VBS (Vacation Bible School) or our partnership with Faith Lutheran for Lutheran Late Nights or Summer Stretch, our students are hungry to be church together! They are excited to share their gifts and skills within our congregations and outside our walls. I wonder if we thought more about our students as examples of what faith lived out looks like? I wonder if we followed their example? Our students are ambassadors for our churches. They are witnesses of the gospel- the promises of Jesus and God’s love for all, not in the future but now! Our youth are talking about their experiences of church with their peers. And their peers know who we are here at Grace. And I find this to be extremely encouraging. This is church together with every generation as much as it is being church in collaboration with other churches.

We just concluded our third partnership with Lord of Life for VBS. Each year this partnership grows and changes. What was first a partnership of necessity during our building project, quickly became a partnership that really does emphasize we are better together! Each year presents its own challenges too, but because we are in this together, we are able to overcome. This year was no different, Lord of

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Life is in the midst of their own staffing transitions. Amanda Johnson was hired as LOL’s Child, Youth, and Family Director and she had never even attended let alone volunteered or lead a VBS before. This didn’t stop her from jumping in with both feet, accepting the challenge and leaning on those of us who have for her questions. Her newness allowed us to reimagine parts of our week together as well. Additionally, we had the challenge of increased busing costs, originally a 600% increase, the bus company did adjust their pricing and Waldo, longtime LOL member and bus driver, will donate to cover these busing costs. None of this would have been possible if we weren’t in this together!



Leading VBS together continues to have its expected benefits too, shared cost of programming, shared resources and volunteers, friendships across congregations, and the majority of stations are staff led. This allows volunteers to do what they do best love and care for the children in our care!



One of my greatest joys this week was getting to see our middle and high school volunteers not only lead in worship and with their small groups but become friends themselves. They even organized a lunch time variety show with their students. A highlight for students and volunteers both! Our students look forward to working with each other and seeing each other! These partnerships strengthen and grow our other ministries and programs too! VBS week we took an offering to support Lutheran camps. And some of LOL's students plan to join us for Summer Stretch, our middle school summer of service program beginning in July.

Another highlight was seeing a student with connections to Lord of Life although living in a different community now, so she is only around for VBS each summer. This particular student's mom had recently died. She made friends with one of our students from Grace. The three of us were able to walk through Springbrook Nature Center together. As we walked and experienced God in the nature that surrounded us, a friendship blossomed. This girl was able to discuss her grief with us. I was so proud of our student from Grace and how she was able to listen, ask questions and offer comfort. And I was encouraged by our new friend's ability to speak openly about her grief. And after our nature walk, they ran back to the group and continued their friendship the rest of the week!

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After VBS worship at Lord of Life, one of their members approached me, thanked me for my powerful message and said she might have to stop by Grace sometime to hear another. I let her know that she is always welcome. And, I thought to myself, although flattered I wasn't there to poach any members of LOL. And I hope if she has community at LOL she remains there. We aren't trying to take people from one congregation to another. But instead, be church together! In fact, throughout week, LOL advertises their musical camp and I hope some of our families try this out! In the same way, their students will join us for Summer Stretch, or we take our high schoolers and middle schoolers to Lutheran Late Nights at Zion in Anoka! All of our ministries benefit from working together- from sharing the pulpit so we can hear different voices proclaim God's message, from joining our ministry teams together in service, fellowship, or learning because when we do we learn, we aren't in this alone, we have each other AND we need each other.

It really is just as Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians 12:27 ~ *"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."*

Blending Together

By Dave Kolar

When I initially began teaching catechism, our group was quite lively. However, as time progressed, we learned to collaborate, enjoy ourselves, and deepen our understanding of God. After my experience with catechism, I was invited to assist with Summer Stretch, which made me anxious about keeping middle schoolers engaged enough to complete the service projects assigned to us. Summer Stretch is a middle school program that combines a service project with a fun activity each Thursday. During these service projects, I witnessed the kids begin to work together, completing each task while enjoying themselves.



