

LAKE AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH NEWSLETTER

JUNE 2024 NEWSLETTER, ISSUE 6, VOLUME 87

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I write this Pastor's article on the heels of an incredible tragedy in the life of Lake Avenue Baptist Church. Many, if not all of you, have no doubt heard of the passing of Sawm Huai, a 6-year-old part of our church community. This was unexpected, sudden, and tragic. No child should die. It is simply not the way things should be.

This past Sunday we put aside much of our church service to speak to this collective loss in the life of our church. We simply knew that a brief mention of this passing followed by a moment of silence would not suffice for the grief in our church family. To be entirely honest with each of you, part of what we did in terms of helping to lead worship was because it was necessary for our church staff to help begin to process our own sense of loss.

Sometimes people forget that clergy and church staff are impacted by the challenges of the church. We are in deep relationship with the people who make up our church, and we feel losses keenly. The difference is that when we experience a loss of anyone in our church family, we have to quickly shift into "work mode." We have responsibilities that we need to attend to, and so we start thinking forward to the things that need to be done. Many times, it isn't until after the funeral that we are able to start to attend to our own feelings that well up in our hearts. This was simply not the case in this instance.

Your staff are feeling this loss particularly keenly. There is no mincing words. We are hurting. We knew Sawm Huai and cared about her deeply. She brought a smile to our faces, and we grieve her sudden passing. It is just harder to move through this when children are involved. Some of your staff have never dealt with this kind of loss before, and even if we have faced this before, it simply doesn't get easier with time.

Yesterday at our staff meeting, we spent a lot of time talking about Sawm Huai. Lee remembers being in North Carolina with Khual Mung (Mark) when Sawm Huai was born. Lee remembers Mark tracking him down and practically jumping up and down with excitement at the birth of his niece. Becka tells the story of Sawm Huai trying to negotiate with her to buy her something nice. Sawm Huai said that because Becka was an adult Becka should buy her something. Becka turned it around on Sawm Huai and said that rather she should buy Becka something nice. If you know them both you can practically envision that conversation taking place and it really does create a funny image. I tell the story of how no matter how often I would go downstairs to preach and serve community, every time Sawm Huai would come up to me, look way up and ask "why are you here?" She just didn't understand why I (the guy from upstairs) would be downstairs. Every single time we'd have this exchange.

Each of you have you own memories, even if you don't remember. I have no doubt that many of you have seen Sawm Huai taking part in one of her favorite past-times ... eating cake. We were going through some pictures of her and it's amazing how many have her with icing on her face. Good memories.

Your staff grieves. We all grieve together. But what we have that may be unique to some places is a built in place to talk, laugh, and grieve together. It doesn't make it better, but it makes it easier to know that we're not alone in our pain.

Please know that all of your staff are here for each of you. As you move through this pain, or through other pains you may feel, please know that we journey with you and want to share with you in your joys, but also in your sorrows. It is a privilege to be part of your lives, and we hold it as a honor to be trusted to walk alongside you through some of the best and worst times of your life. We hold this as sacred.

It will no doubt be extremely hard to attend the funeral service on Saturday, but my hope is that we will be doing it together as a family. We will lean on each other. We will cry together. We will laugh together. And we will support each other. That's what family does and we will be a family together and to Sawm Huai's family. Thank you for being part of the LABC family. It is a privilege to walk through life with you.

Blessings,

Michael



Drawing called God Comes First drawn by Sawm Huai and Evelina

GRIEF AND HOPE

by Susan Maybeck, Assisting Minister

This has been a devastating week for our community. A precious 6 year old girl died in the hospital. The tragedy is that the parents and doctors did all the right things to make her better, but her heart stopped. We weep at her bedside.

The news of this death has travelled through our entire community: a prayer service, Sunday service, telephone calls and emails. Our reactions of shock and grief overwhelm us. We weep, we pray, we sit with the family, we console each other. But the reality is there - a dear child has died. Her bed is empty!

