

January 2026



# The Messenger



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**Custodian**

**Laurie Olson,**  
**Treasurer**

**Pat Westphal,**  
**Financial Secretary**



**Sunday School** 8:45 am  
(September-May, every other Sunday)

**Adult Forum**  
**Sundays** 9:00 am

**Worship**  
**Sundays** 10:00 am  
(Holy Communion on 1st and 3rd Sundays)

**Bible Study**  
**Thursdays** 1:30 pm

**St. Mark's Lutheran Church, 140 S. Green Bay Rd, Neenah, WI 54956**  
**Phone:** 920-725-2828  
**Website:** [stmarksneenah.org](http://stmarksneenah.org) **E-mail:** [office@stmarksneenah.org](mailto:office@stmarksneenah.org)



## The Manifestation of Our Lord

Dear Children of God gathered as St. Mark's  
Lutheran Church,

Grace and peace to you.



As we step into this new year of 2026, we transition from the quiet wonder of the manger into the radiant season of Epiphany. Beginning on January 6 and leading us through February 17, this is a season of "manifestation"—a time when the light of Christ is not just present, but clearly revealed to the entire world.

In this Lectionary Year A, we will walk primarily through the Gospel of Matthew, watching as the identity of Jesus unfolds before our eyes. Epiphany (from the Greek *epiphaneia*) means "to make known, to manifest."

Throughout these coming weeks, we will see Jesus made known in word, action, and divine glory. The Church sees Jesus revealed as King, Son, Savior, Teacher, Light, and Lord of glory—manifested for the life of the world.

### January 6 – The Epiphany of Our Lord

**Gospel:** Matthew 2:1–12

**Revelation:** Jesus is King and Savior for all nations.

**Focus:** The Magi, outsiders and Gentiles, follow the star and worship the Christ child. Jesus is revealed as the one who draws all peoples to God's light.

### First Sunday after Epiphany – Baptism of Our Lord

**Gospel:** Matthew 3:13–17

**Revelation:** Jesus is God's beloved Son.

**Focus:** At the Jordan, the Father's voice and the Spirit's descent publicly reveal Jesus' divine identity and mission.

### Second Sunday after Epiphany – Lamb of God

**Gospel:** John 1:29–42

**Revelation:** Jesus is the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

**Focus:** John the Baptist points to Jesus, and disciples begin to follow him. Epiphany leads to recognition and discipleship.

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## The Manifestation of Our Lord

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### Third Sunday after Epiphany – Light in the Darkness

**Gospel:** *Matthew 4:12–23*

**Revelation:** Jesus is **the light dawning in the world.**

**Focus:** Jesus begins his public ministry, proclaiming the kingdom and calling disciples. God's light shines through mission and healing.

### Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – The Beatitudes

**Gospel:** *Matthew 5:1–12*

**Revelation:** Jesus is **the authoritative teacher of God's kingdom.**

**Focus:** From the mountain, Jesus teaches with divine authority, revealing God's values and the shape of true blessing.

### Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – Salt and Light

**Gospel:** *Matthew 5:13–20*

**Revelation:** Jesus is **the fulfillment of the law and the source of light.**

**Focus:** Jesus fulfills God's purposes and calls his followers to reflect his light in the world.

### Last Sunday after Epiphany – Transfiguration

**Gospel:** *Matthew 17:1–9*

**Revelation:** Jesus is **the glorious Son of God.**

**Focus:** On the mountain, Jesus' divine glory is revealed. The Father declares him Son once more, preparing the Church to journey toward Lent and the cross.

## A Living Epiphany

As we journey through these weeks together, we realize that the "manifestation" of Christ did not end with the Magi or the mountaintop Transfiguration. Because the Holy Spirit dwells within the body of Christ today, St. Mark's is now a place where Jesus continues to be revealed.

When we serve our neighbors, when we speak words of hope to the grieving, and when we gather at the Table, the light of Christ breaks through the shadows of our world. Epiphany is more than a season on the calendar; it is a calling. We are invited not only to *behold* the light but to *become* reflections of it.

