



illumination

Fall – Winter 2023

Live Thankful

By the Reverend Matthew Schramm,
Senior Pastor and Head of Staff

I got to thinking the other day about the little yellow bracelets that were so popular a few years ago encouraging folks to “Livestrong.” They were part of the Lance Armstrong Foundation’s bid to raise awareness about cancer and raise funds for research. The bands also aimed to encourage people to live life to the fullest.

I was wondering what might be a good slogan for Christians – to remind US to live life to the fullest – to live the abundant life God intends for all God’s children. Maybe instead of *Livestrong*, we should try *Live Thankful!* To the English teachers reading this (like my mother), I do realize that this slogan is grammatically incorrect. If I recall, *live* as a verb is properly modified by an adverb, like *thankfully*, rather than an adjective like *thankful*. But adverbs aren’t as catchy – *Live Thankful* it is!

What would it mean to Live Thankful? While declaring Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln said, “The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of almighty God.”

To Live Thankful means that we pay attention to the gifts and graces around us, and we do not take them for granted. It is recognizing when we have it pretty good, and blessings are given to us to share. Thus we become stewards, the hands and feet of Christ in the world. I am reminded of this nearly every week because I have a very good seat on Sunday morning. Whether I’m with the Praise Band playing a song or surrounded by the voices of the choir as they lift praise and thanks to God, I get to look out from the pulpit and see you!

And I give thanks to God for you! For all of you! In seeing the body of Christ gathered for worship, I see faces that remind me to give thanks for the energy and enthusiasm of our children’s ministry, for the skills and gifts put to use in caring for our building and facility, for the boldness of new ideas and your skills to see them to fruition, for people who care deeply about the worship of God, for members willing to talk to their friends and family about Jesus Christ. And I thank God simply that there are people who decide to get up and out of bed on a Sunday morning to be together for worship (or join in online from wherever they may be). I am thankful for being entrusted with a small part of your stories and for walking beside you in your journey of faith. What a blessing it is to serve as your pastors and for us to have so many opportunities to see “behind the scenes” and the million little things that people do to live out their faith in Christ. In the midst of a busy world, little acts of compassion, generosity, and service are so often unnoticed. But it is these moments that make the building blocks of a life of gratitude.

To be able to catch a glimpse of God through the body of Christ “Living Thankful”, I can’t help but “Live Thankful” myself! Wishing you the best of God’s blessings this Thanksgiving, Christmas, and always.

Thankful for beloved Christmas Eve traditions: Deacons’ Flower Ministry and Poinsettia Tree, Christmas Joy Offering, Chrismon Tree, Christmas Cookie Ministry, Children’s Christmas Eve Pageant, and Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

ILLUMINATION

Thank you for picking up *Illumination*, a publication of Memorial Presbyterian Church in Midland, Michigan.

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MPC is a Christ-centered community of believers that is part of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. We are a welcoming community of faith for all people: sharing, growing in, and living the Good News of Jesus Christ! And we live it out through worship, study, fellowship, and service. In everything, we want to point to Christ.

There's a place for you at MPC! We are in the heart of Midland, Michigan, connecting people with their faith and one another. You'll find that we want all people to feel welcome to find a place where they can grow in faith and where their gifts can be used in meaningful ways that impact this world. We invite you to join us as we share, grow in, and live the Good News!

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Cover photograph by Jennifer Mayer

MPC Chancel Choir Touring Great Britain, June 2023

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CHANCEL CHOIR TOUR OF GREAT BRITAIN

By Martin Severance

Chancel Choir director Megan Farison has long dreamed of taking the choir on an extended tour. The last big choir trip together was in the 1990's under former director Bob Sabourin. Megan wanted both newer and long-term choir members to enjoy the unique experience of traveling together, performing in historically significant venues, learning more about our Presbyterian roots, and growing closer. The choir would share their faith through music, broaden their understanding of the world and of their Presbyterian heritage, and develop fellowships with each other and those they would meet along the way. The dream became real in June 2023 when the Chancel Choir toured Great Britain.

Megan worked with Music Celebrations International to develop an eleven-day tour through Scotland, Wales, and England that would feature choir performances and visits to significant sites of historical and cultural interest. By early 2023, twenty-three singers signed on for the tour, ranging in age from teenager to mid-70s. Megan developed a diverse program of musical selections for the choir to perform, ultimately choosing eleven pieces that would comprise both British and American traditions and influences. Rehearsals took place throughout the spring, with some of the music proving to be quite challenging. In worship at MPC on June 11, the tour choir performed three of their pieces for the congregation, and Pastor Matt Schramm offered a blessing to the choir for a safe and successful journey.



Dr. Adrienne Wiley at St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden, London, England

On June 13, we arrived in Edinburgh, Scotland and were greeted by our tour guide, Patrizia. We also met our first motor coach driver, a Scotsman, aptly named Scott. Patrizia provided information about the various sites we passed as we drove through town on the way to the retired Royal Yacht Britannia. On June 14, we toured Edinburgh Castle followed by free time to explore the historic buildings, shops, and restaurants along High Street, Edinburgh's famous "Royal Mile".

That evening it was finally time to do what we came to do – offer our praise to God with music. The first performance venue of St. Giles' Cathedral would be a fitting location. The roots of the Presbyterian denomination in America originate from the Church of Scotland, and St. Giles' is one of its most important

church buildings. Protestant reformer John Knox was once its minister and is buried nearby. The magnificent acoustics were immediately apparent during our warm-up, and the choir felt very privileged at the opportunity to sing within that space.

