



WESTWOOD
LUTHERAN CHURCH

Ministry Minutes
Stories of Impact
2024

Ministry Minute

What is the Ministry Minute?

“Getting the Inside Scoop on the Storyteller”



Westwood Ministry Minute (noun) definition:

An article that spotlights people, staff, lay groups, ministries, the generosity of people's time, talents, and financial gifts, or events happening at Westwood to inspire and motivate the congregation with impactful stories.

Earlier this year, Pastor Jason Van Hunnik and the new Director of Communications, Tricia Goede, discussed more ways to communicate with the congregation about various ministries at Westwood. His initial goals were to: 1) Inform people of happenings at Westwood they may not be aware of. 2) Share the impact the people, events, or ministries have on others at Westwood or the greater community.

“It’s amazing how many things are happening ‘behind the scenes’ among Westwood members. Prior to working at Westwood, our family came 1-2 times a week and thought we were ‘in the know.’ However, I never truly knew the abundance of volunteers, lay teams, and ministries offered at Westwood and where people can be involved,” said Tricia.

Some call it a coincidence; others may say it is a “God-incidence” when the right thing happens at the right moment.

God blessed Westwood with a new member, Rene Kaluza. She spent 40-plus years as a newspaper reporter and editor in St. Cloud and wanted to be involved at Westwood. She began offering her time as a rotating volunteer in the church office. Pastor Jason and Rene talked further, and the use of her gifts and talents blossomed into being the primary interviewer and writer for the “E-News Ministry Minute.” A natural connection was made, allowing Rene to learn about her new faith community while providing short, impactful stories for the congregation.

Rene has a passion for stories. Recalling past experiences, she said, “I loved helping tell the stories of people, events, and ideas that drove our [St. Cloud] community. It was rewarding to watch the writers I worked with [and trained] grow into accomplished storytellers. When Pastor Jason asked me about working on the Ministry Minute, I saw it as a way to share Westwood’s stories and showcase the opportunities Westwood gives its members to share the work we need to do at home and in the world.”



Rene Kaluza & daughter Kate

Since March, Rene has shared a variety of narratives from different ministries: affinity groups, Westwood gardeners, men’s Bible study, youth trips, prayer shawl and quilting ministries, to name a few. Her gift of writing captures the generosity and impact of others here at Westwood.

She further commented, “My favorite part of this is when I can hear in someone’s voice the joy and excitement they have for the work they are doing. No one puts himself or herself first. They might admit to being the conductor, but they always say it’s their band that carries the tune. While they take pride in the work they and their team accomplish, they are never prideful.”

Members should be proud and joyful to share the many actions and activities that make Westwood the vibrant and engaging faith community it is today.

Pastor Jason said, “I’m so grateful to Rene for stepping forward to make the Ministry Minutes a reality. This is an active place, and folks are often not aware of several interesting ministries that are happening in and through Westwood and its people. Rene’s willingness to use her writing and editorial skills to help make this reality has been a huge asset in spreading the stories of impact.”

Tricia’s sentiment included, “I cannot express my gratitude enough for Rene’s efforts, thoughtful creativity, and ability to capture the true impact and spirit of others. I am always excited to collaborate with her on topics, especially to get the first read when I weave in the images, colors, and format, which becomes our final product.”

May the Ministry Minutes inspire you to lead a faith-filled life and consider how you can contribute your time, talents, or support to Westwood’s ministries.

Ministry Minute

Parenting-as-a-Vocation

Kindergarten Affinity



The recent Kindergarten session of Westwood's Parenting Affinity series so impressed Rachal and Dolan Olson that they are eager for their son Myles and daughter Lila to age into future levels.

"As relatively new (Westwood) members, we were looking to meet families in the same stage of life," Rachal described their initial attraction to the five sessions they spent with five other kindergarten families.

They particularly liked that the focus was on the wins and struggles in parenting, what it means to approach parenting as a vocation, and how to prioritize that vocation.

The Affinity series, with its parenting-as-a-vocation-focused curriculum developed by Dannica Olsen, Director of Youth and Family Ministry, has served seven Westwood groups.

For many participants, this is the first time they have thought of their parenting as God's work in the world, Dannica said. It shifts the focus to what it should mean to be a successful parent through a faith lens instead of a typical world lens of activities and academic achievements.

The personal invitation, the small size of the group, and the ongoing connections and resources were also pluses for the Olsons. "I feel like we know some people on a deeper level," Rachal said.

A key takeaway for the pair is learning they have much in common with other parents, including those from other backgrounds. And, even more helpful, Rachal noted: "We feel like we don't have to do it all on our own. God fills in the gaps."

Future groups may focus on parenting middle schoolers, young high schoolers, and older high school children, and possibly grandparenting as a vocation, Dannica said.



Ministry Minute

A Simple Experiment

Westwood Women's Retreat



The hypothesis: Relaxation, grace, a deeper faith life, a sense of community, and strong friendships will result from women spending time apart from their busy lives and together in reflection and introspection.

The ingredients: Westwood women, 1 1/2 days in a comfortable setting minus the typical daily distractions.

The chemistry: Psalm 139's "I Am Wonderfully Made" message and a little bit of "Barbie" magic.



Westwood's Women's Retreat at Mount Olivet Retreat Center in Farmington used that formula to bring some spiritual refreshment to an intergenerational group of 55 women in March. "We had women from their 20s up through their 80s," said Pastor Sarah Scherschligt. "It was a time of renewal and a time to focus on their life with God."

Led by Westwood member and Spiritual Advisor Anna Martinez and Pastors Sarah Scherschligt and Tania Haber, the program used the lens of the recent "Barbie" movie and Psalm 139 to examine what it means to navigate today's world as a woman of faith.

Women who chose to arrive at the retreat center on Friday night for an additional day had time for fellowship, games, and relaxation in the hot tub—Saturday morning offered time for hikes or yoga.

Saturday afternoon, evening, and Sunday morning were dedicated to sessions on self-compassion, life's journey, what mold you think you have to fit into, and on breaking that mold. Sessions combined time for learning, self-reflection, group work, and shared insights. "There was a lot of 'downtime' for people to do what they needed to do," Pastor Scherschligt said. "The aim was to connect them with formal programming but give them space to be renewed and step outside the hectic rhythm of life." Tricia Goede reflected, "It was the perfect balance to feel God's peace upon me, strengthen my faith through a fun and unique lens, and build stronger connections with wonderful women."

If the reviews are any indication, the chemistry was just right. "It was really fun, and there was so much laughter," Scherschligt said.

Other women offered these reflections:

- ♦♦♦ One thing that stays with me is the realization of how many great women are around me at church.
- ♦♦♦ The "Barbie" theme gave a positive light-heartedness to this self-exploration activity. As women who are often critical of ourselves, I believe the time spent learning (or re-learning) how to treat ourselves with love and compassion is always a worthy reminder.
- ♦♦♦ I especially enjoyed the focus on mindfulness and self-compassion and would love it if there were options to continue this focus in a small group format.
- ♦♦♦ Give yourself grace.

While the Westwood Women's Retreat has a long history, this was only the second year of the retreat since COVID restrictions ended.

Ministry Minute

Vacation Bible School (VBS-SCUBA)

“Friendship with God and Each Other”



What do you get when you combine ocean scenery and the following equation: $93+50+4=SCUBA$?

You get Westwood’s fun-filled Vacation Bible School (VBS). This year’s program was SCUBA. We welcomed 93 campers, over 50 adult and youth volunteers, and four days of fin-tastic experiences. Campers swam through Westwood to different stations, diving deeper into friendship with God and each other. Daily themes focused on God being a friend who is real, loves, and trusts. Most importantly, God is a friend to everyone!

Ann Sundermeyer, VBS organizer, and Westwood Early Childhood Ministry Coordinator said, “Last year was my first year organizing VBS, and I had a bit of stress from the unknown. I learned from last year. This year’s stress leading up to VBS was different just due to the fact that we had SO many kids and volunteers involved — which was amazing! It’s a lot of moving pieces to organize, but well worth it in the end watching the excitement of the kids and parents on the last day!”

The youth volunteers make a significant contribution to VBS. They lead a variety of stations multiple times a day, including Bible verses, outdoor games, videos, arts and crafts, or co-leading groups with an adult.

One inspiring aspect is the impact it also has on our youth volunteers. Leo Angleson, a 10th grader, had a wonderful experience. His mother, Kristin Austrum, shared, “It was his first time volunteering for VBS, but not his last! Leo has a big heart, and we are always looking for ways to help him share it and grow his confidence. He loves to work with young kids, and this past year, he connected with his Youtherans group, so volunteering for VBS was a no-brainer, and he jumped at the opportunity!”

The interactions and relationships between the campers and the youth volunteers along with the youth volunteers and the adults are important at Westwood. Kristin also mentioned, “Leo says ‘Hi!’ to kids and adults that we don’t even know, but they know Leo. It has brought him confidence, comfort, joy, responsibility, all the feels.”

The campers see the youth volunteers as kids they can look up to and recognize. With laughter, James Robinson, an 8th grader, said, “I think that as children, they will listen to younger people and think we’re cool –no offense to adults!”

James attended VBS for as many years as he can remember and has volunteered for the last two years. It gives him a great feeling to be involved and not simply sit home playing games.

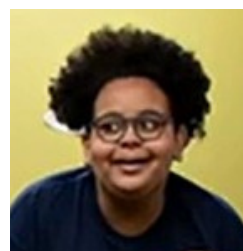
Matias Goede, a 6th grader and first-time volunteer, echoed similar thoughts. “I wanted to know what it felt like to help teach kids and not only learn from older kids,” he said. “It was interesting to take on a leadership role and feel what it is like to be looked up to by younger kids...knowing someday they would want to do this too.”

The bonds between these three boys, the campers, and all the volunteers grew as everyone dove deeper into faithful friendships. It was a great start to the first week of summer, knowing “God is a friend to everyone!”

VBS lives out and builds upon Westwood’s culture of community and generosity from a young age through giving of people’s time and talents, even as it occurs “under the sea!”



Matias Goede



James Robinson



Leo Angleson



Ministry Minute

PRIDE 2024

“Proud to show PRIDE”



If you painted a portrait of Westwood’s interfaith LGBTQIA+ inclusive rally in late June, it would reflect the laughter, hugs, smiles, friendships, connections, and joy of that evening.

It surely would be a depiction of “God’s love,” according to Pastor Sarah Scherschligt.

Westwood and Adath Jeshurun congregations hosted the evening at Westwood, including a parade along Cedar Lake Road, an offering of blessings affirming faith, welcoming speakers and representatives from a variety of services and organizations, and a shared picnic-style meal. And—not to be forgotten—an ice cream truck!

Westwood’s LGBTQIA+ group took the lead in organizing this year’s event with support from Pastor Sarah, who coordinated speakers and the link with Adath Jeshurun, who offered a blessing on the event and its participants.

“I think it was a public acknowledgment that people of a variety of sexualities and gender are affirmed here,” said Pastor Sarah of the activities. “It was a beautiful image of all of us coming together.”

Westwood is a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregation, which affirms a commitment to full participation in the church for those who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. It also theologically affirms that God made people with a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities. Its policies support inclusivity.

