



SMLC VOICE NEWSLETTER

Summer 2025



Pastor Brian's Preponderant Business

As I write this I am preparing for my first pastoral sabbatical, a gift that some congregations provide their pastors once every seven years. The purpose of a sabbatical is to provide an extended period of refreshment and renewal for a pastor. I am incredibly grateful St. Matthew is providing me this opportunity, and want to express my tremendous gratitude for your generosity and willingness to support me with a three month sabbatical.

As part of the sabbatical planning process, I developed a proposal which I shared with St. Matthew's congregation council. The sabbatical dates of June 10- September 10 were approved at the March 2025 council meeting. And a more in-depth sabbatical proposal was approved at the April 2025 council meeting.

I plan to use this time as a period of refreshment and renewal, as well as take advantage of the time to travel and work on personal projects like a book about my PhD dissertation. I will also do a number of things intended to improve my leadership and ministry at St. Matthew. To begin, I have committed to read three books which I believe will positively impact my ministry at St. Matthew: *The New Big Book of Christian Mysticism* by Carl McColman, *The Divine Mileu* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and *More Than Merely Eyes Can See* by Sue Carey. I hope these books will enhance both my personal faith journey and my ministry at St. Matthew. They may lead to Adult Forum topics; and particularly, Sue Carey's book, will increase our partnership with Grace Lutheran Church in Hartford of which the book is about.

The next idea was suggested by Pastor Carter when I sought his advice on creating a sabbatical proposal. That is, to choose one of the Gospels and make it my devotion during my sabbatical. The Gospel of Matthew will be the Gospel we engage with during the lectionary's Year A when I return, thus I chose to make Matthew my devotional reading during my sabbatical.

In addition to the above reading material, I plan to attend several conferences both in-person and virtual which will be part of my continuing education. The first will be the MAPS (Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies) Conference from June 17-21 in Denver, CO. I attended the 2023 MAPS Conference and this year I will be presenting on dissertation research. When I return home after some time traveling, I will attend three virtual workshops on nonprofit management which I hope will enhance my leadership and ministry capabilities as lead pastor at St. Matthew.

I am also excited to share my travel plans with you. A life goal of mine has been to visit all 50 states. So far I have visited 41 of the 50 states, and this summer my plan is finish off the continental 48. I will begin by flying to Seattle, WA and rent a car to drive through Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. After that first week I will drive to Colorado where I will attend the MAPS Conference mentioned above. Following the MAPS Conference, I will drive to Nebraska and then Kansas. I have driven through both of these states before, but it will be nice to spend more time exploring each of them. After this I will drive to Oklahoma, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, hitting the final five states needed to complete the continental 48. I hope to visit a number of museums and educational opportunities in each state before flying home in July.

After my travels, I would like to spend the rest of the summer writing a book I have been working on about my dissertation topic of spiritually significant psychedelic experiences. I have an outline and have started writing some of the chapters, but the sabbatical will provide me with time to focus and really engage in the writing process. I hope to complete a draft of the book by September, and I look forward to sharing a final version with you all when it's ready!

I would like to repeat my deep gratitude and thankfulness for this sabbatical opportunity. Serving at St. Matthew has been one of the great privileges of my life and I am so appreciative of you all. Thank you for being such an important part of my life and thank you for this opportunity to learn and grow, to experience rest and renewal, and to work on some projects. Please keep me in your prayers as I enter into this time of sabbatical. I am looking forward to it and hope that it will not only be a blessing for me personally but for the entire congregation. Thank you to Rev Ryan who will be assuming full-time ministry responsibilities this summer. I know the congregation is in good hands. Thank you for your love and support for Rev Ryan as well. We are blessed to be your pastors! Thank you for the gift you are to us and the gift you are to the world. I look forward to seeing you when I return from sabbatical. Blessings to you all this summer!

Your brother in Christ,
Pastor Brian Rajcok

Rev. Ryan's Reflections

As I write to you it is on the eve of my vacation to visit family in Minneapolis, MN. It's been a rough few days for Minnesotans and especially those who live in the Twin Cities metro area. Two members of Minnesota's State Legislature have been targeted by a gunman. One was killed along with her husband, and one is still undergoing medical treatment alongside his wife.

At times, it feels like the world is crashing down around us or like things are spiraling out of control. It's this kind of news that we engage with when the TV news coverage comes on and it's often what we see on our social media apps.

In this summer newsletter, I want to focus on my *hope* that what we see and hear as "wall-to-wall coverage" on our TVs and social media is not the full truth. I also call upon you to have hope.

Our hope is found in Christ Jesus. The one we acknowledge as savior of the world.