The concert was a success! All of the hard work to rehearse the music paid off, and it was thrilling to add our voices to the centuries of worshipers and musicians that had come before us. We wondered how well the performance would be attended, and who would show up for a choir concert on a June evening in the middle of the week. Surprisingly, quite a few people would! While mingling with audience members after the concert, we learned of several who were visiting the city and made a point to attend when they saw we were on the program. People came from Edinburgh, Colorado, and even Brazil to hear our choir!

The next day we left Scotland and headed south to England in the capable hands of our new coach driver, Armando. Our first waypoint was the city of Durham, where we toured the majestic Durham Cathedral in the morning. The cathedral is one of the most significant structures within the Church of England, and keen-eyed choir members recognized it as one of the filming locations for the Harry Potter movies. After lunch in the Prior's Hall at the cathedral, we continued southward to the city of York.

After a restful night in the hotel, we journeyed out as a group for a guided walking tour of historic York, an important center for England dating back to Roman times. The highlight for many was the visit to York Minster, an Anglican cathedral which is the largest of its kind in the United Kingdom. If we thought the Durham Cathedral was impressive, the York Minster was even more so. Stunning detail and amazing acoustics were present in every corner of this ancient building. Several members paid the £6 fee to take the Tower Challenge and climb 275 steps to the top of the building, mostly through a very narrow spiral staircase.



St. Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, Scotland

Later that day, Armando broke the news that the bus needed a mechanic. On that gorgeous summer day, we were unfazed as we stretched out in the shade of the grassy area nearby. People played cards, took a nap, or just went for a walk. After about two hours we heard the reassuring squeal of the engine belts, and we were back in business. After this no-stress delay (except maybe for Armando and Patrizia), we were on our way to Stratford.

Stratford-upon-Avon is the birthplace of William Shakespeare. The next morning we took a guided tour of the house where he was born and lived as a child. We were then free to walk about the historic area of town, enjoying the summer day filled with street performers and shops. That afternoon we boarded the bus again to take us to our next performance in Wales.

Penmaen Chapel is located in the village of Oakdale in Wales, about 15 miles north of the city of Cardiff. It was originally built for use as a Congregational chapel but is no longer used for worship. Today it is the home of the Mynyddislwyn (“mun-ith-is-loo-in”) Male Choir, who were our hosts for the evening. We sang in a joint concert on Father’s Day for about 60 attendees. To say the concert was thrilling is an understatement, and it was the highlight of the tour for many in the choir. The two choirs combined to sit on a set of risers, with each group trading off performing several songs at a time. The energy and passion of the Mynyddislwyn singers was a joy to hear, and the highly animated conducting by their director, Pauline, made for a spellbinding sight.

The best part came at the very end of the Chancel Choir portion. Our final song was the American classic “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”. Up-tempo and energetic, it was a great way to close the concert. Following the applause, Pauline rose to thank Megan and the choir for a great evening and shared that she enjoyed our last number very much and asked us to repeat it. Megan agreed with one condition: the men’s choir AND the audience had to stand up and sing with us. Deal! The joint rendition was glorious, and it defined our mission for this tour – together in fellowship we offered our praise to God through music. In that moment, we were all part of ONE choir. The men’s choir then presented us with a glass memento to commemorate our visit and treated us to a massive buffet dinner. When it was time to leave, they gathered together to “sing us away” as we boarded the bus. It was truly an unforgettable evening.

The next day, after a morning stopover to tour Stonehenge, we headed east to the final destination of the tour – London! Everyone was very excited to experience this historic city. We checked into our hotel and then split off for some free time, either relaxing, taking in some quick sightseeing, or getting dinner at local restaurants. It was important to get some rest, for our final performance of the tour would come the following day.

Our last concert was held on June 20 at St. Paul’s Church, a Church of England parish church located in Covent Garden in central London. We arrived after a driving tour, in which Armando

skillfully navigated the bus through the very congested streets as Patrizia described the significant sites we passed by. The atmosphere was quite unique at this location; Covent Garden is a popular shopping and dining destination, and the streets were abuzz with crowds of people taking in the shops and street performers. The doors of the church were open for anyone to come in at any time to check out what was going on. Much like in Edinburgh, there were people who came to hear us after seeing the program announcement, but also several came in as we were singing, listened to our music for a time, and then departed. Regardless, we pressed on with our musical praise of God in that historic setting. All the hard work by the choir and the wonderful leadership by Megan culminated in this performance, and it put an exclamation point on a successful tour.

Our time in Great Britain was nearing its end, but we had one full day to be tourists! We attended the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, along with scores of other tourists from every country, all enjoying a sunny June day in England. Choir members then fanned out across the city in small groups. Westminster Abbey, British Museum, Tower of London, and River Thames boat tour were just some of the various activities that were enjoyed. Others also took in musical productions at the West End. The full day was capped off with a farewell dinner at a restaurant in Leicester Square.

