

JANUARY 2026

The magazine of St. Paul Lutheran Church

journey



Curiosity to action



ON THE COVER:
Don Sierk, part of the
Tapestry Farms packing crew

journey

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MISSION

St. Paul Lutheran Church is a faith community, shaped around five core values: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith formation, courageous service, extravagant generosity.

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January 6 is a particularly important day in the life of the global church. It marks the Epiphany of our Lord, the Manifestation of Christ to the world. The most common element of Epiphany is the arrival of the wise men, or magi, to visit the Christ child.

I've always found the characters of the three kings to be a bit intriguing. Scripture doesn't really talk much about them, if we're honest. We know they come from a distant land, guided by a star, to visit Jesus and family (Matthew 2:1-2). They were commanded by Herod to visit and give three specific gifts to the baby (2:7-11). However, they returned home by a different route, avoiding Herod because they had a bad feeling about him (2:12).

And that's all we're told. Later tradition gave them names: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, and they were depicted from three different lands of various ages (probably to embody humanity). In an eastern tradition, they are given the names Larvandad, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas. Again, none of those are scriptural, they simply appeared in tradition as the story got handed down.

In the church today, we aren't necessarily sure what to do with these three roaming royals. We don't usually celebrate Epiphany at all, unless January 6 falls on a Sunday. We may sing some version of *We Three Kings* around that date just to make sure we check that box. We aren't generally sure what to do with them. And maybe that's ok. Maybe we don't need to do anything with them.

These three did do one thing that we need to notice though. They heard a rumor that the savior was born, so they went looking. They took some action, they intentionally hit the road to find this baby and honor him.

Herod's scribes had all the knowledge of what was going on, but it didn't spur them into any action. What a loss for them! They knew that the world was about to change, but it didn't motivate them to do anything about it. So, these three kings did both. Motivated by curiosity and informed with what they needed, they pressed on to find that love had come to earth. We may not know much

about these three, but we can certainly follow their lead of moving from curiosity to knowledge to action.

The new year always brings new opportunities and new challenges. That's probably why some of you are beginning an annual self-improvement plan called a resolution. What I pray you find this year is that you don't need a self-improvement plan to better yourselves, you just need a little bit of curiosity about what God is up to in this world; the Word of God through worship, prayer, bread, and wine to guide you; and then move to action. Taking all of that divine goodness with you, go work for justice and peace in this community, discovering more of that God-breathed grace in the world around you.



Mark Niethammer

MARK NIETHAMMER
senior pastor

WINTER Learning opportunities

In January, there are multiple ways to explore scripture and connect with community throughout the week. Whether you're drawn to contemplative prayer, parable study, or faith and film discussions, there's a gathering that fits your schedule and spiritual journey.

BEYOND SCRIPTURE

Conversations of faith and culture

FIRST THURSDAYS, 6 P.M.

On the first Thursday of each month (beginning Feb. 5), come together with Pastor Mark to discuss select articles from the Christian Century magazine and similar publications and blogs. Articles will be available in the library two weeks prior to each gathering. Contact Mark Niethammer, mark@stpaulqc.org.

Cinema and Spirituality

THIRD TUESDAYS, 6:30 P.M.

Returning for 2026! Let's go to the movies and explore the rhythms of the church year through the lens of film. This year, we're taking a journey together through the stories we watch on screen.

Starting in February 2026 on the third Tuesday of each month (6:30 p.m.), screen films and discuss how they illuminate the seasons of our faith at The Last Picture House in Davenport (325 E. 2nd St.). Spend a year exploring themes of waiting, celebration, revelation, sacrifice, resurrection, and growth through cinematic storytelling.

Family Dinner and Parenting Conversations

SECOND TUESDAYS, 5 P.M. FAMILY DINNER

Gather with other families for food, play, and conversation. After sharing a simple meal together, parents will discuss a recent podcast episode, a chapter of a book, or another parenting topic while the kids are in the capable hands of our childcare and children's ministry leaders. What could be better than connecting with parents for mutual support and understanding while the children play?!

A free will donation received to help cover the cost of food. Sign up at stpaulqc.org/signups. Contact: Sara Olson-Smith, sara@stpaulqc.org.