I don't mean for you to say, "Jesus take the wheel" and ignore what is going on in the world. That's not how we are called to engage. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit for a reason and that reason is to be our Advocate (John 14:26). The word in Greek that is translated in John as advocate can also mean helper. So, the Spirit helps us to know who Jesus is for the world and helps us to know what to DO with that information.

We are asked to be "doers" in this world. In the creation story in Genesis, God gives humanity "dominion" over the world. So, God elected us to be "doers." We have a God-given responsibility to join our active, present, caring and loving God in service to the world. The Holy Spirit, the Advocate/Helper, empowers us to be active in the world in the name and likeness of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus's own ministry he served the poor, he reached out to the outcast, and he healed the sick. Jesus's work gives a glimpse of what God's Resurrection Kingdom looks like. A Kingdom of life, plenty, happiness, and inclusion. This is what forms the bedrock of my hope.

It gives me hope because there are countless people in the world, in our nation and in our community that are being Christ-like "doers." The Grace Meals Ministry team may not be going viral on social media, the Hands of Grace staff may not get coverage on the nightly news, the Canton Food Bank may not receive front page press in the Hartford Courant, our school supplies collection may not get the attention of the mass media, but they – we – are all still working, feeding, clothing, reaching out and serving God's beloved children in care and compassion.

God's Kingdom is well and truly on the way. There are birthing pangs where things happen, like the horrors of what took place in Minnesota this week, that do not reflect God's Kingdom. These pangs really hurt.

I still have hope.

God's Kingdom is well and truly on the way and the resurrection of Jesus Christ shows me that nothing is impossible for God! With the Holy Spirit, the Advocate/Helper, we are empowered by God to join with God in the Kingdom-on-the-way. We can see God's Kingdom arriving all around us in our community. It gives me hope.

This summer, I pray that you will stay connected to the news and understand what is going on, but don't let the news make you feel like you've got the whole story. Take a walk around your neighborhood, notice a little free library in a yard, notice the signs for clothing collections, notice the places that are serving God's beloved people in care and compassion. These manifestations of God's Kingdom are a balm to our aching hearts.

Have hope in God's good work through Christ Jesus this summer. See the Kingdom as it comes. Go and join those hopeful crowds as they serve and stay active in the world in care and compassion for all of God's children.

In great hope,
Rev Ryan

SUMMER EVENT SCHEDULE

As the 2024-25 Program Year comes to a close here at SMLC, a lot of the regular occurrences will pause during the summer to refresh and reflect. The groups and events that continue through the summer are:

Sunday, 9am: Worship Service with Holy Communion
Tuesday, 10am: Alcoholics Anonymous (All Are Welcome!)
Wednesday, 9:30am & 5:15pm: Weight Watchers
Wednesday, 7pm: Overeaters Anonymous
Thursday, 2pm: Centering Prayer

Rally Day, September 14th, will kick off the next Program Year with most regular occurrences starting back up the week after. There will be another newsletter before Labor Day to help prepare.

There are two special events that will take place during the summer. **In a couple of weeks on Sunday, June 29th, we will be blessing this year's high school graduates during worship service!**

Also, St. Matthew will be hosting a talent showcase on July 19th at 4pm as the next event in the Music at Greenwood series. An informational blurb can be found further down in this email, as well as in our weekly email notices and Sunday bulletin announcements.

LOOKING BACK

Recapping the Spring at St. Matthew

2025 Easter Egg Hunt



Each year St. Matthew Lutheran Church hosts an Easter Egg Hunt the weekend of Palm Sunday. Despite the snow and rain (a repeat of 2024's pouring rain!), the egg hunt was a big success! There were around 25 children accompanied with their guardian who scoured the church for colorful hidden eggs. Around 300 eggs were hidden by St. Matthew's confirmation students. These confirmation students also helped the youngest participants find eggs and set up and led games in the Hall of the Evangelist throughout the hunt. St. Matthew was also visited this year by the Easter Bunny! What a special treat.

The egg hunt is held each year as an event open to the wider Farmington Valley community and is an opportunity for families from around the neighborhood to check out St. Matthew Lutheran Church in a low-pressure, fun way.

We look forward to next year's egg hunt on March 28th, 2026!

2025 Palm Sunday Breakfast

The annual Palm Sunday Brunch is a favorite among the community here at St. Matthew! Egg bakes, french toast, fruit cups, sweet treats, OJ, coffee and tea are enjoyed by all immediately following the Palm Sunday worship service. This year nearly 70 people attended our brunch and all of them left with full bellies!

