

The Ascension

FALL 2024

ASCENSIONPITTSBURGH.ORG



A New Season: Welcome Coelho Family!

The Institution of Our New Rector



G O D W I L L I N G

the Right Reverend Alex Whitcomb Cameron,
Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh,
will institute the

Reverend Peter Timothy Coelho

as rector of

Church of the Ascension

on Sunday,
the twenty-ninth day of September,
in the year of our Lord
two thousand and twenty-four
at
six o'clock in the evening

Church of the Ascension
4729 Ellsworth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

*Your prayers and presence are requested.
Reception will follow.*

Clergy: green stoles

We are thrilled to welcome Peter, Shannon, Lucy, and Emmett Coelho to Church of the Ascension. Father Peter's first Sunday with us is September 8.

While they originally hail from Canada, the Coelho's moved to Pittsburgh from Austin TX in August. The kids are starting a new school, Shannon is figuring out a whole lot for the family, and of course Father Peter steps into a big job. Please continue to pray for them and reach out to the wardens, Mandy and Tyler, if you'd like to come alongside them in any way to ease their transition (mandyjabbour@gmail.com; tyler.marwood@gmail.com). With such a diverse history (Canada AND Texas!) we're not sure if they're going to speak Canadian (eh) or Texan (ya'll), but we can't wait to find out, and perhaps make Yinzers of them in the years to come. More importantly, we can't wait to see what God has in store for all of us in the next season of our life together!

Parish Retreat 2024

October 4-6



By Marilyn Chislaghi, Director of Ministry
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Ascension's 41st Parish Retreat is upcoming October 4 - 6. While this year it takes second place to the arrival of the Coelho family (!), the retreat is typically THE highlight of our parish life each fall. For many years Ascension has been gathering annually at Laurelville Church Center, about 50 minutes east of Pittsburgh, to enjoy a weekend of teaching and fellowship. It's an all-ages event with special programming for children and youth, as well as plenty of outdoor activities, prayer ministry, campfires, walks in the woods, and an annual ducky race. The weekend is a great way for newcomers to connect. In 2023, 350+ people attended at some point over the weekend. Registration opened in August.

We are once more offering significantly subsidized rates on food and accommodation. Laurelville Church Center's rates rose an average of 10%, but we have kept our prices stable, heavily subsidizing food and accommodation, and offering free accommodation to youth, college-age, and internationals. In addition to these general subsidies, we offer scholarships. We don't want the cost of the weekend to be a barrier. If you can't afford it, we'll figure it out!

Participants are welcome to come for the entire weekend and stay overnight. If you don't want to stay overnight, coming for a day trip is possible too – either Saturday or Sunday. If it's a cooler weekend, please bring your woolies because we keep the garage-style doors of our main meeting space open for maximum air flow and enjoyment of God's good creation.

We have incredibly winsome speakers this year, Bishop Alex and Tamara Cameron, who have years of experience leading retreats together. They will guide us in reflections around the theme *Revelation: Trust in Tribulation*, looking at three movements which are found throughout the book of Revelation and are part of the arc of the faith walk of all



disciples of Jesus. We will explore the realities of our lives - times of confusion, hardship, trial, uncertainty and transition – asking questions like “Have we done something wrong?” Against that backdrop, we’ll explore two themes woven throughout the book of Revelation, patient endurance and the coming of the Kingdom, in hopes that we all leave the retreat refreshed of heart and with deeper trust in Jesus.

We hope you will consider coming. A preview video of the retreat is on our website (News & Events). Registration began in August. We encourage online registration whenever possible. An information table will also be available on Sundays beginning August 25. If you need to know more about the program or weekend in general, don't hesitate to reach out to me. I'd love to hear from you!

Praying Our Way Into a New Season



By Lauren Scharf, Staff Priest

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As we enjoy the last few weeks of summer and anticipate the weather turning colder, we also look toward changes in our community. In just a couple of weeks we will officially

welcome our new Rector, Peter Coelho, and his family to Ascension. As we welcome and embrace the Coelho's, we can also welcome and embrace a new season in the life of our church.

