

# The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

# Digital

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New Year  
Edition

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WE are  
LUTHERAN

Sydney Robinson  
during a study pro-  
gram in Rome.

By RICK KAZMER  
Editor

*Sydney Robinson is a part of Penn State's faith community with plans to help others after graduation.*

Twenty-two-year-old Sydney Robinson has found a home at the Lutheran Student Community at Penn State.

The English and international affairs major from Frederick, Maryland, joined the Lutheran community on campus during her second year.

"I felt like I needed something grounding in my life. Additionally, I come from a Lutheran family, so it was a nice way to continue my faith," she said.

The fellowship has provided her with a break from daily stress points in life.

(See SYDNEY, Page 22)



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

Reflections from  
Sweden, Page 4



# The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

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Inviting people to love one another.

## OUR VISION

All creation living in harmony with Christ.

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Images should be as high resolution as possible, ideally 300 ppi at 3x5 inches (900x1500 pixels.)

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Allegheny Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

# About Epiphany

*Epiphany Blessings ... St. Paul writes: "Of this Gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access in boldness and confidence through faith in him." — Ephesians 3:7-12*



**Interim Bishop  
Barbara J. Collins**

This is a portion of the Epistle reading for Jan. 6, Epiphany. From the other appointed readings for the day, we are reminded of the journey of the magi who sought the Messiah, the Christ child, to honor him with gifts.

We recall the angel's warning in a dream to flee and seek refuge from Herod's plan to destroy the child. And then, as we move through the time after Epiphany, we again experience the mysteries and life-changing ministry of Jesus.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul points to God's mission for the church — for us — to share this gospel "of the boundless riches of Christ" with "boldness and confidence through faith in him."

We have been known to say that being God's church in today's world is very challenging.

**(See BISHOP, Page 16)**



# Scene of the Edition



This photo was shared on the Allegheny Synod Facebook page with others from The Weekend (more on that event on Page 17). Hearing about and sharing good news is what The Lutheran Letter is all about. Please send us good news from your congregation. Email the editor at [r9remzak@hotmail.com](mailto:r9remzak@hotmail.com). Support the publication by becoming a patron, using the form below.

Submitted photo

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## Remember in Prayer

Join the Allegheny Synod in prayer for these congregations this issue.

### JANUARY

**Week 1:** Ferguson Township Lutheran Ministry: Pine Hall Lutheran and Gatesburg Lutheran, State College

**Week 2:** St. John Lutheran Church, Sinking Valley

**Week 3:** St. James Lutheran Church, Huntingdon

**Week 4:** Benscreek Lutheran

### FEBRUARY

**Week 1:** Trinity Lutheran, State College

**Week 2:** Christ Trinity Parish: Christ Casebeer, Somerset and Laurel Trinity, Jennerstown

**Week 3:** St. James, Altoona

**Week 4:** Mt. Calvary Lutheran, Johnstown



# On the Pilgrim Way with the Church of Sweden

By **PASTOR SCOTT E. SCHUL**

*Senior pastor at Grace Lutheran,  
State College*

It's no secret that across the United States, fewer Americans are attending Christian churches nowadays. During the last few decades here in our Allegheny Synod, bishops, pastors, and laypeople alike have wrestled with this problem in an effort to reverse the trend. There are, of course, myriad reasons for the decline in engagement, and likewise no single response will magically fill our churches to overflowing.

**(See SWEDEN 1, Page 6)**

**Uppsala Cathedral -  
Photo by Pastor Scott Schul**



# Together, 'We Can Do Good Things'

By **HANNA WEIMER**

*Camp Sequanota, Jennerstown*

In November, along with other camp professionals from across the U.S., Pastor Nathan Pile, Angie Pile, Randi Newlin, and I (Hanna Weimer) gathered in Baltimore, Maryland, for the annual Lutheran Outdoor Ministry (LOM) Conference.

This is a time to recon-

nect with peers, continue our learning, and be in community together.

In the short amount of time that I have been attending these conferences, I have learned to appreciate them a great deal.

Being surrounded by camp people show the care and compassion of Christ is an exciting energy to be around.

One of my favorite parts of these conferences is to reconnect with friends that I have met through LOM and meet new people to add to that growing community.

One of our speakers shared with us, "Put together, we can do good things."

When surrounded by these people, it definitely feels that way! When we live into community and share the love of God with others, we do countless good things.

