

LOOKING BACK AND PEAKING AHEAD:

A look back on 2013 provides cause for celebration. December was a monster month for giving, as we wound up 12 for 12 with monthly surpluses and a budget in balance for the eighth year running. For that we thank you. We were proud to continue our commitment to a generous tradition of sharing what we can with ministries outside of the many walls that make up this church home we call Zion, with \$16,700 given in Mission Support to the Northeastern Ohio Synod, \$3,340 dedicated to our support of the ministry of wider church in seeking to serve as a teaching congregation with the Internship Program, \$8,350 spent in our commitment to offering one of the best food pantries in Stark County, \$600 with Thankofferings given in support of the Women of the ELCA, and over \$2,400 shared locally with individuals in need, as well as organizations like the Make-A-Wish Foundation with Akron Children's Hospital, ministries that help in Haiti, and other worthwhile ministries, like the Wernle Youth and Family Treatment Center (in Richmond, Indiana). It all adds up – this year to over \$31,400 – and you are the source of this generosity. For that we thank you.

As I mentioned in December, while Advent was moving without delay through the Christmas season, 2013 was a year filled with far too many funerals for Zion. We said goodbye to Ruth McMillan with a Memorial Service in January. Ann Semple was called home to heaven in January, with her Memorial Service in February. Then it was Dorothy Anderson, Martha Shimko, Mary Bowen, Juanita Meighen, Don Hertler, Sr., Mike Babich, and Betty Lenz. “For all the saints, who from their labors rest ... all now forever blest.” It's hard to go through a year like that, but last was also one that offered some nice surprises, too, with the birth and baptism of Ben Keith, and the baptism of Joselynn Swearingen, as we received her parents, Jimmy and Kara Swearingen, into membership. Other families found us during the year, including Neil and Dawn Tyburk, and the Tvoriks, Ron and Linda, along with grandchildren Chrissy and LJ, who moved right down the street on Portage and came to feel right at home among us. In addition to this, we were happy to celebrate the Rite of Confirmation with Jaret Beaber, Eric Dague, Nathan Fox, and Carley Frank.

The good news is that God continues to bless us as we enter into our two hundredth year of growing in love and service by grace. For that we thank God, and you, for the faithfulness and dedication with which you offer your gifts and your talents for the good of God's kingdom and the life of our church. I'm not sure how many have seen it, but Darlene Milavickas and Carol Rossbach have been busy chronicling Zion's history of blessing with poster board presentations that have moved from the Narthex into Luther Hall. Five are now complete, taking us from our founding to the extraordinary growth that began with the tenure of Pastor Walter Ruth (1957–68). Speaking of Pastor Ruth, his granddaughter, the Rev. Suzanne Darcy Dillahunt, recently elected as Bishop in the Southern Ohio Synod of the ELCA, will be joined by her mother, Carol Darcy, on the Sunday, May 18th, to preach and preside when we hope to dedicate our five faceted stained glass windows on the east wall of our Sanctuary. Pastor Jim Lutz will join us on the Sunday, May 11th, and Pastor Dane Meuschke will be here on Sunday, May 25th. God does, indeed, continue to bless us. I suggest that you mark these dates on your calendar. We will have much to celebrate as we move through a very special bicentennial anniversary year for Zion.

CHURCH COUNCIL NEWS

Mark Votaw called our January Council meeting to order at 7 p.m., Beth Shaheen offered devotions. Also present were Dave Palumbo, Juanita Cignetti, Cathy Harvey, Todd Elsass, Carol Rossbach, Vicki Givler, Renee Keith, and Pastor Sherwindt. Brian Milek was excused due to travel.

The Treasurer's Report documented the good news of 2013: Operating Budget Income in December was \$25,197.96. Income exceeded expenses in December by \$31.96, which allowed us to complete the perfect record of 12 consecutive monthly surpluses in 2013. We ended yet another year with our budget in balance, as we did in 2012, 2011, 2010, 2009, 2008, 2007, and 2006. Over the course of these past seven years, we have accumulated a positive surplus of \$11,295.50.

While balancing our budget yet again, we were also able to exceed our targets for benevolence, which totaled \$31,400. Support was given to the Northeastern Ohio Synod, our Food Pantry, the Women of the ELCA, the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the Wernle Youth & Family Treatment Center, the Internship Outreach Fund, with lots of additional local assistance. It was another very good year, a very generous year.