Grief is so hard. Let me share some words I wrote in 1999 2 months after my mother died with Alzheimers disease at the Fairport Baptist Church,

The shadow of death and grieving have permeated my being - the depth the loss is bone-aching, breath-catching, heart-rending, a pain the neck, a kick in the butt, back breaking, energy-draining. My body has ached - back, shoulders, neck, chest - it is moveable. I have been tired and cranky.

Where will it end, Lord?

Grieving doesn't end. But we can remember a funny incident and laugh. Or treasure her favorite book we used to read to her. Subtle joy returns. We turn to the living for hope and peace. We know that our lost, loved ones are in the loving arms of God. That brings us peace for a moment, a day, and finally forever.

The road to Easter is through the unrelenting shadows of that Friday. We exist in a dark place. The emptiness, the pain, the loss. Jesus is dead. Gone. Never to be seen again. And yet, on Easter morning **hope is rekindled**. We realize that our Lord is eternal and ever present. We can walk with him on the Road to Emmaus and eat fish together on the beach. His presence lifts our grief.

Maybe it's too soon to talk about hope, but my hope for all of us is that we join in a celebration of the amazing life and energy of our dear child, Sawm Huai.

Blessings to Everyone in Their Grief and Their Hope.

An Article from Your Director of Next Generation Ministry

I've always been a good student, and I learned from a young age that one of the ways to earn full credit on an assignment is to turn it in on time. This need for punctuality in task management was further reinforced during my years as a newspaper reporter. The presses hold for no one, so if you want to keep your "Press" badge you'd better submit your copy well before deadline. There's nothing that irritates an editor more than waiting for a reporter's pieces; even if you have one amazing zinger of a quote to include, forget it – deadlines take ultimate priority.

I know all this, and yet here I am, at the very last minute, the proverbial 11th hour, tapping out my article for the newsletter. Poor Ken has gently prodded me at least three times this week, yet I simply have been unable to summon the wherewithal to write this very simple little article. Ken rarely gets angry about anything, but I think that I am pushing him to that state of red alert. But I know why I'm dragging my feet so badly: I'm deeply ambivalent about leaving Rochester and LABC in particular – especially at this moment in the life of the church.

This is a season of grieving for me – not just for our loss of little Sawm Huai, but for my life as a seminarian and lay person and Rochesterian and staffer at LABC. We tend to associate grief with death, and that is perhaps the most significant catalyst of grief, but grief is a natural part of any process of transition, whether job change, relocation, divorce, new medical diagnosis, or becoming an empty-nester. Even overwhelmingly happy occasions like getting married and having a new baby come with a teaspoonful of grief, a sense of disorientation from having lost the life we once knew. Grief means re-learning the world in a new way, and re-learning anything can be slow and sometimes painful. We make mistakes. We lack confidence. We worry about possible outcomes, anticipated and unforeseen.

And so as I'm about to become Reverend Rebeka Fergusson-Lutz (which is still really weird to see in black-and-white), I am quickly re-learning the world. I am formally entering this new profession and taking on the mantle of spiritual and administrative leadership for a congregation in a new state. The good people of Geneva Presbyterian Church are putting their trust in me, my Biblical interpretation, and my management skills, and I desperately want to do right by them. I need to confidently lead this congregation into a complex and uncertain future, and I simultaneously need to find a new dentist and mechanic and hairstylist. Everything is new. Part of me thinks, "Yes, I'm ready! Put me in the game, coach!" but I'm sad that I can no longer just defer to Michael Ford to handle all the really tough stuff!

And, of course, I am heartbroken to leave Rochester so soon after the death of Sawm Huai. I feel a very real guilt about not being able to be here in the coming months to walk with the children and their parents as they mourn her death. This is a vulnerable time, a time for much-needed pastoral care, and I won't be around.

I am not an expert on grief but I have learned a few things, both from life experience and from my seminary journey. First, grief takes as long as it takes. There is no timeline. Secondly, it's critical that we show grace to ourselves. If being hard on yourself worked, it would have already worked by now. Lastly, it's important to find and celebrate the small joys, not only in the life that you once knew and in the life that you're entering, but also in that messy gray area in between. These are my three objectives for the next few months, as I unpack all my stuff and try to find a new dentist and mechanic and hairdresser.

