

THE VISITOR



The Work of Christ's Church Begins with Unity and Belonging

Along with COVID-19, a new epidemic has hit America: loneliness. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, Cigna indicated that three-fifths of surveyed Americans self-reported strong feelings of loneliness, being left out, and being misunderstood. Three years later, we've returned to public life and are as lonely as ever. In the spring of 2023, the US Surgeon General's Office declared loneliness a top public health concern with the release of their eighty-two-page study regarding types of social links and a national strategy for increasing connectedness. Even national companies and nonprofits—from Walmart to the YMCA—are joining forces to create campaigns like "Belonging Begins with Us" to encourage folks to foster relationships.

In the face of our community's loneliness epidemic, a new question emerges: What's the role of Christ's church in all of this? Certainly the church is not just another social club like Greek Life, Boy Scouts, or alumni associations. You don't magically have the same interests, ideals, and friend group as someone just because you both worship together on Sunday morning. Even those who've been attending FBCM for decades know church membership is more complicated than that.

Yet with his Bethlehem arrival, Jesus certainly taught us something about belonging. As he grew and ministered in the community, Jesus showed us that it means something to be a member of a church. And maybe, just maybe, when we all submit our lives to Christ's call within the work of his church, the miracle of unity and belonging is born among us. 🏰

On Sunday, November 5, **Pastor Kendall Ellis** was ordained and the ordination of **Pastor Jonathan Balmer** was recognized. Officials from American Baptist Churches of Indiana & Kentucky were on hand to conduct the ordination, and a close friend and Presbyterian pastor, Sarah Jane Nixon, preached the morning's sermon. A choir singing a composition by Worship Arts **Pastor Clif Davis** provided special music. Before Reverend Ellis led the congregation in communion, members of the congregation came forward to lay hands on her and express their prayers for her ministry. 🏛️



Pray for Those Completing the Budget

By Dan Lemen, Treasurer



Dan Lemen

When the calendar turned the page to November and Thanksgiving was just around the corner, CCT got busy working on the budget for 2024. We at FBC Muncie have a lot to be thankful for, so it was a good time also to pause and count our blessings.

That work has been in full swing and is wrapping up. I'm not going to share any details at this time but will give you a little numbers history: from 2020 through 2023 year-to-date, we have lost fifty givers. Those fifty translate to a \$170,000 loss of revenue over that nearly four-year period. Ouch!

Therefore, I ask that we all be in prayer for everyone completing the budget and that we continually ask God to show us how we can all contribute to help recoup the loss. 🏛️

Long-Term Affiliations: Belonging Is a Gift to be Shared

By Molly Flodder

Can an affiliation with a place for forty-five years make a significant difference in one's life? Maybe you have lived in Muncie all your life or have occupied the same house for a long time. I have attended First Baptist for forty-five years. Since I just observed the forty-fifth anniversary of my membership here—certainly not the longest tenure in our congregation—I am reflecting on what that represents to me.

On November 5, 1978, I came down from the choir loft to join the church I had been attending for about four months. I was a young professional, new to Muncie, single, and ready to find a church home. Little did I know that my request to unite with the church was the beginning of a deep long-term connection.

My link to FBC and its members is even longer than most of my human relationships. For example, I've been in a marital alliance for forty-one years. This is shorter than my connection with our church.

Wow! It occurs to me that kinship with a place—like my forty-five years at FBCM or my thirty-two years in our home—is a defining element for so many people. I have a relationship with a church because going to church was part of my early family life, and long ago I gave my heart to Jesus. A church is the place I go to worship him. But my connection with this church is also because of the comfort of familiarity with the beautiful old building and the friends and acquaintances I see all the time. How empty and strange my life would be without this strong tie!

This church is God's church, and sometimes that is the reality that can drive people with God-shaped holes in their hearts to darken its doors.



Molly Flodder

In this scenario of quickly-dwindling worldwide church-going, we see fewer people beginning church affiliation. But whether they are coming to find a new place of worship or stumbling in to find solace for their souls, do we provide a warm and friendly greeting and invitation for them to come back? Do we model a group of Christians who love the Lord? Do we show how much we want to share his goodness? Or, if these people who have come to our church are very different from us, do we put up barriers that make them feel unwelcome because we are uncomfortable with how they look, how they talk, or where they come from?

An affiliation with a church is a beautiful, comforting thing. But if our church is a place where people can come, give their hearts to the Lord, and join in his service, are we facilitating that opportunity? I need to remember that my church must be more than my long-time place of tranquility and familiarity. My friends and I cannot react to others like we are a country club: "Come and join us if you are just like us."