When we joined forces with the Zion middle schoolers, that group tended to stick to themselves. I decided to pair Zion kids with those from Grace, and soon they began forming friendships, sharing laughter, and joking together. It was heartwarming to see our Grace kids including the Zion kids in all the activities.



Each weekly bus ride was an adventure on its own. Getting the kids to settle down long enough for a headcount was a challenge, as they were all busy socializing. I had never heard so many Taylor Swift songs being sung on a bus before. Although I don't consider myself a "Swiftie," it was a delightful experience to hear all the voices blending together in laughter.



At the start, I felt nervous about the entire program, but by the end, I was saddened to see it wrap up. The new friendships, community activities, and fun experiences for the kids were truly amazing. It warmed my heart when the kids asked if I would be back next year, which made me proud of the relationships I had built with both the kids and the chaperones.

LUTHERAN LATE NIGHT

BY LUKE ANDERSON

Lutheran Late Nights are fellowship and fun nights at Zion Lutheran Church in Anoka for Middle and High School age students. Often on Friday nights in both summer and the school year. These events offer a safe, fun and inclusive environment for our students to meet others and embody what it means to be people of faith in the world.

Lutheran late nights at Zion Lutheran Church have had a pretty big impact on my faith journey. I love going because these events have given me new friends to hang out with and they have brought me closer with people that I would normally not approach. It's also not just for people who go to church, anyone can come. That's one of the reasons I love Lutheran late nights. By being inclusive to other people, they have taught me to be inclusive with my faith and my religion.



We also play really fun late-night games like grog or sardines. These games have taught me that religion is not only serious, but it can also be a really fun thing as well. The first time I went I was really nervous, I did not know anyone but Will Weikle (our youth director) and Will was pretty fun to hang out with for the night, but he had other kids to pay attention to too. I then started playing frisbee with a couple of other people that I had never talked to before. They opened their arms and welcomed me with warm smiles and I had one of the most fun nights ever. One other night I went, they had this event where we got to sing karaoke and that was my favorite night ever. We sang at least 50 songs. We were doing that for hours. There was no judging when we sang, we were all just having a good time. We were of course singing terribly but we all had a truly fantastic night.

Going to Lutheran late nights has taught me not to judge other people and that we are all in this faith journey together and we still welcome those people who maybe don't share our faiths or beliefs. The impact has taught me to have confidence when I'm nervous and have compassion for those who are new to me and welcome them with open arms.



Synod Assembly

By Grace Weingart

I had never heard of the Synod Assembly before Pastor Joanna asked me if I would be willing to attend. I said sure, not knowing what I was getting into. Walking into Lord of Life that Saturday morning, I did not know what to expect and I was overwhelmed by the amount of people. But that feeling quickly went away when I was met by the Children Youth and Family Connector, Sarah. She was so helpful in showing me around the church and introducing me to other youth that were attending.

Attending the Synod Assembly helped me see the church in a whole new way. It showed me that all voices—including youth voices—are necessary to ensure representation of many perspectives.



This assembly showed me a different side of the church that I didn't know existed. I had never been a part of voting in such a large capacity before; it opened my eyes to see that even though I am young, my opinion is valued by the church. There were about twenty youth members there who were lucky enough to eat lunch with Bishop Jen. She was asking us questions on what we thought about the voting process happening. It was impressive to see youth engaged in such a meaningful discussion.

Someone jokingly asked her what her homework assignment for us was. She encouraged us to get a youth member on our board. That really stuck with me. After sharing this idea with the pastors, it opened the door to discuss youth involvement in the decision-making process. We now have a youth representative on our Vision Board and Strategic Visioning Team. Attending the Synod Assembly helped me see the church in a whole new way. It showed me that all voices—including youth voices—are necessary to ensure representation of many perspectives.



