

# Ministry Minute

## Westwood Election PAUSE Worship

### "Prayer Around United States' Elections"



Westwood Lutheran Church opened its arms a bit wider this month to give neighbors, friends, interfaith congregations, community partners, and broader communities two opportunities to join its members for quiet contemplation during a time of uncertainty.

Pastor Sarah Scherschligt and Phillip Shoultz, Cantor for Worship, Music, and the Arts at Westwood, fine-tuned the Wednesday Contemplative Pause services the week before Election Day and a week after Election Day to acknowledge people's concerns and uneasiness.

Organizers of Election PAUSE (Prayer Around United States' Elections) made a special effort to promote community inclusiveness. Invitations extended beyond Westwood's congregation by advertising the two services to various faith communities, community partners such as STEP, school districts, nonprofits, civic leaders, St. Louis Park and Hopkins police departments, and press releases to mainstream media.



"We changed the language that we typically use (in Pause services) to make it more spiritually expansive so people of other faith traditions would feel welcome," Pastor Sarah said. "We understand that we (Lutherans) don't have the corner on God. God is bigger, smaller, more mysterious than we can ever know, and that other people – including people we care about deeply – find a different pathway to God's love and belonging," she offered during the services. "We hope this service is open enough that people with various spiritual traditions can participate fully."

The format of Wednesday Pause services worked well for the election shift. It included a cappella singing, some Scripture, and a reading (from a spiritual guide or blessing text), as well as a participatory ritual. Election PAUSE included an opportunity to light candles and post personal prayers aimed at healing, then placed in the niches in the front wall of the Sanctuary.

"We always have an embodied prayer," Pastor Sarah said. Led by Phillip, the exercise involves focused breathing and step-by-step, intentional relaxation of the body to center oneself on prayer.

Responses and reactions to Election PAUSE have been positive. The turnout has been well beyond the typical Wednesday night service attendance. "I think people were looking for a space like this," said Phillip. "We did hear from people afterward that it was exactly what they needed."



Westwood members Cara and Philip Coen-Pesch attended both services. "I appreciated the centering music that Phillip S. provided," said Cara. "I think in uncertain times, it's real important to be calm and center yourself so you can think clearly."

Philip Coen-Pesch appreciated the pre- and post-election approach. "It was a reminder both before and after that this is a point in time, and there is something greater. So, it gave me that kind of calm, that serenity, that strength."

According to Pastor Sarah and Phillip, the post-election service shifted its focus to going forward in faith with the same goals and missions.

The congregation and council previously determined Westwood's faith core values include: environmental sustainability, LGBTQIA+ affirmation, race equity, child well-being, and interfaith relationships. Pastor Sarah said in the post-election service, "In each of these areas, and perhaps for some of the values you hold near and dear, the election presents a challenge. And yet, it is a time for us to remember that while we hope for government to be a partner in creating the world as we think God wants it, we also know that communities like ours – communities of faithful people, bound together by love, hope, and common purpose are, indeed, where God's light can always shine."