A big thank you is always needed for St. Matthew's Fellowship Team and to the Confirmation students who helped to coordinate this year's brunch. The Fellowship Team is a growing group of wonderful people of all ages who help to coordinate times of fellowship, food and coffee each week. If you have gifts in baking, cooking, or just want to help make coffee on any given Sunday, reach out to office@stmatthewavon.org and get connected to the Fellowship Team!

2025 First Communion



This year St. Matthew was blessed with four 3rd graders who were ready to learn more about the gift of Holy Communion. St. Matthew practices open communion, meaning all who desire the sacrament can partake, however, we do still encourage young children to have their First Communion. By going through First Communion, a child will learn a little of the history of Holy Communion, what it means to have Jesus Christ's body and blood represented in bread and wine and how it is a gift from God. These are complex ideas that are engaged through a resource called "Fed and Forgiven" published by the ELCA.

In the image accompanying this blurb, you will see our four children helping to make bread as a part of their First Communion class! Next year's class will be on May 2nd with the children's First Communion taking place during worship the next day on May 3rd. If you have a 3rd Grader or older who you think is ready for their First Communion, reach out to Rev Ryan at revryan@stmatthewavon.org so he can make sure they are on next year's list!

Confirmation Camp



Time away from home, school, computers and TVs may not be a teenager's first thought of fun... however our Confirmation kids ranked Confirmation Camp as their number one most favorite thing they did during Confirmation!

Each year, St. Matthew's confirmation class heads up to Lake Ossipee in Freedom, NH for a weekend of learning about Jesus, exploring the wilderness, playing games, meeting other young Lutherans and of course some shenanigans. It's a wonderful time for our church's young people to be with their peers exploring their faith as kids do – with lots of questions both serious and silly.

Next year, we'll be taking the High Schoolers up to Calumet for a fall retreat in October and then the Confirmation Class will go to Calumet in the Spring on March 6-8, 2026. If you have a confirmation student, mark your calendars now – remember, it was the kids most favorite part of Confirmation!! You won't want to miss it.

Annual Church Picnic



The end of the school year also means many of St. Matthew's educational programs come to a close. Each year, we end with a bang!! The Church Picnic was on June 1 this year and nearly 65 people enjoyed burgers, brats, salads and fruit after a slightly later worship service.

Of course, the weather put a chilly damper on things with rain, wind and cold. But, we didn't let that dampen our spirits as we celebrated our Sunday School Teachers and their hard work and wrapped up our Choir rehearsals and confirmation classes. It was a wonderful celebration to close out a wonderful program year here at St. Matthew.

Confirmation



As a teenager, you are asked to affirm your faith in the promises God gives us in our baptism: that we are named and claimed as beloved children of God. That's what Confirmation Sunday is all about!

This year 9 young people from 8th-10th grade affirmed their faith in their baptism! They came forward, claimed their belief that God has given them eternal love and salvation through Jesus Christ and that these gifts were given them at their baptism many years ago. They also affirmed that they won't stop asking questions about what this all means as they continue to grow up and become young adults!

We are blessed by these young people at St. Matthew, by their questions and curiosity. We give thanks and praise to God for them and we promise to continue to be with them as they go through the ups and downs of life as they continue their high school education and grow toward adulthood. We don't have it all figured out, but we all affirm that God is with us in our baptismal promises and keeps listening as we keep asking God lots of questions!

Property Cleanup



The spring property clean up was held on Saturday, June 7. Because the weather was uncertain, we focused on 3 main objectives that required teamwork.

1. Cleared the raised bed behind the parsonage and spread 2 tons of stone
2. Gave the Garth a long overdue serious pruning
3. Remounted the large bell in the garth

Thanks to all who helped out! Including: Pastor Brian, Mark & Wyatt Boswell, John Pearson, Jack Pietrick, Carlton Slater, Ben & Karen Wright, Mike Zammett, Roy Zurell. Kudos to Fred Krompegal for his creation of the gorgeous, black walnut wheel for the bell! Special thanks to Rick DuBiel (Avon Land Trust) for helping and taking a full trailer of debris to the Avon Landfill!!

Grace Meals Program



The Outreach Committee continues its partnership with Grace Lutheran Church. Preparing 120 meals in our kitchen and serving them every other month in Hartford!

MINISTRY MINUTE

An update from some of our many ministries

Evangelism Committee

The Evangelism Committee is active again and now includes the Marketing and Communications Committee. Members are Greg Boyd, Ellen Ericson, Rick Hanson, Missy Lindquist, Elaine Menezes and Kelly O'Connell. The group is beginning work on creating an online password-protected picture directory, updating our name tag system and will begin focusing on member recruitment and retention. If you have an interest in helping with these efforts, please contact Rick Hanson.