At Camp Sequanota near Jennerstown, that is what we strive for: Giving guests, campers, and volunteers a place to live into that love of God by connecting Christ, creation, and community.

During the conference, I attended several workshops and learned new ideas and concepts that we will use at Sequanota.

**(See CAMP, Page 24)**



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# SWEDEN 1

*(Continued from Page 4)*

What I think we can say for certain, however, is that we have a timeless treasure, the Gospel of grace, forgiveness, and new life in Jesus Christ. The nature and substance of our core beliefs are unchanging. But how we tell that story must shift with the times. As just one example, in colonial times sermons could be an hour or more in length. For better or worse, attention spans today are more suited to a 12-minute sermon. How we shared God's Word in the 1750s or even the 1950s simply will not get the job done as effectively here in the present day. And so, as we gently set nostalgia aside, our question is how to effectively and faithfully share Christ's timeless Good News in this era, to the people we are called to serve today.

With that in mind, this past August I set off for Sweden for two weeks to partner with the Svenska Kyrkan (the Church of Sweden), our Lutheran partners there. In part, I went because my ancestry is Swedish and I was raised in a Swedish American expression of the Lutheran church in Kane, Pennsylvania. But I also went to Sweden because that nation is even more secular than the United States. I wanted to learn how our Lutheran colleagues there are meeting this challenge.

With the generous cooperation of a number of wonderful people within the Church of Sweden, I studied, learned, and ministered at three sites in central Sweden: Uppsala Cathedral, Linköping Cathedral, and the Pilgrimscentrum in Vadstena. At the cathedrals, I was privileged to meet with bishops, pastors, and deacons to explore



Submitted photo  
**Pastor Schul speaking at Uppsala Cathedral.**

how they are ministering to the faithful of those regions. The Pilgrimscentrum was a very different context. Vadstena was home to one of Christianity's most famous saints and mystics, Birgitta, who died in 1373.

**(See SWEDEN 2, Page 7)**

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## SWEDEN 2

*(Continued from Page 6)*

Her enduring influence has inspired a remarkable pilgrimage center that is drawing both Christians and the “spiritual but not religious” seekers through pilgrimage trails and nature-based ministries.

My two weeks in Sweden were just the beginning of a relationship that I continue to nurture with ongoing conversation and communication. I am also making plans to return next year. So, what did I learn?

1. Don’t believe the popular opinion that Christianity is in terminal condition in Sweden and Scandinavia. People may appear quite secular, but they are deeply spiritual. Worship services at the cathedrals were very full, and people generally saw the Church as the vital “glue” that fostered community and identity. Similarly, the Pilgrimscentrum had a steady flow of people each day; some were overnight guests while others passed through the hiking trails. Some were conventional Christians while others were spiritual seekers still finding their way. All were equally welcomed and invited into deep, meaningful conversation.

2. The Cathedrals are using beauty to reveal God’s presence and love. How often have you heard a non-church-goer say that in a beautiful sunset, a landscape, or music they felt close to God? Those are all examples of how God uses beauty to touch us and draw us near. Through architecture, art, and music — some ancient but much of it contemporary — the Swedish cathedrals and parishes are intentionally and effectively using beauty

to foster encounters with God.

3. It has been said that God wrote two “books”: scripture and creation, and that only by reading them together do we gain the fullest understanding of our Lord. To that end, nature has become a primary way for Swedes to engage their faith. I especially saw this at the Pilgrimscentrum, where extended hikes enabled people to pray with their bodies (not just their minds and hearts) and to put their faith in action by moving their feet.

How might we begin to apply some of these lessons within our Synod?

1. Let’s invite people into a conversation, and dwell joyfully, confidently, and humbly in the questions. Rather than bash people over the head with rules and doctrine, meet them where they are. Acknowledge how God has already been moving in their life, and usher them into a deeper experience of God’s love.

Throwing a catechism at people might have worked in Martin Luther’s day, but people nowadays don’t read instruction books (smartphone manufacturers don’t even bother to print them anymore!) People learn experientially. So don’t merely teach the faith; experience it alongside our seekers.

2. Magnify the beauty in our worship spaces. Invite musicians and artists to play music and to paint. Offer dignified liturgy with meaningful, accessible language. Create a canvas of beauty within our churches where even those who have never attended a church can easily spot God.