Some of the good news of our financial performance was related to special funds that we've created to cover the costs of specific programs: the Food Pantry Fund ended the year with a balance of \$5,773.80; the Youth Fund with \$7,983.66; the Internship Outreach Fund with \$3,340.00. We now have a new Bicentennial Gifts Fund, with a balance of \$18,271.01. So far, the faceted glass windows and the Internship Program are two approved bicentennial projects; but there will be more to come as we head towards June 14 and 15.

MORE COUNCIL NEWS

Early Bird Giving may not be back as a formal program with charts, and chats, and 3-D presentations; but there is no doubt about the fact that it works ... and that it makes sense. We experience our biggest expenses with winter's heating bills and snow removal. This first quarter is when we need some generous giving. Members shifted a little bit more of their yearly giving into the first quarter the past two years, and for the first time in a long, long time, we did not have to watch a deficit grow with huge expenses and average income during January and February. In fact, we have run monthly surpluses every month the past two years!

This year is already off to a different start. Even though we threw \$4,500 (which was left over from Advanced Giving in 2013) into an Early Bird Giving Fund for January, that was not enough, when added to January's giving, to cover the incredible bills the cold and snow brought in January. This is a much colder year than the last couple. Snow plowing and salting have seen added costs for the church. We ran a monthly deficit in January, the first in years, of over \$506! There won't be temple talks or running counts; but we ask that you use the Early Bird Giving envelopes found in the Narthex. It makes sense; it works; it's a good habit; and we need it to get back in the black.

ZION'S JANUARY FINANCIAL FACTS

January's Income	\$ 17,118.89
January's Expenses	<u>\$ 17,625.78</u>
January's (Deficit)	\$ (506.89)

*Our Accumulated Surplus \$ 11,295.50
(from years 2006 through 2013)*

We thank you for your generous support!

FOOD PANTRY SUPPORT

Zion's Food Pantry received \$8,350.⁰⁰ in financial support in 2013. That is surely an incredible amount of generosity, and we have many persons, many groups, many churches, and a few additional organizations, as well, to thank for this generosity. Our congregational family is the mainstay of what keeps our Food Pantry going, but we receive help, substantial help, from many individuals and groups in addition to the members of Zion.

Our Food Pantry is affiliated with the Stark County Hunger Task Force. Its partnership allows us to use the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank, which saves an incredible amount on the purchase of food for our families. Our partnership with the Stark County Hunger Task Force also resulted in cash assistance of \$2,946 in 2013! Fellow congregations in the North Canton Ministerial Association also support our Food Pantry with gifts of food and monetary donations, too. Our most faithful partner is Community Christian Church, whose *Koinonia Class* contributed \$400 to our Food Pantry in 2013. Two generous members added personal gifts of \$475! Our friends at Community Christian encouraged the Parkview Dinner Club to assist with \$200! That's quite a lift from our partners at Community Christian Church, along with the food they regularly donate.

And there's more: Trinity Baptist, Congregational UCC, Northminister Presbyterian, all have helped with food and household items. The YMCA has held food drives for us, as has the North Canton library, and Weight-Watchers, too! Through Sue Heyard, TTI, the company that wound up with the Hoover Company, generously supports our Food Pantry with gifts in-kind; and don't forget the Postal Carriers' Food Drive. It surely does take a village. Our thanks to all!

MORE FOOD PANTRY NEWS

In 2011, we worked through the transition of leadership that came with Jayne Schrader stepping in as Shirley Cavender and Margaret Porter stepped back after a decade of leading our efforts with our food pantry ministry. In 2012, Beth Willis and Cathy Harvey stepped in as Jayne Schrader stepped back to enjoy the addition of grandchildren to her family. Then, this past year, in 2013, Cathy Harvey stepped up her involvement as Beth Willis returned to what was once home in North Carolina. These have been quite a few transitions in leadership for a ministry that had enjoyed stable leadership for so long.

What this has shown is how resilient a corps it is that makes this ministry thrive. This has shown how good God is in making sure that we have the resources we need to continue to serve in the ways that this ministry makes possible. When the resources needed have been supplies, doors have been opened and donations given. When the resources needed have been volunteers, members and friends have stepped forward, shown up, and then realize they like it! What we have learned is that God's people want to make a difference, and this is the difference our members and friends enjoy making, a ministry that brings honor to the church and glory to God.