As Christians, our first call in any new season is to prayer. Over 400 years ago, Puritan Richard Baxter penned the following words as part of a prayer for God's timing:

Draw forth my soul to yourself by the secret power of your love, as the sunshine in the spring draws creatures from their winter homes. Meet it halfway, draw me to yourself, like a compass is drawn to the north. -Richard Baxter (1615-1691)

Praying into a new season is about bringing ourselves before the Lord of all seasons. As Baxter prays, we too can ask that our hearts be drawn to God as irresistibly as a compass needle is drawn north. We can ask that our souls be drawn to the Lord and His will as naturally as the sun's warmth brings birds back to our northern skies.

When we face the uncertainty that comes with new seasons, we can be tempted to rely on our own plans and external preparations. "Thy will be done" can easily and sneakily become "My will be done" before we even realize

it. This is why the act of praying, of bringing ourselves before our unchanging God, is so vital in these moments. As we ask that the Lord draw us to Himself, we find that our realignment to Him prepares us for every new season.

With this in mind, I invite you to prepare for our community's new season with prayer. Pray for your own heart to be drawn to its true north. Pray for our community to greet this new season with optimism, faithfulness, and open hearts. Pray that as we seek above all else to love God and love neighbor, that God's will, not ours, would be done.

Looking for some opportunities to pursue new and deeper experiences of prayer?

- Consider attending Soul Care, a relaxed time of guided scripture meditation and prayer in a safe space. Soul care will be on September 21, October 26, November 16, and December 7.
- Consider joining a short time of weekly prayer for our Youth and Children or International Ministry.
- Also, keep an eye out for more information on a Prayer Retreat, new in our Fall line-up. Details coming soon!

Finally, I commend the Book of Common Prayer (2019) to you. One of the great blessings of the Anglican tradition is that as we learn how to pray, we have historical, biblical, and reliable help. Within its pages you will find the full Psalter (the Psalms) and prayers for many varied occasions. It is a wonderful tool available to us as we come before Jesus, like the disciples, asking him to teach us how to pray.



A Bridge to Changed Lives: Want to Walk it With Us?



By LuAnn Pengidore, Director of International Ministry

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In mid-September 35 teachers, assistants, and Bible study helpers will kick off the fall semester of the International English Program that runs through next April (2 semesters). If you love internationals, or if you are even a wee bit interested from some of the stories I tell below, we would love to have your help as Bible study helpers, substitutes, assistants, occasional field trip drivers, and conversation partners. Training is provided and the volunteer work is fun!

But why? Why help? Why are we even doing this? Ascension is not a language school, but a church.

Why? Put simply, because this program is a bridge to changed lives. We ask people to “Come and See,” and they do!

This past year, the Monday morning international Bible study worked through a discipleship book on the Holy Spirit by Nav Press which allowed students to talk about ways to grow in their understanding and pursuit of God. One French student, “Maria,” said that this study and the discussion stimulated her to make a deeper commitment to reading of the Bible, attending church, and growing closer in her relationship with God. Maria also found more faith to pray for her unbelieving family members and saw several of them come to church and more willing to watch and discuss Bible podcasts with her. As she returns to France this summer, she is thankful for Ascension’s love and support.

Another Chinese student, “Li,” felt that when she was a young woman, God spoke to her during a time of distress and said, “I am always with you.” This piqued her interest to find out who this God is. Last summer, she attended a Bible study that went through Old Testament stories with several Ascension volunteers. She grew in her reading and speaking abilities and in her understanding of the big picture. When she broke her foot last summer, she was cared for with food and rides by Ascension volunteers. Then, this summer, she attended Tuesday fun nights at Timmy Podnar’s home, a Wednesday morning Bible study, and another Monday night study. She also began attending services. Li gave her life to the Lord this summer



and is still working through some questions. She is hoping to extend her visa here in the United States and continue to grow in her faith.

This past summer, Timmy Podnar and Sophia Bernardi led a Jesus Story Bible study through the New Testament for nine weeks. On Monday nights for five weeks, Christina Silva, Lola Alcorn, Philipp Burckhardt and I led a study focusing on HOPE. If you are interested in participating in one of our fall studies, please let me know. I would love more Christian English speakers to volunteer.