**(See SWEDEN 3, Page 8)**





**Pastor Schul distributing communion in Linköping Cathedral.**

**READ PASTOR SCHUL'S WINTER MESSAGE ON PAGE 10.**

Submitted photo

## **SWEDEN 3**

*(Continued from Page 7)*

3. We live in one of the most beautiful regions of the world. How might we make more intentional use of the “green cathedrals” of nature that surround our church buildings? Consider outdoor worship in the summer and opportunities for believers and seekers to walk and hike together, trusting that, just as in the famous Road to Emmaus story from Luke 24, Christ will also be present.

I emphasize again that what I’ve set forth here isn’t a magic solution, but I believe it recaptures the approach the Church took in its earliest centuries while speaking and engaging our present context in a fresh and accessible way. Our partners in the Church of Sweden have given us a head start. Now, by God’s grace, we have a remarkable opportunity within our dear Allegheny Synod to teach the astonishing story of a Jesus to a new generation.

As we do so, I hope that a prayer I frequently heard in Sweden will resonate in our hearts. It was penned by our 14th century mystic, Saint Birgitta: “Lord, show me the way and make me ready to follow it.” Amen. †



# Embracing Epiphany

By **SUE ELLEN SPOTTS**

*Director of Evangelical Mission*

Are you one of the purists who keep the wise men away from the manger until Epiphany?

In my house, we keep those three guys and their camels at a distance until Jan. 6. Sometimes we have a party at the end of the 12 days. We haul the tree out into the yard and (weather permitting) light it on fire. And then ...

Then comes that quiet season where we wait for Lent. And this year, with Easter being about as late as it can come, we have quite a long season after Epiphany. Whatever will we do with all that time before we start our Lenten disciplines?

I want to encourage us to embrace the long Epiphany this year. By embracing, I don't mean that we should just keep staring at the wise men and singing "We Three Kings." I invite you to flip the way we look at this scene.

We often focus on the fact that the wise men sought Jesus, and their epiphany was finding him in that manger. We don't need to seek Jesus. We are God's baptized people; we are marked with the sign of Christ. Our calling as Christians is to bear witness to Christ in the world. Others in the world who are looking for the hope, the love, the peace of Christ should find it in us.

Epiphany may actually be the most



**Sue Ellen Spotts,  
Director of  
Evangelical  
Mission,**

evangelical season of our church year; the season in which we focus most on announcing God's presence in the world. "Evangelical" means good news. The good news we embody is that God in Jesus dwells right in the middle of all the mess of the world.

"Epiphany" is to shed light on or manifest that good news for others. Epiphany people shine with the light and love of God; we dispel the darkness of the world by our light-filled words and deeds. When we do, those who seek comfort and safety find it in us. They find Christ in us.

There are many in our communities and in the world who are longing for the incarnate love the manger offers. There are people who do not know where their next meal will come from. People who have no home in which to sleep. People who are made anxious and fearful by hateful words and intimidating policies. People trapped in abusive relationships. People fleeing bombs that destroy their homes. People grieving loss.

The question we ask ourselves as Epiphany people is, "What will we — as individuals and as congregations — say and do to shatter the darkness so those who come searching will find God's incarnate love? †

# WINTER MESSAGE

By PASTOR SCOTT E. SCHULZ  
Grace Lutheran Church, State College

## Spiritual Hash

When my brother and I recall our favorite meals from childhood, one in particular always garners a favorable mention.

We called it “hash.” Mom is constantly surprised that we have such fond memories of it because it’s a simple, humble meal designed to stretch a dollar and use up every leftover. For the uninitiated, the recipe for hash is to shred a piece of leftover roast beef (the centerpiece of the meal), supplement it with whatever veggies you have on-hand (like a can of corn), add some cubed potatoes, and fry it up in a pan. It’s the definition of comfort food, especially in winter.

Making hash is surprisingly similar to crafting a sermon. You begin with the “meat,” which of course is the Good News of Jesus Christ. Then you add to it whatever stories in your life you have on hand. Those “extras” are how preachers help us take a 2,000-year-old story and apply it meaningfully and comprehensibly in our own lives. Over the years I’ve discovered that the material I add to my “sermon hash” of-

ten comes from stories and experiences I remember as a boy growing up at Tabor Lutheran Church in Kane.