Westwood’s LGBTQIA+ group also helps plan an acknowledgment of that RIC status in a January service, coordinates Westwood’s participation in the Golden Valley Pride Festival, and helps with the Pride worship service in June.

Gavin Berg, Westwood’s organist and facility manager, played a more substantial planning role and spoke at this year’s event. “I wanted to get across that it isn’t just about gay, straight, or color. It takes all of us to make these changes and shift the barometer,” Berg said. He was overwhelmed by the show of support.

Turnout for the June 2024 event, estimated at 150 people, was stronger than in past years.

“When we have an event, and I see that it’s showing support for those who might be in the community and also for the allies and all these people around supporting them no matter what they are or grow up to be. We had an impact beyond our two [faith] communities,” he said. “I enjoyed seeing not only Westwood come together and Adath join us, but I met people from the St. Louis Park community and other organizations and services.”

Overall, the event is a crucial effort, supporting two of Westwood’s core values, interfaith relationships and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity.

“I think part of our mission is to have joy when possible. It was a joyful event, and I think that was really evident,” Pastor Sarah said.



Adath Jeshurun & Westwood leadership teams in attendance



Gavin Berg

Ministry Minute

Westwood Staff Retreat

“Teamwork Takes Trust”



It takes a dedicated team of players and coaches to win the World Series, the Stanley Cup, the NBA or WNBA Finals. For nearly a year, Westwood’s team of leaders has put in the hard work of a pro team and has aimed through a series of retreats to strengthen its teamwork dynamic and effectiveness.

The Westwood team wrapped up its fourth “training camp” in late May, following retreats in August and October 2023, and January 2024 facilitated by Sarah Carlsen of Carlsen Coaching and Consulting.

Carlsen specializes in working with leadership teams during transitions and began working with Westwood as the church started living into a new leadership model.

“The goal really was to strengthen and deepen relationships across the team so they could each bring their full gifts to the ministry of Westwood,” Carlsen said. “Continuing a healthy culture during times of change takes intention -- it doesn’t just happen. The aim was for the team to be aligned on how it will work and how it will do that work well.”

“Mission accomplished,” according to Pastor Sarah Scherschligt. “The retreats helped us all grow closer. This team really cares about each other,” she said. “Remembering that and spending time together helps us work well for the good of the church.” Scherschligt also noted, “We decided to use the Enneagram system as a ‘lens’ through which team members could understand and appreciate the different approaches each brings to their work.

We introduced it at the first retreat in August as the foundation for the work.”

“This has been a great tool to help us understand how best to work together,” said Pastor Jason Van Hunnik. “Our time together has also resulted in an even stronger sense of belonging and commitment to one another as a staff.”

In the simplest terms, the system is a detailed form of personality test. Its results can help team members understand their motivations and decision-making process as they make choices and plans within their work subsets – ministry, music, administration, etc. – and in the team as a whole.

Shorter sessions in October 2023 and January 2024 helped team members understand how personality and experience shape the way they and others deal with each other and conflict. Building skills for working across differences is essential.

“Conflict often indicates something new is needed. If handled well, conflict can be a generative rather than a destructive force,” Carlsen explained.

“We have a staff that has great gifts. We want everyone to use them, and the vibe is one of celebration, not competition,” said Pastor Sarah.

“Staff retreats allow us to have fun and get to know each other in ways that day-to-day meetings and work don’t. It is a gift to be on this dynamic and dedicated staff,” said Dannica Olsen, Director of Youth Ministries at Westwood.

“The final session gave everyone a chance to reflect on what they’ve learned about working across differences and how to integrate that into the work of the church and its broader mission toward inclusion,” Carlsen said. “Self-awareness, relational awareness, and building trust are key to developing strong, effective, and inclusive teams and missions.”

“I took away a deeper understanding of how I show up as a team member, what motivates me, what are my needs, what pitfalls might show up when I’m not working with a healthy frame of mind,” said Sara Moran, Westwood’s Director of Congregational Care. “I also came away with a greater appreciation of my teammates after learning more about what motivates them, as well as some of their vulnerabilities and how that drives the way they work in our system as Westwood staff.”

Dannica had a similar take on the retreats’ value for the staff. “The more we learn about each other, the more we build trust and work together honoring each other’s stories and points of view,” said Dannica.



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Monthly Moms' Group



Westwood's Monthly Moms' Group technically doesn't meet monthly. Instead, it runs on "Mom Time."

Some months are just too "crazy town" for a meeting, said Ann Sundermeyer, who has coordinated the group of eight to 15 moms that have gathered for a break – and for a connection – since 2022.

May and September are out of the question for moms with school-age children, for example. Summers also get busy, but one nice July evening on the Westwood deck can be the right summer break for a mom with active children.

Ann is the Early Childhood Coordinator at Westwood (part of the Children, Youth, and Families team). When the mom of 1-year-old twins went looking for some Westwood connections for herself, she was encouraged to start a group for moms. No program is planned. "The evening is strictly socializing," Ann said, "but there is never a lack of things to talk about.

"They welcome and hope to be joined by moms of all ages, but for now, most who attend have young children.

"We would welcome any woman," Ann said, noting they would appreciate the insight of a mom of middle- or high-school-age children. Last fall, some moms of older children joined them. "It was so good to have all the perspectives," she said.

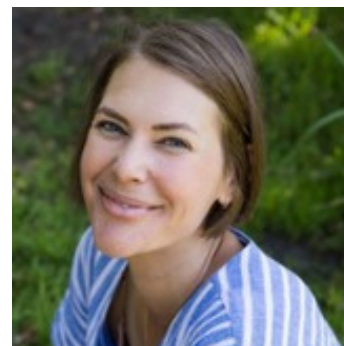
While there isn't an agenda, the meeting date and time are almost sacrosanct. That lets moms set aside "7 pm to whenever" on the second Tuesday of the month and arrange childcare. The evening is casual—everyone pays their own way.

"Conversation turns toward our kids and commonalities like that," Ann said. "Where are your kids in school? What's been your experience with this?" They also talk about programming at Westwood, activities that are coming up, and resources they would like to have.

"There is no RSVP. We're happy that you're there. It's 100 percent understandable if you can't make it. No feeling that if you've missed some meetings you can't return," she said. The group understands that schedules change, new jobs, and even new babies require adjustments. Still, the group is there when it's convenient once again. "I think every single time we've met, we've had a woman come who's never come before," Ann said. "It's never too late to come."

For most of the group, Ann said it's about connection. Sometimes during church services or children's activities, moms are too busy managing children to make a connection to another mom.

"One cool thing is that many times moms will come and say 'I don't know you' but then find (their) kids are friends. Or they say, 'Oh, I do know your kiddo,'" Ann said. "Our kids have opportunities to connect through events. This group is a good way for our moms also to connect."



Ann Sundermeyer

Ministry Minute

Westwood Office Volunteers

"Serving with Purpose, Behind the Scenes"



Have you ever wondered about who stuffs all the envelopes for stewardship campaigns, who are the kind voices answering the phone, or who makes the first impression on a member or visitor coming to the Westwood office during the week? These essential tasks are accomplished by a wonderful group of volunteers who, like many ministries at Westwood, work behind the scenes to create ripples of impact throughout our community.

Westwood's dedicated office volunteers give of their time and talents each week, contributing an essential role in keeping the office running smoothly. With diverse backgrounds and unique skills, these women not only impact the church's mission, but have also felt a deep impact in their own lives.

Marilyn Nelson began volunteering just before the pandemic. She brings a wealth of experience to the front desk with a background in reception and education. Particularly, teaching English as a Second Language has proven invaluable; Marilyn's careful attention to detail in proofreading materials is a unique way her gifts have found a home at Westwood, and another is connecting with people.

"I enjoy interacting with a variety of people each week," she shared. "Whether it's members, non-members, or staff, these connections enrich my life. Being at the front desk is one small way I can support our ministry."

Another familiar face for over 18 years is Donna Bushway. She echoed similar sentiments: "The flexibility of hours is great, and I love staying connected to my church family. Volunteering gives me a sense of purpose, and I always feel appreciated." Donna's contributions extend beyond simple tasks; she creates a welcoming, organized, and efficient environment that supports both staff and members alike.

Volunteering became a way for Luanne Bachman to stay engaged after retiring from teaching. "Joyce Kautz asked if I could take over for her in the office, and 13 years later, I'm still here!" The ever-changing nature of the office keeps her on her toes. "Each day is different, and I thrive on finding answers and solving problems," she reflected. As a result of her enjoyment, Luanne has even recruited others like Patricia Lasse!

Patricia has been making her mark for about a year. "I hadn't done much office work before, but I've been able to bring my graphics knowledge to help where needed," she says. Volunteering allows her to assist others but has impacted her even more with a deeper connection to the Westwood community and a new purpose in retirement.

After being inspired by one of Pastor Jason's sermons, Pat Dix said, "It felt like it just hit me, the need to volunteer at Westwood!" After seeing Sara Moran's interactions with elders and many other members, Pat knew Sara was the person to talk to. As fall programming and activities began to gain momentum, the next thing she knew, both Lisa Boers, Westwood Office Manager, and Ann Kisch, Westwood Kitchen Manager, reached out with new opportunities. Enthusiastically, Pat said, "I'll do it! I'll do it! So that's how I ended up in the office...and today is my first day."

Whether it is the joy of day one or the knowledge of nearly two decades, these volunteers share a common thread: their commitment to serving the Westwood community creates meaningful connections that transcend simple office tasks.

"Together, these wonderful women and our fantastic subs - Karen Rohweder, Eileen Dahlen, Rene Kaluza, and Mary Anderson - form the backbone of volunteer support," said Lisa Boers. "I rely on this dedicated support team to accomplish all the necessary responsibilities with their collective efforts and unique skills. They are invaluable!"

In their service, the Westwood office volunteers find joy, purpose, and connection. As Marilyn put it, "It takes a village to support a church, and we are all a part of that village."

Ministry Minute

Westwood's Gift of a Lift

"Going the Extra Mile, a Ministry Set in Motion"



Jeanette Anderson's calendar for the next couple of weeks includes orthopedic, dental, and eye appointments. The 96-year-old Westwood member who no longer drives will need a ride to and from each one.

Because most of her family lives in other states, she will likely look to Westwood and its "Gift of a Lift" service for at least some of that help. Taxi cabs, Ubers, and van services can be costly and often involve wait times before or after appointments.

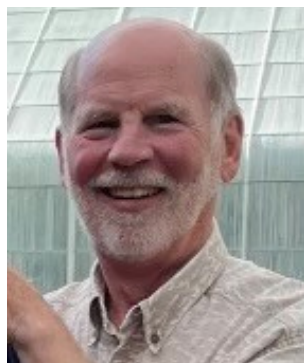
"And I have a lot of friends, but I hate to impose on them if I don't have to," Jeanette said. "The service with the church has been great."



Gift of a Lift became a formal ministry a few years ago, growing out of more casual connections, according to Sara Moran, Director of Congregational Care at Westwood. It can provide a ride to appointments outside the church or activities within the church.

"We have many members who don't drive but continue to live busy and active lives," she said. Now it's as simple as a call to the church, an email to the approximately 12 drivers, and a volunteer to accept and set things in motion. Drivers provide door-to-door service, often wrangling walkers and wheelchairs and offering an arm to lean on to ensure that riders get safely to appointments and resettled back home.

