

AUGUST 2026

SUNSET HILLS MESSENGER

UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Photograph by Ryan Gracey

A MESSAGE FROM PASTOR LAURA



*“The earth is what we
all have in common.”*
— Wendell Berry

Death hasn't always been a lucrative business. Before the cost of caskets could rival a kitchen remodel, vaults preserved our loved ones for decades, and make-up covered any sign of passing, death was part of the home. Individuals would die at home with loved ones surrounding them, and then they'd be laid out in their home the following two days for those who wished to pay their respects. After the viewing, the loved one would be wrapped in a shroud or placed in a pinewood box before being lowered into ground that had been dug by community members. In short, death was a part of life. Death was normal.

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SUNSET HILLS UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Office Hours:
Monday, Tuesday and Thursday
9 am - 2 pm

“ The Penn Forest Natural Burial Park is making death normal again at a fraction of the typical funeral costs. I had the opportunity to tour the Natural Burial Park in early May alongside interfaith leaders from Jewish, Ba’hai, and Buddhist communities. What I saw just about had me placing a deposit on my own final resting place!

The park begins with a gravel path. Cars aren’t permitted on the path. Instead, when an individual dies, their body is transported back into the cemetery via an 18th century funeral wagon. The employees may pull the wagon or the family of the deceased may choose to do so. The body is in a biodegradable container. Some individuals choose to be buried in a pinewood box, others have gone so far as to quilt their own 100% cotton shroud. The deceased is then placed in a grave located either in a meadow (which is mowed regularly) or a forest (which is not mowed). While the cemetery has their own means for digging the grave, they’ve had individuals in the past who chose to dig their loved one’s grave as part of the grieving process. The individual is buried in their shroud or biodegradable casket without a vault, being returned to the earth as the Scripture says, “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”



Following the burial, the journey of grief continues. The loved ones may put biodegradable items on the grave, such as twigs in the shape of a nest or a cross made of flowers. When the grave has settled, in roughly six months to a year, a locally-sourced stone is engraved with the deceased’s information and placed on the grave. For future visitations, loved ones of the deceased are provided with a flower garden on site to cut flowers to place upon the grave. There is a meditation hut and plenty of benches where loved ones can reflect when paying a visit.

As you can likely tell, I was enamored with this way of handling death. It wasn’t sterile, but rather natural. It acknowledged that we are all a part of nature from the time of our conception to our returning to the earth. The Natural Burial Park honors the reality of death, inviting the loved ones of the deceased to take their time in grieving and loving the one they’ve lost. It’s a beautiful honoring of life’s biological processes and the sacred nature of our connections.

If you’d like to learn more about the Penn Forest Natural Burial Park, go to pennforestcemetery.com or call 412-265-4606.

With Joy,
Pastor Laura



*"God has blessed my
labors...and I need
nothing which even a
king could supply."
-John Fawcett*

MUSIC NOTES

SHELBY GRACEY, MUSIC DIRECTOR

Throughout the summer, we express our thanks to the people who will give their time and talents each Sunday morning to offer special music. We truly appreciate you! If you were in worship on May 31 (or watching us online), you'll know that we celebrated Ray Bowman (Raybo) that morning. After 25 years of singing in the Chancel Choir, he made the difficult decision that he needed to 'retire' from the choir. While none of us was happy about his decision, we love Ray enough to accept that this decision was made in the best interest of his health and safety, mobility-wise. But we still hope to get Ray up front for the occasional singing opportunity with the men or the GPM group!

We thank you, Ray, for your long-time dedication to the choir over the years. We'll miss you, but we look forward to seeing your smiling face encouraging us from the pews each Sunday morning!





August 3 - 7, 2026

VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL

Every day from 9:00 - Noon we will step into Rainforest Falls (also known as Sunset Hills United Presbyterian Church), overflowing with wild waterfalls, towering trees, and colorful creatures. Children ages 3 - 9 will plunge into a lifelong adventure of discovering the nature of God.

Email Pastor Laura at revlaurastrauss@gmail.com to volunteer!