My regular reflections upon my formation at that little Lutheran church in Kane have surprised me. As I was growing up, nothing in those experiences seemed extraordinary, noteworthy, or likely to be remembered many decades later.

Yet on any given day, as I contemplate a sermon, I am surrounded by warm memories of St. Lucia festivals, recollections of simple, heartfelt, grace-filled messages from wise Sunday School teachers, and awe at the theologically faithful pastors who endured the noise and wise guy comments from kids like me in confirmation class.

Likewise, there are hymns, Bible stories, and phrases from the Sunday liturgy that attached themselves to my heart with a resilience I never expected or thought possible.

Those years were formative in ways that astonish me and I am sure shock my mother.

**(See WINTER Page 11)**



# WINTER

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*(Continued from Page 10)*

And so I hope this is a word of encouragement to the parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts out there who wonder if the effort of getting sleepy kiddos ready for church on Sunday, dragging them (often against their will) to worship, and enduring their wiggles and occasional outbursts is worth it.

It is! You are planting beautiful seeds of faith that are forming their hearts and minds. You may not see results until far later (believe me, as someone who started seminary at age 41, I know!). But hang in there. Don't get discouraged. Remember that when you plant actual seeds in the ground, it takes time for them to germinate. Moreover, their success depends on things like the soil, the sunshine, and the rain that are more in God's control than your own.

The same is true for faith seeds. Consistently plant them, pray always for your dear ones, and trust that God will bring those seeds to bloom at the right time.

We often fall into the trap of thinking that our faith lives are a failure unless they are marked by miraculous epiphanies and spectacular revelations. Such things happen, but they are rare.

Jesus usually works much more quietly and subtly, the way that drops of water gradually wear away a rock. Jesus is active through simple things like regularly showing up for worship with your family, saying a prayer at bedtime, or lighting a candle. It's like those old bowls of hash my brother and I loved: nothing flashy, but absolutely precious, life-giving, and life changing. Peace be with you. †



**Jesus usually works much more quietly and subtly, the way that drops of water gradually wear away a rock.** — *Pastor Schul*



# UPDATE

## *News from the Go Tell It IN the Mountains Initiative*

By **PASTOR JOHN KRATZ**

*Initiative Director*

In our quest to develop compelling preaching in our tri-synod region, the Initiative focuses on four major components of preaching. These four are the Content of preaching, the Context in which we preach, the Delivery styles/options, and Digital resources.

**CONTENT:** Biblically based exegetical preaching is at the heart of compelling preaching. We are participating in the divine when we proclaim the Gospel and thus our spiritual life and the content of our preaching are at the forefront. To enhance our preaching content, the Initiative is co-sponsoring a summer 2025 periscope text training on May 21. The Rev. Dr. Allison Deforest of United Seminary will present this training, which will be available on site at the Lutheran Home in Hollidaysburg and via Zoom. A Curriculum Task Force has been formed and will begin the process of reviewing best options for content development in 2025.

**CONTEXT:** Knowing our listeners and situation in which we preach helps to bring clarity to the message. We have multiple actions being taken to focus on context. We are hiring specialists in understanding the Appalachian heritage, the small church



**Pastor John H. Kratz**

dynamic, and human sexuality components to create training videos for all of our preachers to learn more. A major tool for all congregations and preachers in our tri-synod region is the MissionInsite. We have contracted with this firm to allow every congregation to do specific studies on their local communities and populations surrounding those congregations. Though this tool is limited to two years due to cost constraints, within that timeframe every congregation may use this tool to study the missional needs of their area and get to know the underserved in their community. A full FAQ on this tool will be launched in January at the ALWL Core 4 Training and then distributed to every congregation in our region.

**(See UPDATE, Page 13)**



# UPDATE

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*(Continued from Page 12)*

**DELIVERY:** Those who have chosen and have been affirmed to serve as Mentors will have training on delivery options in May. Mentors will be assigned to new preachers to aid in their development in compelling preaching. Then, in September 2025, it is our hope to have a full cohort of up to 90 preachers trained by the Rev. Dilip Abayasekara. This monthly cohort will focus on preaching delivery and tools to move away from manuscript reading.

**DIGITAL:** An additional training video is being contracted to learn the basics of AI and use of AI in presenting and distributing a weekly sermon or creating a series of sermons. The Digital Resource Team has also been formed and will help with curricula and digital tools to enhance the work of proclaiming the Gospel to multiple contexts.