- May we seek Him with the persistence of the Magi.
- May we listen to Him with the obedience of the first disciples.
- And may we live out the Beatitudes so that others might see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.

Let us walk boldly into 2026, confident that the Light has come, and the darkness shall not overcome it.

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Niveen Ibrahim Sarras, Ph.D





**Called to order:** President Dawn Jones called the meeting to order at 6:30 pm.

**Members Present:** Dawn Jones, Jason Blank, Laurie Olson, Joe Rehorst, Tara Dieck, and Pastor Niveen.

**Members Absent:** JT Rose, Tammie Kersten, and Tom Frantz.

**Devotions:** Devotions by Pastor Niveen. Jason agreed to do January's devotions.

**Sharing Highs & Lows:** Council members expressed the highs and lows they are experiencing in their lives.

#### **MSC by Jason Blank/Joe Rehorst to approve minutes of November 206, 2025**

**Thank Yous:** Pastor Niveen will send a thank you to Jeff Tharp for his assistance with the Basket Raffle and a thank you in the newsletter for those who helped with the Community Christmas Meal. Tara will send a thank you to Christian Ed for the Christmas Children's Program, Dawn will send a thank you to Donna & family and Jane Arps for work on the Basket Raffle, and Laurie will send a thank you to those who made meals for the Advent mid-week fellowship.

**Did You Know?** Pastor Niveen will do January and Jean Memken February.

**Financial Reports:** Laurie reviewed current account balances through end of November 2025. November's giving to current monthly expenses was \$16,068.88 and expenses of \$7,307.15. The difference was \$8,761.73. Year-to-date: Spending=\$154,310.50 and Giving=\$164,857.36 with a net of \$10,546.86. It was noted that we have not received the November invoice for Pastor's salary/benefits from the synod which is generally in the amount of \$8,000+.

Total Associated Bank checking has a balance of \$259,181.89 which includes \$149,396.79 allocated to designated accounts and \$109,785.10 for current operating. Additionally, \$173,675.05 in the Thrivent money market and \$1,048.42 in Thrivent TIPS account and \$58,191.38 in the ELCA Mission Investment Fund.

#### **MSC by Joe Rehorst/Tara Dieck to approve November's financial report.**

#### **Pastor's Report ~ Pastor Niveen Sarras**

During the period from mid-November to mid-December 2025, my ministry has been shaped by pastoral care, worship leadership, ecumenical engagement, and ongoing learning, all within the rich rhythm of the Advent season.

I attended the Synod Orientation and training for both the Discipline and Consultation Committee members. As a member of the Consultation Committee, I found this training to be extremely informative and valuable. It helped deepen my understanding of the responses and behaviors of individuals who are brought to our attention for actions that are not in keeping with Christian conduct within the church. The training offered important insights into human behavior, psychology, and how stress, fear, and conflict affect the way the brain functions. This knowledge will strengthen my pastoral approach, allowing me to respond with greater wisdom, compassion, and clarity when difficult situations arise.

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I also met with a prospective new member of St. Mark's. During our conversation, I shared who we are as a Lutheran congregation, how we understand our faith, and how we function as a church community rooted in grace, Word, and sacrament. She comes from a Catholic background, and our discussion was marked by openness, mutual respect, and meaningful dialogue. It was a positive and encouraging meeting that reflected the welcoming spirit of St. Mark's.

One of the highlights of this season was participating in two meaningful ecumenical services that embodied our shared faith and unity in Christ. The ecumenical Thanksgiving service, held at the United Church of Christ in Neenah, brought together Catholics, Lutherans, and members of the United Church of Christ for worship and fellowship. This gathering was a powerful expression of Christian unity and reflected Jesus' prayer that we may all be one, just as he and God the Father are one (John 17:21). That same spirit of unity continued during the ecumenical Christmas service at St. Paul Lutheran Church, where Lutheran pastors and clergy from the United Church of Christ, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Methodist Church joined in worship. Despite the cold weather, attendance exceeded that of previous years, making it a joyful and encouraging celebration of Christ's birth and our shared Christian witness. Following the service, participants gathered for a Christmas meal and fellowship, further strengthening our ecumenical relationships.