All that remained now was to get back home. On June 22, we said goodbye to Armando and Patrizia, singing them a verse from “The Road Home” before departing the bus at Heathrow Airport. Our direct flight back to Detroit was uneventful, and cheers broke out as our charter bus pulled into the parking lot at MPC to reunite with loved ones. We had done it! The MPC Chancel Choir had taken on Great Britain. In doing so, we forged the bond of fellowship we needed to carry out the call to use our talents to praise God in a different corner of His world. And all of it was enabled by Megan Farison’s outstanding leadership.

It was a truly glorious experience, and you can be sure the entire choir has the same question, “Hey Megan, when can we do this again?!”



relaxing in York during bus maintenance

HERBERT VISITS BETHLEHEM

By Tommy, Herbert (the Talking Presbyterian Church Mouse), and Mike Hoy (Herbert's story editor)

Herbert was wandering around the Bethlehem village display in the transept area of the sanctuary. He felt a sense of wonder all around him and was excited about the coming advent season. Herbert stopped at the 'front gate' of the village where the innkeeper, Thaddeus, was standing. He said to him, "I noticed many villagers were looking up in expectation as if something was about to happen."

"Something wonderful has happened!" Thaddeus exclaimed. He pointed to an unusual star that was brighter than any other in the sky. He said, "That new star shines right over the stable behind my inn where a special baby was born and he was named Jesus!"

"I will go to see this new baby for myself!" Herbert said. He looked up to follow the guiding star which will lead him to find Jesus. Herbert then hears a noise and looks over to see a young boy running with a drum. Herbert calls out to him and asks, "Where are you rushing to?"

The boy calls back, "I am going to the stable behind the inn to play my drum as a gift for the baby born there."

"I am going there too. My name is Herbert. What is your name?"

"I am called Jareth," he said as they continued on their way to the stable together.

When they reached the stable and saw Jesus in the manger, they both stood in awe and then Jareth began to play his drum. Herbert slowly and quietly moved away and found himself near a

pond. There he saw another young boy fishing. The boy shouted with glee when he caught a fish.

"Hello," called out Herbert. "That is a great fish you caught. What do you plan on doing with it?"

"Thank you. It is a gift for the new baby and his mom and dad. Have you seen Jesus yet, the one who was born in the stable?"

"Yes, I just came from there. That is a wonderful gift for them. My name is Herbert. What is your name?"

"It is Jada and I come from a long line of fishermen," he said proudly.

Herbert said goodbye to Jada as he headed back to the stable.

Herbert plans on hanging around the village through Christmas, and he invites everyone to visit the Bethlehem nativity and village display. Can you find where Herbert is hiding and spot his new friends mentioned in the story? Can you find another baby? Can you find the littlest angel? How many different animals do you see? How many sheep, camels, ducks? What else do you see in the village?



KID'S CORNER

Countdown to Christmas: In December, read part of the nativity story every day to Christmas Eve. It's a "Biblical mash-up" based on the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Reprinted from Jennifer Needham www.thepartyteacher.com

<p>1</p> <p>In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.</p>	<p>2</p> <p>And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth...</p>	<p>3</p> <p>...to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary his betrothed, who was with child.</p>	<p>13</p> <p>When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another: "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened."</p>	<p>14</p> <p>And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.</p>	<p>15</p> <p>And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child.</p>
<p>4</p> <p>And while they were there the time came for her to be delivered.</p>	<p>5</p> <p>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.</p>	<p>6</p> <p>And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.</p>	<p>16</p> <p>And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.</p>	<p>17</p> <p>But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.</p>	<p>18</p> <p>And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.</p>
<p>7</p> <p>And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.</p>	<p>8</p> <p>And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people."</p>	<p>9</p> <p>"For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."</p>	<p>19</p> <p>When Herod the king heard about the birth of Jesus, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.</p>	<p>20</p> <p>Then Herod assembled the wise men secretly and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying "Go and search diligently for the child."</p>	<p>21</p> <p>When they had heard the king they went their way, and in the star which they had seen in the East went before them till it came to rest over the place where the child was.</p>
<p>10</p> <p>And this will be a sign for you, you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."</p>	<p>11</p> <p>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,</p>	<p>12</p> <p>"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"</p>	<p>22</p> <p>When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and worshiped him.</p>	<p>23</p> <p>Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.</p>	<p>24</p> <p>And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.</p>

AN ILLUMINATING TRADITION

Words and Photographs by Elinor Hnizda

Montreat Youth Conference takes place in Montreat, North Carolina, as a week-long summer gathering for high school students to connect with youth from other churches across the United States and to discover more about their relationship with God. Students enjoy activities such as attending worship services (pictured right, middle), meeting new people, exploring the small town of Montreat, playing hands-on games, and doing recreational adventures like hiking and rock-hopping. This year's theme was "In Joy," a play on the word *enjoy*.

Attending the conference was a great opportunity to learn more about my own faith and to meet people from other churches and states. Small groups of one leader and about ten students, all from different churches so they do not know each other before meeting, are assigned so they can get together to talk and share their thoughts. Then a few small groups meld into connecting groups for games and activities.

Montreat's candlelight ceremony is a special tradition to close out the week and to send off students from Montreat (pictured right, top and bottom). The candlelight ceremony has significance for me as a graduated high school senior. During those tranquil moments, I felt appreciated and loved by God and my peers. Following the worship service on the final evening of the conference, all participants gathered around Lake Susan holding candles. One by one, each candle was lit as the flames made their way around the lake, encircling it in illumination.