Alongside of the Food Pantry, our Clothing Closet is present to offer all sorts of benefits to the families we serve with the food pantry. Clothing is provided, but also household items, and sometimes even furniture, are given to families that can use the help. Becky Aquilo is the mainstay of this ministry, and we are grateful for her dedication. She asked recently that I let everyone know that the Clothing Closet can use a richer supply and wider array of household items. So if there is some way you can help, please do.

AN INTERNSHIP UPDATE

The 15-page application has been updated, and then signed, sealed, and delivered. All the appropriate committees have been consulted. The Northeastern Synod Office has offered its blessing. Trinity Lutheran Seminary received the application with interest and the Contextual Education staff went out of their way to encourage us to remain confident that a match with a seminarian seeking an Internship assignment this year is in our favor.

The next step is to attend the *Meet and Greet* sessions that the seminary has arranged at the end of February. On Monday and Tuesday, February 24 – 25, Pastor Sherwindt, and all Prospective Internship Supervising Pastors, will be lunching with Trinity's faculty, meeting individually with seminarians, and enjoying an evening with the Rev Dr. Hank Langknecht, Acting Director of Contextual Education. This is a tradition at Trinity where seminarians seeking Internship assignments meet with the Supervising Pastors of the Sponsoring Congregations selected for participation in the program, to determine whether potential matches click.

While we do not, in fact, have an Intern assigned at this time, it is still important to be about our work of preparing for this possibility. Zion's Internship Committee, which consists of Brian Milek (Convenor), Pastor Sherwindt, Mark Votaw (President), Debbie Fox, Miriam & Ronda Keating, Janet Slease, Connie Riffle, Nick Lanzlotta, and Renee Keith (on leave), will meet Saturday, February 22nd, to work on finalizing a Sexual Harassment policy, while also tweaking the survey of congregational priorities for Youth & Family Ministry that we introduced back in December during the Sunday Evening Advent dinner hosted by the Youth of Zion.

A BICENTENNIAL UPDATE

We ended January with 57 plates sold, 16 of which were purchased as donations so that we can use them as gifts for guests who honor us with their presence during the year. Our goal in February was to turn the 5 and 7 in 57 around to 75. We want to have 75 commemorative plates sold by Valentine's Day, if not before. On Ground Hog Day, which was a Sunday, we increased our total from 57 to 68, with some pledged, others purchased. We have had a great response among persons who serve as ushers, deacons, and with the Audit and Finance Ministries, purchasing a total of 29 plates! Members of the Bicentennial Task Force are right behind with 20. Council has stepped up with their support. There is still plenty of room and a great need for you to assist with the purchase of these plates, for yourselves, your children, or as donations for gifts. We appreciate your support, and, make no mistake, we invite it!

We have good news for May, with visits planned by members of the Lutz family on *May 11th*, the day of our Mother's Day Breakfast, by the Ruth family (the late Pastor Ruth's daughter, Carol Darcy, and his granddaughter, Bishop Suzanne Darcy Dillahunt) on *May 18th*, and by the Meuschke family on *May 25th*. Pastor Jim Lutz will preach on May 11th; Bishop Dillahunt on May 18th, and Pastor Dane Meuschke on May 25th. Darlene Milavickas is actively at work hoping that these dates will work as great days for Confirmation Reunions. Let's all spread the word in the hope members and friends who were in Pastor Ruth's, Pastor Meuschke's, and Pastor Lutz's Confirmation classes will join us for their reunion celebration, the reception between the services, and time to talk afterwards. These will be great days. Mark them on your calendar, and join us.

GOOD NEWS FROM ZION'S SUNDAY SCHOOL



HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO:

UPCOMING EVENTS – MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Saturday, February 22nd: Thrivent Financial for Lutherans Night with the Canton Charge

Sunday, March 2nd: Our *Farewell to Alleluia* signals that Lent begins on Ash Wednesday

Wednesday, March 5th: Lent begins with the Imposition of Ashes on Ash Wednesday

Saturday, April 12th: Dress Rehearsal for Children's Easter Program, and a Pizza Party, too!

Sunday, April 13th: The Children's Easter Program is set for Palm Sunday at the 10:30 service

Sunday, April 20st: Our Annual Children's Easter Egg Hunt for all ages during Sunday School

Sunday, June 8th: It's a ways off; but this is the Festival of Pentecost and Confirmation Sunday!

SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES: PRE-K THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL

Sunday School will continue on its normal schedule this month. As a reminder, Sunday School begins at 9:15 a.m. each Sunday, and ends at 10:15 a.m. Our classes will continue to learn important lessons from the Bible along with much fun and learning for all. We make good use of great crafts, puzzles, games and snacks. Please join us!