Sunday-morning learning

Curious about what's coming next at St. Paul? Scan the QR code to discover our exciting lineup of learning opportunities exploring topics that matter to your daily life. (See the back cover for learning in January)



BIBLE STUDIES

Fed on Scripture-Lunchtime Series

MONDAYS, 12 NOON, LIBRARY COMMONS

Spend your lunchtime in conversation about Jesus and his teachings. Using a contemplative practice of Bible study called *Lectio Divina*, we read, share and pray through Jesus' words from the Gospel of John.

No experience necessary, just an open heart and your own lunch if you want it. Each week covers a new passage, so come when you can! Contact: Sara Olson-Smith, sara@stpaulqc.org.

Heart | Soul | Mind Bible Study

THURSDAYS, 9:30 A.M., FELLOWSHIP HALL

Senior Pastor Mark Niethammer takes over leadership of the popular Heart|Soul|Mind Bible study. Please note an important schedule change: Heart|Soul|Mind returns to meeting on Thursdays at 9:30 a.m. only. The topic for the winter 2026 study is Kingdom, Grace, and Judgement: The Parables of Jesus. Questions? Contact Mark Niethammer at mark@stpaulqc.org.



january

HAPPENINGS



Faith milestones planned for January and February

Faith milestones are special markers, grounded in the Bible and nurturing faith in everyday life. We discover God's presence in seemingly ordinary happenings.

► **Sixth Grade | Digital Identity:** On Sunday, Jan. 18, 10:15-11 a.m. in Fellowship Hall, gather to talk about creating and maintaining an identity that reflects God in our daily and digital lives. Explore the responsibilities carried with each interaction and share practical tips for navigating decisions that accompany digital independence.

► **One-year-olds | Faith forming beginnings:** Connect and share in the joy and exhaustion of life with a newborn. Learn what it means to form a child's faith. A gathering for parents of children born in 2025 will be Sunday, Jan. 25, 10:15-11 a.m. in Fellowship Hall. Each child receives a colorful Bible. Sara Olson-Smith leads a discussion.

► **First Grade | The Lord's Prayer:** On Sunday, Feb. 1, 10:15-11 a.m. in Fellowship Hall, children and parents learn together about the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

To sign up for milestones, visit stpaulqc.org/signups.

Young adults escape room adventure

Ready to put your puzzle-solving skills to the test? On Monday, Jan. 20, 6:30 p.m., St. Paul young adults gather at the TBK Bank Entertainment Center in Bettendorf for some escape room fun! Whether you're channeling your inner detective or just looking for a fun excuse to hang out with other young adults, this is your chance to connect, laugh, and maybe even surprise yourself with how well you work under pressure. The St. Paul young adult ministry is for those in their 20s/30s looking to connect and build relationships at church. Sign up at stpaulqc.org/signups. Contact: **Maddy Tyler, maddytyle@stpaulqc.org**.

Sing in the choir!

At St. Paul, voices soar gracefully in praise. All have a place in one of St. Paul's five choirs from four-year-olds to adults.

Rehearsals for all ages resume in the new year on Wednesday, Jan. 7, 6 p.m. There's a place for you! Questions? Contact Chris Nelson, chris@stpaulqc.org.

Youth choir alumni ring in the New Year

Celebrate the new year at St. Paul with a beloved annual event. All former Youth Choir singers are invited to sing alongside the current Youth Choir for worship on Sunday, Jan. 4. Gather to rehearse a favorite anthem, "Who Is the Lamb?," at 8:30 a.m. in the Chapel. The choir sings during the 9 a.m. service. Questions? Contact Dan Pepper, pepper@stpaulqc.org.





Mission partnership: Meeting growing needs

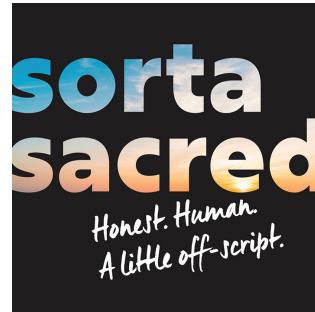
Since launching this summer, the partnership between St. Paul and Tapestry Farms has flourished beyond expectations. What began as monthly deliveries of culturally appropriate food and hygiene items to refugee families has grown into something deeper—a web of connection, nourishment, and human dignity. Volunteers have packed and delivered care packages to more than two dozen families from Syria, Afghanistan, Haiti, and Nicaragua, many with six to ten family members navigating unfamiliar systems and language barriers.