The liturgist then recognized the groups of people that helped make Montreat possible by instructing each to blow out their candles. The first round was the Montreat staff, then the small group leaders and helpers, followed by church leaders and youth directors. Last is the students, ascending from incoming ninth-graders to graduated twelfth-graders. Slowly, the candle lights dwindled to a just handful of dazzling specks that represented the high school graduates.

My fellow MPC youth group members gathered around me and the other graduates, Elleana Bucknell, Lydia Schramm, and Abby Wilson, and placed their hands on our shoulders. I closed my eyes and just listened as the liturgist said a special prayer for us: "As you go from this place, remember that you bring God joy simply by being you. Remember that God made you in God's image, unique and wonderful. Remember that God has equipped you with all that you need to make a difference in your family, your church, among your friends, and in the world. Wherever you go, may you serve God with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Whatever adventures and challenges lie ahead, may you feel God's presence, listen to God's call, and follow God's light each and every day."

This ceremony was one of my most memorable moments from my last year at Montreat. This special send-off made the whole week feel gratifying, and I knew that my time there was worthwhile. At that moment, I knew for certain that God would continue to guide me during the big change in my life of going off to college just months later.



FAMILY TIES & LABOR MIGRATION II

By Sheryl Billmeier Hnizda, Communications Director

In February, I embarked on a two-week labor migration travel study in the Philippines and Hong Kong. In the Summer 2023 edition of *Illumination*, I shared about my week in the Philippines. Since Hong Kong is a two-hour airplane ride from Manila and has a prosperous economy, many Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) migrate there for jobs. The farm fields and gritty city life in the Philippines greatly contrasts with the affluent citizens and architectural abundance of Hong Kong. For my second week, I stayed at the CityView Hotel, renowned for its achievements in eco-conscious accommodations and management under YMCA.

On Sunday morning, I worshiped and took communion with the congregation of United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP)-Hong Kong, mainly comprised of OFW hired as domestic servants. Pastor Joram serves as their pastor and was part of our travel study team. My soul was stirred by their collective vision of not counting *how many* people they helped bring to Christ, but rather their concern with *how* they have helped others, offered care to others, and showed compassion to others.

UCCP-Hong Kong uses space provided by Kowloon Union Church, an independent church whose motto is “Where All Are One”. Pastors Phyllis Wong and Maggie Mathieson proudly shared their ministry’s heritage of being welcoming to all and reacting to those in need. Their People’s Prayer from Mark 11:17 is the same as the one etched on the front of MPC, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.”

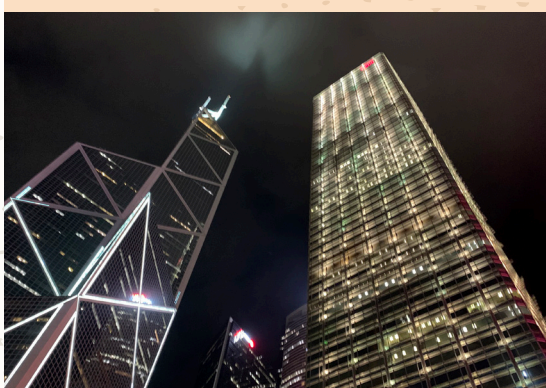
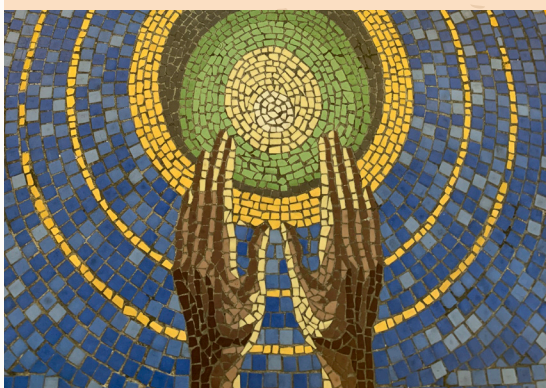
Sunday is the migrant workers’ only day off, and many choose to spend the morning at church for Sunday School and worship, followed by free time congregating in the plaza on Hong Kong Island. Many OFW do not have their own bedrooms at their employers’ homes, and they may have to share space using an extra room. In extreme cases, some have been documented as sleeping on the family’s living room couch, sleeping on the floor of the children’s room, or laying on a mat in the washroom.

After arriving in the plaza, I saw a sea of pop-up tents and clusters of ladies. They tend to congregate by provinces, finding comfort in being with others who understand them best. Some are playing music, others are resting, with most just talking, laughing, and relaxing. Pastor Cathy, John, and I had a pre-arranged meeting with the Abra Tingguian Ilocano Society. They strive to advance the rights and welfare of OFW in Hong Kong. As leader, Ba Neng Mendez has her employer’s full support in being an activist.

Sandwiched between a concrete wall and a glass elevator belonging to the opulent shopping mall nearby, the ladies were seated on flattened cardboard. Ba Neng kindly said, “Welcome to our home.” I was about to take a step forward when she gently held me back, and reiterated, “This is our home.” Aha! I took off my shoes and placed them on the concrete next to the cardboard, then stepped inside. By current law, face masks were mandatory, but even with cover, I could see smiling eyes welcoming us.