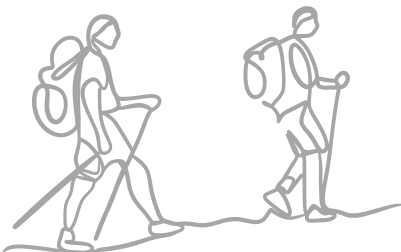
Reflections from the Migrant Trail



As a soon-to-be retired professor of U.S.-Latin American relations, immigration and its causes, is an undeniable central issue of the past forty years. I studied history in college as the civil wars in Central America and the Dirty Wars in South America were underway. Those wars, and the U.S. complicity in those wars framed my historical lens. Since 2023, I've worked with a local Presbyterian church in taking people to the Arizona/Mexico border through Frontera de Cristo, a Presbyterian-based ministry located in Douglas, AZ. This year, we didn't have a firm delegation committed, so I decided to do the Migrant Trail as a fundraiser to raise money and awareness for/ about Frontera, and a local, South Carolina nonprofit, the Carolina Immigrant Alliance, which helps immigrants with necessary documents and paperwork. (If you wish to make a donation to this fundraiser to support the two groups mentioned you can do so here: <https://onrealm.org/ProvidencePresb18431/give/migranttrailwalk>.)

I made the decision to do this trek in late March and had only scant awareness about what the whole journey would entail. I consider myself a feet-first type of person, though, and decided to jump in and then quickly learn about what I was doing.

I signed up for the 23rd annual Migrant Trail, from Sasabe to Tucson, Arizona, the week of May 25-31. I knew nobody, and although I read the participant packet (mostly), I didn't know exactly what to expect. The group of approximately 40 walkers convened at Shalom Mennonite Church in Tucson on Sunday, May 24, for a four-hour orientation/training session. During the training session, each of us committed to serving on a team, which had daily work assignments. I joined the Food Team, which set up and broke down each meal, daily snacks, and set up washing stations after lunch and dinner each day. We learned at our training that over 8,000 migrants had perished in the landscape where we would walk, and 109 had died since the previous May.



My biggest fear, before starting, was that I didn't have all the things I needed for the seven-day trek. That proved right, and partly because I misunderstood that we needed to pack EVERYTHING in one bag—we didn't—our gear, including tents, folding chairs, and sleeping bags could have been packed separately. For that reason, I ditched my sleeping bag because it took up 1/3 of my duffle bag. That was a mistake as the first two nights were very cold. Rolande, a colorful, dedicated Tucson activist, who accompanied the group with her own vehicle, lent me a blanket on day 3, which made subsequent nights better.

We began our journey with a ceremony and press conference at Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson. This was the most beautiful church I've ever seen outside historic cathedrals in Europe and Latin America. Pure, simplistic beauty. At this service, each of us took a cross with the name of someone who had died crossing the desert. My cross said "desconocido," (unknown male) 2006-2007, representing an unidentified male who had died during that year. Most of our crosses bore the same name because few bodies are ever clearly identified. We rode in cars from Tucson to Sasabe on Monday morning, which is approximately a 2.5-hour drive (I was captivated by the conversations in the vehicle because everyone was interesting and everyone had a story.) After a moving Native American prayer ceremony, we began our trek in Sasabe, along with people who were hiking with us for the first day only. By the end of the day, it became clearer who was in our group for the week.

I wanted to participate in this journey to deepen my commitment to working on immigration issues/policies in the United States, which most of us understand are deeply problematic. I wanted to learn more about the desert and the terrain that many undocumented are forced to negotiate, and I wanted to deal with some of my own grief that had compounded over several decades.

We walked between ten and sixteen miles every day except for the first day, which was barely over seven. We began most days by 6 a.m. but began walking one day at 3:30 a.m. to protect ourselves during the hottest part of the day. I'm very near-sighted and exactly "half blind," which adds an important dimension to waking up in the middle of the night and packing everything quickly. Our journey was mostly a solemn one, but not entirely. Every other "leg" of the trek we walked in silence. This silence grounded us and I grew to look forward to it. Every other stop we would iterate the "Presente" litany, calling out the names of the (dead) people on our crosses and all responding to each name, in unison, "Presente!" – meaning we/they are here with us. We walked single-file on paved roads and highways and two-by-two when off-road. I ended up walking near some of the same people. Ellen is a retired schoolteacher from Chicago, who now lives in Flagstaff, and was usually close by. She pointed out all the "foreign" plants along the way. I had never seen a mesquite plant before but learned to step carefully around them. The Saguaro cacti were majestic. We sometimes had to be reigned in for walking too fast. We were constantly reminded to drink water as it is easy to dehydrate in the desert.