Conversation partners are also great because so much can happen one on one! There were at least 20 conversation partners meeting this past year (that I know about) offering help on pronunciation, fluency, applying for jobs, and discipleship. On Wednesdays in the fall, we’ll resume our morning “Conversation Café” that was widely attended last year. We hope to be in the new parish hall – more space and better coffee is promised! If you would be interested in making one on one connections with internationals, either as a Conversation partner or through the Conversation Café, please reach out to me.

The Why of Community Groups: Creating Space for Growth, Connection and Care



By Kevin Antlitz, Assistant Rector
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“Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. Alleluia!”

At the end of every Sunday worship service, we are commissioned with these powerful words. One of the ways we put this charge into practice throughout the week is by joining together in Community Groups hosted in one another’s homes.

So what are Community Groups (CGs)? CGs are small groups for people who consider Ascension to be their church home. In addition to corporate eucharistic worship on Sundays and personal devotions (daily prayer and Bible reading), participating in a CG is one of the best ways to grow in your faith and relationships.

By design, each CG is unique. Some are more focused on discussing biblical and theological content. Others are more focused on community-building. Some are life-stage specific, others are more intergenerational. Despite the diversity, all our groups generally include four core practices. These practices are inspired by the glimpse of the early church we see in Acts 2:42: *“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”*

Studying the Scriptures. Each group spends time discussing the Bible or a book rooted in God’s holy word. The Bible anchors us in what is true and is a lamp for our feet as we walk with Jesus together. This fall, many groups plan to discuss the Sunday sermons together using the Discussion Guides provided by the clergy.

Caring for one another. Given Ascension’s size, meeting in a CG (or similar sized group like Choir) is one of the best ways to know others and be known. In our groups, we share our needs, hopes, and concerns with one another, and do what we can to love and support one another.

Practicing hospitality. Our groups enjoy table fellowship. This may be snacks around a coffee table or



a potluck meal around the dinner table. Breaking bread creates space for new folks, builds community, and is a sign of our unity in Christ despite our differences.

Praying together. Groups devote time to pray for one another, the church, and the world. Sometimes this prayer is guided by the Book of Common Prayer. Other times, prayer is more free-form and spontaneous. Either way, we believe that God hears our prayers and responds to them as is best for us.

As groups engage in these rhythms and practices, we create space for growth, connection, and care. This is the *why* of Community Groups.

This fall we will have around 30 CGs that meet in different places throughout the city and on different days throughout the week. If you are interested in plugging in to a group, the best way to do that is through the Church Center app. In the Groups section of the app, you can explore the CGs that are receiving new members. Each group has a brief description of who they are, what they do, and when and where they meet. You can request to join groups right on the app. The leaders will then get in touch and, together, you can discern whether the group is a good fit or not. In addition to exploring the app, you can also reach out to me or any of the clergy or staff and we’d be happy to come alongside and support you as you get connected.

Habits of the Household

By Liz Ealey, Community Group Leader

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It was 6pm on a weeknight and our family was trying to eat dinner at the table. The dog was constantly whining for no discernible reason, the toddler had spilled her drink and was now running around the living room half naked, and the baby, previously content, was suddenly screaming. I looked at my husband across the table and said, “This is absolute chaos.” “What?” he responded, proving the point. “This is CHAOS!” and then quieter I said, “Is doing dinner even worth it?” I’m not sure if it was the birth of our second or our oldest turning three, but suddenly we felt like a young family full of chaos.

After corralling our children from dinner to bath to bedtime, I picked up a book, *Habits of the Household* by Justin Earley. The back said, “Find meaning in the daily chaos of raising kids.” The first page talked about his four boys running around the house naked and wet after a bath. That sounded familiar! The truth is that all young families are full of chaos. Realizing the wisdom of habits and structure, we waded into the book.

A main theme of the book is “that the greatest spiritual work happens in the normal moments of domestic life.” At Ascension, we are blessed with a wonderful children’s ministry on Sunday morning, but the real discipling of our children typically happens in our homes during the other 164 hours of the week. Children learn to pray, love, and know Christ in families. How we eat matters. How we apologize matters. How we start and end our day matters.