In November and December, responding to the increasingly urgent need in the community, St. Paul and Tapestry Farms expanded the partnership from one Tuesday delivery per month to two. The timing couldn't be more critical. By doubling the frequency of deliveries, St. Paul volunteers helped to fill a widening gap—providing not just essential food and supplies, but also the human connection that combats the isolation so many families experience during their difficult transitions. The expanded partnership at the end of 2025 is a testament to both the growing needs in the community last year and St. Paul's commitment to walking alongside our neighbors when they need us most.

Have you listened to the Sorta Sacred podcast?

Sorta Sacred explores faith, spirituality, and the sacred moments we encounter in everyday life. This isn't your typical religious show—we dive into the messy, beautiful, and sometimes unconventional ways the divine shows up in our world.

Hosted by senior pastor Mark Niethammer and communications director Jessica Taylor, episodes are released biweekly and feature St. Paul staff and leaders from around the community. Join us as we discover that the sacred isn't always found where we expect it—and that's exactly what makes the journey so meaningful. Find episodes wherever you listen to podcasts, on the St. Paul website, or at youtube.com/@StPaulQuadCities.



ongoing opportunities

St. Paul has a variety of ways to connect with others this winter season.

Faith, Health, & Wellness Coffee Chats

| First and third Tuesdays, 10:30 a.m., Luther Loft

Bring a beverage of your choice and settle into a conversation on faith, health, and wholeness. No need to sign up, just come! Each month features a different subject. Contact: Dave and Dortha DeWit, dorthamdw@aol.com.

Guys Coffee Group

| Second and fourth Mondays, 10 a.m.

Grab a cup of coffee and settle in to connect with fellow St. Paul men. Contact: Dave McPherson, davemcph@msn.com.

Moms' Morning

| Second and fourth Thursdays, 9-10:30 a.m.

Moms' Morning celebrates parenthood with laughter, prayer, and mutual support. Study the Bible, explore parenting topics, and sometimes just hang out and drink coffee. Childcare is provided. Contact: Sara Olson-Smith, sara@stpaulqc.org.

Caregivers Group

| Second and fourth Tuesdays, 1-2 p.m.

All who walk this journey are welcome to share ideas, gather resources, support one another, and learn how to nurture one's own needs while supporting a loved one. Steve Kalber and Kathy Becker facilitate. Contact: Steve Kalber, steve@stpaulqc.org.

Racial Awareness Team

Fourth Tuesdays, 7 p.m.

Expand awareness of our world, deepen empathy, advocate for change, celebrate justice, delight in diversity, and partner with neighbors in our city. Anyone is welcome. Contact: Sara Olson-Smith, sara@stpaulqc.org.

Finding the puzzle piece

As St. Paul continues its search for a new associate pastor, the seven-member call committee has been working steadfastly behind the scenes—not just to fill a position, but to discern a sacred calling.

Joel Moore serves as the chair of the call committee. He is an ordained deacon who has been part of the St. Paul community for more than 20 years.

"This is not a job someone applies for," Joel said. "This is a vocational calling into ministry as an associate pastor. It's sacred work."

Joel brings a unique perspective to the role, balancing his work as Chief Nursing Officer at MercyOne Genesis with his calling to serve the church. Just as he cultivates future leaders in healthcare, he now helps shepherd a committee diverse in thought, experience, and connection to St. Paul.

Woven together

The call committee itself reflects the congregation's rich diversity. Among its members are Jason Mahn, a professor at Augustana College; Anne Budde, a career educator; Peggy Wrzesinski, a volunteer passionate about service; Amy Paustian, a farmer who once called into a committee meeting from her tractor; Ron Mullen, church council president; and Madison Castleberry, an occupational therapist and avid knitter.

"They are so diverse, but we are woven together and make this beautiful representation of this congregation," Joel said. "I continue to be surprised by how much depth, passion, servitude, and connection these new friends bring. I really didn't know any of them before we started this work together."

Since assembling this past fall, the committee has prioritized getting to know one another—building trust and understanding each member's strengths and perspectives.