I started out sleep-deprived and squarely rooted on Eastern Standard Time. I didn't sleep at all the first night, so went into day two exhausted. I eventually slept more and felt better as the week wore on. At all times we were accompanied by at least four vehicles carrying food, water, our gear, and port-potties, all the things that migrants themselves do not have access to. We were all aware of the fact that while others do this alone unaided, we had ample support.

Committed groups accompanied us on this journey—churches and various humanitarian organizations. Humane Borders of Tucson brought us a lot of water and sometimes allowed us to spray ourselves with hoses—something I greatly looked forward to. Frontera de Cristo, from Douglas/ Agua Prieta, came and brought us dinner on our first night. A couple of Tucson organizations brought us several meals. On Thursday night we had a real shower and flush toilets, as we stayed in a campground.

We were all appreciative of the luxury of a real shower. Buddhist monks from Tucson prepared us a delicious Thai meal on Friday, which we ate in a Baptist church that allowed us to stay inside the sanctuary for the night. Friday happened to be my 62nd birthday. This was the first birthday that I've ever spent with people that I didn't know, but I felt embraced and appreciated by a wonderful group of kindred souls—a diverse group of different people who all shared many of the same values about humanity. We were, in the words of Harvard philosopher and theologian, Josiah Royce, "A Beloved Community." That night, in the church we had a talent show. Several people sang, we all learned a line dance, and several recited words from sage poets and writers.

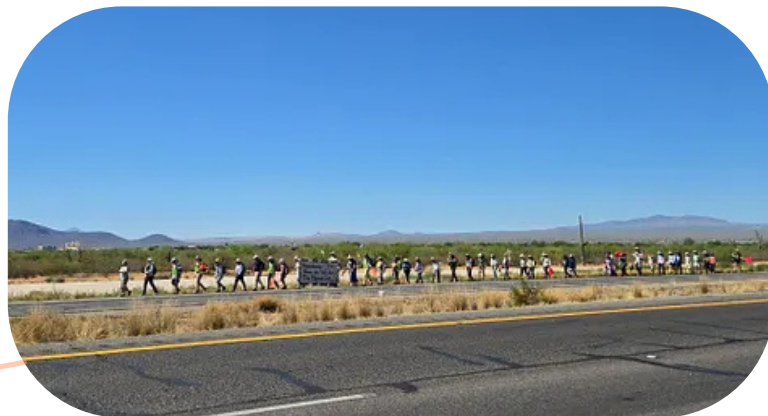


As we approached Tucson on our last day, many cars beeped at us as we walked along the highway. As far as I could tell, nobody heckled us or jeered us. Border Patrol cars passed by many times during the walk but left us alone. If the Border Patrol had given us a hard time, I was certain that Rolande would have “politely” scolded them and sent them on their way. We finished our walk at Kennedy Park in Tucson, where kindred organizations met us with food and a warm reception. An Episcopal priest washed the feet of twelve of our participants. He kissed the ground before each washing and then kissed the feet of each individual. It was moving-- I was tired; I cried tears of happiness, sadness, and relief.

While the Migrant Trail isn't for everyone, it is a moving experience for those of us concerned about our brothers and sisters who feel compelled to leave their homes because of violence, genocide, war, and climate change. It's a good way to deepen our commitment and understanding of how U.S. policies perpetuate the conditions that compel people to migrate. It's a great experience for those of us who often feel alone with our personal convictions about how to confront the hegemonic powers that wield injustice. It's something we can DO in solidarity with others.