As Christians, do we provide the pathway to welcome strangers into an affiliation with Christ that can change the trajectory of their lives? Do we encourage a sense of place where new people can be accepted and find deep meaning? This personal anniversary makes me think about that and want to do better. 🏠

A Christmas Covenant: How Jesus Models Membership

BY PASTOR KENDALL ELLIS

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

-John 1:14 (MSG)



Despite being a pastor’s kid, I never really thought much about church membership. My family had always been members of the church where they served as youth ministers. It never crossed my mind that one day I’d have to choose whether to make a covenant with the body of Christ.

But then I moved to Texas. As a seminary student, I wanted to get plugged into church. Almost immediately, I began attending and serving a Baptist church within walking distance of my house. After about a year, my friends and seminary mentors began asking why hadn’t I become a member yet.

Honestly, the answer wasn’t that interesting. I just hadn’t thought about membership, so I never took steps to join. But once the question of church membership came up, it forced me to reflect theologically on the reverse: *Why should* I become a member?

I quickly found I wasn’t alone in my wondering. Though the Baptist tradition has long encouraged membership, larger Baptist churches—including a popular, contemporary college church nearby—were beginning to eliminate membership from their church structure because they feared it was an exclusive practice. Other denominations, such as Church of God (Anderson)—which is especially present here—never had formalized membership: their church is whomever is present and committed at the time. It’s not like the Bible has an eleventh commandment, “Thou shalt commit to being a church member.”

“I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.”

-Jesus (John 17:21 NLT)



But in my wondering, I returned time and time again to the Biblical language of “covenant,” or a committed relationship between two parties. First, God covenants only with individuals like Abraham. Then, with the coming of the Law and throughout the Old Testament, God covenants with Moses and *all* of Israel: “I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God” (Jer. 30:22 NIV). And all of these covenants culminate in the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to make all things right: Immanuel, God with us. Jesus is born to the Virgin Mary. Or, as John’s Gospel tells us, Jesus moved into the neighborhood.

As a couple who recently bought their first home, we can tell you moving into a neighborhood is a commitment with a sense of permanence. Sure, you *can* move again. But it’s not like it’s easy to pack up all your stuff into boxes, load it into a truck, and find somewhere else to settle! So you really want to make sure

that you’re sure when you move into a neighborhood. Are these *really* the people you want to see daily? Are you *really* going to commit to having cookouts with these folks? Are your kids *really* riding the bus to school with them?

Jesus chose the kinds of neighbors we so often avoid. His first neighbors were a bunch of cattle and sketchy, lower-class shepherds. His neighbors in his hometown of Nazareth tried to *literally* throw him off a cliff the first time he attempted to tell them the good news of God’s coming. The disciples—Jesus’s neighbors in ministry—constantly underestimated and betrayed him.

Even after Pilate washed his hands of Jesus's trial, Jesus's religious neighbors brutally murdered him. Yet, in spite of all that, Jesus moved into the neighborhood anyway! Not the neighborhood worthy of the King, but the neighborhood that's rough around the edges. It was here that Immanuel had compassion on his creation, lived in community with them, and kept his covenant to bring light to the darkness, hope to the hopeless, and justice to the oppressed.

It was complicated and messy to be in covenantal relationship with these people in these neighborhoods, but it's also where we see Jesus's greatest miracles of healing, hope, and redemption.

This Advent, as we continue to reflect on the implications of God's coming, I wonder: perhaps church membership is Jesus's call to move into the neighborhood. This kind of membership isn't a physical move, but a spiritual and relational move. This kind of membership is one that recognizes that even though FBCM isn't perfect and may not have all the "bells and whistles," it is the place where God has called us to covenant with one another. It's the place where "we pledge to be the family of God for you in this place: Bearing your burdens as you bear ours; Encouraging you in the faith as we are encouraged by you; Delighting in the Lord's ways; and Offering our lives as a living sacrifice: Holy & Pleasing to God."

It's only then, when we fully commit ourselves to following in this way of Christ, moving into covenantal faithfulness with one another, that our lives will be transformed. It is only then that Jesus trades our isolation for community, our loneliness for belonging. It is only then that, with Jesus as the head, the many members become *one* body. If you haven't already, we hope that this will be the year that you choose to join our church family in membership. 🏰

Schubert's "Ave Maria" Focuses on Mary, the Mother of Jesus

By Cynthia Smith

Often during the Christmas season "Ave Maria" is heard, either recorded or live. This beloved song was composed by Franz Schubert (1797–1828) and first appeared as "Ellens Gesang III (Hymne an die Jungfrau)" with a text translated in German from the original English by Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832).