Some seek rides short-term while recovering from a surgery or physical setback; others are almost regulars. Some members of the Widows' Support Group use the service monthly, for example.



Sara's dad, John Scott, has been a volunteer driver for about four years. He drove a bus for a church in Fargo when he lived there. It was a natural fit when Westwood's call went out for volunteers.

He says the work is as much a gift to him as it is to the rider. Some weeks he's behind the wheel often, picking up people at home or at assisted living centers. Other weeks are slower, but he stays busy with other volunteer work for the Community Meal (he likes to do dishes) or the Properties Team.

"I call it intelligent selfishness," John said. "It makes me feel good, but I know I'm helping. I know the main concern isn't to make me feel good, but I feel useful."

Then there's the gift of getting to know other Westwood members. John starts conversations by asking where someone grew up, or about their family or where they met their husband.

"Some have great stories," said John.

Sara sees those talks as an added benefit of the ministry.

"There is rich conversation that occurs. I have heard equal stories from drivers and riders about the opportunity to connect, to feel needed or supported and to go through the rest of the day with more joy," she said.

Gift of a Lift drivers typically wait during appointments, so they are ready and available when the rider is ready to head home. John brings a book or sometimes just engages with others who are waiting.

"I think it's just a great mission. Westwood is such a giving church in so many ways. We have a growing younger population, but at the same time we have an aging population. It fits right in with the giving mission of the church," John said.

For Jeanette, a member of Westwood since 1959, it's been a blessing. "It's a wonderful service. Friends tell me, 'My gosh, I wish our church would do that'."

Ministry Minute

Westwood Funeral Reception Volunteers

“Serving Up Grace: Comforting Families Through Food and Friendship”

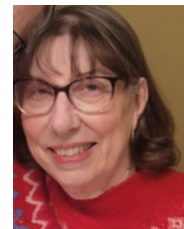


In the old days, we might have called them church basement ladies, but these days they are not in the basement – at least not at Westwood – and all ages and genders are welcome to join the team that produces Westwood’s funeral luncheons.

Anyone who has had to plan a funeral for a relative or friend knows it’s a bit like piecing together one of those crazy quilts. It takes a lot of shapes and colors and sizes to create a beautiful memory -- food, flowers, service, videos, music, readings, and memorials.

The funeral reception/luncheon team in Westwood’s kitchen is a strong contingent of about 40 volunteers who bring experience, dedication and a big helping of grace to the mission of tending to a grieving family and their friends while they share memories over a meal or a cup of coffee and a piece of cake.

“We’re trying to help someone who’s lost a loved one. We’re trying to make it easier for them so they can have their service and not worry about anything else...so they can walk in and everything is taken care of,” said Nancy Olesen, one of several kitchen team leaders for Westwood funeral receptions.



Nancy, Beverly Robinson, Marsha Flatgard and Donna Bushway serve as funeral reception team leaders. (Nancy is recovering from recent surgery and on hiatus now.) Most of them say the term “leader” primarily means they make sure a list of duties prepared by kitchen manager Ann Kisch is completed. They add that most of the seasoned volunteers already know what needs to be done or have favorite duties and go ahead. All are happy to help a new volunteer fit smoothly into the crew.

Carole Wogen, a long-time volunteer, recalls the days when a group of women would gather to make large casseroles – or hotdish, if you prefer – while others who couldn’t be on hand would drop off homemade cakes, bars or cookies or a Jell-O salad to feed hungry funeral guests. Volunteers would have to pick up groceries as well as build sandwiches and salads.

The process changed more than once over the years, and volunteers adjusted, Beverly said.

These days, the needs, circumstances, health & safety regulations and family expectations have changed, especially since the pandemic. Now Ann orders the required food. Westwood’s funeral planners help the family choose from a selection of meals that range from cake and beverages to a variety of sandwiches paired with chips, potato salad, fruit, vegetables, and cake.



The 6-8 volunteers needed for each funeral cut fruit, prepare veggies, make coffee and lemonade, cut cake slices and prep sandwich trays. They also decorate tables with flowers and napkins in favorite colors chosen by the family, and they prepare serving tables. Later, they are on hand to refill food trays and beverages and to clear tables and clean the kitchen.

Volunteers like Brenda Knutson and Patti Disch handle dishwashing duties, sometimes for hundreds of guests. DeLores Holman, a long-time member (deceased), even came for dishwashing duty once while on oxygen.

“It’s kind of a combination of pointing out what needs to be done and asking someone to do it,” said Beverly of leadership duties.

“I was afraid at first (to be a team lead), but most people who work funerals have done it before or been hostesses for family, and don’t need a whole lot of direction.”

Beyond the work, the women say they especially value the long-term friendships that have been built by working together in a kitchen. So far this year, they have served 23 funerals.

“Oh, we have a bit of fun as we work. There’s a lot of camaraderie,” Beverly said.

But most importantly, they enjoy working in an atmosphere of grace – giving and receiving it as they attend to a family’s needs.

“I love the appreciation from family and friends. It fills me,” said Marsha. “I feel so blessed that I can help and support people in this way.”



Ministry Minute

Sacred Sites Tour - Westwood Staff

"The More You Know, the More You Grow"



Westwood Lutheran's leaders grew in their knowledge of Native American and Minnesota history during a Minnesota Council of Churches Sacred Sites Tour earlier this month.

The tour, led by Pastor Jim Bear Jacobs, was part of the staff's ongoing race equity work, which addresses one of Westwood's Core Values.

Jacobs is co-director for Racial Justice at the Council and the founder of Minnesota Healing Stories, a 13-year-old program that develops dialogue, education, and healing events, particularly within faith communities. Healing Stories became part of the Council's resources about six years ago. Jacobs is a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Nation and has degrees in Pastoral Studies and Christian Theology.

The tour consists of visits to:

- A bluff overlooking the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, the site of the Dakota creation narrative.
- The Dakota Internment Camp at Fort Snelling, where 1,600 Dakota were held after the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War.
- Pilot Knob Hill, a burial site for the Dakota people.

Jacobs said the tour aims to raise consciousness of Minnesota's Indigenous history and interest in Native American history in general.

While most of the 11 who attended from Westwood had knowledge of Minnesota history, the tour provided them with broader and deeper insights and unique perspectives.

After the tour, Sara Moran shared her new understanding with her daughter but found that the 11-year-old had already been learning about the difficult and unjust pieces of Minnesota history as part of her social studies classes. "We need to know the true story if we ever want to make things better," she told Sara.



"I feel hopeful for our future knowing children are being educated with the full history," Sara said.

Others were also grateful for the broader perspective and insight.

"The sites we visited are places we all drive by – Pilot Knob Road, the Mendota Bridge, along the river. I've biked and hiked there, but I didn't realize the unjust and tragic events that have happened on that holy ground," wrote Pastor Tania Haber. "As the great-great-granddaughter of a Swedish pioneer, who settled on land that I found out was given to the Dakota in the Treaty of 1851, I wonder what he knew, what he wasn't told, how our country could be doing this, AT THE SAME TIME as we were fighting the Civil War to free slaves?!"

New knowledge comes with each visit for some.

"I've done this tour twice and learned different things each time. I was especially struck by the stark difference in treatment between two sacred burial grounds (Dakota and European) and the stark injustice in desecrating the Dakota site," wrote Pastor Sarah Scherschligt. "I was also moved by the importance of place. It is much more powerful to hear these stories in the places where they took place rather than from afar."

The sense of place is strong during visits to the sites, and the history of the 'granddaughter tree plantings' especially connected for Elsa Lee, Worship Team Director at Westwood. While one tree grows differently from the others, it still thrives. "(Pastor Jacobs) said something about how he now trusts that (the tree) will continue her beautiful, crooked journey towards the sun. And it made me feel like every day we all wake up and continue down our own crooked journey towards the sun."

The background on how the Dakota were exiled from Minnesota left a deep impression on Tricia Goede, Westwood's Director of Communications. "How will people ever know these stories if we don't share them with others?" she wrote. "What is more shocking, is that Minnesota laws technically state the Dakota people still are not legally supposed to settle or live here."

Ministry Minute

The Lovas Family: Letters of Care

“Handwritten Hope - Letters Bring Joy Across Generations”



Some things take a village to accomplish, but sometimes great things happen with just a few words or a child's hand-drawn picture.

Anna and Nick Lovas and their three young boys live a busy life. This summer, there were lots of youth baseball games, Camp WAPO for the boys, and a trip to the Paris Olympics for Anna and Nick to cheer on a friend.

But in September, as the family got back into their school routine, Anna sat down and wrote a letter to some special Westwood friends the family has made in the past few years. It was the kind of letter one might send at Christmas, but it talked about those summer adventures and what was happening in their lives right now.

“Brecken is at a new school as a 3rd grader but still has Spanish immersion. He's adapted well and enjoying it so far. Brecken's continuing break dance, playing baseball this fall, as well as soccer. Edison is a 6th grader at a new school, joining Jacob. Both are playing saxophone in their respective grade bands. Nick's back at Hopkins High School teaching (and helping coach the middle school cross-country kids), so he's back to school, too. Anna's working from home ...”

Anna writes the letters, tucks them in a unique card, and mails them off to several elderly or homebound Westwood friends. Some include a note or picture drawn by one of the boys.

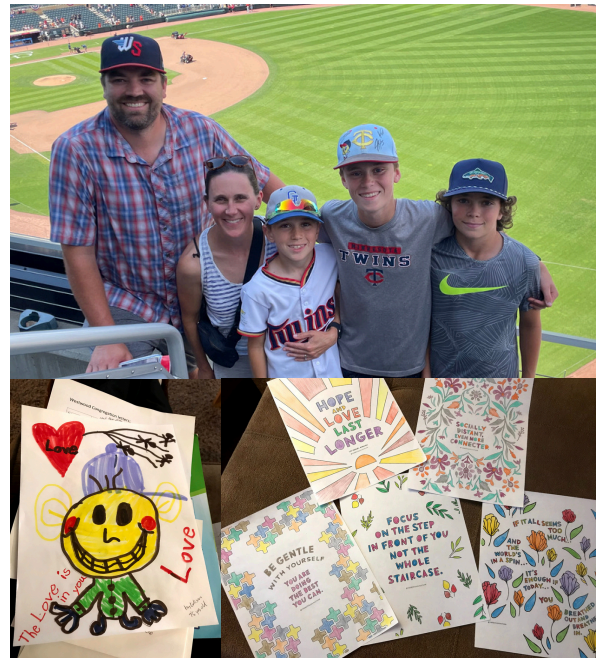
“A few years ago, Sara Moran, Director of Congregational Care, was looking for people to connect or visit with elders,” Anna said.

“I actually love doing that, but at the time, I couldn't do visits because of work and the kids' schedules. I've always loved writing notes and letters to cousins and friends, and that was something I definitely could do,” she said. “And I could get the kids to contribute too.”

So, she started writing, and the boys started drawing.

And then COVID hit. The Lovas letters became an even more important connection for many who were homebound during those long months.

“It helps to get a piece of mail that looks personal,” said LaVonne Grotta, a Westwood member since 1965 and a grateful recipient of the letters.