Mohyeddin, a soon-to-be 79-year-old Palestinian and a mainstay on the Migrant Trail, kept us focused on the intersectional issues that compelled our walk. Each time we would recite the Presente litany, he professed loudly: “Desconocido! Desconocida! Desconocido/a! ... Victims of War, Genocide, and Violence Everywhere!” Another world is indeed possible. For more about the Migrant Trail go here: <https://azmigranttrail.com>.

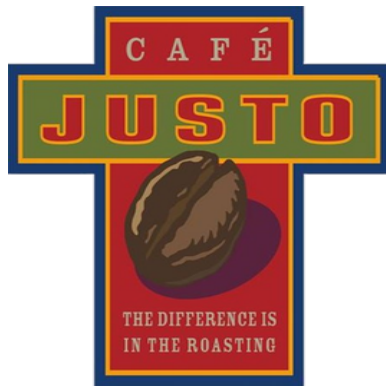
With gratitude,
Ginger Williams
williamsv@winthrop.edu



Want to read more?

Article link: <https://fronteradecristo.substack.com/p/reflections-from-the-migrant-trail>

2026 BORDER-TO-BORDER DELEGATION:



Coffee, Migration & Faith

Join with people on both sides of the border for a pilgrimage from the US/Mexico border to the Mexico/Guatemala border, exploring the connections between coffee, migration, and faith.



From Douglas, Arizona & Agua Prieta, Sonora to Salvador Urbina, Chiapas

Walk the migrant trails where coffee farmers walked
Visit the Café Justo roasting facility
Get an overview of the US border policy
Enjoy meals with families who have migrated from Chiapas to Agua Prieta
Spend time in biblical reflection and prayer
Enjoy a fiesta with members of the coffee cooperative
Participate in harvesting coffee
Enjoy fellowship and meals with the co-op families

Talk with parents whose children have migrated
Participate in a grower meeting
Visit members of the Café Justo Cooperative in El Aguila
Tour the Mexico/Guatemala Border
Visit the Scalabrini Migrant Center in Tapachula
Visit local markets and a butterfly sanctuary
See local waterfalls and other popular sites
Drink lots of great coffee!

Nov 6-14, 2026



Register Online

- Cost: \$1,800
- \$200 refundable reservation fee
- \$800 Payment 1 due September 1
- \$800 Payment 2 due October 1
- Limit 15 participants

For more information,
contact Mark at 520-364-9257 or
mark@fronteradecristo.org

All expenses included from Douglas, Arizona, except for two meals on travel days. Based on round trip air travel between Hermosillo and Tapachula. We may be able to arrange for a flight on November 14 back to the airport of your choice from Tapachula or Mexico City at no additional cost if we know by September 1. If the cost is more, you would be responsible for the difference.

THANK YOU

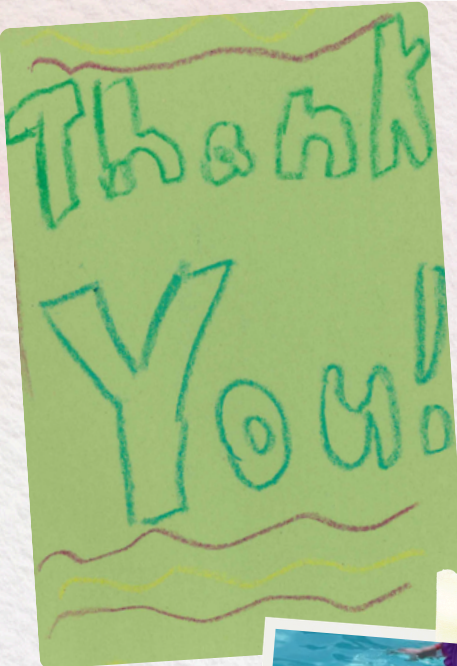
Dear SHUP Family,

Thank you for making my birthday such a wonderful time. The flowers, cake, singing and all the cards and messages. This family has always been kind, serving, caring, and welcoming to strangers. That's why it's Sunset Hills Church.