Scott's poem concerns a young woman, Ellen, who in a desperate place prays a version of a "Hail Mary" that fits her circumstances. Schubert's original 1825 setting is a German translation of Scott's text. The version of "Ave Maria" that is most often performed today includes the traditional Latin text that in English states, "Hail Mary, Full of grace, the Lord is with thee." The Latin text makes this work performable most in sacred settings, whereas singing sacred texts in languages other than Latin before the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was quite scandalous, if not heresy, in the Roman Catholic Church.



The captivating melody contains a repeated triplet pattern, fitting three beats into the space of two. This arrangement of "Ave Maria" is so alluring that pianist and composer Franz Liszt (1811–1886) arranged it into three differing piano versions. Many vocal performance students learn this music as a part of their training.

Although you are much more likely to hear this in a Catholic church, find a version by a favored performer and enjoy Schubert's "Ave Maria" this Christmas season. 🏰

Get to Know . . .

Aaron and Cynthia Smith run a home that is filled with music. Recorded classical music playing during dinner is frequent, and singing—lots of singing at all sorts of times—is a consistent activity.

Their home shows evidence of Aaron's handiwork, sporting new hardwood floors and a remodeled stone-tile hearth. In seven-year-old **Elinore's** closet is a Daddy-built cozy space where she can climb a little ladder and play in a close and protected section at the top of the closet. He also does much of the cooking, most frequently baking bread and other goodies. These are among Aaron's contributions in his role of caring for the children and managing the house while Cynthia follows a busy schedule in the Ball State University (BSU) School of Music.

"I teach voice to students pursuing BS and BA degrees, as well as occasional master's students," said Cynthia. In addition, using an internet platform, she has a private studio at home, instructing students online—a convenient undertaking for those in places like California, where she can teach after her children are in bed, due to the time difference.

One of the most time-consuming parts of Aaron's role is caring for **Adrian**, who just turned two. Adrian loves music as much as everyone else and often dances to the beat! These days, Adrian's new favorite word is *Wow!*

Elinore's hobby is loving and learning about tigers. She keeps a sort of journal with facts about them, including observations like "Tigers have black, white, and yellow stripes." She also proudly shows off her three stuffed tigers: the largest one, "Tigress"—a gift from her grandma and grandpa—is as big as she is!

Aaron and Cynthia, both from Tennessee, met at Tennessee Technical University north of Knoxville. One common thread was their focus on music. Aaron was a bassoonist in the orchestra, and Cynthia was a voice major. Aaron finished his bachelor's of music and Cynthia her master's at Western Carolina University in North Carolina.



Cynthia, Elinore, Adrian, & Aaron Smith

The Smiths were married in 2004, and from then until 2009 she taught K–12 music and he held varied positions ranging from remodeling stores to merchandising. In 2010 they came to Muncie, where Cynthia pursued her doctorate in vocal performance at BSU. For the next three years, they attended FBCM, and she did a one-year internship leading the choir. With another two-year internship, she led music at Riverside Baptist.

Just before completing her doctorate, Cynthia received a Fullbright scholarship to Switzerland where she did research and studied the musical works of composer Viktor Ullmann. Their other foreign experience was in India, where Cynthia taught four years in a music conservatory in Chennai (formerly Madras). During their tenure, Elinore was born.

In reflecting on her years of involvement in church music, Cynthia said, "I believe that a good church music program is one that is Christ-centered and inclusive. An inclusive program gives people the chance to participate in music and liturgy." Over the years Cynthia has participated in both high church and low church programs. "High church" emphasizes liturgy and "low church" has a stronger emphasis on preaching. Cynthia has enjoyed her many roles—whether singing a solo, leading or participating in a small choir, or being part of a large music program that carefully follows the liturgical calendar. She comes to the same conclusion about all these opportunities: "I am blessed." 🏠

Team Approach Lightens the Load

The saying “Many hands make light work” can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome. The idiom made its English introduction in John Heywood’s book *Proverbs* in 1545. Everyone seems to understand that a tough, “heavy” task can become easier, quicker, and “lighter” when multiple people help.

As we think about the new year and discern our relationship with our church and church family, we can examine how we might contribute to week-to-week needs. We can create an environment that is conducive to helping people worship and is better suited for welcoming and supporting new people and families at our church.