Ba Neng has family members back home who ask for money, thinking that she has it easy. In reality, life in Hong Kong is expensive, plus OFW are not recognized as citizens and therefore receive no governmental aid. Her response to family is, “For every dollar you want to spend, that is one hour we are away from each other.” She would rather be home in the Philippines, united with her family, but cannot combat the poverty there.

During a break in our talk, the ladies shared dishes of delicious Filipino food, fruity desserts, and carafes of hot coffee. I was honored to be included in this communal time together. They impressed me immensely with their determination to make the greatest



good come from a tense situation. Later we participated in the One Billion Rising dance. Then we enjoyed a Filipino cultural festival with authentic dishes, music, and dancing. I thoroughly enjoyed the food and fellowship, just like we have at MPC.

A Little Background on One Billion Rising

“One Billion Rising is the biggest mass action to end violence against women in human history. Launched on Valentine’s Day 2012, the campaign began as a call to action based on the staggering statistic that one in three women on the planet will be beaten or raped during her lifetime. With the world population at seven billion, this adds up to more than ONE BILLION WOMEN AND GIRLS. We rise to show we are determined to create a new kind of consciousness – one where violence will be resisted until it is unthinkable.” Learn more at www.onebillionrising.org.

Our travel team practiced a special, global dance for OBR in Hong Kong to take place on February 12 but it was postponed due to a local marathon. That didn’t stop us from doing an informal version together in the plaza! OBR in Hong Kong was later celebrated on March 5.



Filmmaker Francis Catedral created an insightful documentary called *Migrant Women Rise* in 2022. In it, two OFW in Hong Kong are “red-tagged” as they advocate for human rights and oppose repressive Philippine government policies. The United Nations states that red-tagging has “posed a serious threat to civil society and freedom of expression.” One of the women featured in the documentary is Dolores Balladares, chairperson of United Filipinos in Hong Kong, established in 1985 as an alliance group that advocates for OFW. I was thrilled to find myself sitting next to her at one of our group outings, chatting all the way as we rode the Peak Tram to the tallest point in Hong Kong.

Pastor Joram’s wife Edwina Antonio is Executive Director of Bethune House, an emergency shelter for migrant women who are in crisis and seeking justice. A worker may run into problems with an employer not honoring a written contract. They have two weeks to find a new employer or leave. It’s expensive to leave, and if their employment agency fees were not paid up, they may have debt. If legal issues arise, help groups exist for that too, and they have a place to stay while things are sorted out. The system is usually in favor of the Hong Kong citizen over an OFW, so these advocates are very important.

We met with the Hong Kong Christian Council, and they are extremely organized in their efforts to care for migrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers from many countries. Aaron Ceradoy and Rey Asis serve with Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants. Father Dwight dela Torre gave us a tour of St. John’s Cathedral, built in 1849. Their outreach program is called Mission for Migrant Workers, with Deaconess Joy Prim (a US missionary worker serving in Hong Kong) providing us with vital information as well. She also works with the Hong Kong Campaign for Human Rights and Peace in the Philippines.

One afternoon, as the ladies at UCCP-Hong Kong prepared lunch of adobo, rice, and coffee, with fresh tangerines, some quietly shared their personal situations. One woman who thought she would be cleaning the home of an elderly man instead found herself serving as his nurse and tending to his children’s households too. The employer isn’t likely to admit fault; she seeks a new position or must go home. Another woman earned a college degree in computer programming, only to find no jobs in the Philippines. Likewise for another woman with a degree in botany. She felt overseas domestic work was her only option. Her last statement still haunts me, “Is this all I am good for, to clean someone else’s house, in a foreign land, away from my family, year after year?”

When people ask how they can help, I say pray, strive to educate yourself on world events, and advocate for others. Remember that labor migration is about real people who have dignity, non-freedom of movement, injustice, and separated families. Please support the missions and ministries of the agencies listed here and of people like Pastor Cathy.



FEBRUARY 2023 TRAVEL STUDY SEMINAR TEAM

Co-Leader, The Rev. Cathy Chang
Presbyterian World Mission

Co-Leader, The Rev. Carl Horton
Presbyterian Peacemaking Program

Christi Boyd
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Pastor Roceni Bakian
UCCP

The Rev. Joram Calimutan
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Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants in HK

Sheryl Hnizda
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from Malaysia

The Rev. Helivao Poget
from Madagascar

Doug Tilton
Mission Co-Worker based in South Africa

John Wallace
Presbyterian and Activist from California



FOSTERING CARE

By Sheryl Billmeier Hnizda

The Pentecost Offering is one of four special annual collections through PCUSA. It is used to encourage, develop, and support the Church's young people. Of the total that we collect, 60 percent is sent on to the Presbyterian Mission Agency to help at-risk children, and 40 percent is to be managed by us for use in our community. For the 2023 offering, we collected nearly \$1000.

Under a one-year term, Olivia Mayer has been serving as our youth deacon since February. While attending Board of Deacons meetings, she learned about the Pentecost Offering and its purpose of helping young people. As a junior at Dow High School, her Student Leadership class was actively tying blankets and raising over \$1000 to donate to the Midland County Foster Closet (MCFC). She proposed that our Pentecost Offering collection be donated to the MCFC as well, and the board agreed. Olivia happily presented MCFC co-presidents Julie Stanley and Pam Durfee with a check for nearly \$400.