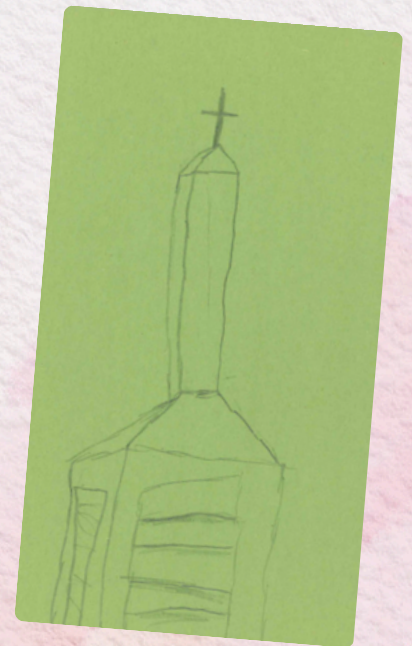
The years here have been many but I wouldn't change them for anything. Please know that you have served the Lord in many ways and I know you will continue in his work.

Thank you for all you do.

Blessings,
Harriet Rickard



Thank you for
sending me to Crestfield
It was really fun
learning and doing
activities with my
peers! I hope to go
next year!



Sincerely, Fritz

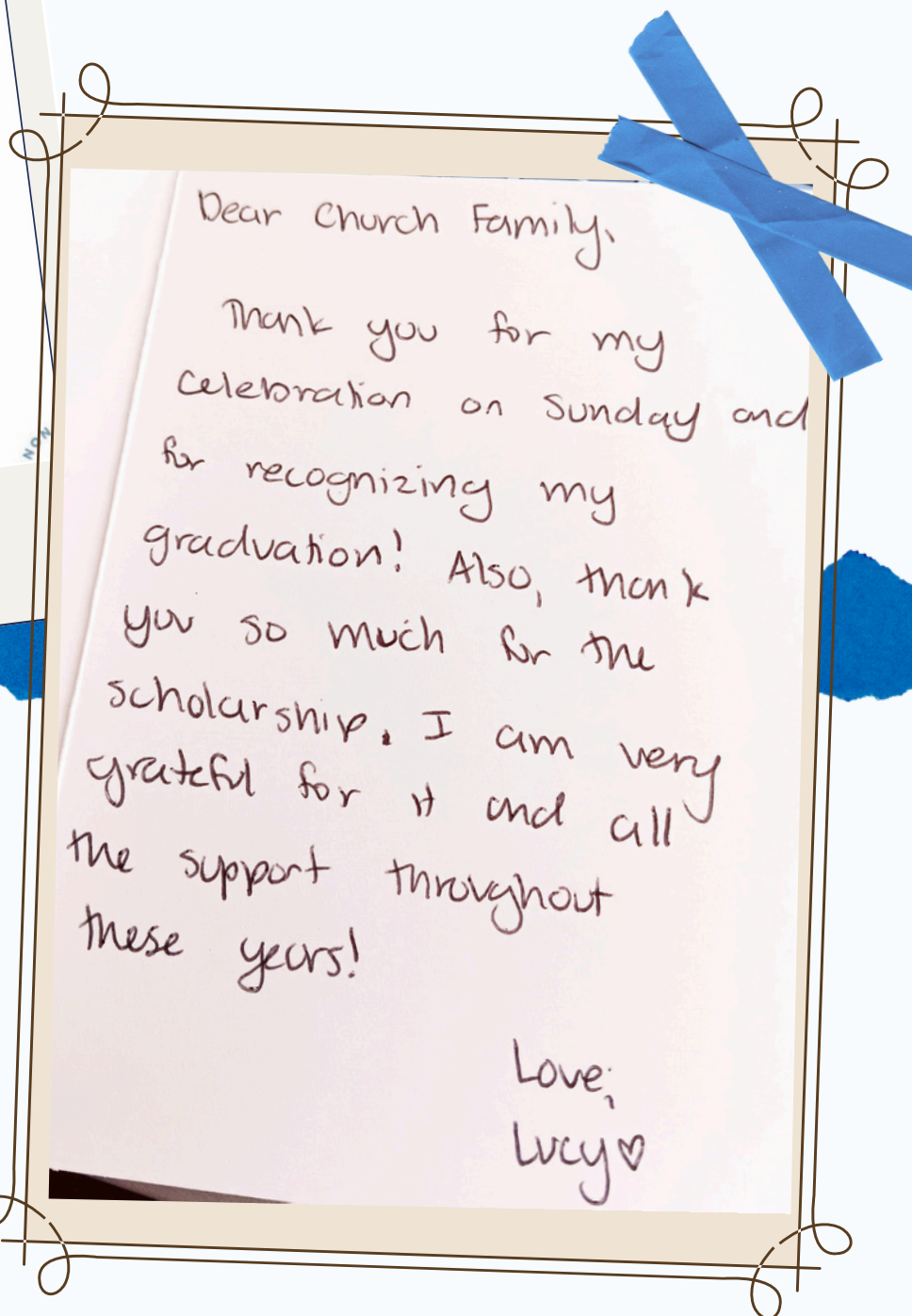




GRADUATION



We are incredibly proud of Lucy and all that she has accomplished. We are grateful for the opportunity to support her as she continues her journey, and we look forward to seeing all that God has in store for her.





Sunset Hill's 2025 Food Contribution: **282 lbs**



Most Needed Food Items

- Dried Beans
- Pasta
- Lentils
- Pasta Sauce Jars
- Cereal & Oatmeal
- Soup
- Condiments
- Spices
- Adult Diapers
- Infant Diapers (Size 4-6)
- Dog & Cat Food
- Personal Care Items



SHIM Clothing Closet

Accepting donations of in-season clothes, shoes, and linens. Please no large household items. Located at Church of the Nazarene, 5601 Library Road.

Drop-Off Hours:
Monday 10:00am - 1:00pm

If you are unable to deliver your donations, you can leave them in the closet outside of Findley Hall and a Mission Commission member will deliver them for you.





SUNSET HILLS UP CHURCH

Bring Your Backpack for:

BACKPACK BLESSING

SUNDAY, AUGUST 23

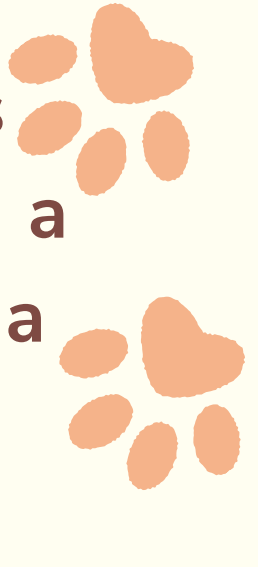
DURING THE 10:15 A.M.
WORSHIP SERVICE

Students, Teachers and School Workers
of ALL Ages and Stages Welcome!

Sunset Hills U.P. Church