Meet (left to right): Ann Budde, Ron Mullen, Peggy Wrzesinski, Joel Moore, Amy Paustian, Jason Mahn, and Madison Castleberry (not pictured).

"We are such a diverse congregation—I'm confident that someone will be drawn to the richness of who we are."

— JOEL MOORE, *call committee chair*



New places

Working closely with senior pastor Mark Niethammer, the synod office, and pastoral staff, the committee has a clear view of who they're seeking: someone passionate about people who will connect with this congregation while stretching into new outreach.

"We're looking for someone who will push us, continue to cultivate relationships—people to people, people to organizations within the community. Connectedness is part of our genetic make-up at St. Paul," Joel said. "The ideal candidate will inspire the congregation to walk more closely with God, administering not just to the neighborhood but to the world beyond."

Joel envisions the St. Paul staff as one big puzzle, with the new associate pastor being "the perfect fit—the last piece of the puzzle."

Sacred timing

The search process for a pastor isn't a typical hiring process.

"We have to remain faithful and let the Spirit do the Spirit's work," Joel said. "We have to listen, and be faithful to the process."

Working in partnership with Pastor Dan Kuckuck, their synod liaison, they're discovering together what it means to be part of a vocational call rather than simply hiring an applicant for a job.

Joel's confidence in finding the right person stems from trust—in the process, in the Spirit's work, and in St. Paul's identity as a beacon in the community.

"We are such a diverse congregation—I'm confident that someone will be drawn to the richness of who we are."

As the call committee continues its work, they carry not just their own discernment but the prayers and hopes of this congregation. And when that final puzzle piece falls into place, it will be because the right person was drawn at the right time—just as many of us are drawn to St. Paul, finding our place in a church that shows up for each other in the brokenness and beauty of life.



St. Paul expands teaching mission

For nearly 20 years, St. Paul has served as a crucible for pastoral formation, welcoming ordained pastors fresh from seminary into a two-year residency program. Now, responding to shifting realities in the church and an opportunity to shape pastoral leadership even earlier, St. Paul is expanding its teaching mission to include one-year internships for seminary students.

The evolution reflects St. Paul's continuing commitment to pastoral education.

"The residency program St. Paul has created translates to interns in very wonderful ways," said senior pastor Mark Niethammer. "We get to plug them into every aspect of ministry. All the different facets of being a pastor, all of the intentional continuing education things we do. This transition fits the overall goals of the program and our identity of being a teaching church."

Core seminars

Central to both the internship and residency experience are core seminars—two half-day educational sessions each month devoted to intentional learning on topics that matter in real ministry. Recent sessions have covered managing anxiety and pastoral self-care, building maintenance, communication strategies, and sermon writing, among many others.

Not just St. Paul's residents and, now, interns, benefit from these educational sessions. First-time pastors in solo roles from churches throughout the Southeastern Iowa Synod join the sessions too.

"These first time pastors don't really have anyone to go to for any of these topics. Having these young pastors learn together,

it makes for a better setting for current residents like Maddy Tyler, and it helps these new pastors, too," Pastoral residency coordinator Pam Garrett said. "We have these young pastors who want to do their best job. I walk out of these sessions with hope because they all really want to be the best person they can be."

Making an impact

While St. Paul gains fresh perspectives and energy from new staff, Mark sees the broader impact most clearly.

"The benefit to the larger church is apparent. We're going to continue to raise up really good pastors who know how to love their people. That's something St. Paul does well," Mark said. "If we can do that with interns at an earlier stage in their development, the better chances they'll have of really good ministry throughout their careers."

The addition of internships doesn't replace the search for residents.

"We're continuing to recruit resident pastors," Pam emphasized. "Interns are not a substitute for that recruitment process. This gives us new opportunities. It's not a completely new vision for the program."

Residents vs. Interns

What's the key difference?

Residents are ordained pastors in a two-year call. Interns are seminary students in a one-year program (not a call) and are not ordained pastors.

Do we address them as "pastor"?

Interns are called by their first name.

How similar are the responsibilities?

Virtually the same, except interns have one year less experience and require more intentional onboarding.

A new space

The program is moving into newly renovated space on the third floor of the church house, bringing it physically into the heart of St. Paul's main building.