I saved the best for last! The Prayer Team has regularly been holding this Initiative in prayer and we have seen wonderful results from doors that God has opened. People have actively been saying “yes” to requests to help in this work and to provide resources for this work. Just recently, one door closed in the direction we were taking, but two more opened that same week! To God be the glory for this movement and work being done. If you would like to join the Prayer Team, simply email John Kratz at [Director@alleghensynod.com](mailto:Director@alleghensynod.com). †



# ICYMI: SYNOD NEWS

These are some of the churches Bishop Barbara J. Collins and Assistant to the Bishop Pastor Kevin Shock visited during the past two months, along with some other news of note from around the Synod.

**Newer pastors and deacons throughout Region 8 gathered in Gettysburg in late November for the First Call Theological Education Conference. Pictured from Allegheny Synod are Interim Bishop Barbara Collins, Pastor Laura Waltermire, Pastor Regina Holliday, Pastor Kevin Shock, and Pastor Allen Stump. Missing from the photo is Pastor Ted Williams.**



**Assistant to the Bishop, Pastor Kevin Shock, was busy welcoming new congregation members! Meet Violet Grace, from St. John in Summerhill (above); and Greyson Alexander, from Trinity in Sidman (below).**





# Assisting One Another

## *Thoughts from the Assistant to the Bishop*

By **PASTOR KEVIN SHOCK**

*Assistant to the Bishop*

For this column I'm usually thinking of, and writing about, small ways that we in the wider church can assist one another.

For this issue, however, I'm thinking about a very big and necessary thing, if one could even



**Pastor Kevin Shock**

call it a "thing." Let me give you some back-

ground.

This past December, youth and adults from across the Synod gathered at St. James in Huntingdon for The Weekend event.

I had the privilege of leading small groups in one of the Bible study sessions.

We were discussing Matthew 11:28-30, when Jesus tells the crowds, especially the ones "who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads," (Common English Bible) to come to him, and he will give them rest.

In the course of conversation with the groups, we talked about how easy or difficult it is to talk openly with strangers, versus friends, versus family.

That led to the question of how easy or difficult it is for us to talk to God.

**(See SHOCK 1, Page 21)**

## SINGERS WANTED

for the choir of a Lenten Musical Meditation:

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### CONTACT

For more information, contact Ecumenical Choir Director Laurel Sanders ([lsanders@glcpa.org](mailto:lsanders@glcpa.org)), visit the Grace Lutheran Church website ([www.glcpa.org](http://www.glcpa.org)), or call Grace Lutheran Church at 814-238-2478.



## **BISHOP**

*(Continued from Page 2)*

Society, our communities, and the world have changed so drastically that being part of a faith community is not in the Top 10 of everyone's list. But, if we are honest, I believe we can also say that being God's church has been challenging since the very beginning.

Still, we are all called to be bold and confident in the faith given to us. We are called to continue to serve as God's people in proclaiming the good news of Christ Jesus, here and now, in words and deeds, in prayers and worship ... in simply being present and showing up as the body of Christ to serve.

As the Allegheny synod, we are on a journey (on the way together) for the next 10 months that will lead us to the election of a new bishop and potentially a renewed focus on how to be God's church together in this place. It will be a time for conversation, a time for listening, and a time of discernment — together — to hear where

and how the Spirit is leading us into this mission as God's church. Will there be challenges along the way? — yes. Will we face potential change? — yes. Will we be facing these things alone? — no, for we are in this together and the Triune God is right there with us.

I know there will also be opportunities to share ideas, support one another, and celebrate the ministries that are making a difference in our lives and the lives of our neighbors.

Please be open to add your voice to our upcoming conversations and be present when we schedule gatherings during this 10-month journey. Your presence and voice are important for the sake of the whole Synod.

And may we all remember that we can share the Gospel with boldness and confidence as God's church, as the Allegheny Synod, in today's world because of the boundless riches of Christ.

Shalom, Bishop Collins †





# Fun & Fellowship

## *The Weekend Returns*

Allegheny Synod youth took part in The Weekend — the weekend of Dec. 6. It was an awesome time for fellowship, fun, and even participation in Huntingdon's Christmas parade. The event was hosted by St. James Lutheran.

Zion Lutheran Church Youth Ministry Leader Ryan Custead, from Hollidaysburg, helped to plan the event. He answered some questions about what made it a great gathering.