All species
welcome on a
leash or in a
carrier



Pet Blessing

AUGUST 30

6 - 8 P M

Blessings, Food, Games
and Fun for the Whole
Family



Questions?
Call (412) 561-6261



HOLY CURIOSITY SERMON SERIES



The Bible is full of passages that make us laugh, scratch our heads, argue, wonder, and occasionally say, "Wait—that's in there?" This fall, Pastor Laura's turning to you. What Scripture have you never heard preached but wish you had? What story deserves another chance? What text has puzzled or inspired you?

Drop your suggestion in the basket in the narthex. Pastor Laura will use these suggestions for worship in September through November 2026. Together we'll explore some of the Bible's most surprising corners and discover what treasures await us there.



FAITH AND THE WORLD: COOKIE CHATS

SHUP

TALKS

13
SEPT

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence is changing the way we work, learn, and relate. What wisdom does the Christian faith offer in this new era?

7:00 - 8:30 PM, Church Library

Led by Pastor Laura

11
OCT

DEATH AND DYING

Most of us avoid talking about death—until we can't. Let's explore what the Christian faith has to say about mortality, grief, and hope. From funeral homes to resurrection hope: How does the Christian story help us face death?

7:00 - 8:30 PM, Church Library

Led by Pastor Laura

8
NOV

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Can love of country and loyalty to Christ ever come into tension? Let's explore the question together. What happens when religious identity and national identity become difficult to distinguish?