While multiple service opportunities exist, working with youth and children is an ongoing need. Our safety guidelines require that we have two adults per care/leadership situation, which means we sometimes need as many as ten adults each Sunday.

If our church is going to be a place that welcomes and prioritizes the discipleship of families with children, then we need at least the following roles filled immediately:

- Two nursery volunteers who will commit to serve one week a month
- One or two Sunday School volunteers who can commit to teaching every other month in their choice of children’s or youth classroom
- Four children’s church volunteers who will commit to a regular rotation as helpers

Michelle Heimlich, children’s ministry coordinator, said, “I have children in each one of the different classes except for the nursery! We need more workers in every classroom.” Please prayerfully consider how you might be blessed by serving our families and working with our children. 🏠



Upcoming Events

December 3 (Advent 1)

- Worship at 10:45 a.m.
- Hanging of the Green Lunch and Decorating

December 9

- Family Day Out: Reindeer Games (4:00–6:00 p.m.)
- Youth Second Saturday: Progressive Dinner (4:00–6:00 p.m.)

December 10 (Advent 2) Worship at 10:45 a.m.

December 17 (Advent 3)

- Worship at 10:45 a.m.
- Budget Info Meeting following Worship Service

December 24 (Advent 4)

- Worship at 10:45 a.m.
- Intergenerational Christmas Eve Candlelight Service at 7:00 p.m.

December 31

- New Year’s Eve Worship in Fellowship Hall at 10:45 a.m.
- No evening youth life groups

January through March

*Winter Life Group Season. All groups will be studying *The Art of Neighboring*.

***January 7** - Annual Business Meeting following worship

***February 11** - “Soup-er Bowl Sunday” lunch fundraiser for Youth Camp

Parental Leave Plans Begin for Pastor Kendall and Pastor Jonathan

The first time in living memory that a senior pastor's family has added a child to their family during their tenure came to reality on Sunday, November 19. **Moira Jane Ellis Balmer** was born at 2:07 a.m. at 5 pounds, 15 ounces, and 18.5 inches. The double baby shower in October also honored **Michael and Sarah Hoffman** with gifts. Their son, **Miles Alexander Hoffman** was born almost 23 hours earlier on Saturday, November 18 at 5 pounds, 13 ounces, and 17.75 inches.

Family leave plans for co-pastors stemmed from group and individual discussions with the Church Coordination Team (CCT) making certain temporary delegation of typical pastoral care could be picked up by willing volunteers. James Heimlich and other FBCM members and guests will be using their talents and gifts to fill the pulpit. 🏛️

DECEMBER 2023

Pastor Kendall began her twelve-week leave when Moira Jane was born. Pastor Jonathan will continue preaching and working from home until Christmas Eve.

JANUARY 2024

The pastors will be on leave together, but they will be in town, and you will likely see them with Moira Jane during worship. In case of emergencies, such as hospice and/or death, church members may call them at home. For all other concerns, call the Member Care Coordinator or Deacon Chair. (The Church office has these phone numbers.)

FEBRUARY- MARCH 2024

Pastor Kendall will return to work in early February, while Pastor Jonathan finishes his paternity leave. He will return to work in mid-March before Holy Week and Easter.

Esther Is Happy

Visiting the hospital and our shut-ins is something the pastors do regularly, assisted by ministry resident **James Heimlich** and other FBCM members.

Recently James was called to go and visit **Esther Syphers** in the hospital. Many of Esther's family had gathered and they told him that Esther was mostly unresponsive. As soon as James entered the room, Esther perked up and greeted him warmly, "Hi, James!" They talked about her late husband, Jack, and how she knew where she was going when she died. They prayed together. She told him, "Tell everyone at the church that I am happy!" She passed away later that week on October 29, 2023. 🏛️

Pastoral Team

Senior Co-Pastors

Rev. Kendall Ellis
kendall@fbcmuncie.org

Rev. Jonathan Balmer
jonathan@fbcmuncie.org

Worship Arts Pastor

Dr. Clifton Davis
clif@fbcmuncie.org

Ministry Resident

James Heimlich

The Visitor is a quarterly publication of ©First Baptist Church Muncie

309 E. Adams, Muncie, IN 47305

PHONE: 765-284-7749 | EMAIL: info@fbcmuncie.org

WEBSITE: www.fbcmuncie.org

Produced by Molly Flodder, Editor;
Michelle Heimlich, Graphic Designer;
and Julie Davis, Copy Editor