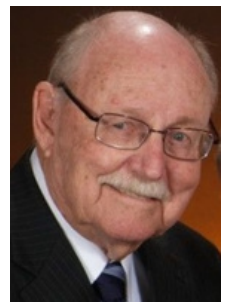


This mother of three and grandmother of four often watches Westwood's services via livestream. She greatly enjoys the connection the letters make with other Westwood members.

“I'm amazed that in their busy lives, they have time for me,” LaVonne said of the Lovas family.

Longtime member Jerry Stanton also loves being on the receiving end of the letters.

“They sort of adopted me,” said Jerry, who will turn 102 next month. “I don't know why they chose me. They're very good to me. They are very nice people.”



The cards, letters, and pictures make a difference for the Lovas family as well. “I think, if nothing else, (the boys) are really aware of the elders in our church. They're good at saying 'Hi' and connecting with older people at church,” said Anna. “It's intergenerational awareness and learning.”

“It's joyful for me and brings a little joy to others,” she added.



Ministry Minute

Community Meal Dessert Baker

“Westwood’s Cookie Crusader: The Sweet Side of Dean Almquist”



When Westwood member Dean Almquist says he raided his mom’s cookies, he doesn’t mean her cookie jar. He means her cookie recipes.



Dean bakes the majority of the desserts served weekly at Westwood’s Community Meals, which restarted Sept. 11 after a summer break. His contribution for this week’s kickoff meal – his mom’s gingersnaps – a favorite for many at the Wednesday night gatherings.

The Meal is popular, often drawing 200-250 to healthful meals that offer people a chance to meet neighbors and friends for conversation and camaraderie.

“It brings people together,” Dean said.

Other specialties in Dean’s repertoire are sugar cookies, snickerdoodles, coconut macaroons, lemon poppy seed muffins, and oatmeal lace cookies. He found the oatmeal lace recipe in his mom’s recipe box. He also looks for favorites in old church cookbooks, including those from Westwood.

Last year he helped Kitchen Manager Ann Kisch revise the Community Meal recipe book, adding some of his mother Jean Almquist’s recipes.

Almost every Tuesday, he turns up in the Westwood kitchen to bake sweet treats. He also turns out sugar cookies for the holiday dinner, and sometimes other bakers provide special treats like Rice Krispie bars or pizzelles.

“If we didn’t have a good, yummy dessert, I don’t know what we’d do,” said Ann, a food service specialist.

Dean had volunteered for other Community Meal duties but stepped up as baker about six years ago when the previous baker retired.



“I thought to myself, my mom was a good baker, and I like to bake,” Dean said about his decision.

He has been a member at Westwood since his parents, Jean and Wes, moved to the area from North Dakota in the mid-1960s. Both were devoted members and now rest in Westwood’s Columbarium.

As an adult he worked for an engineering firm and his most recent job was as a water resource specialist for Three Rivers Park District. But, Dean says, he made a tough decision at age 59 when both his parents died within a year of each other.

“I said, I’m done. I decided life is too short, so I went to human resources and retired.”

Freshwater biology was his specialty area. Now at 65, his specialty is freshwater fishing. He’s sometimes called upon to operate a grill for a Westwood event. He also bakes at home in addition to his time in front of the oven at Westwood. Dean and his girlfriend Louise Ogden enjoy his coffee cakes and cookies.

So, what’s Dean’s favorite from his mother’s kitchen?

“My mom used to make these meringues with chocolate chips and corn flakes.”

You could almost hear him lick his lips at the mention of them.

Ministry Minute

Grace Circle

“Many Hands Lighten Grace Circle's Workload”



What's that Biblical admonition about idle hands?

Well, there are no worries about that when you know all that Grace Circle members have their hands in.

The group puts together the “Laundry of Love” kits for homeless youth and STEP, and they assemble kits for newborns in other countries, as well as collecting and sorting the goods for each of those works of love.

Grace Circle organizes the Country Store, which is part of Westwood's Holiday Fair. The women gather up containers for a member who creates soup mixes that are sold as part of that event. In addition, baking days and personal contributions provide many of the jams and jellies, canned goods, breads, cookies, bars, and other baked goodies for the operation. Some contribute popular Scandinavian treats such as lefse, spritz, and krumkake.

Recently, when a member began dialysis, the women signed up to provide rides to and from treatment.

But at the heart of their commitment is the Bible study and monthly meetings that inspire many of their good works.

Grace Circle meets at 12:30 pm on the second Tuesday of each month from September through May. Each meeting includes a Bible study and discussion, a business meeting, and prayer requests. Average attendance at each meeting is 15-20 members, though there are more members who contribute to the work through donations or work at home.

Their monthly lessons come from Gather, a magazine produced by Women of the ELCA that includes a mix of devotions, stories, theological reflections, and sometimes inspiration for projects. The group also has two potluck luncheons each year: one in October and another in May.

Summer activities in the past have included visits to different churches, a trip to the Arboretum, and a tour of the Hindu temple in Maplewood. Those events have become more limited as the members have aged.

“Many of us are getting older, so we don't do as many field trips. It's hard to know if places are accessible for us,” said member Kay Elliasen.

They are eager to grow.

“The women are friendly, and it's a warm group,” said member Mary Ann Cameron. “It's a congenial group that welcomes new members.”



Members assemble a minimum of 100 Newborn Kits each year for Global Health Ministries. GHM sends the kits to other countries to encourage prenatal care and to make connections with mothers in the hope of encouraging vaccinations and well-baby checks. To assemble the kits, Grace members spend part of the year collecting infant hats, undershirts, diaper pins, and cloth diapers, receiving blankets, small bath towels, washcloths, and bars of Ivory soap. All of that is wrapped in a pillowcase.

“People donate (supplies), and we receive grants from Thrivent to buy what's needed. Cloth diapers are hard to come by,” Mary Ann said.

Grace Circle members assemble the kits and, when supplies are abundant, have put together over 200, according to Kay.

This year, the annual laundry kits were donated to STEP, the St. Louis Park Emergency Services Program. The kits consist of a small package of detergent and \$5 in quarters for laundry machines. The decision where the kits are donated is based on needs each year. Some other years, they are distributed to young people in unstable housing situations.

Grace members understand the mission they serve at and for Westwood. “It's outreach,” Kay said. “We do a lot, but in a group, it's easier to do.”

Ministry Minute

Westwood Sailing Trip 2024

“Inspiration and introspection amid the wind and the water”



Pastor Tania Haber offers a playful comparison when she talks to people about Westwood’s Sailing Ministry each summer. She tells sailor wannabes that the annual Lake Superior sailing trips are easier and more fun than Pastor Jason Van Hunnik’s Canoeing Ministry in the Boundary Waters because sailors don’t have to carry their boat. (He, of course, gives it back by tempting paddlers with descriptions of unparalleled days and nights amid the natural beauty of the Northland’s woods and waters.)

Earlier this month, 28 people with Westwood ties boarded four sailboats at Bayfield, Wisconsin, for three days and nights around Lake Superior’s 22 Apostle Islands. Most years the weekend includes a trek to a lighthouse and a talk by a park ranger, hours enjoying the sun and the water, morning and evening devotions created by Pastor Tania and a Sunday morning communion service on an island beach. Weather sometimes drives the agenda.

The boats vary in size from 37 to 43 feet and sleep 6-8 people. Every crew member pitches in, learning how to sail, helping to keep the boat operational, and cleaning and cooking.

Pastor Tania launched Westwood’s sailing excursions about 20 years ago. Over the years, the number of sailors and skippers has ebbed and flowed, but a mix of single, married, young and retired sign on for the trip. Some are novices, others are experienced sailors.

Listening and sharing – both sailing knowledge and personal insight – take the helm for the weekend. Morning devotions sometimes become conversations that last until lunch.

“Conversations are very deep, and people are very vulnerable in an environment like that, which kind of takes you out of everything you know,” Pastor Tania said. “That opens people’s spirits to know God is working in them.”



Josh Edgar and his wife, Erin, joined the sailing group shortly after they became Westwood members in 2011. He’s been on 11 trips and became certified as a skipper six years ago. Erin re-joined the group for this year’s adventure after a few years’ hiatus.

“Every trip is amazing. The Apostle Islands are an incredible place,” Josh said. “Gorgeous scenery. A great connection to God. It’s a great way to enjoy Lake Superior.” He enjoys helping others learn to sail. “Our skippers not only love sailing, but they love teaching. We’ll talk you through what it means and how the boat works and how the wind works the sails,” he said.

He treasures most, though, the deeper conversations and connections he makes with other Westwood members.

“I always feel refreshed (after a trip). I’ve been centered and just connected to the rest of the community by being on the sailboat on a big lake like that,” he said. “One of the most amazing things is that you have time and space to have conversations that are not time bound. ... I feel very connected to several generations at Westwood and have made lifelong friendships.”

At day’s end everyone climbs onto one of the sailboats to share evening devotions.

“Some people say the devotions are key to the trip,” Pastor Tania said.

This year’s theme was Sabbath – connecting to God, nature, each other and one’s inner self. “Three days, six different devotions. It made me realize the whole trip is the Sabbath,” she said.

Ministry Minute

Westwood & the ELCA Youth Gathering “Explore, Examine, Excite, Experiment, Extol”



Seven Westwood youth experienced all of that and more at Created To Be, the ELCA's 2024 National Youth Gathering in the heat and humidity of July in New Orleans.

Alison Broman, Coordinator of the Children, Youth, and Families Ministry for Westwood, and volunteers Kristina and Michael Seehusen were adult leaders for the group.

Several others with Westwood connections were on hand as part of the national planning and execution teams for the event. Service opportunities and fellowship directed at having social justice, mental health and anti-racism conversations were offered through youth activities, worship, and Bible study. Participation was 16,000 strong this year.

Worship services in the Smoothie King Center opened and closed the national gathering, but the three days in between focused on opportunities and activities around the city. Divided into groups of about 5,000, the teens rotated into Synod Day, Interactive Learning Day, and Accompaniment Day.

Westwood's journey began with a Synod Day that started with a worship service including other Minnesotans and ELCA Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. It also had an exploration of the French Quarter and a scavenger hunt using a phone app.

Westwood's Dannica Olsen led the national team for planning the Synod Days. Her team included Westwood's Ann Sundermeyer and Elsa Lee on the implementation team. Ian and Rachel McConnell, who have strong Westwood ties, also served on planning teams.

“We were responsible for just over 5,000 kids per day doing our program,” Dannica said.

The aim was to engage all five senses. “It wasn't just ‘take a photo of something.’ It was, find out why it's significant. Look at a statue of a jazz musician. Look up one of their songs. Create a music video,” she said. “Our intention in a place with such a huge, rich history and culture was to make sure the youth were experiencing what New Orleans had to offer.”

The Westwood group's second day was Interactive Learning at the New Orleans Convention Center. It offered six football fields full of stations for sensory learning, photo ops, game play, merchandise shopping, music, and activities.

The third day was an Accompaniment Day focused on action, advocacy, and awareness regarding mental health and tools and techniques to bring back to Westwood and its larger community.

Westwood teen Luke Rowan points to several highlights, including the large worship services, the scavenger hunt, and the end-of-the-day Community Life parties. Those included dancing, snacks, and card games with other teens at the hotels hosting guests for the Gathering. “I made some connections with other students from Westwood I didn't know fully and now they are very good friends,” Luke said.