I am enormously grateful that I have been able to serve Lake Avenue Baptist Church for the past 21 months. I know that God brought me to LABC at a critical juncture in my formation as a pastor, and I know that I will be a better pastor for having worked and learned at LABC. I am enormously grateful for the love and support of this community (even though I'm Presbyterian and not Baptist!) and LABC will always hold a very special place in my heart.

Blessings to you all!

~Becka

Our
**Church
Family**



Our hearts go out to Maman, Suan No, Mark (Khual Mung) at the loss of their young and precocious 6 year old daughter and niece, Sawm Huai, suddenly on Friday, May 24th. A visitation has been scheduled for Thursday, May 30th, 2024 at Newcomer Funeral Home, 2636 Ridgeway Ave. Rochester, 14626 from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm. The funeral service will be held at Newcomer Funeral Home on Saturday, June 1, 2024 at 10:00 am. We hope you will be able to join us as we remember the life of this sweet little girl.

●As of June 11 **Rebeka Fergusson-Lutz** new address will be 42573 Amherst Court, Canton, Michigan, 48187-2358. Please update your address books.



THE LAKE AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH GRADUATES

●**Congratulations to Rebeka Fergusson-Lutz, our Director of Next Generation Ministries** who received her Master's Degree in Divinity from Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School on Saturday, May 18th. Rebeka will be ordained to the ministry at Third Presbyterian Church on **Sunday, June 9, at 3:00 pm**. Upon completion of her ordination she will begin her ministry in Canton, Michigan.

●**Congratulations to Mark (Khual Mung)**. Mark received his Bachelor's Degree in Biblical Studies from Roberts Wesleyan College.

●**Maman (Niang Lam Lun)** received her Bachelor of Science degree from Brockport State University in Mathematics and Education.

●**Congratulations to our Choral Scholars Elizabeth Healy and Ashlee King** who graduated with a Master's Degree from Eastman School of Music. We also congratulate Choral Scholar **Xiaoge Zhang** who graduated

with a Master's Degree from Eastman School of Music and will be continuing at Eastman for her Doctor's Degree. Elizabeth has returned to home state of Tennessee and Elizabeth will be returning to her home state of Colorado. Xiaoge will be spending the summer with her parents in China. She will return once again as our soprano choral scholar in September.

●**NoBa Htoo** graduated from Roberts Wesleyan with a B.S. Degree in Social Work.



Soe Win's Graduation at the
University of Buffalo, May 17

●**Congratulations to Soe Win** who graduated on May 17 at the University of Buffalo with a Doctor of Philosophy Degree. Soe Win would like to thank all who came to her graduation and wants to let them know how much it was appreciated greatly.

THE LABC COMMUNITY AID FUND

Did you know that LABC has a "Community Aid Fund?" If you've been around LABC for any amount of time, you may remember that on the first Sunday of each month (Communion Sunday) we used to receive a special offering for what was formerly called the "Fellowship Fund." This fund has been renamed to more appropriately reflect how those monies are used ... to offer aid for the community.

You may have heard me say that the ministry of LABC that happens during the week can often look quite different than what we see on Sunday mornings. Quite often the door bell is chiming and the phone is ringing with people who are facing real and significant challenges and they turn to the church for support. The Community Aid Fund provides some money to be used at the Pastor's discretion to help meet some of the needs of those in our community (within the church and beyond).

The challenge that we are facing is that while the needs are great, the funds need to be replenished. In recent years we have simply not made the collection of funds for this purpose a priority. There are some people who have donated here and there, and we absolutely appreciate their contributions. We, however, need to work to make this a more regular practice.