MCFC is a non-profit agency comprised of all volunteers who collect and distribute items that a foster child and foster family may need. Often, foster children are placed with nothing but the clothes they are wearing. MCFC alleviates the physical needs of the children so foster families can focus on their emotional needs.

The closet is actually a shop located in the Midland Mall, allowing them visibility and awareness in the community. After a foster family makes an appointment, they visit the store and choose anything they need.

Gently used clothing is arranged by size, gender, and season. MCFC offers everything from size newborn to adult, accommodating any child or young adult they encounter. New clothing is stored offsite, and selected items are brought to this first meeting. They recently received a large donation of new socks from a family celebrating their former foster child's "gotcha" day when he was adopted. New shoes and boots are housed in a side room. Since they are located in a mall, they find it easy to slip down to Target if they need to supplement anything that is missing, like undergarments or another size of shoes. All of the items are placed in a suitcase or travel bag, something the child takes with them if they leave their foster family.



Julie Stanley, Olivia Mayer, Pam Durfee

Besides donations of new and used clothing, MCFC also receives other creative items. Handmade quilts and tied fleece blankets, like the ones Olivia made with her school group, are available to each child. Lavender Life Company of Caledonia, Michigan, wants to make sure that each child leaves with a soothing lavender-stuffed plush bunny. Education is important to the founder of MCFC, so a cabinet is always heavily stocked with books. Another group made up "nighttime bags" that include a flashlight and other comfort items, just in case the child is having first-night jitters in their new home. When a man who was formerly a foster child passed away, he asked for toys to be donated to the foster system instead of flowers. They received over 200 toys thanks to his thoughtfulness. Other donations

include diapers, wipes, and toiletries. The children may outgrow clothing, but blankets, books, and toys are things that can move with them.



This is not a "one and done" system; families are encouraged to return seasonally. From swimsuits to snowsuits, and as the children outgrow their clothing, families visit again. For any other necessary items, the volunteers make purchases with donated funding. That's

why our Pentecost Offering is important to the foster closet, as it helps supplement any needs that arise. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the Pentecost Offering.

Visit www.MidlandCountyFosterCloset.com to learn more or to find out how you can donate items.



Welcome, New Members

MEET THE WISNIEWSKI FAMILY

Mitch and Jill met in college and moved to Midland after finishing graduate school in 2008. Mitch works as a product director at The Dow Chemical Company. Jill worked as a physical therapist until 2020 when she became a stay-at-home parent with their children Olivia (9) and Claire (4). The Wisniewskis started attending MPC in 2022. Mitch enjoys running, Jill enjoys tennis, and Olivia and Claire enjoy music and swimming.



BUILDING A TRADITION OF SERVICE

By Ethan Dastick

My volunteering journey began with the 2020 flood in Midland County. My family's house was one of those damaged, and we would need assistance to rebuild. Two groups of volunteers, one from MPC and one comprised of local public school teachers, arrived to help us gut our entire basement. This was the first time I saw the amazing impact that disaster volunteers have.



After we had stabilized our situation at home, I contemplated my efforts and realized I could continue helping others who were still in need of assistance. I joined Sanford Disaster Relief and worked on a house near Sanford Lake, one of those hit hardest by the flood. One other volunteer from our church and I spent the afternoon re-siding one wall of the house. It was hot and laborious work, but afterward I felt like I had actually made a difference. I didn't know it at the time, but that would be the catalyst that pushed me to begin volunteering my time frequently to help others in need.

In the summer of 2021, I joined the volunteer efforts of Midland County Habitat for Humanity's "Rock the Block" Neighborhood Revitalization Project. After learning about the opportunity through MPC's Helping Hearts & Hands ministry, I took it upon myself to go and help. I was very apprehensive about that first day. While I had my previous experience, I was worried I didn't have any skills that would be useful and I was worried that I wouldn't know anyone there. Ultimately, what I feared most was the fear that my work would not make a difference or that the work I did would be viewed as inadequate. I mustered all of my courage and drove to the location to join in the efforts.

Completing the first day was the hardest of any of the days I've spent volunteering, not because of the work, but because I felt alone. I began helping where I could, listening to the leaders and making use of my physical strength. By lunch time, I had helped assemble scaffolding around the house so the roof work could begin safely and laid out tarps to catch falling materials. I felt decent about the work I was doing. I was making visible progress, but I still didn't really know anyone, nor did I feel comfortable. I

was the youngest person volunteering (and not by a small margin) and I still felt like my skills were far below the others. At lunch, I sat by myself, unsure of where I belonged. Before long, the other volunteers sat around me and we began talking. They made me feel comfortable working with them and this assured me I was where I was meant to be, despite the gaps in age and skill.

For the rest of the day and all the days after, I tried new tasks and was taught new skills by the other volunteers. I ripped off the roof, put a new one on, helped fix a rotting fence, painted the entire outside of the house, and much more. By the end of the two weeks, I had gained an incredible amount of knowledge, and I made many new friends, both at MPC and with our partner Trinity Lutheran Church.

Coming back the following year to Habitat's Rock the Block project, I was excited to see everyone again. It was easier to get into the swing of things with all of my knowledge from the previous year, and it felt fantastic to be reunited and work with everyone again. It was a great time to catch up and get to know the new volunteers all while doing good, important work in the community. I now look forward to future Helping Hearts & Hands projects so that I may make a difference in the community and feel good while doing it.