He also enjoyed being a part of the huge gatherings at the convention center. “I have a new-found appreciation for church,” he said.

While the aim is to inspire youth, adults feel the connections of Created to Be as well. “I attended the gathering twice in New Orleans as a youth,” said Alison. “It was a formative experience for me.”

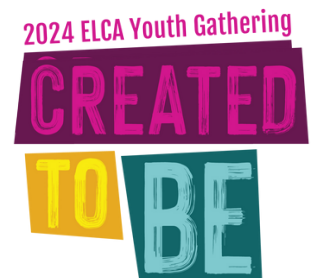
Dannica has attended eight of the triannual gatherings as a youth or adult leader. This is her first time on the national planning committee.

“The youth gathering has been a significant event in my faith life since I was a teenager. It was my call to ministry,” she said. “To be on the other side of the event was so special. Hopefully, we helped create that kind of experience for some teenagers who might be in leadership roles down the road.”

Just being present for the massive worship services is inspirational, according to Kristina Seehusen. “I thought it was special to have an experience where they were surrounded by thousands of youths from around the country, creating bonds with other people and having the opportunity to worship in an extremely large community, and listen to speakers on pressing topics from social justice to resilience in their lives.”

Worship with 16,000 is hard for young people to imagine before they experience it. “Westwood doesn't look like the Smoothie King Center. There's no way for me to explain (to youth) what worshipping with 16,000 other people is like,” Alison said. “That it's pretty amazing!”

In 2027, the gathering will take place in Minneapolis. Learn more www.elca.church/gathering/about/what-is-the-gathering.



Ministry Minute

Coffee, Conversation, and Connections

“Westwood Puts a Kick in a Cup of Morning Joe”



Westwood took the morning coffee klatch to a new level this year with its Coffee, Conversations, and Connections group. It was so successful that the group will take it up a notch when programming resumes in the fall.

Pastor Tania Haber gives credit for the kicked-up coffee break to Westwood member Penne Sewall.

The first two months of this summer were an experiment to gauge interest, so session topics were left open to those who showed up. But the Thursday morning gatherings quickly evolved from simple socializing to conversations about life, retirement, grandchild care, travel, health, and more. Participants shaped the agenda.



Penne Sewall

“The group tends to skew older because it meets during the day,” Penne said. But within the group, there is a diversity in where people are on their faith and life journeys.

Some are newly retired or thinking about retirement, while others have been retired for a couple of decades. Their interests are similar, but their stage in life is different.

Initially, about 60 showed up for coffee. Over the season, attendance shifted weekly, and an average of 20-25 people showed up each time to share a beverage and a bit of chatter.

John Stark attended almost every session. He’s been doing the hard work of making healthcare, financial, and personal adjustments as he adapts to retirement. And he’s begun searching for his next chapter.

He joined because he was interested in Pastor Tania’s Third Chapter ministry and wanted to meet people. “I thought it would be a good friendship thing,” he said, “...and there were treats!”

The sessions have provided valuable insights on retirement and other topics.

“Everybody is in different situations. They’re telling you to do bucket list things while you still can. People’s travels were a really good conversation,” he said. “Someone had just come back from a trip and talked about how they arranged it. Another week, we did a computer scam thing, and that was really good. We’re making it up as we go along,” he said. “We like being around each other.”

That suits Pastor Tania and Penne Sewall.

“One component of the Third Chapter is ‘What’s my life going to look like?’” said Pastor Tania. Westwood’s vision statement includes a mission to “create connections so we can know each other and feel like we belong.” “This just nails that one,” she said.

Penne likes the group’s recognition of a shift in priorities. “There is a change of paradigm in what it means to age. This is a productive time of life and a place where we can make a difference,” she said. “We can take some of our life experiences and wisdom we’ve gained from the challenges and good times of our lives and share them with others.”

She also sees an advantage to a Westwood-based group that learns from each other. “We have the luxury of bringing the faith perspective to this. It makes such a difference that God’s presence is in our life as we go through life,” she said.

The group brainstormed ideas and topics for the next round of sessions, which starts the first Thursday in September. Instead of weekly meetings, they will meet twice a month, and sessions will include guest presenters, panel discussions, research literature, videos, and TED talks.

Sara Moran, Director of Congregational Care, and Pastor Tania will be the group’s Westwood staff liaisons in the future.



John Stark

Ministry Minute

Westwood Prayer Shawl Ministry

“We Say a Little Prayer for You - knit, purl, pray”



A Westwood team has a talent for turning a few stitches into a lot of comfort. The Prayer Shawl Ministry, approximately a dozen members, work diligently from their homes throughout the year to knit or crochet soft, cozy shawls. The shawls are gifted in various ways to people facing a difficult diagnosis, grief, upheaval, or uneasy changes in their lives. Some stitchers also produce the soft, white shawls given to the newly baptized at Westwood. Baptized children (and adults) are wrapped in the shawls during the ceremony.

Sara Moran, Westwood's Director of Congregational Care, maintains the supply and often suggests a prayer shawl to those who want to show their love for someone struggling. A Westwood group might gift one to a church member with new challenges, and pastors might also gift one during a visit. “They are not only for Westwood members but for whoever can benefit,” Sara said.

A tag attached to each one reads, “Made with Love by a Member of the Westwood Prayer Shawl Team. God Loves You.”

Julie Arnott has been part of the prayer shawl ministry for at least eight years. The church provides the yarn and the patterns, but most of the work is done individually. The team is not limited to Westwood members.

Julie and Sara work together each year to choose the yarns the group will need. Funds are part of Westwood's Caring Ministry budget.



Several recipients of prayer shawls.



Julie Arnott

“The idea is that while you are knitting or crocheting, you are praying for the person who will receive the shawl,” Julie said. “We don't know who the shawls will go to while we're making them.”

“When knitting the prayer shawls (which are in colors), we ask God to provide healing of the body, mind, and spirit to the person, and we pray for the love of Jesus to surround and support the person,” she said.

“When knitting baptism shawls (white yarn), we ask that the person receiving it be filled with the Holy Spirit and [overall] for their lives as a new member of the body of Christ.”

Distribution of the healing shawls isn't limited to members. “If someone says, ‘I have a friend who could really use one,’ we give them one,” Julie said.

Margo Chesley has been part of the group for at least 15 years and remembers when it met regularly at the church.

“I often imagine the person I'm knitting for and the comfort it may bring someone who is in a really tough spot right now,” Margo said. “I think it's the sort of ministry that one can do by themselves, and you may think you're stuck in your home and feel isolated, but if you're creating something like this that is going to provide comfort for another [person], it's a way to get outside of yourself.”



Margo Chesley

Margo recalls a friend of a different faith who was flabbergasted by Westwood's generosity in giving her a shawl as she faced a difficult time and the comfort it brought her for many years.

“As I too have gotten older, I've become aware of how comforting the shawls are around your shoulder,” Margo said. Julie's perspective is similar.

“I think for many people who like to knit or crochet, it feels like a wonderful thing to use a skill that you have to help someone get through a difficult time or celebrate an event,” Julie said. “We get good feedback from people, and people are really thankful for them.”

Recipients, their relatives, or friends often send notes of thanks and pictures to the group. Sara shares them when the team members meet quarterly during the year to connect with each other, share a cup of coffee, and stitch a while together.

The prayer shawl team represents a wide age group and is always looking for more people to join the group!

Ministry Minute

Quilting Ministry

“Stitched in Love”



They look like quilts, but there's more than warmth wrapped up in the blankets that Westwood's quilting team creates. The 100 to 150 quilts produced and given away each year provide caring, love, and support to those who receive them.

“And, of course, the quilts keep them warm,” said Mari-Claire Dart, Programs Director at STEP of St. Louis Park, an organization that receives many of Westwood's quilts for its St. Louis Park clients who arrive in need of food, clothing, housing, and other resources. “They are so well made, it kind of becomes an heirloom for that family,” said Mari-Claire. “Because they are handmade, it just makes people feel special. It's a nice addition to someone's home.”

Westwood's graduating seniors were the most recent recipients of the quilting group's work. Each senior chooses a quilt from the supply as they move on to the next phase of their lives.

Westwood 2024 Graduation Seniors Quilt Blessing



“Others who have been gifted the women's handiwork are nursing homes, a ministry project in Cameroon, a program that works with Hispanic groups, and a family starting over after a fire in their home,” said Karen Pitkanen, who has quilted at Westwood since the 1960s. “If someone on the Caring Response Team sees that someone could use a quilt, we gift them one,” Karen said.

In years past, the quilts were part of a Lutheran World Relief project, but because so many other churches participate in that program, Westwood has shifted its donations to more local connections and programs, like STEP.

In another example, quilters at Calvary Lutheran in Edina were committed to providing quilts to a nursing home and needed 6-8 additional quilts. Westwood filled the gap. When Calvary closed, Westwood's quilt program received a generous gift from a Calvary endowment.

“How grateful we were to get that gift,” Karen said. The group also has received Holiday Fair grants for supplies.

These days, about 14 women participate regularly, while about 20 are on the contact list. Donations of fabric have kept Westwood's supply strong. “We've gotten such a large donation of fabric from mothers, aunts, and grandmothers cleaning out their supplies, that we all kind of laugh,” Karen said, noting that many on the quilt team are older and at least three are in their 90s. “We don't think we'll live long enough to use it all!”

Some quilters sew the tops at home after “shopping” in Westwood's closet for fabric or take supplies with them to winter getaways. The group comes together the last Tuesday and Wednesday of each month (except December) to cut new quilt pieces, enjoy conversation, and tie the knots that turn tops, batting, and backing into the highly sought-after and much-beloved blankets.

As much as the quilting team is helping others, its members also help each other. Team members sign cards for those who are ill or have changes in circumstances, and members check up on each other when necessary.

Karen was told by one visitor who observed their camaraderie, “There's a lot more than quilting going on in this room.”

Ministry Minute

Parents' Night Out

"Getting Time for Themselves"



Everybody needs a break from their routine now and then.

For parents, that "routine" can get pretty crazy when life revolves around children's extracurriculars, homework, family commitments, church activities, household demands, work schedules, and the list goes on and on...

During the busiest times, the stretches between parents' breaks can get longer and longer. Westwood stepped up recently to ensure some of its parents got at least one of those necessary breaks. Nine adults and 13 youth volunteers (grades 7-12) found ways to keep over 50 children ages 3 to 10 busy while parents had a three-hour window to do as they wished, go out to dinner, clean the house, or even enjoy some quiet relaxation.

Alison Broman and Ann Sundermeyer, team members of Westwood's Children, Youth, and Family (CYF) Ministry, organized the event, which included art activities, outdoor time, games, and snacks.



"Parents' Night Out is a gift to parents," said Dannica Olsen, who took advantage of the "me" time offered by the activity. Dannica is Westwood's Director of Youth Ministry for grades six to 12. "It's an incredible way to support parents and a fun time for kids to be in a place they love with their church friends."

Parents' Night Out was offered in October 2023 and recently in April 2024. As the CYF team plans for the next program year, Ann Sundermeyer commented that Fall and Spring options are already in the works.

"It was well received by parents, and kids had a blast—they were excited to be there! We learned what worked and where we can adjust for the future."