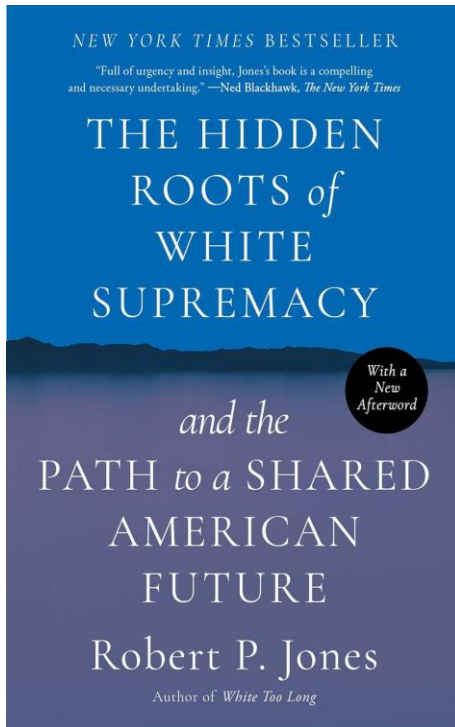
On the first Sunday of each month (Communion Sunday) we will now be encouraging people to make a contribution (large or small), if they are able, to the Community Aid Fund. You are absolutely welcome to make contributions at any time you wish, but we are going to work to help regularize bringing the needs of this ministry to the congregation. You'll start to hear more about it. Please give some thought to whether you can offer some financial support to the Community Aid Fund, and you are encouraged to put it in an enveloped marked "Community Aid Fund" and place it in the offering plate. On behalf of those we help, thank you.

Michael

p.s. If you're wondering, we do not ever provide cash assistance. If someone has a bill they need help with, and they are within our zip code (we have to place some parameters around those we help so it doesn't get overwhelming), they bring the bill and we can help pay it that way ...we can't do everything but we try to help when we're able. Thank you again.

Rev. Jackie Sullivan would like to ask anyone in our congregation who can play the piano if they would be willing to accompany hymns and play a prelude and postlude for the service she conducts at The Gables in Brighton, 2001 S. Clinton Ave, 14618 at 3:00 pm on Sunday afternoon. If this would be of interest to you, please contact Jackie at (585) 729-6992. This does not have to be an every week commitment and you can choose which Sundays you are able to play

ADULT EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY



Adult Education Mid-Week Book Study - The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future – Robert P. Jones

Taking the story of white supremacy in America back to 1493, and examining contemporary communities in Mississippi, Minnesota, and Oklahoma for models of racial repair, The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy is “full of urgency and insight” (The New York Times) as it helps chart a new course toward a genuinely pluralistic democracy.

Beginning with contemporary effects to reckon with the legacy of white supremacy in America, Jones returns to the fateful year when a little-known church doctrine emerged that shaped the way five centuries of European Christians would understand the “discovered” world and the people who populated it. Along the way, he shows us the connections between Emmett Till and the Spanish conquistador Hernando De Soto in the Mississippi Delta, between the lynching of three Black circus workers in Duluth and the mass execution of thirty-eight Dakota men in Makato, and between the murder of 300 African Americans during the burning of Black Wall Street in Tulsa and the Trail of Tears.

From this vantage point, Jones offers a “revelatory...searing, stirring outline” (Kirkus Reviews, starred review) of how the enslavement of

Africans was not America’s original sin but, rather, the continuation of acts of genocide and dispossession flowing from the first European contact with Native Americans. These deeds were justified by people who embraced the 15th-century Doctrine of Discovery: the belief that God had designated all territory not inhabited or controlled by Christians as their new promised land.

This “blistering, bracing, and brave” (Michael Eric Dyson) reframing of American origins explains how the founders of the United States could build the philosophical framework for a democratic society on a foundation of mass racial violence—and why this paradox survives today in the form of white Christian nationalism. Through stories of people navigating these contradictions in three communities, Jones illuminates the possibility of a new American future in which we finally fulfill the promise of a pluralistic democracy.

Join me (Pastor Michael) as we discuss this important book and explore how we as a church community can utilize its insights as we seek to live into our Christian calling as people of justice and mercy.

Dates – Wednesday June 5, 12, 19, 26

(Please read the preface and chapter 1 for our first meeting; we will determine future reading schedule at our first meeting)

Time – 1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Location – Classroom 1 (conference room)

Book is available at local libraries and book stores; digital, audio, and paper books available)

“Youth is the gift of nature, but age is a work of art.”