I feel that Helping Hearts & Hands is vital to the community but almost seems invisible. The first and most important impact is the one left on the community—or rather—the work and the care we leave behind.

Spreading the love and kindness of our church in the community can only be done by reaching out to those in need and giving what we can. The most satisfying part of the work we do is seeing the look in the home owner's eyes after we've completed the project. It brings us closer together with the community as a whole while also leaving it in better conditions than when we arrived.

Other impacts are only felt by those who partake in the projects. For example, I get a feeling of pride every time I see a house I have worked on, knowing



that I made a difference in that person's life. I've gained skills and knowledge that I wouldn't have otherwise, such as working with a variety of power tools or personal skills like adaptability. Most importantly, I gained self-confidence in myself and trust in my fellow volunteers. Ultimately, this ministry is important because we change the lives we touch and we are also changed in our own ways, all for the better.

This June, I had the opportunity to volunteer at One Week One Street in Saginaw. This was the tenth year of this project in which an entire street is uplifted by volunteers from neighboring churches and communities. I had the pleasure of working with a team from the First United Methodist Church of Midland on a house in need of a new paint job and (as we found out mid-way through the project) a shed clean-up.

Over the course of four days, I spent my time assisting with wall preparations, chipping off old paint, repairing worn-down floor boards on the porch, and cleaning out a very worn down shed. The shed had been neglected for some time; large sections of the roof had caved in and one of the walls had rotted completely away. My first task was to completely remove the rotted roof and destroyed items on the floor to make space. Nature had crept in certain spots, so my next task was to shovel and uncover a large section of the concrete foundation that had about an inch of dirt and vegetation growing on top of it. After about ten wheel barrow loads of rotten material and dirt, the shed was ready for a new roof. With the help of two carpenters, we reinforced the studs



of the rotted wall, created a framework for the roof, and finally installed the roof on top of it. As a team, we cleaned and repaired the shed, replaced an overhang over a doorway, repaired the porch and railing, and completely repainted the house. This was a difficult project to work on but the team I was a part of pulled through to uplift our neighbors in Saginaw.

What started out as helping my family recuperate from a flood three years ago has turned into a tradition of service to others. I look forward to a new season of service with these important neighborhood programs like Helping Hearts & Hands.

“The hardest part of any volunteer project is that first day. There has never been a project where I haven't initially doubted my skills and considered turning away. It isn't until I push myself to try new things and step outside of my comfort zone that I feel the joy of community and can spread God's love through my work, and it's this that makes it all worthwhile and is why I keep returning. It's easy to do nothing; it's hard to make a difference. Without the dedication and hard work of the volunteers, there would be no change. Therefore, I make it my mission to be the change I want to see in the world and I encourage others to join me in making a difference.” – Ethan Dastick



MISSION REFLECTIONS: CHRISTMAS IN NIGER AND DECOLONIZING GIFTS

By the Reverend Michael Ludwig, Associate Pastor

Gifts become front and center at Christmastime. We've all seen it happen (or made the mistake ourselves) that a person might give a gift that they thought was wonderful, but they didn't take into consideration enough how it would feel to the recipient or how practical it would be for them. I'm thinking of the vegetarian whose relative assumed they'd like a George Foreman grill because it was all the rage that year.

I've seen this all too often in Niger with Christmas shoebox programs that go to places where the kids don't need most of the contents. Or it's the well-to-do city families who end up with a bunch of trinkets that they can get at the corner store for half the cost. This type of giving doesn't just happen at Christmas, but it does happen too often in cross-cultural relationships.

Decolonizing has been on my mind for a while as it has become a bit of a buzzword. It's applied to more than just colonial governments handing over power when it focuses on the other things that we do unconsciously from positions of power. We can be more positive contributors to the world when we recognize the ways we may over-exert power, which take away agency and the freedom we desire for others. I'd like us to think about how focusing on the true meaning of giving gifts at Christmas is an effort in decolonizing. This would mean realizing things like how we are asking the receivers of Christmas shoeboxes to fit into our context of what is desirable at Christmas (e.g. heavy socks no matter if they have shoes) and satisfying for us (more spent on shipping and visual quantities than quality and local choice).

I have to admit I have a bit of a negative reaction to decolonizing statements. Asserting that something needs to be decolonized often comes off as ignoring what has been done in self-sacrificial and thoughtful ways. Despite that, I do believe the "decolonize" call has been important because our efforts to correct power



Children participate in impromptu Christmas Eve service in Niger

abuses in many areas (like mission) have been too slow and with too much baggage weighing them down.

A parallel for this came into high-definition for me when the military

coup in Niger toppled the democratically elected (and incumbent) government at the end of July. I was most surprised to understand from

this situation how deep the resentment still is among everyday Nigeriens toward the French former colonial overlords. Although the new military leaders seriously threaten their democratic rights, there is a swell of support around the country for them. That's because these leaders seem serious about becoming separate from French influence and all the burdens that they have acquired by going along with French interests for so long.

Some may look at France's standing behind Niger's currency as a huge benefit to Niger, protecting from devaluation and inflation. But many Nigeriens still feel swindled because the French national bank makes a percentage on all their bank transactions. So the larger the aid money coming into their country, the more money the French bank makes off of their poverty. That may not be the full story, but many other similar practices do call into question, "Who benefits most from the half-solutions that continue to be offered to African countries?"