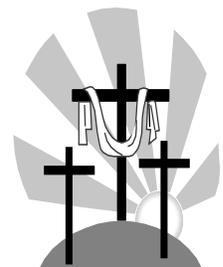
A FINAL CALL TO ALL FOR ACME RECEIPTS

Thank you for turning in your ACME receipts. Please continue to bring in your ACME receipts. Our collection jar is located outside the office in the Narthex. We will get credit for all receipts dated between September 21, 2013 and February 8, 2014 that show a community cash back amount at the bottom of the receipt. *So please bring in all of your ACME receipts to church by Sunday, February 23, 2014.*

LOOKING AHEAD TO LENTEN DINNERS & EASTER PLAYS

It is still a ways off, but we are looking ahead to the Lenten and Easter Season because it'll be here before we know it! We are planning our traditional activities for the children, namely, the Children's Easter Program on Palm Sunday, which is April 13th, and the Easter Egg Hunt between the services on Easter Sunday, which is April 20th. We will pass out parts and start practicing for our program in March; and we will start collecting Easter candy and small prizes around the middle of March for the Easter Egg Hunt. We need to fill lots of eggs – over 500 in the past years. So any donations are greatly appreciated. The older youth in our Catechism and High School classes will be filling the eggs for our hunt.

As you can see, we are looking out a couple of months. With that said, if tradition is followed, Zion's youth and youth leaders will be hosting the fifth Lenten Sunday Evening Dinner on Sunday, April 6th. We will be contacting families in March to make arrangements for this dinner and service.



THE CANTON CHARGE!

The Stark County Chapter of Thrivent Financial for Lutherans has made the evening of **Saturday, February 22nd**, the official *Thrivent Financial Night with the Canton Charge*, which means that families can go to the game for a great price. Tickets, which usually cost over \$30, will cost us \$5 per person! That's youth and adults: \$5.00 per person. As an added option, Thrivent is also selling food vouchers for \$5.00, which includes a hot dog, pop corn or a hot pretzel, and pop or water. At Zion, the Pastor is going, the President is going, the Christian Ed. Director is going; but more importantly, the Fox family, the Dague family, the Rhodes, the Hendersons and the Thompsons are going. The deadline for tickets was February 3rd; but if you have an interest in joining us, let the Church Office know (330-499-3909). The game begins at 7:00 p.m. Pre-game gates open at 5:45 p.m.

A BEABER BAPTISM!

As many now know, Lorin and Tina Beaver, along with their boys, Jaret and Grant, moved to Houston in June, following Lorin's job transfer with Exxon-Mobil. We truly miss the Beabers, both because of who they are and what they did as active members of our church family; but we are happy that their move has gone well, especially for their boys. Their oldest son, Corey, followed his Dad in becoming a chemical engineer, and remained in northwest Ohio, working in his field in Bowling Green. He and Juli celebrated the birth of their first son, Bryce Anthony Beaver, on December 4th; and the families of Corey, Juli, Lorin, and Tina plan to join us here at Zion on March 16th to celebrate Bryce's baptism. That's Sunday, March 16th, at the 10:30 a.m. service. Plan to be here.

THE WOMEN OF ZION

Women's Monthly Bible Study: We continue our study of *In Good Company; Stories of Biblical Women*. The focus shifts to the ultimate service of sacrifice offered by the daughter of Jephthah. With a look ahead to Lent, Psalm 130 sets the tone for this study: "*Out of the depths I cry to Thee. O Lord, hear my voice.*" Last month we focused on getting away for rest. The theme verse is Judges 11.30-31: "*Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, 'If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, and I will offer him up by me as a burnt offering.'*" The *him* in this text became a *her*, the daughter of Jephthah, and the controversies surrounding human sacrifice have never abated. This should be a lively conversation. You are invited to join the Women of Zion in the Resource Center on the third Tuesday, which is **February 18th**, when the coffee is served and the conversation begins at 9:30 a.m.

Zion's Comfort Givers meet on the second and fourth Thursdays, weather permitting, with February 13 and 27 set aside in Luther Hall for this time of fellowship and service. Their work begins at 9:30 a.m. Along with an active dose of sewing, Zion's quilters enjoy coffee, conversation, and being filled with the feeling of knowing that we are helping persons around the world through the good that we do and the fun that we have. You are invited – and encouraged – to join in. As they say, many hands make light work.