During Advent, I participated in a Zoom Morning Prayer with Red Letter Christians, where I offered a devotion that was published online. My devotion was based on Isaiah chapter 2 and addressed the suffering of Palestinians, connecting their reality with the biblical witness and God's call to justice and peace. This gathering was part of a larger Red Letter Christians Advent series titled "God With Us: Faith in the Face of Genocide," which features voices of Palestinian Christians and their allies. I am grateful for the opportunity to share scripture and reflection in this important and faithful space.

I am truly enjoying the Advent season at St. Mark's, especially as we welcome and train new acolytes. They are a wonderful group, and their enthusiasm and dedication have brought joy and energy to our worship services.

In addition, I attended the Social Ministry Team meeting held at St. Mark's Apartments. I have also been involved in preparing for the children's Christmas program and continue to work closely with Pastor Amy in leading Wednesday Advent worship services—both the morning service at St. Mark's and the evening service at St. Paul.

Pastorally, I remain in close contact with several members of our congregation who have recently undergone surgery or are preparing for surgeries after Christmas. I continue to offer them care, prayer, and support during this challenging time.

While this season can be stressful for pastors, I am deeply grateful and blessed to serve among the people of St. Mark's, who are consistently supportive, generous, and eager to help. I look forward with excitement to the upcoming Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services and all that God will continue to do among us.

Yours in Christ,  
Rev. Dr. Niveen Ibrahim Sarras, Ph.D

**MSC by Tara Dieck/Joe Rehorst to approve Pastor's report.**

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### **Ministry Team Reports:**

#### **Christian Education Ministry Team**

No meeting this month. Team members did gather to put the children's Christmas bags together, and some members helped with the rehearsal of the children's Christmas program.

#### **Property Ministry Team—Monday, December 1, 2025 ~ Submitted by Jason Blank**

Members Present: Bruce Grundman, Joe Rehorst, John Olson, Ginny Schieck, Phyllis Ziemke, and Jason Blank

- Budget will be discussed at the January meeting.
- We signed the contract for the snow removal service for this winter.
- We will be fixing the back door and adding a small ramp to bridge the gap for the blacktop drop off until the rest of the parking lot is installed in the spring.
- We will be taking a little time and adjusting the heat in a few different areas.
- There was some discussion on getting a new snow blower. Our current one is 20 years old.

Jason and Joe reported that the Property Team is interested in purchasing a new snowblower. The snowblower we currently have is old and small and makes removing snow from the sidewalk and other areas very difficult and time consuming. Since the purchase is over \$500 and not a 2025 budgeted item, they are requesting council approval for a new snowblower. Joe reported that he has been investigating models and costs and is interested in a blower at Lowe's for \$1,200. **MSC by Jason/Joe to purchase a new snowblower and use funds from the Building Improvement account.** Laurie will work with Joe on the purchase (use of church charge card and ensuring we set up tax exemption.)

#### **Social Ministry Team—Monday, December 8 ~ Submitted by Gwen Hoehne**

Chairperson: Karen Jordan

Present: Pat Thompson, Phyllis Ziemke, Pastor Niveen, Gwen Hoehne

The meeting opened with prayer led by Pastor Niveen.

#### **Discussion & Action Items**

##### **1. 2026 Budget Update**

The team agreed to adjust the Social Ministry budget to \$900.

##### **2. Food Pantry Update**

The current pantry balance is \$4,186.

Pastor Niveen has submitted an application for a \$1,200 grant to support this ministry.

##### **3. Shopping Assistance**

Karen and Phyllis volunteered to complete the upcoming ministry shopping.

Additional help will be requested when items need to be unloaded.

##### **4. Help for Christmas**

One thank-you was received.

The team decided who will receive gift cards for Christmas.