In this type of gift-giving, we see the tendency to let the giver be at the center of the giving, rather than the recipient and intended user of the gift. If we look hard at ourselves and the way that we are most inclined to be involved in God's mission of love and care for the world, I think we can see the same tendencies. Important learning, intentionality, and reflecting go into giving a gift. Jesus is the supreme example of that in becoming fully human. But it's hard to do all those things in a cross-cultural relationship. The only help I know is when we are connected to mission co-workers who are connecting with siblings in another culture, really listening to them, and being directed by them. Then we have a better chance at being involved in much more meaningful gifts that are more recipient-focused.

One of my biggest lessons from connecting with Christians in Niger was that everyone has a gift they can give, no matter how small. One obvious example of this was the regular, but almost impromptu, Christmas Eve services we attended. They mostly consisted of youth and children going up front and doing different songs and dances they had coordinated the day before. It wasn't having the best choreography that was important, but knowing what was fitting for the situation. And that was whatever included and evoked great joy on that night of glad tidings.

Many more discussions about decolonizing our actions (for at least 30 more years) will inevitably occur, but in the meantime, we are still called to act in the most faithful ways we know how. We are called to learn, reflect, and intentionally seek connection with those that we hope to help and share with. That may lead to the sharing of many gifts, most likely of the small things in life. I hope this is the direction that we are moved as we think about the greatest gifts at Christmastime!



WARM HAT MINISTRY

Hat Collection Now – March

store-bought or handmade • collection box at reception desk
Memorial Presbyterian Church • 1310 Ashman Street, Midland, Michigan



Lux Women's Choir Concert

Sunday, December 10
4:00 p.m.

Grace A. Dow Library Auditorium



POINSETTIAS

Now – December 11

Honor your loved ones by sponsoring poinsettias that will be distributed to the Deacons' Congregational Care list of friends.

The suggested donation is \$25 each. Forms are located in the lobby and www.mempres.org/poinsettia, and payment can be included or made on Realm.



Christmas Eve Service COOKIE Donations



Drop-Off:
MPC Office
Now – December 21
M-F 9:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

On December 17, we celebrate the collection of the Christmas Joy Offering to provide assistance to current and retired church workers in their time of need.

Please give via Realm or pew envelopes.



CHRISTMAS JOY
SPECIAL OFFERINGS
LEADERSHIP, PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE
DECEMBER 3 – DECEMBER 24

GREENHOE LIBRARY • NOW – DECEMBER 2023

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JERRY MAXSON

CHRISTMAS & ADVENT BOOKS

QUILTS BY NANCY STANLEY

3 MAGI BY ANN WARD

NATIVITY DISPLAY



Christmas Alternative Gifts Fair

Sunday, December 3 • 9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

A.C.T. Uganda

Camp Fish Tales

Children's Grief Center

Church World Service

Emmaus House

For a Brighter Tomorrow

Habitat for Humanity

Heifer International

HELP Food Pantry

Home to Stay

Midland County Foster Closet

Midland's Open Door

Midtown Mission Garden

Presbyterian Coffee Project

Project Peanut Butter



Reaching Out for Justice and Peace Committee
thanks you for supporting your local and global neighbors!

Rejoice! The Savior is Born!

Sunday, December 3

9:00 & 10:45 a.m.

Worship Services & Sharing Tree Ingathering

9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Christmas "Alternative Gifts" Fair

Sunday, December 10

9:00 & 10:45 a.m.

Worship Services

4:00 p.m.

Lux Women's Choir Concert

Sunday, December 17

9:00 & 10:45 a.m.

Worship: Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols

Sunday, December 24

10:00 a.m. (*please note the time!*)

Single Worship Service: Behold the Lamb of God

5:00 p.m.

Children's Christmas Eve Pageant

9:00 p.m.

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

Merry Christmas! Monday, December 25

Sunday, December 31

9:00 & 10:45 a.m.

Worship Services





The Bertha E.R. Strosacker

Memorial Presbyterian Church

A House of Prayer for All People

1310 Ashman Street
Midland, Michigan 48640-5493



2023 Great Britain Chancel Choir Tour

Repertoire

With A Voice of Singing – Kenneth Jennings
E'en So, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come – Paul Manz
Zion's Walls – Aaron Copland
The Lord's Prayer – Malotte/arr. Deis
Ave Generosa – Ola Gjeilo
O Thou the Central Orb – Charles Wood
To the Lamb on the Throne – Dan Forrest
The Road Home – Stephen Paulus
Rockin' Jerusalem – arr. Damon Dandridge
It Is Well With My Soul – René Clausen
Will The Circle Be Unbroken? – arr. David Moore



Above: Penmaen Chapel,
Oakdale, Wales

Left: St. Giles' Cathedral,
Edinburgh, Scotland

Ensemble

Director: Megan Farison

Accompanist: Adrienne Wiley

Sopranos: Virginia Bales, Sharon Leenhouts, Helen Myers, Dana Schramm, Natalie Schramm, Jennifer Warren, Elizabeth Neithamer

Altos: Billie Bauer, Katie Bucknell, Betsy Evans, Olivia Mayer, Evie Schramm, Lydia Schramm, Amy Willing, Ellen Woodard

Tenors: Daniel Farison, Cody Ridder, Matt Schramm, Martin Severance

Basses: Danny Farison, Barry George, David King, Brian Kruse