Woven Together

By Nikki Salfer

As a parent of two young boys in the preschool class at Seeds of Grace and members of Grace Lutheran Church, I've seen just how deeply the preschool and the church are woven together. Seeds of Grace isn't just a preschool, it's a ministry, a community, and a spiritual home where learning, play, and faith all come together as an extension of the church.

This church and preschool have a special place in my heart as I have grown up at this church since I was 6 months old and attended Seeds of Grace, which at the time was called Golden Rule. At that time, the church and the preschool still worked together but were separate. It has been exciting to watch the two integrate.



Preschool and church partner for chapel each week on Thursdays. Led by Pastor Joanna, Pastor Maria and Will Weikle, chapel is a special time filled with lessons about God's love. My boys often come home retelling the story of the day. Chapel is not just a weekly event; it's a cornerstone of the preschool experience that ties the church and Seeds of Grace together.



Another example of this connection between the church and Seeds of Grace includes both the Christmas and Spring programs. The spring program/preschool graduation is a time where toddler and preschool classes perform for the Seeds of Grace families. The weeks of preparation are full of excitement as the children rehearse, learn songs, and practice their lines. With the help of David Phelps, they learn all the songs, my kids often singing them repeatedly in the weeks leading up to the program. At the end of the ceremony, the church gives all of the graduating preschoolers a children's bible, marking a special time for the graduates in both preschool and in faith.

This partnership gives us, as parents, a deep sense of peace. We know our children are not only being taught a curriculum but also how to be kind, how to forgive, how to pray, all within an environment that reflects the values we strive to teach at home. Every day, the seeds of grace are being planted in our boys, and every day we see them grow in knowledge, in kindness, and in faith.

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For our family, the connection between Seeds of Grace and Grace Lutheran Church has been more than just a place to bring our kids while we go to work, it's been transformative. It's a wonderful collaboration, one that nurtures not just children, but families, faith, and the community.



Beloved and the Cloud of Witnesses

By Anne Weikle

Grace has a new piece of art that has been on the pulpit for the past few weeks. The painting is meant to be a memorial to our son, Matthew, who left us suddenly two years ago when he had a motorcycle accident. About 8 months after he died, it came to me that the world needed a reminder of Matthew. He brought much beauty to this life, and his absence left a huge void. "Commission a piece of art," a voice said to me. "Add some beauty back into world." And so began the story of the painting. We invited Pastor Steve Thomason to be the artist for this idea. Layers of prayer, layers of paint, and layers of connection went into this project.

In the foreground is a single white orchid, the center of our attention, the Beloved, and the background represents all of us, living and dead, whose lives bare witness to the Beloved.



During the period after Matthew's passing, I felt like I was in a literal cloud, sounds were muffled, my visual field was softly blurred around the edges.

The phrase, "Beloved, we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses" was part of that hazy feeling. The cloud of witnesses who have come and gone through generations, ancestors and angels, and Jesus himself, carried me through that time. This painting captures that essence for me and invites me to acknowledge all the life and love that surrounds us all the time, especially in times of great sorrow and loss.