—STANISLAW JERZY LEC

The next meeting of Aging Gracefully and Joyfully will take place at 1:00 pm on Monday, June 3 when we will have our party. Please bring a food or drink item to share. So, don't eat lunch!!! Desserts are always welcome! Please contact Ken Setera at kjsetera@gmail.com to let him know if you will be attending and what you plan to bring or call Susan at (585) .Ken will coordinate the food with the others attending. Ken will be bringing a casserole, Jackie will be bringing plates, napkins, and cups and Susan will be bringing some soft drinks and water. We will plan to meet in the conference room but, if it is a nice day, we will move our party outdoors. This will be our final meeting until September. Hope to see you all there.



This month's Be You Movie Series offering is "Smoke Signals" While it is not the first film created by native filmmakers in the United States, Smoke Signals is recognized as being the first feature-length, written, directed and produced by Native Americans to reach a wide audience both in the USA and abroad. This film is also notable for its authenticity with regard to its cast of Native American actors and actresses. This movie was filmed on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation in Idaho. The theme of the movie is forgiveness, and so I thought it an appropriate choice for the month of June in which we celebrate "Father's Day".

As usual, the film will be shown in Classroom 1 (Conference Room) on Saturday, June 1st at 6:00 pm. Come early to watch Chuck This try to make Fried Bread from a recipe he found on the Internet.



DIVINE SCIENCE

BY Ken Setera

I love science and scientific phenomena. The reason is, even if we know how they occur, we really don't have a handle on who or what put them there and for what reason. I leave that for you to decide. But, just as the total solar eclipse in April was astounding and can be explained in human terms, the question still remains "who is responsible for it." The same is true with the Aurora Borealis which we experienced this month. (The picture at the left was taken by Lee Foster at night at Lake

Ontario where ambient light of the city doesn't interfere with its visibility.) It is truly an incredibly beautiful and wonderful natural phenomenon.

Did you ever wonder how the ancients explained this phenomenon? The name Aurora Borealis comes from the Greek words "aurora" meaning "dawn or sunrise" and Borealis (boreas) meaning "wind." Aurora was considered by the Greeks and Romans as the goddess of the dawn. They explained the Aurora Borealis as Aurora's racing her colored chariot across the horizon to announce a new day. The ancient Chinese culture thought that the Aurora Borealis was the result of a battle between good and evil dragons whose flames lit up the night skies. Other cultures assumed that these lights were the result of their gods dancing. Some assumed that they portended something evil, such as war or plague. Other cultures looked at them to be a good omen. For example, some peoples believed that children conceived at the time of the northern lights would have good looks, intelligence, and would be blessed with good fortune. (<https://www.theaurorazone.com/>)

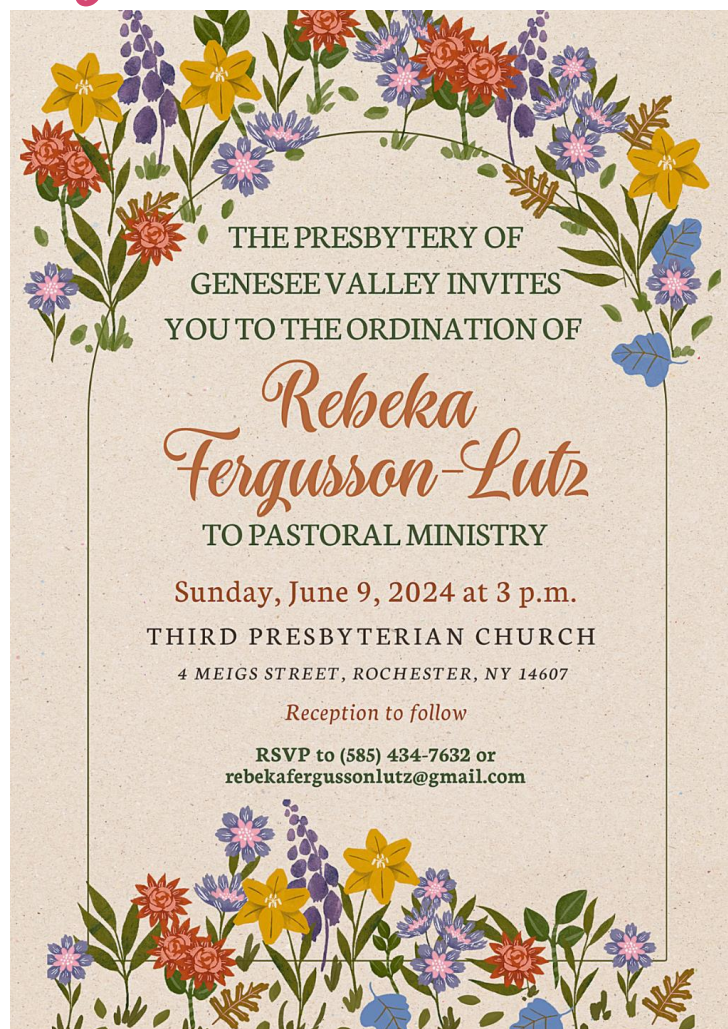
[about-the-aurora/aurora-legends/](#)