Our family began a journey of working through *Habits of the Household*, one habit at a time. Earley identifies 10 household habits:

Waking, Mealtimes, Discipline, Screentime, Family Devotions, Marriage, Work, Play, Conversation, and Bedtime. Each chapter dives into the significance of the habit for family life, theology, and the spiritual formation of children. Each chapter ends with main takeaways, practical suggestions, and specific habits to try.

We began to apply one specific habit to our life at a time and as we have added more habits, this has developed into what older Anglicans tell me is called a Rule of Life. Creating a functional Rule of Life for our chaotic family has been transformative for us. There is still plenty of chaos, but it no longer rules our home, and more importantly, we are developing daily habits that build spiritual formation for the children and adults in our family.

We want to invite you, our fellow chaotic young families, to take this journey into *Habits of the Household* alongside us. Please join us for a once-a-month book study and Rule of Life group. The group will include discussion, questions, family stories, resource sharing, mutual encouragement, and accountability. The homework for each month will be light, about one chapter of reading and most importantly, practicing your chosen habit as a family. (This group is not intended to replace other groups you are in.) The book is meant for families with children aged 10 and under, but families with older children and couples planning to have children are also welcome in our group. We look forward to journeying into family discipleship with you.

Please sign up for the group on the Church Center app. The topics and dates of our meetings can be found there. As a preview, they include Waking, Mealtimes, Discipline, Screentime, Family Devotions, Marriage, Work, Play, Conversation and Bedtime.





Children's Ministry Fall Launch



By Catherine Slocum, Director of Children's Ministry
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Nurturing Young Faith: Discover Our Children's Ministry at Ascension

At Ascension, fostering the spiritual development of our youngest members is more than just a mission - it's a vibrant and essential part of our community life. Every Sunday morning, our church comes alive with the energy of our children's ministry, marking the start of a meaningful faith journey for our youngest attendees.

A Dynamic Sunday Experience

During our worship service, children are invited to gather at the front of the church for a special message from one of our priests. This engaging moment sets the stage for our "Kids' Church" program, a dedicated time during the service where children embark on their own spiritual adventure.

An Immersive Learning Environment

Following the priest's message, children follow the cross and are led to a bright, welcoming space where they participate in interactive liturgies, lessons, and activities designed to capture their imagination and hearts. Our goal is to make learning about faith both enjoyable and impactful.

Exploring Faith Through the Book of James

This September, our Kids' Church program will delve into the teachings of the Book of James. Each Sunday, children will explore themes like

overcoming challenges with faith, practicing generosity, speaking wisely, and cultivating patience. These lessons are crafted to help them apply biblical principles to their daily lives.

It's back!

We're happy to announce the return of the Petting Zoo at our Parish Retreat! This event, along with other exciting activities, promises to be a delightful experience for the children, blending fun with spiritual enrichment.

Parish Retreat for Kids - Embracing Our Core Values

Our Kids' Church program focuses on five core values: Listening, Truth, Beauty, Kindness, and Grace. These values are integrated into every lesson and activity, reinforcing the moral and spiritual teachings essential to the children's growth. During the Parish Retreat weekend, we will delve deeper into these values through engaging lessons and activities.

A Unified Church Effort

The entire church community plays a crucial role in supporting our young members' spiritual journey. We are united in our commitment to guide and nurture our children, encouraging them to embrace what is true, pure, and lovely, as exemplified by Jesus Christ.

A Prayerful Commitment

Our shared mission is reflected in this prayer taken from our prayer book: "Almighty God, heavenly Father, bless



us with the strength and wisdom to train our children to love all that is true, pure, and lovely, following the example of Jesus Christ. Amen." As we continue to invest in the spiritual development of our children, we do so with faith in the Holy Spirit's power to shape the next generation into vibrant followers of Jesus Christ.

Fall Connect!

Help us keep our participant list up to date by clicking on the Kids' Church Fall Connect link on our app. Also, if you're interested in volunteering with any aspect of our Children's Ministry, you can reach out to me. Each Sunday we need a group of teachers and additional volunteers to staff our classrooms and nursery.