Parents' Night Out demonstrates Westwood's values on many fronts and its commitment to families. It serves not only parents but also allows children to play and socialize with church friends. For older youth, it offers an experience to volunteer, and it reveals Westwood as a community dedicated to serving others and building friendships.

"Parents' Night Out supports parents in a way that allows them to enjoy a bit of time together or to do what they need to do without kids around. It is important -- a value statement for sure!" Dannica said.

Claire Patterson, 16, was one of the volunteers who supervised preschool children at Parents' Night Out. She kept them busy with coloring projects and a lot of time spent playing in the park.

"I love working with kids and babysitting. The children are really fun to play with," said Claire, who has also worked with Vacation Bible School. She recommends similar volunteer opportunities. "The evening gave parents a nice break where they could be away for a while and relax."

Ministry Minute

Westwood's Gardening Team "God's Coloring Book"

It takes teamwork to make Westwood the neighborhood showpiece it is! The colorful blooms and smartly trimmed shrubs and bushes that greet members, visitors, and passersby require regular and frequent TLC, and Westwood's garden team is on the job weekly.

Gordy and Linda Meyer organize the team of Jana Mjor, Rogene Bergquist, Gloria Kruppstadt, Julie Scroggins, and Debbie Waldorf. "And husbands when needed," said Linda.

Each team member chooses an area. Jana works in the east garden and south island. Gloria tends the west end; Rogene, Julie and Debbie handle the courtyard. Gordy and Linda do the north island, hosta garden, south and north sides.

That's a lot of ground to cover, and the team would welcome help.

This year has added work as the team shifts Westwood to plants and designs that further support Westwood's environmental sustainability initiative. "We are moving away from the annuals because they require a lot more water," said Gordy, who has Master Gardener training and a Master's degree in Soil Science. "Mostly, we want to ensure we're pushing and moving toward perennials, bushes, and shrubs."

Don't expect that to be dull or boring, though. "There will be lots of texture and differences in size and shape," Linda said. The changes could make Westwood an example for others.

"As we get into environmental sustainability, maybe we can be a bit of a leader in the neighborhood," Gordy said. "We don't need to have lots of water if we do our planting carefully."

The work doesn't end with planting, pruning, and weeding. The team has installed 315 bags (and counting) of mulch this year. Their supplies are paid for through a grant from a Westwood Foundation-managed fund created by Stanley Crist to honor his wife, Esther. Crist was the Meyers' mentor and worked for years on Westwood's gardens.

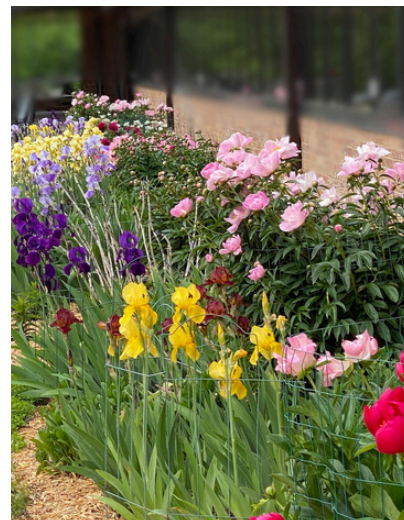
That benevolence continues with the gardening team, which puts in many hours every week to maintain the landscape.

"We want the church to have beautiful grounds. It creates an inviting environment and a welcoming feel," Gordy said. "It creates a positive image of the church; we hope together with the Community Meal, it works together and invites others in."

Jana Mjor has helped in the gardens for about ten years. She admires Gordy and Linda's work, their vast knowledge of plants, shrubs and trees, (and weeds!), and their keen eye for what type of flowers or shrubs would complement each other and create interest. They have shared many of their own plants from their beautiful gardens at home by transplanting them to the Westwood gardens.

Jana sometimes tends to the Westwood gardens in the late afternoons or evenings when the temperatures are cooler. "So many people are out walking with their families or dogs and almost always tell me how beautiful the gardens are. For me, I feel God in this space. Listening to the birds sing and all the sounds of nature...I find it peaceful and meditative."

Gordy and Linda feel that link to the Lord, as well. "In the Bible, humankind began its journey in a garden. We feel that God would like gardens to be a part of our continuing journey, and Westwood and its gardens can help in that role," they wrote recently. "Nature and gardens are God's coloring book."



Jana
Mjor



Gordy & Linda
Meyer



Ministry Minute

WECC & Rise Early

“Go Tell It in Vancouver”



World leaders in childcare and education recently got a glimpse of Westwood's success in the field at the World Forum on Early Care and Education in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Kellee Nelson, Director of Westwood's Early Childhood Center (WECC), and Kylie Cooper, Director of Rise Early Learning Center at Rise on 7 affordable housing development in St. Louis Park, were invited to share their work as part of a conference panel.

"We got to present our story on how the community of Westwood Lutheran Church made this huge impact on the local community of St. Louis Park, Kellee said.

She also said, "The conference's primary aim is to build relationships that expand perspectives, provoke new thinking, and share stories that inspire different ways of thinking about how people can come together to create something really beautiful for the community."

With its 40-year history of quality childcare and education, Westwood has been a shining example as it committed to developing a similar program tied to St. Louis Park's efforts to provide quality affordable housing.

The two programs use a Reggio-inspired and nature-based curriculum. WECC's program, which serves 97 children, is faith-based, accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and earns the highest Parent-Aware rating.

The Rise Early Learning program, which is in its first year, currently serves 43 children and has begun work toward those same accreditations. Its core effort is in family-focused program design, braiding housing, wrap-around supports, and high-quality childcare. About 40 percent of its families pay privately, and 60 percent receive financial support through state and federal subsidies or local scholarships. Rise Early provides an inclusive and anti-bias approach to early childhood and welcomes and celebrates everyone from every background, Kylie said.

Nearly 700 people from 54 countries attended the Vancouver conference, which also offered information and discussions on race, equity, trauma, climate change, AI, and what those topics might look like with early childhood education.

"Our common cause is to help children and families. As an educator, what I appreciate about this conference is that we stay plugged into current topics and issues, and we can bring that back to the work we do, inspire change, build on our practices, and strengthen our program," Kellee said. "More than just a conference on early childhood education, it's a community."

Those attending the panel's presentation were particularly interested in Westwood's collaborative model for connecting housing and childcare and what that did to build community support for the Rise Early program.

Kellee and Kylie pointed to Westwood leaders' work with other community leaders on gathering and examining data on affordable housing needs, community meetings, and WECC's long-standing reputation for quality education and care of the community's children.

"We use quality practices, and we are a model program for others," said Kellee, who has directed the WECC program for about 10 years. "We were comfortable taking the lead."

At the conference, Kellee and Kylie had the added benefit of connecting with experts in the curriculum they offer and authors of relatable books. They even made a connection for Westwood's Tanzania project.

"I was excited to meet an individual I've followed for years. This is someone I looked up to in my career and really focused on in my professional work, degrees and certifications with regard to the quality of care, wellness of staff, and compensation," Kylie said. "Now we're actually putting some of that work into action."

Kellee's takeaway: "I think attending this conference really allows us to share our ministry beyond our church and local community as well as learn from others."



Ministry Minute

Community Meal

“Setting a Growing Table”



“When you have more than you need, build a longer table, not a higher fence.”

A sign that bears this challenge has a prominent home in Westwood’s kitchen these days. It was a gift from members Nancy and John Scott. Nancy and John are long-term volunteers, and Nancy has led kitchen crews. “It is a fitting reflection of our weekly Community Meal effort,” said Ann Kisch, Westwood’s Kitchen Coordinator and food specialist.

What began as outreach has become Westwood’s growing table – available to all in the community, members, and non-members. These days the table still embraces those in need, but it has extended to include busy families, retirees, the elderly, people who work from home, youth, musicians, new members, potential members, and church volunteers. Just how many are at that table? On some Wednesday nights, the count hits 200, others 250, and still others closer to 300. The top was a holiday dinner—turkey with ALL the trimmings—that provided 325 meals.

“Jesus said ‘Love one another,’ no exceptions,” said Carole Wogen, a volunteer team leader with the program, who, along with Stephanie Seubert, has volunteered in various forms almost since its beginning. “This is what God is calling us to do, feeding the hungry and providing socialization for people. For some, the socialization is as important as the meal,” Carole said.

Ann also manages the daily lunches for Westwood’s Early Childhood Center and coordinates the Community Meal teams. At least 26 people are needed each week. Some are from Confirmation classes or youth doing community service work, but she has a strong core of regulars and willing reserves. “It’s amazing that it gets pulled off each week,” Ann said. “It’s like having company for dinner once a week, and you never know how many are coming.” How many sometimes depends on the meal. Taco, pizza, and spaghetti meals rounded out with fruit and veggies, and dessert are the most popular!

People love being part of the work. Some have specialty jobs. Others, like Donna Bushway, who manages the meals’ beverages, consistently show up to wash dishes or prepare the donated bread. Dean Almquist bakes dessert for almost every meal. In 2023, he turned out 6,254 cookies, 296 muffins, and 500 servings of cake.

Volunteer Judy Christiansen is in her second year as a volunteer chef. She looked for volunteer opportunities after her 2019 retirement. After a hint to Pastor Jason that she liked to cook and bake, he sent her in the direction of the Community Meal. She was a helper for several months before she claimed the spatula and ladle. Her prior work in computer technology involved project management and application management in the retail grocery business, so she’s well equipped to plan, order and cook for large groups. Her parents and Godmother made and served food for weddings. Judy cut fruit, made chicken salad, and filled fruit bowls at an early age. “I like to think there’s a little part of Mom in there with me when I cook,” Judy said. “I’m not real good at following recipes. I cook like my mom. But I’m good at documenting things,” she said. “If I create the recipe, we debrief and figure out if we bought the right amount.” She has added recipes for tater tot hotdish and cheesy potatoes to the mix, but she has a different favorite.

“When we do the holiday meal and make gravy and dressing from scratch, that’s probably my favorite.” Judy also makes cranberry sauce from fresh cranberries for the meal. “We served 10 quarts of it,” Ann said. A few other stats: They cut sixteen 20-pound turkeys basted with 16 sticks of butter, used 10 rolls of sausage and 20 sticks of butter in the stuffing, and 20 gallons of milk in the gravy.

The church pays for the food Ann orders for the meal, always aiming to be economical. That’s supplemented by specific donations to the program, free-will donations at the meal, the Cause of the Month funding, and a Holiday Fair grant. This year, the Holiday Fair grant will buy more highchairs for the growing number of children.

Judy likes the idea that the meal fills a great community need and a Westwood mission. “We’re helping others, bringing people together, helping moms and dads. We’re promoting the family. It helps with the seniors, making sure we care for people, that we take good care of them, and help them eat healthy, well-balanced meals. The food is not fried. The meals are well-rounded with fruit, protein, and veggies,” Judy said, “and we’re having fun.”

This season’s final meal is May 22, 2024, though the program will also provide a meal for the Pride event on June 26. The Community Meal will resume after Labor Day.

Ministry Minute

Men's Bible Study

"Committed to Learning and Sharing"



Sometimes, a Westwood group formed for one purpose reshapes itself a bit as time and interests change.