**THE LUTHERAN LETTER:** Do you have any key takeaways you'd like to share?

**RYAN CUSTEAD:** The kids and leaders both made this an incredible weekend. Particularly after the pandemic, this event is a valuable ministry that connects kids and bolsters their growing faith.

**TLL:** What was the biggest impact moment or event?

**RC:** Walking together in Huntingdon's Christmas parade was a special way to spend an evening with the town and create an opportunity for outreach. The most impactful moment for me was leading the singing and dancing to our event theme song with St. James during our combined Sunday morning closing worship.

(See WEEKEND, Page 18)





Submitted photos

**Allegheny Synod youth participate in the Huntingdon Christmas parade. On Page 17, the entire group at St. James Lutheran. The youth event is a time to rejoice, join together, and celebrate.**

## WEEKEND

*(Continued from Page 17)*

**TLL:** What was something that really caught your attention?

**RC:** All of the kids made sure no one was left out of anything. They all cared and looked out for each other the whole time.

**TLL:** What was the most rewarding

part of the event?

**RC:** As a leader, watching my kids and chaperones take care of each other as well as the kids and adults from other groups was the most rewarding. I also loved the opportunity to grow closer and continue to partner with colleagues in the Synod. †



# Exciting Arts Program is Back

By **LAUREL SANDERS**

*Director of Music & Arts Ministries at Grace Lutheran, State College*

Children entering grades 2-8 in the fall of 2025 are invited to create art and music this summer with hearts, hands, and voices camp artistic director and nationally acclaimed children's music educator Dr. Michael Burkhardt, and regional fine arts educators.

The four-day camp, hosted by Grace Lutheran Church in State College, will be held from 1 to 7 p.m. June 29, and from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. June 30 to July 2, with extended hours available on request.

Burkhardt's nationally acclaimed program, which was founded in 2008 in Michigan, teaches children how to tap into the arts using their unique gifts of artistic expression and develops their skills so they can participate confidently as they assist in leading worship.

This summer, students will learn how to play xylophones, metallophones, recorders, handbells, chimes, African drums, and rhythm instruments, as well as singing in multiple languages and creating liturgical art within a worship context.

The goal is to help children develop confidence in their uniqueness and leadership skills that they can use when they return to their home churches and communities. Classes are segregated by age; children enjoy worship, daily recreation and fellowship opportunities together. Some music reading skills are

helpful, but they are not required.

This is the second year Burkhardt's hearts, hands, and voices camp has been offered in State College.

It follows on the success of last year's program, which was based on the Psalms and was also hosted at Grace Lutheran Church.

This year the theme is "Created, cared for, and called by God," with a focus on baptismal identity and the unique gifts each individual brings to the table.

The daily schedule includes an opening and closing worship service in which Burkhardt intentionally involves all children in ways that brings out their unique gifts from beginning to end.

At 6:30 p.m. July 2 — the last day of camp — a closing worship service will be offered to the public, when campers will unveil the art they created and share their music, followed by an ice cream social.

The camp fee is \$50 for the four days and includes a camp shirt, all supplies, access to instruments, lunch, and snacks.

Registration for the 2025 summer camp opens online on Jan. 1.

Video footage from 2024, information about the 2025 camp, and a registration form can be found [here](#), or by calling Grace Lutheran Church at 814-238-2478. Thanks to generous contributions, the low \$50 fee for the all-inclusive camp is designed to make the experience accessible to everyone who wishes to come.

**(See MUSIC, Page 20)**



Children participate in a previous camp, using a variety of instruments.

Submitted photos



## **MUSIC**

*(Continued from Page 19)*

Spread the word and encourage children you know to join in the fun this summer. Every child who attends will benefit — and so will their churches when they return home, ready to help with worship!

Burkhardt is an internationally known composer, musician, and children's music educator at Eastern Michigan University who is known for his inspiring hymn festivals and creative work with children. His curriculum and compositions for children are used around the world and his "Hearts, Hands, and Voices" music and arts camp is offered at several sites across the country. †



# SHOCK 1

*(Continued from Page 15)*

I was joy-filled to hear that most of the young people there could easily talk to God. One group, however, did seem a little less certain of having conversation with God.

I heard some comments that led me to ask: Do you ever feel like God might judge you for the things you want to, or need to, say?