7:00 - 8:30 PM, Church Library

Led by Pastor Laura

10
JAN

LONELINESS AND BELONGING

We're living through what some researchers call an epidemic of loneliness. What is loneliness doing to us, and what does the church have that social media, streaming services, and busy schedules cannot provide?

7:00 - 8:30 PM, Church Library

Led by Pastor Laura

Join Us!

Cookies will be provided. Bring your own coffee/tea/cocoa.

Monthly Recipe

Easy Cinnamon Coffee Cake

Ingredients

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 egg
- 1 cup milk
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

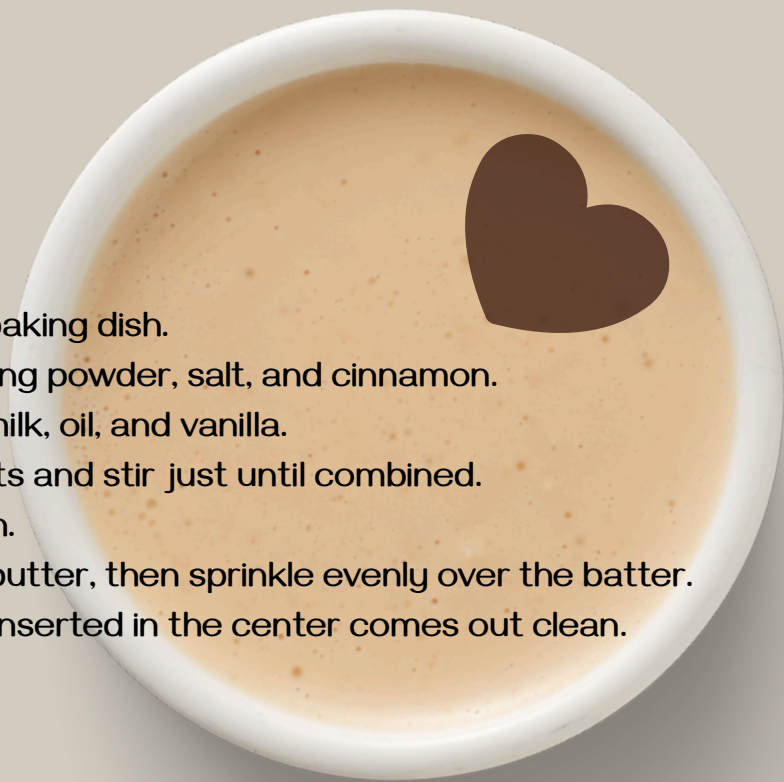
For the Topping

- ½ cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 2 tablespoons melted butter

Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease an 8x8-inch baking dish.
2. In a large bowl, combine the flour, sugar, baking powder, salt, and cinnamon.
3. In a separate bowl, whisk together the egg, milk, oil, and vanilla.
4. Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and stir just until combined.
5. Pour the batter into the prepared baking dish.
6. Mix the brown sugar, cinnamon, and melted butter, then sprinkle evenly over the batter.
7. Bake for 30–35 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.
8. Allow to cool slightly before serving.

Makes: 9–12 servings

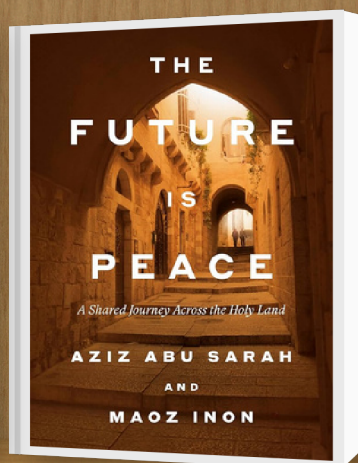


Book Club Picks

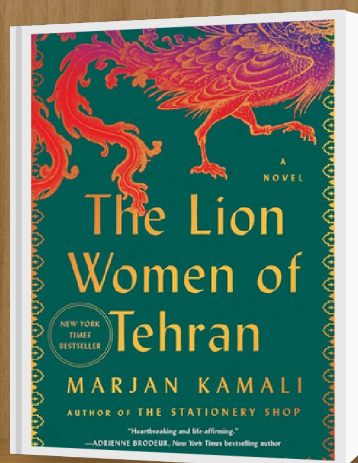
JOIN US FOR DISCUSSION WITH PASTOR LAURA ON THE LAST
WEDNESDAY OF EACH MONTH AT 7:30PM IN THE CHURCH
LIBRARY