"Those conversations you miss when not physically near people make it harder to foster good relationships," Pam said. "This move will be great for staff relationships."

The St. Paul residency/internship program continues to change and expand in exciting ways, shaping pastoral leaders who will serve the church for decades to come.



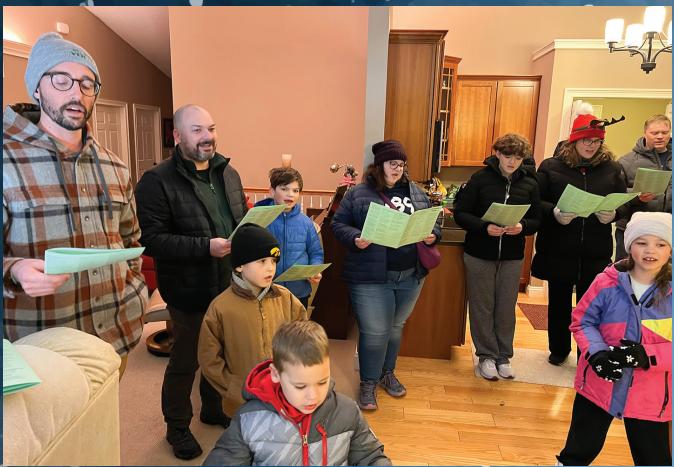
Welcome to Sarah Yotter, St. Paul intern

Sarah Yotter joins St. Paul in early February as the congregation's pastoral intern. A graduate of Wartburg College, student at Luther Seminary, and former band teacher, Sarah brings fresh gifts and perspective to St. Paul. Learn more about Sarah in the February edition of *Journey* magazine.

Christmas Joy at St. Paul

St. Paul celebrated the season of Advent and the birth of Christ with candlelight services, a children's pageant, and joyful worship. These moments capture the light, love, and fellowship that filled the building this holy season.





Finding joy in the next phase

St. Paul members Lisa and Jason Holdorf explore life as empty nesters.

When Lisa Holdorf dropped her daughter Ellie off at Iowa State University (ISU) this past fall for her freshman year of college, she braced herself for the wave of emotion everyone warned her about.

"My friends thought I was going to be a basketcase," Lisa said. "Ellie's our life. She was a three-sport athlete. Our days were filled with sports tournaments practices. But, dropping Ellie off at college, we were just so excited and proud of her."

Lisa did her homework. She found *The Midlife Momma* podcast, a faith-based series exploring everything from empty nesters to holiday changes and beyond.

For Lisa and her husband Jason, the fall football season provided a bridge into this new chapter. The family had season tickets to ISU games, bringing them to Ames on gamedays.

"It was great to see Ellie and her friends," Jason said. "It was a comfortable transition into this next phase of life."

With Ellie gone, Jason and Lisa have reimagined their own routines. They're taking exercise classes together at the YMCA. Jason started making sourdough bread. Jason's work has expanded to include more travel, and Lisa's part-time remote job allows for her to join him, offering the couple newfound flexibility.

"As empty nesters, it's been important for us to create those activities that you can expand on and fill those time gaps as a couple," Jason said.

Faith has anchored them through the shift. They've attended church with Ellie at ISU, watching her explore her own spiritual path.

"Ellie has not been afraid to change and mature spiritu-

Empty Nester Milestone

Tuesday, Jan. 27, 6:30-8 p.m.

If your child has left for college or post-secondary life within the past 3 years, join other parents for conversation, connection and faith-based reflection. Snacks provided. Contact Katy Warren at katy@stpaulqc.org.

Save the Date: Recent Retirees milestone,

Tuesday, April 14, 10 a.m.

ally. It's been cool to walk with her on that path," said Jason.

For Lisa, knowing other families facing the same transition has been essential. Several of their friends have children who started college this year.

"When you have that community of friends going through the same thing, that makes it a lot easier," Jason said.

Lisa's advice to those approaching this milestone?

"There's no wrong way to do an empty nest," she said. "Instead of comparing—these people are doing this and these are doing this—we all do it differently. We can celebrate these transitions together."

Adult milestone ministry

Recognizing that faith continues to evolve after youth group ends, St. Paul is launching an adult milestone ministry.