Two youth raised their hands quite easily. My heart broke, not just because they feel that way, but because it became quickly evident to me that they feel that way because people have judged them for the things they wanted to, or needed to, say.

I don't know either of these kids well, but I know enough about them to know that they don't fit neatly into the nice, little packages that society wants kids to fit into.

I spent enough time with them at The Weekend to learn that they are both creative, fun, and thoughtful kids. They are the kind of kids I would want my own kids to be, if I had any. They are also the kind of kids who could become easy targets for active or passive bullying.

They're the kind of kids, I could imagine, who may have been told by adults to quit being who they are. They're the kind of kids who notice when people's stares linger too long, or who hear their classmates whispering about them.

Friends, they're the kind of kids —

like all kids — who should not have to endure unkind words or unkind thoughts or any of the other nonsense that the world gives them. Please read that last sentence as many times as it takes for it to sink in.

These kids, like most of the youth at The Weekend, have congregations and families who love and support them. They have adults who advocate for them.

They know love and care. I pray that would be enough to protect and sustain them, but I know it might not be enough in this angry and fearful world. I told every group at The Weekend that when Jesus says, "Come to me," those are the words of someone who will never judge them for the struggles they face or the burdens they carry or even the joy they feel in who they are.

I can't remember if I told them that anything they hear about Jesus that is contrary to that truth is a lie, but I do believe that to be the case.

One thing I've learned and proclaimed over the course of my ministry is that judgment, or the threat of it, is not transformative; only love is transformative.

Jesus does not say from the cross, "I'll hang here for you now, but you better get your act together or I'm out of here."

His message is more like: "For however long you live and in whatever you do, my life is given for you."

**(See SHOCK 2, Page 23)**

# SYDNEY

*(Continued from Page 1)*

In fact, spending time in the faith-based program has become a part of her weekly routine.

She credits Deacon Alicia Anderson for helping to provide the welcoming atmosphere.

"I cherish the opportunity to meditate on something bigger than myself. I have also built some of the most important parts of my support system through the club, including my best friend, Zane," Sydney said.

A Penn State, Sydney enjoys learning something new each day. But 8 a.m. classes are her least favorite part of the experience.

Econometrics has been a challenging

class. And it's easy to see why. She said it's a combination of statistics, calculus, and economics.

"My biggest nightmares," Sydney added.

When finished, the Maryland native has a noble calling. She wants to be an attorney focused on getting people who are wrongfully convicted off death row.

For now, she is taking in the full college experience, which includes her faith.

"There is a vibrant religious student community through the Pasquerilla Spiritual Center. Every time I walk through the doors, there's a service or community event going on. For many of us, our spirituality is an important part of our lives that coexists with our academic and professional identities," she said.

## WE ARE LUTHERAN

**THE LUTHERAN LETTER:** What's your earliest memory of attending a Lutheran Church?

**SYDNEY ROBINSON:** I remember sitting in Sunday School while our teacher told us that Jesus was everywhere. I wondered if he used the same system as Santa Claus.

**TLL:** What's one thing you would tell someone before attending a Lutheran church for the first time?

**SR:** You are welcome and wanted in the space.

**TLL:** What are you praying about the most lately?

**SR:** I've been asking God to help me do his work through my hands. While I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do after graduation, I know I want to help people. I trust that he'll guide me to the best way to do so. †



## **SHOCK 2**

*(Continued from Page 21)*

I know this, because his actual words are: "This is my body, given for you," and "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Those are words of love. The judgment of Jesus is loving and merciful judgment.

Friends, I get frustrated with the world and with the church. I was angry for those kids that day. I look at the whole church and see all of the people who aren't easily welcome in it: people who aren't managing their mental illness well; people who are on the journey of figuring out their true identity; people who are being beaten up by their addiction; people who have lost a job or home or income; etc.

We can do better. I stick with the church despite my frustration, because I can't imagine any other entity in this world that is better equipped to love and protect people who are on the margins than the church is. But also, we must do better, if we profess to follow the One who pushes his own disciples out of the way and commands them: "Let these kids come to me!" If we follow him, we have to make a way for them, and for all people, to be embraced by his love. †

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**Camp Sequanota's Hanna Weimer at the gathering of camp professionals in Baltimore.**

Submitted photo

## CAMP

*(Continued from Page 5)*

In a mental health workshop, we were shown an example of a “calm down bottle.” In the water bottle, there were several objects to help campers when they are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or homesick. Objects included a fidget, a dice with different options, and a card with a breathing exercise. This simple water bottle could benefit many campers who sometimes feel overwhelmed at camp. Because of learning about this idea, we will help campers learn ways to work through uncomfortable feelings in a way that is understandable and simple.