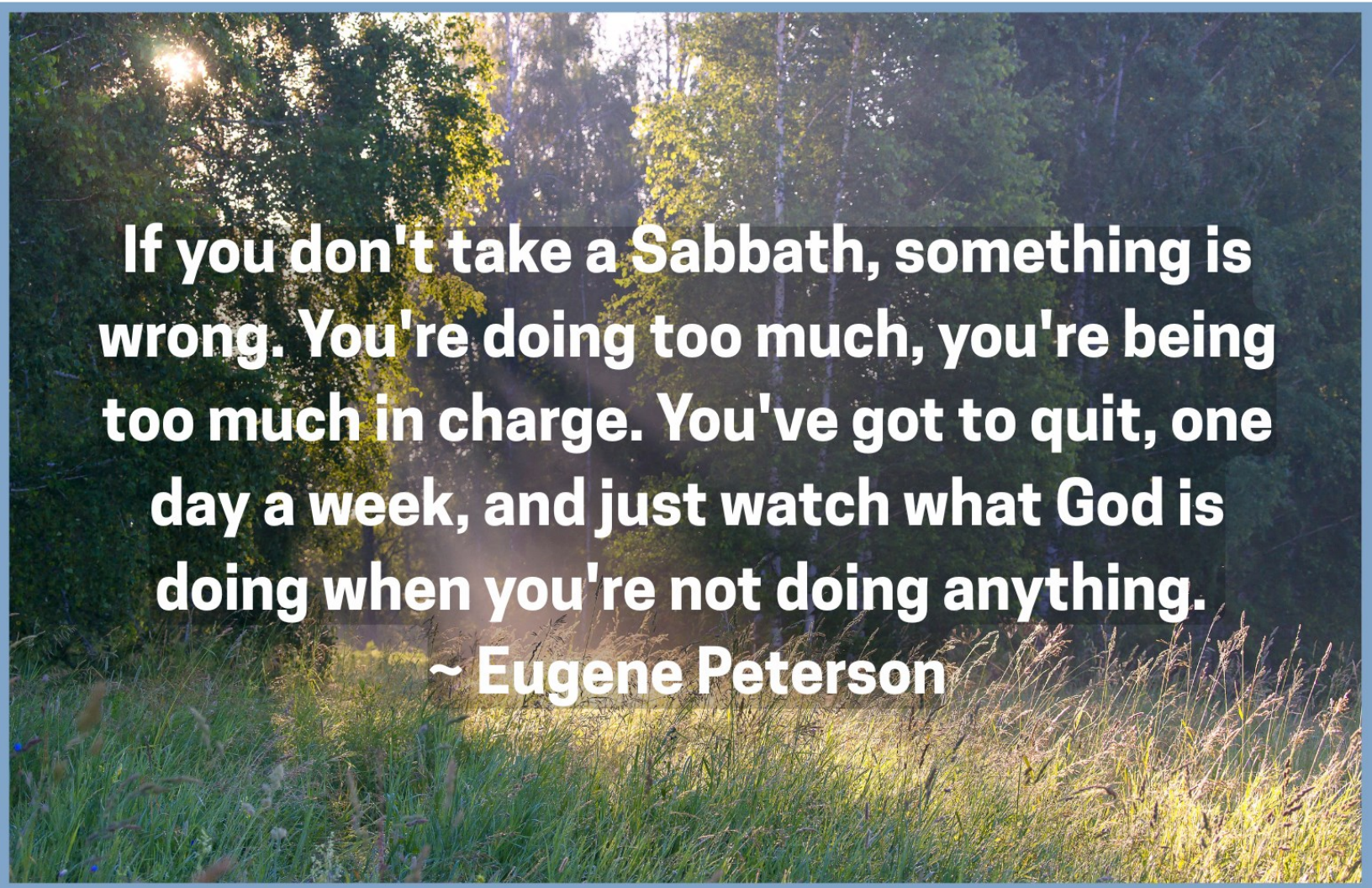
Grace is a neighborhood church and we as a community often host families in their time of loss. My hope is that families that come here might on some level experience the cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints, the gathering of spirits during their times of loss as well as times of celebration, and normal, mundane daily life. We are not alone, and it has been a continual strand of love that has brought us to this place. Though Matthew's life inspired the painting, each of us holds the place of the Beloved and each of us bears witness to the beauty of the other.

*For a story of the painting
from Steve Thomason's
perspective, visit his blog at:*



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A photograph of a sunlit forest with tall grass in the foreground. The sun is shining through the trees, creating a warm, golden light. The grass is tall and green, with some yellowing at the tips. The trees are dark green and form a dense background.

If you don't take a Sabbath, something is wrong. You're doing too much, you're being too much in charge. You've got to quit, one day a week, and just watch what God is doing when you're not doing anything.
~ Eugene Peterson