##### **5. Next meeting is on January 12, 2026, at St. Mark's apartments.**

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**Worship and Music Ministry Team—December 15, 2025 ~ Submitted by Pat Westphal**

Present: *Joy Case, Jenny Case, Ardys Seelow, Pat Westphal*

Absent: *Judy Hellman, Mary Jane Hartley, Betty Linna, Mary Ellen Tracey, Pastor Niveen Sarras*

Devotions were shared by Jenny Case relating to Zechariah's song of praise for his son, John the Baptist.

The next meeting will be Jan. 19, 2026, at 10:30 AM in the fellowship hall with devotions by Ardys or Pat.

Pat prepared a list of about 25 items that the team worked on for 2025. We discussed and edited the items to be sent to Judy (or summarized by Pat) for the report for the annual meeting in early 2026. We had been busier than we remembered during 2025. We also discussed our budget request for 2026 since it needs to be submitted before our January meeting. We decided to request the same budget dollars for 2026. Although we have a few dollars left unspent for 2025, we felt that some of the unusual events toward the end of the year affected our expenditures.

LuAnn will apparently be returning in January. The current plan is to again have Delores play the first and third Sundays; Judy play for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday; and LuAnn play the fourth Sunday of the month. We like the idea of a hymn sing during the months with 5 Sundays. Judy said that when her foot heals, she would be willing to assume more playing responsibilities. Looking ahead for January, Sherri Denney will provide special music for Jan. 11; and Pastor Dara will provide guitar music for a hymn sing Sunday on Jan. 18 or 25 depending upon her schedule.

The poinsettias have been placed near the altar for the rest of the holiday season. As more arrive they will be added to the display. We discussed "de-decorating" day and since Epiphany is on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, we suggested things be removed before the Jan. 11<sup>th</sup> service. So, the day to put things away is Jan. 10<sup>th</sup>. The team would appreciate help from the congregation.

There have been requests from some members of the congregation to provide some variety to the services. An *ad hoc* committee is being established to look at what this might look like. Lawrence University advertises that they have students who would like to provide music for special things in the communities. We have endowment funds that we could spend for this purpose once we decide how to proceed. The *ad hoc* committee will be assembled in January from members of the congregation and members of the Worship and Music Team. We will ask Jean to include a request in the January *Messenger*.

We have also been asked to reconsider placing Bibles in the pews. We really need further guidance about whether these will be utilized and a worthy expenditure of church funds.

We suggest that the *ad hoc* committee, the Bibles, and Lenten activities be included on the agenda for January 19<sup>th</sup>.

**Youth Ministry Team—November 30, 2025 ~ Submitted by Laurie Olson**

**Members Present:** Jeff Tharp, Laurie Olson, Nancy Rose, Sherri Denney, Ginny Schieck, JT Rose, Pastor Niveen and Jenny Case

**Members Absent:** Joe Rose

**Prayer:** Sherri Denney

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## **Business for Consideration**

### **Review of Events:**

- **Youth Workers Dinner at Our Savior's:** Jenny Case and Laurie Olson attended. Reported that there were eight in attendance. The group shared ideas on youth fundraising and Sunday School planning. The group talked about having a one-day Sunday School planning day – where teachers could attend and get lesson plans together for the following season – assist each other with ideas.
- **Corn Maze Palooza at Porter's Patch:** Ginny reported that it was a good time and would participate again. Not many attended, from St. Mark's, but those who did enjoyed the event.
- **Soupster-Bible Camper Fund fundraiser:** Nancy reported it was a success. Over \$900 was raised. Laurie will get the exact dollar amount for next meeting.

### **Bible Camper -Fundraiser Events:**

- **Basket Raffle** is currently in progress.
- **Valentine's Day Dinner – Friday, February 13<sup>th</sup>.** Sherri is gathering options for entertainment to present at our January meeting. Laurie shared the publicity from the Valentine's Dinner that was held by the Partnership Ministry Team in 2020; posters, buttons, bookmarks, photo booth, and dinner tickets. We will go with the same type of planning but change the graphics. We will be applying for Thrivent grants to cover our expenses for food, photo booth, buttons, etc.