There were many takeaways from the conference like this one. Pastor Nathan, Angie, Randi, and I came back from this conference feeling refreshed, rejuvenated, and ready to put into place new ideas and concepts that we learned at the conference. One of our speakers had shared this question with us at the end of the conference and I challenge you to ponder it with me: “Who will your love reach next?” I feel emboldened and ready to find more communities for our love at Sequanota to reach.

How can the Sequanota community reach you? Check out our upcoming events that include our annual New Year’s Day hike, our elementary and junior high Ignite retreat in January, several other retreats in both February and March, and the Tend Festival in June. Summer camp registration opens on Jan. 3. Check out [www.sequanota.com](http://www.sequanota.com) for more information. We can’t wait to see you here! †



# Campus Update

# Looking Ahead

By **DEACON ALICIA ANDERSON**

*Campus Minister with Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State*

Though most college and university students graduate in the spring, there are a good number who graduate in December, at the end of the fall semester.

This year, I had the opportunity to attend the honors college medal ceremony at Penn State where two of our students were among the graduates honored (congratulations, Sydney and Henry!)

Students were dressed in their graduation caps and gowns, professors were there looking pleased, and proud family and friends filled the rest of the room. It was a festive and celebratory event, marking the completion of years of hard work and commitment.

Administrators spoke in glowing terms about these graduates, touching on the journeys that brought them to campus, exploring the breadth and depth of work they each had finished to reach graduation, and naming many of the opportunities and potential that is ahead. At this time of transition, their comments balanced past, present, and future.

I am sad to see our graduates go. Sydney and Henry will be missed in our campus ministry circle. Their stories, laughter, questions, and insights have shaped the time we share as a campus ministry community and have been a blessing. It has

been a joy and a privilege to see them grow as people and to help them grow as people of faith. Yet, I am also happy for them as they move on. They have put considerable work into their education and those efforts are bringing new and exciting work and education opportunities. This is just part of the life of a campus minister — celebrating each graduation while also grieving a bit.

The graduates at that ceremony will each find many new beginnings as this new year unfolds. Often, when something new begins, something else must come to a close. We often have mixed feelings as we move on, leaving a place or person or experience that has been part of our lives. Setting aside the past gives us the chance to move more fully into the future, embracing growth, changes and new opportunities, even as we experience some regret for what we leave behind.

May this new year be filled with opportunities and transitions for us all. May we find the courage and support we need to set aside the past and move into the future and its new beginnings. May we find reassurance that the same God who journeyed with the people of Israel through the wilderness into the promised land will also journey with us into whatever new possibilities lay ahead. Happy New Year! †

# BEFORE *you* GO

*Yes, we put up the tree on Nov. 1*

If you drove down our street in Somerset the night after Halloween, you saw our Christmas tree twinkling in our sun room window.

Courtney and I are always eager to start the holiday season as early as possible, because it goes by so quickly.

The tree comes first, then the nativity scene, followed by the rest of the decorations.

Soon the Christmas countdown days on our calendar reduce, and the number of weeks left in the NFL season dwindles (my countdown more than Courtney's).

Soon, it's Jan. 2. Now what?

In past year's we have featured psychiatrists, counselors, and pastors who have provided insight into avoiding the winter blues, something many people deal with after Christmas. As Director of Evangelical Mission Sue Ellen Spotts notes (on Page 9, if you missed it), Easter is late this year.

So, there's a long gap until the Easter season begins, and we can start embracing spring.

Winter is a cold friend. Someone once told me that "everything is harder in the winter."

Getting your car ready to drive, bundling up to go anywhere — there are many ways cold weather and snow complicates our lives.

But, it's important to remember that it, like all of our seasons, is fleeting. I recently talked to another friend, who moved back here from Florida. That person had a renewed sense of appreciation for our changing seasons here in the hills and valleys.

Depending on how the weather is as you are reading this, you may be rolling your eyes. In truth, I am ready for spring, too.

The good news is that Lent (and the NFL draft) are right around the corner. The next time you read this column, it will be early March.

See you in the spring,

— Rick Kazmer