CAYG: Fall 2024



By Josh Bennett, Director of Youth Ministry (Interim)

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CAYG (Church of the Ascension Youth Group) is for middle and high school students, Sunday evenings from 6-8pm. Here are details of what is ahead:

- Youth Group begins: September 8 (please register your kids on the Church Center app)
- Parent Gatherings: September 22, October 20, November 17
- Parish Retreat: Oct 4-6

Youth Group this Fall

In his essay, *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis points out that the human problem is not that our desires are too great but that we settle for too little. We're like kids, rejecting a beach vacation to make mud pies - always tempted by the lie that God's way of living will diminish our lives. But Christ says that he came that we "may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The problem is not that we want too much, it's that we should be wanting more - more of the abundant life Jesus offers.

Parent Gatherings

New this fall are our parent gatherings. Come, drop your teens off, and join me as we discuss the struggles facing



our students, ways we can support one another, and spend time praying. We will meet September 22, October 20, and November 17. To learn more about parent gatherings and to receive our regular CAYG emails, just email me.

Join the Youth at the Parish Retreat

We hope you will join us for our annual Parish Retreat from October 4 - 6. Students will join the rest of the Church for worship and teaching with Bishop Alex and Tamara Cameron. We will also have a youth lodge to spend time in, evening activities, and high schoolers are invited to stay in the youth lodge overnight.

College-Age Ministry



Join us on Wednesday evenings from 6:30 - 8:30pm beginning August 21 for conversation, pizza, and prayer. Young adulthood is often a season of asking questions and sorting out the ideas we hold about faith and life — we are committed to being a safe space of relationship, curiosity and honesty as we wrestle together.

We are made up of students from surrounding universities, as well as folks already in the workforce or taking a gap year. We would love to have you! Reach out to Jess Bennett (jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org) for more info or click "Request to Join" on the College-Age group on our church app!

Mark Your Calendars



Name Tag Month

In September we're hosting a "Name Tag Month." Knowing a person's name is a powerful act of hospitality. God calls us each by name. One Ascensionite reports that the Sunday of her second visit someone called her by name when she entered the church. She was sold and has since built friendship and community that has sustained her through very difficult times.



Opening and Dedication

Sunday, September 1

It has become tradition at Ascension to dedicate ourselves vocationally to the Lord on the Sunday of Labor Day. We look forward to doing that on Sunday, September 1. And, we look forward to using the new Parish Hall for the first time after Sunday worship!



Elise Massa: Fellowship and Mission Report

Saturday, September 14 from 2:00pm – 3:15pm

We welcome our former Assistant Director of Music and Worship Arts back to Pittsburgh for the weekend. In the afternoon, from 2:00 – 3:15pm, Elise will be reporting on her work with United Adoration in the UK. Please join us!



Soul Care

Saturday, September 21 from 9:30am – 11am

Soul Care is designed to help us engage in the disciplines of prayer, reading and meditating on Scripture. We begin and end our gathering in silence, and throughout the morning we leave space for silence. Join us on Saturday, September 21 from 9:30am – 11:00am in the Hunt Rooms. Please register on the website or app to let us know you are coming.



Explore Ascension

Saturday, September 21 from 1pm – 4pm

New? Interested in finding out more about Ascension or Anglicanism? We offer a half-day introductory course for newcomers. It is also part of the pathway to membership for those who have made the decision to become part of the Ascension church family. Contact jess.bennet@ascensionpittsburgh.org or sign up on the website or app. Childcare is available to those who indicate a need.



The Great Race

Sunday, September 29

There are street closures on the morning of the Great Race that make it difficult to get to church if you live in the east part of the city or eastern suburbs (i.e. Squirrel Hill and beyond) or south side of the city (i.e. Dormont). Many roads and bridges are closed (i.e. Forbes, Boulevard of the Allies). Plan your route to church carefully that morning and come even earlier because parking is challenging too!

LEGACY SENIORS MINISTRY

Let's talk about Artificial Intelligence with Shawn Scannell

THURSDAY | TIME
SEPT 19TH | 12:30-2:30PM

Legacy September Meeting

Thursday, September 19 from 12:30pm – 2:30pm

Join Legacy for its fall kick off meeting with Shawn Scannell who has chosen the topic, *Let's Talk about Artificial Intelligence*. The group meets for lunch at 12:30pm. The cost is \$15 but first-timers are free. The great news is that we'll be in the new parish hall! To register, sign up on the website or app or email kafisher208@gmail.com.