### **Upcoming Events:**

- **Movie Night-Friday, December 19.** Sherri, Nancy, JT, Ginny, and Laurie can work at the event. Discussed game ideas – pin the tail on the donkey could be one. Laurie will finalize games and get supplies.
- **Synod Snow Tubing -Kewaunee Winter Park, January 17 at 10 am.** We will begin promoting this event in December.
- **Synod Gathering – Journey with Jesus** (with Dave Scherer (AGAPE), February 20-22. Pastor Niveen will gather more information and get an email out to families to participate. Youth Activities fund is available to assist with the costs to attend.
- **Synod Bowling** – April 5. Team will try to do a St. Mark's and friends bowling event in mid to late January. Will participate in Synod event, as well.

### **Other Items to Discuss:**

- Ginny brought up hosting St. Patrick's Day themed fellowship on March 15. Laurie will get us down for that Sunday. Discuss details at a future meeting.
- Laurie said that Linwood Place would like us to bring our youth to their place for an event, such as a game/Bingo afternoon. The team discussed doing this in April.
- May will be a car wash.

Closed with the Lord's Prayer.

**Next meeting: Sunday, January 11 at 11:15 AM. (NO December meeting)**

**Connections Ministry Team—November 24, 2025 ~ Submitted by Mary Jane Hartley**

**No report.**

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### **Racial Equity Ministry Team**

No meeting this month.

### **Finance and Stewardship Ministry Team—December 16, 2025 ~ Submitted by Laurie Olson**

Laurie Olson, Treasurer, and Pat Westphal, Financial Secretary, met and put together recommendations for salaries of church personnel for the Church Council to consider.

### **Endowment Ministry Team**

No meeting this month.

<b>ST MARK'S CHUCH COUNCIL TERM STATUS</b>	
<b>Member</b>	<b>Term Ends at the end of the noted year (serves up to the annual meeting date in Feb.)</b>
Tara Dieck	February 1, 2026, annual meeting
Tom Frantz	2027 (1st term)
Laurie Olson (Treasurer)	n/a
Dawn Jones (President)	2025 (1st term)
Joe Rehorst	2027 (1st term)
JT Rose (Youth Representative)	2025 (annual term)
Jason Blank (Vice President)	2025 (1st term)
Tammy Kersten	2027 (1st term)
Pastor Niveen Sarras	n/a

### **Unfinished Business:**

**Music Ad Hoc:** Dawn reported that she has asked Tara Dieck, Lois Hill, and Pat Westphal to work on this temporary team and they accepted. Pastor Niveen will also be involved. Dawn will also talk with Judy Hellman. It is the council's hope that the meetings will begin in January.

**Lighting Update:** Joe said he hopes to finish up in February.

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**Computer Upgrade Updates:** Laurie noted that the process ran into a snag – Windows 11 is not compatible with the back door program. She is working to get this resolved and if this is not feasible, a new system may need to be installed.

**New Business:**

- **Church Council Academy:** Dawn asked that council members put April 18 on their schedule. Details will be shared as they become available.
- **Ministry Gifts list:** Dawn referenced the lists that were handed out and asked council members to review those listed under their Ministry Team (teams they represent) and contact new names and invite them to the next team meeting. She reminded everyone that all who show interest should be asked.
- **Council Terms:** Jason Blank and Dawn Jones both have completed their first 3-year term and have agreed to run for another 3-year term. JT is interested in running again for the 1-year youth position. Tara Dieck, who is finishing up Emily's first year, is interested in running. Laurie will check the February 2025 Annual Meeting Minutes for those who are on the nominating team and update them with the council status.