That's sort of what happened with the Men's Bible Study group at Westwood. Yes, the men still study Bible texts, but they have broadened their scope as Westwood's missions adapt to modern needs and interests and as members face life changes.

"Originally it was formed around the idea of staying active and going deeper in relationship with other church members to become a community. The group of about a dozen older, retired men meets the first and third Wednesday mornings at Westwood," said Sara Moran, Director of Congregational Care for Westwood.

"These days, we mostly read books and discuss them," said Craig Halverson, who helps organize the meetings at Westwood. During COVID, the group met and chatted on Zoom. The books are related to religious topics or topics of particular interest to Westwood. Most recently, the group's discussions have been drawn from "The Planet You Inherit: Letters to My Grandchildren When Uncertainty's a Sure Thing," by Larry L. Rasmussen. The book complemented Westwood's Lenten focus on environmental sustainability (a recently added core value).



"We will be on a book for a couple of months," Halverson said, noting the group has also spent several weeks on a "Moses" series and the search for a Moses for this day and age.

The group goes beyond its interest in faith study, self-improvement, a taste of good morning coffee, and a sweet treat. "It's also social interaction among members that is probably the most significant, but we do appreciate the information that we gain from reading the books and the ideas that are expressed," Halverson said.

"We are not sticklers for sticking to the topic, though. We wander off frequently," he said with a chuckle.



Craig Halverson



Ministry Minute

Every Meal

“Fighting Child Hunger in Our Community”



If you knew fighting childhood hunger was as easy as carrying a few bags of nutritious food to classrooms once or twice a month, would you step up?



Longtime Westwood members Connie and Dick Strandberg answered yes to that question a few years ago when they volunteered to be part of Westwood’s community outreach through the Every Meal program. “It sounded interesting from the standpoint of being able to be part of feeding students and their families,” said Dick Strandberg.

[Every Meal](#), based in Roseville, sources food for packages that can be distributed to Twin Cities students’ families when they don’t have access to school lunch programs on weekends, extended holiday breaks, and during the summer. In partnership with Aldersgate Methodist Church, Westwood provides meals for about 26 families at St. Louis Park’s Aquila Elementary School during the school year. Volunteers like the Strandbergs ensure those food packs are distributed to the right classrooms and students weekly. Bags and the distribution guide are color-coordinated to ensure each student gets a bag relevant to their family’s tastes and needs.

Blue bags are focused on East African foods.

Green bags contain a wider variety of foods.

Orange bags have a Latino focus.

Purple bags are more relevant to Southeast Asian tastes.

Yellow bags contain more ready-to-eat, easy-to-open items that work best in limited cooking or prep spaces.

Families register for the program at the beginning of the school year, but the number changes during the year as new families arrive or families experience changes. Each bag has five or six items that provide four-weekend meals, said Bethany Michiels, who is one of Every Meal’s coordinators in the Twin Cities area and the Westwood team’s connection. For extended holidays, more food is added.

“The work is easy,” said Brenda Knutson, who coordinates Westwood’s effort. On Thursdays, the appointed volunteers visit the area at Aquila where Every Meal stores its inventory. They load the required bags on a cart and distribute them to the designated classrooms. “I feel like the schools are stretched,” Knutson said. “We’re helping those kids get food that they wouldn’t get on weekends, and it’s helping right in our community.”

Most of the funds for the program come from Westwood’s Cause of the Month collection for the program, grants from other Westwood programs, or special donations.

Dick Strandberg also likes the discretion the program uses to respect students’ privacy. “It’s an anonymous program. The teachers know the children’s backpacks,” he said. “It’s not done out in front of other students.” The work is also rewarding for volunteers, Strandberg said. “The teachers are always thankful.”



Ministry Minute

Dads of Young Children Retreat

Grand Marais, MN



An ad for Westwood's annual Dads of Young Children Retreat might proclaim:

Hike and bike! Hear inspiring stories! Learn from peers! Tap the experts! Share ideas! Relax!

Those kinds of benefits drew eight dads to the retreat at Jim and Ruthanne Vos' place on Devil's Track Lake near Grand Marais earlier this month. Jim Vos and Pastor Jason Van Hunnik are the founders of the 8-year-old retreat, which is focused on dads of children in sixth grade and younger.

The aim: "Get some perspective," said Kurt Koubal, the father of four -- ages 9, 7, 5, and 3 -- and a participant in this year's retreat. "It's a great time for relaxation, and it is really good community building with a peer group. It allows you to connect at a level you wouldn't normally get just over coffee," said Koubal, who counts on the longer and deeper relationships he develops with other dads. "You can address different questions you wouldn't normally ask," he said.

Vos helped develop the retreat for just those reasons. "It's not a structured or scripted event," he said. "It's about developing relationships in a meaningful way that men might do differently than women." The dads arrive at various times on Friday and enjoy an evening of good food and relaxation. Vos does the cooking. The group spends Saturday in activities of their choice such as games, cards, hikes, cross-country skiing, and even the sauna. Saturday evening is reserved for digging deeper, sharing, insight, and reflection led by Pastor Jason. The content really focuses on the guys' vocation as fathers and husbands.

"One of the key features is that we're all in this together, and we can kind of learn and ask questions and struggle together," Koubal said. "(Pastor) Jason and Jim (Vos) can give us perspective." He appreciates that the group shares both the joys and the struggles of parenting. "We are not all the same age, but we are all in that same period. We can struggle together and rejoice together," Koubal said. "It's comforting."

The longer-term relations formed are of great importance to the success of the retreats. "Westwood is committed to having different entry points for people to build authentic relationships that are based on honesty and real-life journeys and how our faith connects to that. This is one of them," Pastor Jason said. Vos witnesses that success in the monthly men's coffee group and at Sunday services. "When I see these dads looking for each other in church the next week or the next month, then I know we created relationships that matter."



Ministry Minute

Ethical Wills

“Sharing My Legacy”



Westwood’s Ethical Will sessions are helping people identify and share their ideals and beliefs, both for their sense of clarity and as a legacy gift to family and friends.

“I find much value in being intentional in life. This process is another way to live with intention, to be thoughtful about priorities and values of life,” said Randy Romsdahl. He and his wife, Diana, are crafting ethical wills and share the experience with the small group of Westwood members they meet with monthly. “In this last third of life (intention) becomes paramount, Romsdahl said.

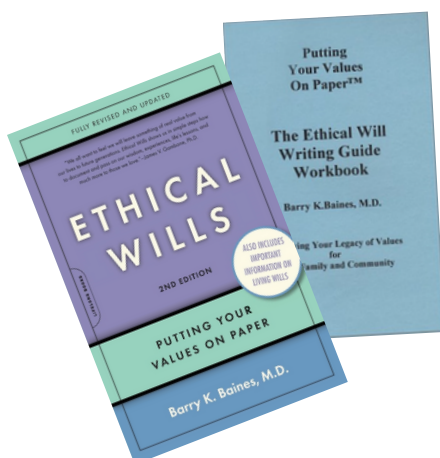
Westwood’s program, organized and adapted by Pastor Tania Haber, is structured around Dr. Barry K. Baine’s book and workbook, “Ethical Wills, Putting Your Values on Paper.” Initially, it brought together about 50 people. Others asked later for access to the materials. The in-person sessions, weekly writing prompts, and at-home work provide pathways to answers for those interested in defining what is important to them, the lessons that shaped them, and the beliefs and standards they value.

“Four small groups are meeting to encourage each other and share their writing as they go,” Pastor Tania said. Others work independently. She emails the larger group two questions or writing prompts weekly. “Our ‘bookend’ to this will be a Legacy Sunday on May 5, 2024, where a few people will be sharing a little of their work,” she said.

For Karoline Pierson, a 20-year-plus member of Westwood, the process has been enlightening. “I thought I would do this for my family and my son, however...It turns out I’m doing it for me. What I’m choosing to include is what I’m interested in and how it aligns with my values. I plan to read it and record it so my family has my voice for the future. I really like that idea.”

People often work to create a financial or estate plan, a funeral plan, and a health care plan for later years, Pastor Tania noted. But many don’t consider a written legacy of values and priorities. Pierson said she plans to pair her work with other late-life planning.

Romsdahl said he has thought about his values and priorities before, but through this process, he’s been forced to think about them in a way they can be delineated. “This process has a way of introducing some accountability.” He also values the peripheral benefits of the search. “The monthly sharing of this process will be another way of deepening our friendships and relationships,” said Romsdahl. He is the father of two grown sons and also grandparents nine children.



Ministry Minute

Westwood Spirit Squad

“Rallying Behind the Next Generation: Join the Squad”



Get out your pompoms! We're building a Westwood cheer squad!

What do we want? Connection!

When do we want it? Now!

Who will we cheer? Westwood's young athletes, mathletes, scientists, musicians, artists, actors, engineers and motorheads.

Who can help? Adults who like to follow and support the activities of Westwood youth in grades 6-12.

We promise: No splits, no body pyramids, no cartwheels or flips required.

Organizers of a Westwood cheering squad hope to create a group willing to turn out at school, college, or community events to show support and connection for Westwood youth.

“We're gathering (activity) schedules, talking to parent groups, and gathering volunteers,” said Amy Briggs, who has been designated captain of the squad after helping form the idea. “We're trying to figure out how it will look. For instance, will there be buttons or t-shirts or whatever?”

Amy, 52, who joined Westwood in 2016, said she believes it's important to support youth and that important connections can happen that way.

“The purpose of the Spirit Squad is so youth can know that somebody in our faith community cares about them and is taking time out of their lives to watch and cheer them on,” Amy said. “I always thought it was cool when somebody showed up (to my activities) that was not my mom and dad. When my youth director showed up, that was special.”

She believes adults modeling a connection between faith and community for youth is key.

“[Kids need this support] especially now, post COVID,” Amy said, “because they spent so much of their earlier years doing school online and felt disconnected.”

Organizers aim to keep it simple, voluntary, and about all kinds of activities, not just athletic events.

If a person (or people) from the cheer squad likes school or community theater, they can focus on that activity. People who prefer sports, academic challenges, or music can be on hand for Westwood students in those areas.



Westwood member Luanne Bachman is a model for recognition and encouragement of Westwood youth within and outside of Westwood. She has written notes of encouragement to Westwood students after seeing a concert or performance they were in.

“I wanted to encourage these kids in things that expand their lives,” Luanne said. “Hopefully, it increases their good feelings about themselves to know they are recognized by other people.”

For now, Westwood Spirit Squad organizers are working on ways to identify Westwood youth and the activities they're involved in. They need volunteers to join them in shaping the squad.

“We want it to be fun,” Amy said. “There's a mountain biking team at one of the schools. I heard they ring cow bells to cheer on the riders.”

To become part of the team, contact [Amy Briggs](#) or [Dannica Olsen](#).

Ministry Minute

Women's Study Group Spreading Support in Many Directions



Sometimes, the work of one Westwood group enhances the mission of another.

Westwood's Caring Response Team members show up to hold a hand, say a prayer, deliver a card, raise a spirit, or share a cup of coffee in some of Westwood members' loneliest or darkest moments.