LEGACY SENIORS MINISTRY

BIBLE STUDY
Letter to the Galatians

THURSDAYS | TIME
IN OCTOBER | 10AM-12PM

Thursdays in October: Legacy Bible Study on Galatians

Thursdays in October

Join Legacy for Thursdays in October (3, 10, 24, 31) from 10:00am - Noon for an intensive on the Book of Galatians. Sign up on the website or app or email tefft.ann@gmail.com.

Music Ministry



By Gary Harger, Traditional Worship Music Coordinator (Interim)

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Adult Choir

We are a vibrant group of singers and worshipers aged from 18-85. Led by Jenn Miller, we gather every Thursday from 7 – 9pm to rehearse, read scripture and pray for each other. We lead worship each Sunday at the 11am service. We have experienced and novice singers. There is no audition, just a willingness to learn. This year we especially need women's voices. You may also want to consider joining the choir for a season. We welcome additional voices for special services, Advent, Lessons and Carols, Lent and Easter. Please contact Jenn Miller for more info (jenn.miller@ascensionpittsburgh.org).



Important Dates:

Thursday, August 29

First choir rehearsal in the Millard Multipurpose Room beginning at 7pm. We will be dedicating the new rehearsal space, rehearsing some new music and finishing off the evening with a champagne toast to the new year and the new space.

Sunday, September 8

Choir will begin the fall season by singing at the 11am Eucharist which happens to be Father Coelho's first Sunday with us.

Thursday, September 12 and 26

Come join the choir at 7pm as we rehearse for the Institution of Father Coelho

Thursday, September 19

Choir and Music Team Dinner & Evensong
We will gather at 6:30pm for dinner in the Parish Hall and

move into the nave at 7:30pm for a service of Evensong and dedication of ourselves for the new year.

Sunday, September 29

The choir, music team, and instrumentalists will participate in the Institution of our new rector. Brass and String Players are needed. Throughout the year we need instrumentalists for preludes, choir anthems, and special services. Dust off that instrument from high school or college and help enrich our worship. Please contact me for more information.

Saturday, October 12

Hannover Girls Choir

On Saturday, October 12 at 7pm the Pittsburgh Girls Choir will be hosting The Hannover Girls Choir at Church of the Ascension. One of Germany's premieres choirs, the choir of girls and women between 14-20 will share a lively performance of classical and contemporary music. Contact me for more information.



Attention All Artists!

Saturday, September 14 from 10am to Noon

You are welcome to join us in the Hunt Rooms to connect with other artists at the church. At this event, we will be announcing the initiation of our Worship Arts Ministry, the Arts Collaborative. Our Arts Collaborative will be broken down into six main subgroups: Drama (stage and screen), 2D visual, 3D visual, Songwriters, Writers, Gardeners.

Each of these groups is led by two artists from our congregation who will organize time together for the artists of their discipline. If you are interested in joining the Arts Collaborative, please register for our event on the website or app! You can also reach out with any questions to wes.williams@ascensionpittsburgh.org.

Something Beautiful



By Daniel Behrens, Ascension Missionary in Residence

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I saw something beautiful, and I want to share it with you.

“Anna” is a middle-aged woman from Ukraine. Her family home is near the border with Russia. She and her husband came to the United States after the invasion in 2022. She takes English classes at Ascension, and she was facing major challenges: Her husband was preparing to return to Ukraine, leaving her alone in her apartment which was far away from her job. She worked nights as a housekeeper at the casino and was suffering respiratory problems from the cigarette smoke.

Another English student named “Natalia” had already stepped in to help prepare a resume. Lu Ann told me about the situation, and I was able to connect her with another ESL student, Irina, who had been volunteering with me as a Job Partner. Irina and Natalia are both from Russia.

One Monday evening before ESL classes, I met with Anna, Irina and Natalia. The three of them could communicate in a combination of Russian and Ukrainian, and they were kind enough to translate for me. It was a painful, tearful conversation, especially when Anna spoke about her husband’s return to the war zone.