**Pastor Niveen was excused, so the council can discuss staff, organist and Pastor's Salary & Benefits.**

- **Staff, organist and Pastor's Salary & Benefits**-Laurie reviewed the proposed wages and benefits for the office administrator and custodian positions, organists' stipends, and Pastor Salary & Benefits. It was noted that the staff proposals are based on the federal Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), the organist pay was reviewed by the Worship & Music Team and Pastor's salary/benefits are based on the ECSW Compensation recommendations and Pastor's call agreement. A discussion followed. **MSC by Jason Blank/Tara Dieck to approve the recommended wages, stipends, salary/benefits.** Tara suggested that Worship & Music discuss paying for practice mileage, for those who come to St. Mark's to practice. The below will be presented to the congregation at the Annual Meeting on February 1, 2026.

**2026 Budget Considerations**

**2.8% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA)**

**Office Administrator**

2025 Budget:	\$17.02 per/hr x 16 hours x 52 weeks =	=	\$14,156
2026 Proposed	\$17.50 per/hr x 16 hours x 52 weeks =	=	<u>\$14,560</u>
	Difference	=	+\$404

**Custodian**

2024 Budget:	\$15.52 per/hr x 10 hours x 52 weeks =	=	\$ 8,070
2025 Proposed:	\$15.95 per/hr x 10 hours x 52 weeks =	=	<u>\$ 8,294</u>
	Difference	=	+\$224

**Worship & Music recommends the following for 2025:**

**Organists**

2025 Budget:	\$141 (plus mileage) X 62 services =	=	\$8,740
2026 Proposed:	\$141 (plus mileage) x 62 services = \$	=	<u>\$ 8,740</u>
	Difference	=	\$0

Mileage rate 2026: 72 cents per mile (est. 2026 national mileage reimbursement)

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**ST. MARK'S - PASTOR SALARY BENEFITS CALCULATIONS  
PROPOSED -2026**

	2025 Approved	2026 Proposed	
<b>Base Salary</b>	54,785	57,092	10 yrs service + \$2,000
<b>Housing Allowance 30 % of salary</b>	16,435	17,128	
<b>S.S.-6.2% Medicare-1.45% allowance</b>	5,448	5,678	
<b>Subtotal defined comp</b>	<b>76,668.00</b>	<b>79,898.00</b>	4.05%
<b>Benefits</b>			
<b>Pension (retirement) 10%</b>	7,667.00	7,988.00	
<b>Survivor, Disability &amp; Retiree support .5%</b>	383.00	399.00	
<b>Med. &amp; Dental Mem. Only-Portico calc</b>	11,486.00	12,118.00	
<b>Subtotal Benefits</b>	<b>19,536.00</b>	<b>20,505.00</b>	4.96%
<b>Other</b>			
<b>Auto allowance</b>	1,500	1,200	based on projected 2025 actual
<b>Continuing Education</b>	1,200	1,000	
<b>Theological Conf &amp; Anti-bias training</b>	575	675	
<b>Books &amp; Publications</b>	400	400	
<b>Cell Phone Stipend</b>	500	500	
<b>Subtotal Other</b>	<b>4,175</b>	<b>3,775</b>	-9.60%
<b>Total Salary &amp; Benefits</b>	<b>\$100,379.00</b>	<b>\$104,178.00</b>	3.78%
			Increase of \$3,799

MSC by Joe Rehorst/Tara Dieck to adjourn.

Next meeting will be January 15, 2026 at 6:30 PM.

Closed with the Lord's Prayer.

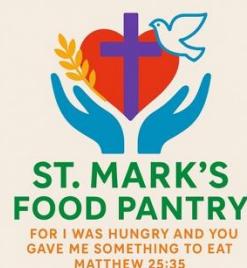
*Please be  
Praying for...*

Ellen LaMarche  
 Sarah L.  
 Richie Sczerzen  
 Gary Kostrzak  
 Traci  
 Lacey Joachim  
 Linda Rehorst  
 Mary Ellen Tracey

## Moses Message

Hope everyone had good and safe holiday season. Hope you remembered whose birthday it was and worshiped Him. Sunday School will start up again on Sunday, January 11, 2026. It is hard to believe we are into 2026 already. The holidays went fast as did your Christmas break. I look forward to seeing everyone on January 11th at 8:45 am.