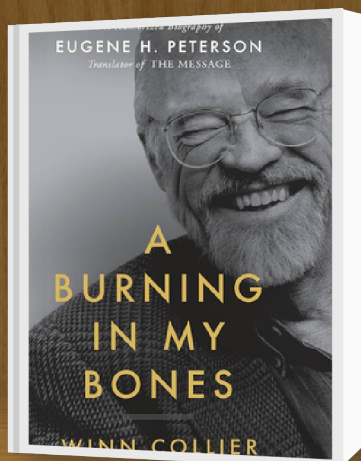
July 29



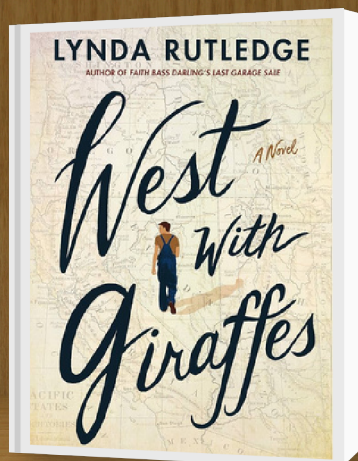
August 26



September 30



October 28



December 2



January 6

UPCOMING EVENTS

SUNDAYS

9:00 am Adult Sunday School – Findley Hall
9:00 am Children's Sunday School – Library
10:15 am Worship – Sanctuary
10:45 am Children's Church

TUESDAYS

7:00 pm Square Dance Class – Crystal Hall
7:00 pm Counseling Group – Rm. 6

WEDNESDAYS

10:00 am Days for Girls – Wilson Hall
2:00 pm Parkinson's Group – Findley Hall

THURSDAYS

10:00 am Quilters – Findley Hall

FRIDAYS

5:00 pm – AA

SPECIAL EVENTS

August 3 – 7 : VBS Week

August 23 : Backpack Blessing 10:15 am

August 30: Pet Blessing 6-8 pm

September 7: Labor Day – Office Closed

INTERESTED IN TAKING PART IN AN UPCOMING EVENT?

Parkinson's Group

Contact Jeanine Hartman
412-215-2391

Peanut Squares Dancing Club

Everyone is welcome, no partner
or previous experience is
necessary. The cost is \$5/class.

UNABLE TO JOIN US IN PERSON FOR WORSHIP?

A video of the service is posted to
“Sunset Hills Church” Youtube channel
the Monday after the service. A copy of
the bulletin is available on the
homepage of www.shupchurch.org.

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Hebrews 13:16

AUGUST BIRTHDAYS

- 3 Jeannine Stimmel
- 4 Alice Bonim & Jeffrey Fitzwilliam
- 6 Joanne Enterline
- 8 Lee Cepits, Jacey Ellis & Jill Fako
- 10 Dottie Fleming
- 13 Sarajane Obarsky & Judy Stacey
- 14 Rowan Zeglin
- 15 Robert Tang
- 19 Carla Robinson
- 20 Christa Jo Tang
- 21 Pat Ellis
- 22 Missy Voto Sullivan
- 25 Chip McCoy
- 28 Kay Walker
- 29 Emily Yates
- 30 Grace Yates
- 31 Betty Coffey

PRAYER CIRCLE

- August 2..... Susan Pocheh, Harriet Rickard and Amy Riley
- August 9..... Michael & Carla Robinson
- August 16.....Elizabeth Romig and Rosemary Romig
- August 23.....Harriet Ross and Matt & Brienne Sembrat
- August 30.....Thomas & Judy Stacey and Jeannine Stimmel

PRAYER LIST

- Evelyn Lape
- The Van Haitsma family
- Rev. Brenda Barnes
- Ron Sumner
- Nancy Brumfield
- Rev. Mark Adams and Miriam Maldonado Escobar and their children



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- Dried Beans
- Pasta
- Lentils
- Pasta Sauce Jars
- Cereal & Oatmeal
- Soup
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