After discussing her job and housing needs, the three of them sat on a pew in the hallway, with the two Russians wrapping their arms around Anna, speaking words of comfort and letting her cry. It gave me great joy to know that God had used our church to bring these women together.

Lu Ann connected Anna to an apartment which would be cheaper,

closer to downtown, and had international neighbors. From there, Lu Ann recommended a job as an instructor at a preschool near Ascension, and Irina walked Anna through the process of interviewing, applying, and completing clearances. Anna is teaching children again, as she did for many years in Ukraine. Since then, Anna’s family has had ongoing support from ESL teachers and tutors, helping Anna keep up with the vocabulary that comes with her new job.

I asked Irina a few questions about this experience, and I want you to hear from her directly:

Why did you want to help Anna?

I was very deeply touched by her family history, and by the fact that we were both forced to leave our countries for different reasons but caused by one terrible event - the war between Russia and Ukraine. We are almost the same age; we are not young anymore and we had to leave everything and start here from scratch. That’s why I really wanted to help her.

What did you learn from helping her?

We talked a lot. Anna told me about her husband who, despite his age, intended to return home to defend his city and his country, and other stories. I have learned to understand and empathize more.

How is Anna doing now?

Now Anna and her husband live in a beautiful house - they rent a room from a [friend] of your church.... Anna got a [part-time] job in a field that interests her and now she must work hard to get a permanent full-time job. But she managed to get her foot in the door and now she has got hope for a better future.



Irina and Anna

Is there anything you would like people at Ascension to know about people in Russia and Ukraine?

Some time ago, Russia and Ukraine were parts of one country - the Soviet Union. We lived in peace and harmony. There were many mixed families. We had common favorite books, songs and movies. Ukrainian "borscht" was a favorite dish of many Russian families. During World War II we defended our country from fascism together. And now Putin is trying to make Russian people consider Ukrainians our enemies. But this is not true.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

I would like to thank the staff and volunteers of the Church of the Ascension for their help to foreigners who are new here. Thank you for your time and patience. You help us feel at home with you.

Working with displaced people confronts me with the brokenness of this war-torn world, and the peace of God’s Kingdom breaking through, like a sunflower rising from a crater. If you do not already, I encourage you to find a way to participate in the International Ministry and Refugee Ministry!

Fearfully & Wonderfully Made

By James Scannell

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From the editor: For this issue James, a young adult at Ascension who has non-speaking autism and communicates via a spelling board, interviews Kate Marwood. Kate attends the 9am service with her husband Tyler and daughter Mercy.

James: I always start my interviews by asking this: How did you come to Ascension?

Kate: About 12 years ago moved to Pittsburgh to go to nursing school. I visited Ascension with the guy I was dating. I remember two things: someone greeted me right away and I felt welcome. And, as I stepped into this beautiful church I thought, "Well, I hope this works out because I'd love to get married here!" It did work out and we recently celebrated our 10th anniversary.

J: That's a great story. I'm curious, what did you do with nursing?

K: I worked at several hospitals. My passion is for oncology nursing. I quit my job a year ago to go back to school. Currently, I am a student at Trinity Seminary and hoping to get a master's degree in religion. I feel as if I'm called to be a hospital chaplain.

J: So, Marilyn Chislaghi suggested you would be a good person to interview. I'm assuming you have a "thorn in your side." Can you tell us your story?

K: I do. About 2 years ago I had a sudden and severe autoimmune reaction. (For medical people — it was Steven's Johnson's syndrome with toxic epidermal necrolysis.) It caused much of my skin and mucous membranes to blister and fall off. I



was in the ICU burn unit at West Penn for care. My eyes were severely affected, and I was completely blind for weeks. It can be fatal if the airway is affected, but I'm thankful that mine wasn't.

I do have my vision back to some capacity. My vision continues to be a big issue - scar tissue, corneal issues. I've seen 17 different eye doctors in the last 2 years. I have difficulties with vision, chronic dry eyes and eye pain. You forget how much your eyes affect your life. It has been up and down; my eyes are not dependable.