As with Rochester, this colorful phenomena was not usually visible in Greece and Italy or southern China unless there was extreme solar activity. Generally the aurora borealis or Northern Lights are confined to the far northern areas of the world close to the north and south poles.

So, what are the northern lights? According to NASA, "*these natural light shows are caused by magnetic storms that have been triggered by solar activity, such as solar flares (explosions on the Sun) or coronal mass ejections (ejected gas bubbles). Energetic charged particles from these events are carried from the Sun by the solar wind. When these particles seep through Earth's magnetosphere, they cause sub-storms. Then fast moving particles slam into our thin, high atmosphere, colliding with Earth's oxygen and nitrogen particles. As these air particles shed the energy they picked up from the collision, each atom starts to glow in a different color.*" (<https://spaceplace.nasa.gov/aurora/en/>)

So, we know that the Aurora Borealis is caused by the sun's activity and the ejection of plasma into space and reacting with earth's magnetic field. But, who or what created it and why was it created in the first place? It is another mystical phenomena that either occurred by chance or by a higher power. Obviously, it is not for me to say, but it is something worth thinking about!

Congratulations Rebeka!



Congregational Meeting



Join us on Sunday June 30, 2024 following the 10:00 a.m. worship service for our Semi-Annual Congregational Meeting. At this meeting you will be receiving your Annual Report Booklet and we will be electing a number of persons to our Church Council. Each year we hold two Semi-Annual Congregational Meetings and it is an important part of our work together. We hope you're able to join us for worship on June 30th, and remain after for our Semi-Annual Congregational Meeting.

Missions Ministry

Summer is around the corner and we are having warmer weather, beautiful flowers, and the kids are anticipating the end of the school year and all of the fun times that entails. Unfortunately, one of the things that happens in the summer is an increase of violence. For a variety of reasons, we wish to have Rochester children and teens involved in constructive activity and learning over the summer. One of the agencies that does a fabulous job of keeping kids engaged is Cameron Community. We are talking with Cameron about ways to enable this work. We know that transportation and food prices have increased steadily over the last year. We want to support Cameron in providing a safe environment with rich experiences that keep them on track for success. You can also support their summer programs individually by going to their website at www.cameroncommunity.org.


WEDNESDAY NIGHT



Community Dinner

The next LABC Community Dinner will take place on Wednesday, June 19th, 2024 at 6:00 pm. These dinners have been quite successful and a number of neighbors have been attending. At this time, we once again have to decide what we will be serving, I am open to suggestions with out necessarily repeating dinners that we served since we started in the fall. Some possibilities that came to mind are a sausage egg casserole, or a hash brown egg casserole, or some variation of an egg strata. If you have other suggestions please do not hesitate to contact Ken in the office.

NEWS AND EVENTS FROM OUR EXTENDED COMMUNITY



First Inversion
presents . . .