Zion's Chancel Guild is looking forward to hosting one of the Sunday Evening Lenten Dinners, but unfortunately, the dates for our Lenten schedule are yet to be determined.

SOME NEO SYNOD NEWS

With the election of Bishop Elizabeth Eaton to serve as Presiding Bishop of the ELCA (and her tenure in that Office beginning November 1), our Synod has been served by Interim Bishop Marcus Miller, which was an ELCA first, when a former bishop returned to serve as the interim bishop. Bishop Miller served as the Northeastern Ohio Synod's Bishop from 1995 to 2006, when he accepted the call to serve as the President of Lutheran Southern Seminary (Columbia, SC).

The process of electing another bishop began last June from behind the scenes in the organizational machinations of the church. Planning for our saying farewell to Bishop Eaton, selecting Bishop Miller to serve in an interim capacity, working with Conference Deans, and various Synod committees: our Synod Council has been quite active in moving forward. The next step will be called to order on Sunday, March 9th. That is the date that the *Bishop Election Committee* has set for conference meetings to be held for the stated purpose of suggesting potential nominees for the office of the bishop of the Northeastern Ohio Synod.

Here in our Canton-Massillon Conference, Dean Chip Belanga will call us to order at a 2:00 p.m. meeting to be held at St. Stephen Martyr Lutheran Church, which is located at the intersection of Dressler and Fulton Roads just south of Belden Village. This is the first phase of an ecclesiastical ballot, where every congregation has an opportunity to be represented in offering names for consideration (from the ELCA clergy roster) as we prepare the list of candidates to be presented before our Synod Assembly when we gather at the John S. Knight Center in Akron on Thursday through Saturday, May 15 – 17, 2014.

ANNIVERSARIES & MORE

To my Church Family,

“A friendly smile, a casual touch: these are the things that mean so much – to know you are with us in our time of sorrow, sharing prayers, today and tomorrow.” I thank you for all your prayers, cards, calls, and support during my husband's illness and passing. He was a good man and I wish he could have attended services with me and enjoyed meeting so many of you. During a time like this we realize how much our friends and relatives mean to us.

*Love and Blessings to all of you,
Moe Alters & the Alters Family*

An Anniversary to Remember: This first *Valentine's Card* ever written was on the day that St. Valentine died, February 14, 269 CE.

Anniversary Dates to Remember: On May 11, we invite Confirmation Classes of Pastor Lutz to join us between the services for a reception. On May 18, we invite Confirmation Classes of Pastor Ruth to join us. On May 25, we invite that Confirmation Classes of Pastor Meuschke to join us, again, between the services for a reception. Our Guest Preachers on those Sundays will be Pastor Jim Lutz, Bishop Suzanne Dillahunt, and Pastor Dane Meuschke, respectively.

IN LOVING MEMORY OF JOSEPH DALLAS ALTERS

(January 2, 1941 – December 21, 2013)

There have been a number of times when I have had to admit that my personal knowledge of the loved one whose loss we mourn was very limited. What I have often done is to begin by affirming that far more important than what I didn't know about Joe Alters is the Good News that God not only did know every intimate detail of Joe's life, but He also loved him; and what is more, Joe knew it, and so do we. That's the point that draws us to this place, and that's crucial to the perspective I bring to our gathering today, affirming God's loving presence in Joe's life, and God's loving presence in ours. All of this is true, but I must also admit that I have come to know Joe through the generosity of family in sharing the details of memories and the very real presence of a deep and enduring love. I met Joe shortly after he was moved to the Compassionate Care Center. It is difficult for a newcomer to come into that kind of situation. But the family could not have been more welcoming and more appreciative of my being there for them. Tami, Laura and Moe gave me the opportunity to play a little catch-up in joining Joe on this journey we have all become a part of. Joe was just trying to get his bearings. Moe and Tami took the lead in introducing me to Joe; and that was the beginning of feeling like I was among friends who were happy to have me as a part of their lives at a time when death had unexpectedly and somewhat suddenly stolen center stage.