I tried to go back to work, thinking that would make things normal again. Bless my little heart, what was I thinking? I can't see, stare at a computer, or use my eyes for hours at a time. At some point during this, I told the Lord I would go to seminary if I made it through this

J: What helped you when you were sick and afraid?

K: Just a few weeks before I got sick, we were introduced to a new song

at church - a version of Psalm 23. The chorus is, "Hallelujah, I am not alone." I played that song many times a day, every day for months, all the time. It was such a comfort. It was a very lonely season for me and for my husband, and so good to know we are not alone.

J: I think that's the biggest message in suffering - that Jesus is with us. There are no answers to the "why" questions.

K: Yes. Working in oncology I often saw people getting sick out of nowhere. I say this with caution because I have not had a cancer diagnosis - but the struggle of "why", "why me? I'm a good person..." was common. And I share their questions. I don't think we will ever get an answer to those questions, though, and the energy it takes to wrestle with those questions can be better used in other ways.

J: What things have people done or said that helped or hurt during this time?

K: I'm thankful that my first thought

is that our church acted like the church so well - a beautiful display of love to us. We were flabbergasted by the help and generosity people showed - they fed us, gave us money to help with medical costs, helped with our daughter, cleaned our house. I even had friends come to change my dressings and wash my hair because I was unable to care for myself. I could go on for hours about how well the church showed up for us

And luckily, I can't remember many hurtful things. No one does this on purpose - but the world is not built for people with disabilities. This is the first time in my life I'm encountering that, and my disability is not as severe as many people experience. I can't read small print, for example. The other thing is that I LOOK normal so people can't tell when I'm having a bad day with my sight or with my pain. That can be hard to navigate.

J: I was going to ask about what it's like to have an invisible disability.

K: I think I'll be learning the answer to that throughout my life. Sometimes I look fine, but I'm in pain. I almost wish I could wear a t-shirt that says, "buy me a present and a snack", "I might bite your head off". I have compassion also for those who see me at my worst - I may hold it together all day and then at home I can be at my worst. I'm thankful that the Lord knows my heart more than I do. I don't have to hide anything from the Lord and He sees past the "invisibility." It only hurts me when I'm not honest with Him.

J: Sometimes I wonder if we are all walking wounded.

K: Yeah, we all have thorns.

J: And we need to be compassionate with each other. Tell me about school - what is challenging?

K: I'm not an academic at baseline. Getting a Master's degree would have been hard for me a few years ago. And now we've added in unpredictable eyeballs! Reading can be tough - I can't read small text. My first purchase was a large print bible. It's enormous - like the giant gospel book they carry during the liturgy. I've found some low vision rehab supports that help with equipment and software.

J: I bet it's hard not to feel productive.

K: More than I ever thought! Before my illness I worked full time and was a mom. I was so "high functioning". For my body to not let me do those things - what a challenge! Clearly my identity was not in Christ, and that's an ongoing lesson. Your identity can't be in what you are doing, because one day out of nowhere you may be incapable of doing that. Not my favorite lesson to learn!

J: You are amazing. Suffering and the presence of Christ - you can share this as a chaplain. It's hard to know what to say to people who suffer without sounding trite. Thoughts?

K: Yes. Sometimes when someone is suffering you don't need to say anything. Those who aren't suffering may feel uncomfortable and may try to say things that are not necessarily helpful. A practice that can be beneficial is just to sit with the suffering and be with them in their space. Often there is nothing you can say to help them, and that's ok. Maybe they don't need to hear anything, they just need to know that you are sitting with them.

J: How have you avoided bitterness?

K: Oh man, that's a great question! I think that ties back to the "why" questions. I have avoided asking that question because it doesn't have an answer. I think that has helped me. I think if I ruminated on that question, bitterness might develop. I don't AVOID the question, but I hold it cautiously because it can so easily lead to hardness of heart. The term "holy mysteries" is so helpful.

J: Is there anything else you want people to know or that you want to say?

K: I want people to know that you don't need a lot of things to pray. You don't need your eyes or the rest of your body to work. I think I personally have underestimated the power of prayer and the power of the presence of God. You can be lying on your bed in pain and the Lord is there and you can be with Him.

J: That is a good word for the people!

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