Relating

to the universe, the earth, our communities, and each other

The Choir of First Inversion with
Jonathan Madden, assistant conductor/piano,
Juli Elliot and Dane Noble-Rosema, piano,
and Lee Wright, conductor/violin

Friday, June 7, 7:30PM
Downtown Presbyterian Church,
121 N. Fitzhugh St., 14614

Sunday, June 9, 4:00PM
Lutheran Church of the Incarnate Word,
597 East Avenue, 14607

Info: firstinversion.org or 585.520.2003 | Tickets available at the door \$25/adult, \$10/student suggested admission

The poster features a colorful background with a gradient from blue to orange. It includes silhouettes of a diverse group of people at the bottom, a large heart shape in the center, and several blue butterflies flying around. The text is arranged in a clear, readable layout.



Yes, there will be vacation Bible School this year! It will take place at Greece Baptist Church on Long Pond Road (the same as last year.) Please see all the information below plus the attached application form. Additional larger application forms will be

available on the Welcome Table at church.

VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL 2024

THE VBS OLYMPICS



A **FREE** program for children entering Kindergarten to Fifth Grade in September 2024

- Enjoy fun games, crafts, and songs
- Experience fun Bible stories through skits and puppet shows
- Healthy snack provided

Thursdays, 6:00 to 8:00 PM
July 11, 18, 25 • August 1, 8
Come as many weeks as you can



Greece Baptist Church
 1230 Long Pond Road
 Rochester, NY 14626
 (585) 225-6160
www.greecebaptistchurch.org

VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL 2024

THE VBS OLYMPICS



Free Registration

First and Last Name _____

Address _____

Age _____ Home Church _____

Allergies _____

Medical Issues or Special Needs _____

Parent Name (first and last) _____

Phone (where parent can be reached during event) _____

Other Emergency Contact (if parent cannot be reached) _____

Medical Release

I give my permission for Vacation Bible School staff to administer basic first aid to my child in the event of an injury. I understand that emergency services will be called in the event of significant injury, and all expenses for such emergency services will be paid by me.

Parent signature _____ Date _____

Photo Release

I hereby grant the Vacation Bible School staff permission to use photographs/ videos taken at Vacation Bible School of the minor designated above in any way lawful at any time.

Parent signature _____ Date _____

Juneteenth 2024

JUNETEENTH TAKES PLACE ON JUNE 19TH.



What is Juneteenth?

Even though we know that the Emancipation Proclamation freed African Americans in rebelling states (Texas being one of them) when it went into effect on January 1st, 1863, we also know that slavery did not officially end until the end of the Civil War in April of 1865. However it took a while until the end of slavery and the end of the Civil War reached the western most confederate state of Texas. It wasn't until June 19, 1865 that the freedom of slaves was actually enforced by the Union Army in all rebelling states. However, it did not free enslaved people throughout the nation! Keep in mind there were still border states which were still part of the Union and had not seceded, such as Maryland, that still maintained slavery. It took the creation of the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War and the **passage of the 13th**

Amendment to the Constitution to bring an end to slavery throughout the United States.

(<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/what-juneteenth>)

THE JUNETEENTH FESTIVAL will take place in Rochester on Saturday, **June 15th from 12 to 8 pm** at **Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park at 353 Court Street** where there will be local performers, vendors, food and fun. There is no admission fee. The festivities begin at **10:00 am to 11:00 am with a parade** on Chestnut and Broad Street. From 12 pm to 8 pm there will also be free entry to the Strong Museum of Play.

2ND ANNUAL WHITEWATER RAFTING TRIP DOWN THE GENESEE RIVER

**THURSDAY
JUNE 27
2024**

SCHOOL'S OUT CELEBRATION FOR YOUTH IN GRADES 6-12! For more information and registration, email: erin.jacobson@pittsfordpres.org.

**COST PER PERSON NOT TO EXCEED \$50
FEE INCLUDES A PICNIC LUNCH**

LGBTQ+ Folk Are Everywhere

by Brian Henderson | May 17, 2024 | Feature-, Opinion



**Stock Photo Illustration (Credit: Tseinn Wong/
Unsplash/<https://tinyurl.com/39bs3h2u>)**

As the Executive Director of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB), I was invited this spring to visit the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia. The purpose of my visit was to cultivate a partnership with the Peace Cathedral located in the country's capital city, Tbilisi.