Earlier this year, a small women's study group from Westwood used their time, talents, and some leftover supplies to make the Caring Response Team's work even more personal. Sheryl Burmaster, a women's study group member, had created greeting cards from old hymn sheets and decorative crosses for sale at Westwood's annual Holiday Fair and as part of a fundraiser for Rise Early Learning Center. They were a hit. "And I just thought, I have supplies yet, so why not make some for the Caring Response Team as some (members) overlap with this group," Burmaster said.

She took the supplies to a meeting and the group assembled 36 care cards decorated with familiar lines and titles from old hymns and ephemera like flowers and crosses. "We had a great time. There were about five or six of us and it only took us a couple of hours," Burmaster said. "We recognized it as a need. We've all helped family members or homebound parents, so we know what it means to be remembered," she added.



The Caring Response Team delivered them as Easter cards to some homebound and elderly in the congregation. "We knew these elders would know these hymns they sang for years and how touching it would be for them to receive a card that connects them to that experience of the church," Burmaster said. "Not only are they receiving a personal note, but the card was made by hand, too, by someone at their church."

The women's study group got its start during a time of congregational emphasis on "vocation." Some people were invited to start groups focused on interests. Burmaster asked a few friends and acquaintances. These days they are more than their origins – more activities, more kinds of people, and more connections. Single and partnered women are part of the 10-member unit that offers strong support for its members.

"Sometimes the women study a recommended book, sometimes they do Bible study, and sometimes they are a social group," said Sara Moran, Westwood's Director of Congregational Care.

"We usually do all the book studies (suggested for the congregation)," said Burmaster. They shared readings from Pastor Sarah's devotional book in a park setting last summer.

But it is the strength of the women's connections that keeps it going. "We're a sisterhood. We're so close," Burmaster said. "We recently lost a member, and it was really hard, but we were there to support each other. We text each other about our crises. We have a group text going. We pray for each other."

And, sometimes, they lend a hand to other groups.

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."

Ministry Minute

"Liturgical Beauty: Mark Carlson's Quiet Dedication to Westwood's Sanctuary"



We may not always notice Mark Carlson's work at Westwood. He likes it that way, quickly eschewing praise for his weekly efforts to ensure that Westwood's sanctuary reflects the appropriate church season, with all the accoutrements in the right place at the right time.

"Some people take the changes for granted. I'm kind of fine with that," said Mark, who has been a Westwood member since 2001. "I really see my Westwood activities as being a servant as we are asked to be," Mark said. "Some of the things I do, I do because I don't know anyone else who would do them."

Mark follows the ELCA's script on sanctuary display, working in tandem with Gavin Berg, Facility Manager and Organist, and G. Phillip Shultz III, Westwood's Cantor for Worship, Music, and the Arts, as well as with volunteers for special holidays and occasions. He was mentored by the late Carla Walgren, who passed along not only beautiful pieces she created for the sanctuary, but also the importance of attention to detail and creativity in the work.

Sometimes the sanctuary changes are subtle; other times, such as at Christmas and Easter, they are more dramatic. Many at Westwood rely on Mark's long-term commitment and his memory.

"Mark has a good liturgical sense, a great memory of what we have (banners, etc.) and where it's all located. So he has been the consistent "first-call helper" when it comes to hanging banners, setting up candles and other worship accessories, and knowing when paraments should change," wrote Pastor Tania Haber.

In an almost instant recall mid-interview, Mark recited which Sundays the paraments change from white to royal blue and back to white again as Westwood moves from Christ the King Sunday into Advent and Christmas. His attention to detail has even been known to help out a pastor wearing the incorrect stole color before a service.

Pastor Tania notes the sanctuary work is often difficult and physical due to the ropes and pulleys needed in the wide-open expanses of Westwood's sanctuary. Mark recalled the creativity needed to install unique sanctuary hangings created from toilet and paper towel tubes by the Westwood Early Childhood Center children for its 40th Anniversary celebration in June (several are shown to the right).

Mark has been the presence that provides consistency and continuity as Westwood has managed staff and membership changes in the two decades since he joined. "Mark is the one who usually has an answer for those questions about what, when, and where it comes to our sanctuary liturgical seasons," Pastor Tania wrote. "In addition to working at the soundboard, changing the slides, and most Sundays at the 9:00 am service, Mark avails himself for so many of these behind-the-scenes, but important, tasks."

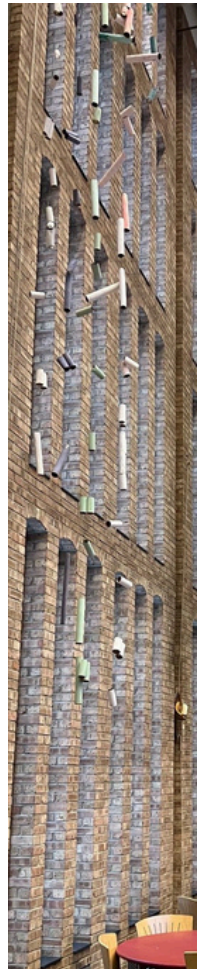
While Mark enjoys being a quiet force at Westwood, he does hope people notice these liturgical details.

"I think it's important to show people changes are happening. The church is a dynamic place. Seasons change. Lifestyles change. We can't do things like we did in the 1940s," Mark said.

"Our sanctuary is so beautiful, that complementing it with color and design enhances its beauty and helps us worship in vibrant ways is critical to our worship life and experience," wrote Pastor Tania. "Mark firmly believes that, and quietly helps make that happen."

Mark's commitment doesn't stop at the sanctuary door. He's part of Westwood's Visual Arts Group, which oversees the display of fine art in the Westwood Room and the office reception area. Outside of Westwood, Mark volunteers as an usher for Friday Minnesota Orchestra performances.

Now, heads up: Check out our sanctuary dressed in green. Then, watch for the shift to white adornments for Christ the King Sunday.



Ministry Minute

Westwood Widows Support Group

"Finding Strength, Empathy, and Fellowship Together"



It's not a group anyone begs to join.

Admission requires personal heartache and hardship. Women invited to membership have lost a life partner and inherited a unique emptiness and sometimes months and years of insecurity and confusion.

But the Westwood Widows Support Group has been a godsend for many of them. When it began years ago, the group met for lunch at local restaurants. These days, however, afternoon coffee, a few treats, and insightful programs at monthly gatherings at Westwood leave lots of time for sharing and remembrance, and for deep, meaningful conversations about coping physically and mentally after loss.

Westwood member Marcia Rose coordinates the group, which now has about 30 members. Membership is fluid, she said. Some are longtime members; others attend for a couple of years and then move on. Some come occasionally; others are regulars.

Empathy is the welcomed guest at every meeting.

"You can talk about things, and we all understand what you're talking about," Marcia said. "It's hard to talk to people who haven't lost someone yet."

"For all of us, we've suffered the hardest grief of our life. Everything is turned upside down. Life gets kind of messy," she added. "I just think the group gives us that feeling that grief is normal. Normal and necessary."

It also gives those who have suffered loss a chance to tell others about their partner, which some people worry might be uncomfortable for a person grieving. But Marcia, whose husband, Fred, died in 2012, knows the delight those conversations can bring.

"I love when people talk about Fred," she said, recalling her own joy when friends and family recall an experience with him.

When Marcia joined, Penne Sewall was coordinating the group as part of her Westwood ministry. At a time of change, Penne asked Marcia to take on the role, which she does in cooperation with Sara Moran, Director of Congregational Care.

Westwood member Jan Brown joined a year or two after her husband died 11 years ago. She remains a part of the group for several reasons.

"We all feel like we're in the same boat. There are practical suggestions about how to maneuver. Others just like the support you get. Plus, the fellowship is really good," said Jan, a longtime Westwood member.

Many members also make lasting friendships and social connections, enjoying activities such as going to lunch or a movie outside of the Westwood meetings.

Marcia and Jan believe the Widows Group is a perfect fit for Westwood's mission of outreach and service to a community need.

These days, the Widows Group welcomes others regardless of their Westwood affiliation or partnership type.

"We're reaching out to people who may need a place," Marcia said.

The group meets at 1 pm on the third Wednesday of each month at Westwood. Contact Marcia Rose (mroseteacher@gmail.com) for more information or Sara Moran at Westwood.



Marcia Rose

Ministry Minute

Westwood Office Volunteers

"Serving with Purpose, Behind the Scenes"



Have you ever wondered about who stuffs all the envelopes for stewardship campaigns, who are the kind voices answering the phone, or who makes the first impression on a member or visitor coming to the Westwood office during the week? These essential tasks are accomplished by a wonderful group of volunteers who, like many ministries at Westwood, work behind the scenes to create ripples of impact throughout our community.

Westwood's dedicated office volunteers give of their time and talents each week, contributing an essential role in keeping the office running smoothly. With diverse backgrounds and unique skills, these women not only impact the church's mission, but have also felt a deep impact in their own lives.

Marilyn Nelson began volunteering just before the pandemic. She brings a wealth of experience to the front desk with a background in reception and education. Particularly, teaching English as a Second Language has proven invaluable; Marilyn's careful attention to detail in proofreading materials is a unique way her gifts have found a home at Westwood, and another is connecting with people.

"I enjoy interacting with a variety of people each week," she shared. "Whether it's members, non-members, or staff, these connections enrich my life. Being at the front desk is one small way I can support our ministry."

Another familiar face for over 18 years is Donna Bushway. She echoed similar sentiments: "The flexibility of hours is great, and I love staying connected to my church family. Volunteering gives me a sense of purpose, and I always feel appreciated." Donna's contributions extend beyond simple tasks; she creates a welcoming, organized, and efficient environment that supports both staff and members alike.

Volunteering became a way for Luanne Bachman to stay engaged after retiring from teaching. "Joyce Kautz asked if I could take over for her in the office, and 13 years later, I'm still here!" The ever-changing nature of the office keeps her on her toes. "Each day is different, and I thrive on finding answers and solving problems," she reflected. As a result of her enjoyment, Luanne has even recruited others like Patricia Lasse!

Patricia has been making her mark for about a year. "I hadn't done much office work before, but I've been able to bring my graphics knowledge to help where needed," she says. Volunteering allows her to assist others but has impacted her even more with a deeper connection to the Westwood community and a new purpose in retirement.

After being inspired by one of Pastor Jason's sermons, Pat Dix said, "It felt like it just hit me, the need to volunteer at Westwood!" After seeing Sara Moran's interactions with elders and many other members, Pat knew Sara was the person to talk to. As fall programming and activities began to gain momentum, the next thing she knew, both Lisa Boers, Westwood Office Manager, and Ann Kisch, Westwood Kitchen Manager, reached out with new opportunities. Enthusiastically, Pat said, "I'll do it! I'll do it! So that's how I ended up in the office...and today is my first day."

Whether it is the joy of day one or the knowledge of nearly two decades, these volunteers share a common thread: their commitment to serving the Westwood community creates meaningful connections that transcend simple office tasks.

"Together, these wonderful women and our fantastic subs - Karen Rohweder, Eileen Dahlen, Rene Kaluza, and Mary Anderson - form the backbone of volunteer support," said Lisa Boers. "I rely on this dedicated support team to accomplish all the necessary responsibilities with their collective efforts and unique skills. They are invaluable!"

In their service, the Westwood office volunteers find joy, purpose, and connection. As Marilyn put it, "It takes a village to support a church, and we are all a part of that village."

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