"We have this robust children's milestone ministry, but faith doesn't stop growing or changing when you graduate high school," said Katy Warren.

The church will host two milestone events in early 2026, beginning with empty nesters and expanding to recent retirees.

"These are milestones we've had more conversations about recently," Katy said. "They are both life-altering and significant in different ways."

The empty nester gathering creates space for parents to connect, share stories, and reflect on how this transition shapes their faith.

"What I hear over and over is, 'Does everyone else feel like this? Am I crazy for feeling this way?'" Katy said. "These milestones are a way to walk through these life changes together."

The hope is to expand the ministry to other adult transitions in the future—graduating from college, starting a first job, and becoming a parent are just a few.



Council Notes

The Congregational Council met on a windy December evening to look back at the wonderful things going on in November as well as what we have accomplished over the past year.

As part of normal business, the council noted the amazing work our St. Paul preschool does and the love and care they give to those young learners. Many thanks to Karen Strusz and her amazing team for their wonderful ministry.

We continue to welcome new people into the St. Paul community. The sense of community and radical hospitality that we live are appreciated by those looking for a church home.

In February, we will welcome a Seminary Intern to the team. This intern will be involved in all aspects of pastoral ministry, it is a role very similar to our Pastoral Residents.

Staff and leaders are anxiously awaiting Christmas Eve, a source of particular joy for many.



The St. Paul annual meeting will be held Sunday, Feb. 8, at 10:10 a.m. in the Sanctuary. This meeting includes items of important business such as approving the 2026 budget and review of 2025 financials. Pastor Mark Niethammer will also present a report and candidates for church leadership positions will be voted on.

Christmas blooms beyond the sanctuary

After the candlelight service on Christmas Eve, the 120 poinsettias that adorned the Sanctuary begin their journey to bring continued joy throughout the community.

Many of these vibrant red plants were purchased in loving memory of family and friends. Following the service, families who sponsored memorial poinsettias are invited to take their plants home, carrying with them both the festive blooms and the warm memories they represent.

The remaining poinsettias are delivered to St. Paul's homebound members the day after Christmas. A dedicated group of volunteers ensures that those unable to attend services in person still receive a tangible reminder of the congregation's love and the season's joy. This annual tradition transforms the poinsettias from simple Sanctuary decorations into meaningful gifts that continue spreading Christmas cheer. Thank you to all who contribute so these vibrant flowers can beautify the Sanctuary and bring joy to those at home.



WORSHIP at St. Paul

► January 3 & 4 *Second Sunday after Christmas*

Preaching:
All services: Katy Warren
Liturgical tradition:
5pm/8 & 9am
Contemporary Open Spirit:
11:15am

► January 10 & 11 *Baptism of our Lord*

Preaching:
All services:
Mark Niethammer
Liturgical tradition:
5pm/8 & 9am
Contemporary Open Spirit:
11:15am

► January 17 & 18 *Second Sunday after Epiphany*

Preaching:
5pm, 9am: Maddy Tyler
8/11:15 am:
Mark Niethammer
Liturgical tradition:
5pm/8 & 9am
Contemporary Open Spirit:
11:15am

► January 24 & 25 *Third Sunday after Epiphany*

Preaching:
All services: Sara Olson-Smith
Liturgical tradition:
5pm/8 & 9am
Contemporary Open Spirit:
11:15am

► Jan. 31 & Feb. 1 *Third Sunday after Epiphany*

Preaching:
5pm/8am: Maddy Tyler
9 & 11:15am: Katy Warren
Liturgical tradition:
5pm/8 & 9am
Contemporary Open Spirit:
11:15am



ST. PAUL
LUTHERAN CHURCH

2136 Brady Street
Davenport, IA 52803



coming up in adult learning

Sunday mornings, 10:15-11 a.m.

- ▶ **Jan. 11: The Witness of Lutherans in Tanzania**

Pastor Sara Olson-Smith

- ▶ **Jan. 18: Dialoguing Across Differences**

Dr. Gauri Pitale, Augustana College

- ▶ **Jan. 25: Christianity and Climate**

Everett Hamner, Western Illinois University

- ▶ **Feb. 1: Film and Faith**

Francis Agnoli, film and television scholar

- ▶ **Feb. 8: Annual Meeting**

No regular adult learning