About a decade ago, with the leadership of its Bishop, Malkhaz Songulashvili, the Peace Cathedral went on record as welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ+ individuals. In a part of the world where being openly queer is not culturally safe, this is a courageous conviction to live out. As I am writing, legislation is being pushed through the Georgian government that could pave the way for it to be outright illegal to identify as LGBTQ+.

The freedom to identify as openly queer cannot be taken for granted. Yes, there are places throughout the United States and even the world where one can be LGBTQ+ and feel safe and at home to be who one is. However, this isn't the case everywhere. In our day, with ideologically motivated religious and political nationalism movements afoot, to be openly queer can leave one feeling very vulnerable and unsafe.

In fact, as an openly gay man, when I travel, whether in the United States or abroad, I find myself thinking carefully about who I am and even how I present and identify myself to others.

It is always awkward when the person in the seat next to me on an airplane asks, "What do you do professionally?" Admittedly, depending on the person's vibe, I must decide in the moment whether to share how I work for an LGBTQ+ advocacy organization.

For some, something as simple as needing to use a restroom facility can become a stressful experience.

Recently, a non-binary identifying friend shared with me how excited they were their driver's license and passport were updated, identifying their gender marker as "X." However, once they took their first trip abroad, the "X" on their passport became a marker they knew was better shared only when absolutely necessary. They decided not to do certain parts of their itinerary, fearing they may have to present their passport.

While visiting the country of Georgia, I had the opportunity to have a conversation with a gay ally-identifying university professor as well as with two human rights activists who identify as queer. The professor shared with me how sad she is that in Georgia, the only alternative some queer individuals feel is possible is to flee the country to other "safe" cities or countries to be fully who they are. This professor regrets how, as a country, Georgia is losing scholars, musicians, artists and, in general, individuals with so much to offer their society.

The two human rights activists with whom I visited are not ready to leave their home country but are very aware of how the government may soon force people to live their queerness secretly.

While anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is yet to be passed, many think it is only a matter of time before it is. Queer people are already fearing they could be physically harmed, arrested, or even killed simply for being who they are.

In Georgian society, queer people can be marked as suspect for simply holding a partner's hand, being too affectionate toward the one they love, or for presenting in non-heteronormative ways to others.

Call it my gaydar but as a queer-identifying person, I often can pick up on signals or vibes from other LGBTQ+ folk. Whether I was strolling the streets of Tbilisi, sitting at a restaurant, or patronizing a local shop, I was

reminded that queer folk are everywhere.

One gay couple I saw, two young men, were sitting on a street bench with pedestrians bustling by. It was obvious to me they were working hard not to be too obvious with their affection toward each other. As I walked by them, I think they caught me staring and so the glance they gave me in return indicated they feared they'd been seen. I could see it in their eyes. Oh, for that not to be the case. Oh, for that not to be the reality in Georgia or any part of the world.

It breaks my heart to know humans marginalize and dehumanize other humans because of how we want to love another or for how we long to present ourselves to colleagues, co-workers, family, friends or even to people we pass by while walking down a street. While we can be grateful for "how far we've come" in the United States when it comes to LGBTQ+ inclusion, the look I saw in the eyes of that Georgian gay couple is a look that can be seen anywhere.

As I continue in my work with AWAB, I know there is much work for faith communities to do to make more spaces and places safe for all people to be fully who they are. I am grateful for the welcoming and affirming witness evidenced through Peace Cathedral in Tbilisi. It is courageous work they are about.

I am grateful, too, for the courageous work I see lived out through Baptist communities in the United States and the world over. This work of welcome and affirmation is desperately needed, and it is a work we will forever need to live out. While it is hard to be LGBTQ+ anywhere, and since LGBTQ+ people are everywhere, as an ally and friend, what can you do today to be more welcoming and affirming? I wish I had engaged the couple I saw on that street bench if only to say, "Yes, you are seen. And you are not alone."

My prayer is that someday, all of us, allies and LGBTQ+ folk alike, will live safely being the humans we are, no matter where we are. May it be so.

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