Outreach Ministry

The Outreach Ministry will be helping to support various targeted organizations on a bi-monthly or seasonal basis in addition to continuing our support for Gifts of Love and the Canton Food Pantry with items always needed by their clients. The first Seasons of Giving effort, to collect school supplies for those in need in Hartford County, will continue through the end of August. The organizations we are working with are Gifts of Love, The Village for Families and Children and Grace Lutheran Church.

Supplies needed include: #2 pencils, colored pencils, pencil cases, sharpeners, thick and thin markers, crayons, individual-colored folders, spiral notebooks, water bottles, lunch boxes, thumb drives, and backpacks. Monetary donations made directly to the organizations so that they can make purchases in bulk are also welcome.

Goods that are "Always Needed" are personal care products, paper goods and non-perishable food items especially pasta sauce, canned tuna and fruits, cereal, 100% juice, coffee, and 1# bags of rice.

If you'd like to know more, or get involved, please contact the Office, Karen Wright, or Doreen O'Leary.

Adult Forum

After an exciting and educational program year, Adult Forum will take time off in the Summer to begin planning for the fall. Our first Adult Forum of next season will take place following worship service on Sunday, September 21st!

Women's Fellowship



Our first women's fellowship group was a wonderful blessing, and we would love to see more women join us in the fall (and you don't need to come to every gathering – you can pick and choose, depending on what you are interested in).

Some of the year's highlights were:

- “Show and Tell” – 4 of our women shared crafts with us – 3 knitting and 1 barn quilt painting on wood
- Christmas games and sharing of Christmas cookies
- Writing birthday cards to church members
- Valentine cookie decoration and make your own heart-shaped brownie sundaes – and writing special notes with sweets for our staff
- Environmental theme – talk on toxic-free cleaning products and take-home non-toxic laundry detergents (with recipes to take with us)
- Invited guest: Meg from FoodShare spoke to us and shared ways for us to donate food and toiletries to local food pantries
- Self-care – we were shown ways to do chair yoga and hints on how to stay healthy

There are still so many more things for us to explore, so please come and join us in September, for coffee and dessert and a time to re-connect, and hopefully welcome new women to our monthly gatherings!

Men's Ministry

The men's ministry meets for breakfast and devotionals on the third Saturday of the month September through June. This year's readings are from Awakened: A 52-Week Progressive Christian Devotional. Each month we also collect a free-will offering to be put towards helping one of our younger members attend the ELCA National Youth Gathering coming up in 2027. All men are welcome!

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer group continues to meet **on Zoom on Thursdays at 2:00 p.m.** even throughout the summer. This meeting includes 20 minutes time of silent contemplative prayer, followed by the practice of lectio divina with either a passage from scripture or spiritual devotional text. All are welcome to join at any time. Simply click the link in our weekly email blast to join!

Bible Study

St. Matthew's Bible Study group will begin again at 10am on Thursday, September 18th and continue meeting every 1st and 3rd Thursday of the month. Thank you for joining us during 2024-25, and if you'd like to take part in next year's study drop in on any meeting you are free! All are welcome.

Healing Prayer

On the first Sunday of each month, healing prayer ministers will welcome anyone to request prayer during worship. During the distribution of Holy Communion, healing prayer ministers will be present at the back of the sanctuary to pray for you. We invite you approach one of them, share your prayer request, and join together in prayer.

St. Matthew Choir



After Sunday, June 15, the choir will begin its summer break. Many thanks to all who have been a part of our choral program this year, and we hope to see you back at the end of the summer!

LOOKING AHEAD

Previewing the next few months at SMLC

Music at Greenwood: Save the Date

Saturday, July 19 @ 4:00 pm

This summer, we are switching gears a little: St. Matthew is presenting a coffeehouse-style Musical Talent Exhibition to collect donations for the Canton Food Bank! This fun event will feature performances by members and friends of St. Matthew, Grace Lutheran, and Trinity Episcopal. Snacks and beverages will be provided.

If you have a musical talent you would like to share, please contact Sarah Schiener-Redenz at music@stmatthewavon.org by Tuesday, July 1st. Performance slots are 2-10 minutes in duration, and an upright piano will be available.

Whether you want to perform or simply have a good time, we hope to see you there!

Coffee Hour | Summer Changes

Beginning Sunday, June 22, we will be hosting a "modified" coffee hour after worship each Sunday. That means, we will serve beverages only (coffee, tea, lemonade) to give our volunteers a break.

Online Directory | Help Wanted!

Are You a Shutterbug? The Evangelism Committee is planning on producing an online member picture directory. We're looking for a couple of volunteers to take pictures over the summer for it. It's a great way to participate with a minimal time investment!

Please contact Rick Hanson at rhanson7720@gmail.com for details.