Moe told me that she first met Joe when he coached her son in the Little League, which meant more to her son than to her, and for Tim, too, whose coach his Dad was. I am well aware of the fact that you can't live and work in North Canton without growing in appreciation for the role of sports in shaping the community and forming our lives. Like many of you, I follow the traditional sports. Lately I've heard more commentators talking about this or that player having a high basketball IQ, or a high football IQ. I don't know what Joe thought about having a high baseball IQ; but there is no doubt that he had a people IQ that was off the charts. This was apparent as Moe and Ninette and Tim spoke about Meyer's Lake and Joe's taking his *Guess Your Weight* booth on the road at county fairs. While there is always an element of risk in taking a chance with someone in the crowd, it wasn't luck or simple guesswork with Joe. It was a skill he had naturally and with practice mastered, because people mattered to Joe. He had a high people IQ, and those of you who knew him well loved him for it ... because you knew that he cared about you, that you mattered to him, that you meant the world to him, which is why he took the time to know what you liked, to listen as he made the people he loved feel loved with the laughter they shared. You knew. He knew. There was a connection you shared.

We know these same things about the God who loves us like the shepherd described in the 23rd Psalm, the shepherd who leads us beside the still waters, and joins us on the journey that leads through the valley of the shadow of death, with the evidence of *Footprints in the Sand*, and the faithfulness of His promise ever before us: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life; for we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." God put his name on that promise in Jesus Christ. This is why I said that what we know about God is far more important than what I might know or not know about Joe. God's love has enriched our lives. Even death has lost its sting in the light of the promise that has been proclaimed with our Lord's Resurrection. These are hopes that lift us up and encourage us to believe that life, not death, will prove victorious in the end, when the embrace of a love that never dies invites us to share in a life that never ends. The truth is that even if I knew everything about Joe, this knowledge would not be as important to us as what we know about the Good News of God's love and the gift of true life, which are ours in Jesus' name. Amen

IN LOVING MEMORY OF LINDA ANN ELSASS

(January 21, 1941 – January 25, 2014)

I begin with a reflection on important L's in Linda's life offered by her foster daughter, Dee Hoffman. "The name Linda starts with the letter 'L'. So do a few other wonderful words she embodied, like love. She loved life! Whether it was dancing with her beloved Larry, busily planning one of the countless family get-togethers, or simply sitting in her Florida room sipping a cup of coffee and watching her bird friends flutter about. She poured love into everything she did. She loved meeting people. She loved everyone she met with open arms. She loved family tremendously: whether biological or collected along the way, everyone was family to her. If you were a friend, you were family. If you were fostered, you were family. If you needed help or love, you were family. Linda loved babies and children. Her boundless love touched over 250 young hearts as she opened her heart and home and nurtured them like a super hero mom. Her positive impact on these children will have ripple effects for generations to come. Linda filled her home with love on a daily basis. She loved her mixture of family and friends, and was delighted as her vision of family grew leaps and bounds year after year. If you were lucky enough to be born into the family, you inherited top quality traits of unconditional love and compassion from her and the love of her life Larry."

The passage I've chosen as our Gospel Reading is from Luke 18: "People were bringing children and parents were bringing babies to Jesus, that he might bless them. Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. For truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'" What does it mean to enter the kingdom of God as a little child? First of all, it means trust, and the responsibility that we never betray it. Entering the kingdom of God as a little child means leaving our reluctance at the door, entering empty-handed, offering nothing except our willingness to receive the love that's offered, and giving it back ... with interest, with knowledge gained, with the riches that come with the friends and family we've inherited in being received as children of God.

Welcoming children is an important part of our Gospel message. When it comes to the gift of children, there is a sanctity that God confers, a God-given right to respect. Life deserves respect. Innocence must be guarded. What could be more important than the duty to protect, nurture, build up and make our children strong? I remind us of this because welcoming children was an important part of Linda's life, and thank God for that! Creating a safe place where we give the respect due, honor the value God bestows, and, above all, where we do not betray the trust that is invited and extended: these are what the kingdom of God stands for, builds on, expects, demands, makes possible and real. This is the hope proclaimed with the Gospel. These are themes Linda lived. She knew what it meant to offer hospitality to the stranger. She and Larry made their home a safe place and a welcoming place. Linda knew how important a helping hand extended in love could be in being there to see to it that those were at risk of losing their way found their way home.

Linda knew how important trust is in finding a way to redeem those who could be lost. It wasn't a story in a book. It was her life. It was their life as decorated partners and licensed participants in Stark County's foster care program: 250 lives affected, with the ripple effect of paying it forward, as those at risk found their way because of the unconditional love and heartfelt compassion that turned their house into a home, and transformed people "collected along the way" into a family. That's a life well lived, a job well done. It is the story of redemption in the flesh right here on earth, the vulnerable helping the vulnerable to find that love can be trusted and life filled with joy. Amen