With God's Blessings,  
Gwen Hoehne, Superintendent



The Food Pantry was very busy in November, as usual. We were shut down one week while they worked on our parking lot, but still had 50 families shopping to feed 153 family members. With all your help we are still in pretty good shape. If you would like to help us, we would appreciate cash donations. Our numbers were up in 2025. In fact, Feeding America estimated we provided about 3,000 meals to local families this past year. Our budget was stretched, but we still were able to give lots of help to those needing food. Thanks for all your help. – Karen Jordan



**GIVE NOW**

Scan the code and give to support the ministry of St. Mark's Lutheran Church. Thank you.



Iris Place in Appleton provides a safe and welcoming environment that offers an opportunity for individuals experiencing emotional distress or crisis to grow and change through the support of others with lived experience. Free to all Wisconsin adults (18 & over) who want and need peer support to navigate emotional distress or crisis related to mental health and/or substance use, Iris place offers a short-term stay in a home-like healing environment. They

also provide hope and healing through 24/7 peer support. They are a self-directed, strengths-based, holistic respite. Please consider supporting this worthwhile agency this month. Include your donation in your offering envelope and mark "Mission of the Month" on the front of your envelope or denote Mission of the Month with your online giving.



## It's That Time of Year...

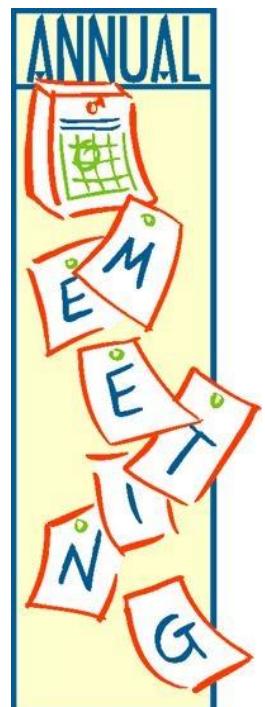
Our annual congregation meetings will be happening soon. Be sure to get them on your calendar.

### **Sunday, January 25 – Congregational Budget Hearing – After Worship**

Come and hear how our Church Council and Ministry Teams have proposed our offering money will be spent in the coming year. Copies of the budget will be available for you to look over and there will be time for discussion and questions.

### **Sunday, February 1 – Annual Meeting and Potluck – After Worship**

You definitely want to be in attendance at our Annual Meeting where there will be election of officers and representatives to various meetings and committees. There will also be the selection of our "Missions of the Month" for 2026-27. Finally, we will hear highlights of what happened in 2025 here at St. Mark's and some updates on what is coming in 2026. And then there will be a potluck dinner for all to enjoy. The Church Council will provide the sandwiches, condiments, and drinks. Bring a dish to pass (salad, side, or dessert) and enjoy some time of fellowship with your St. Mark's family!





## What "Church Together" Means Today

We often say, "We are church together," but together with whom? The answer reaches far beyond our walls. In the ELCA, we are united through three partners—local, regional, and global—each doing what the others cannot do alone.

### Our Local Heart: St. Mark's

It starts right here at **St. Mark's**. This is where God's Word is heard, the Sacraments are shared, and neighbors are known by name. We are more than a gathering; we are the frontlines of God's mission in our community, serving and loving those around us.

### Our Regional Bridge: The East Central Synod of Wisconsin

Next, we connect with our neighbors through the East Central Synod of Wisconsin, a network of 112 congregations walking together. The synod supports leaders, shares resources, and strengthens congregations across our region. At St. Mark's, we benefit from this partnership, knowing we are not alone in ministry.

### Our Global Reach: The Churchwide Organization

Finally, our mission extends nationally and globally. By joining nearly 9,000 ELCA congregations and participating in the **Lutheran World Federation (LWF)**, St. Mark's is connected with millions of Lutherans—and all Christians—around the world. Together, we provide disaster relief, support missionaries, and advocate for justice and peace.

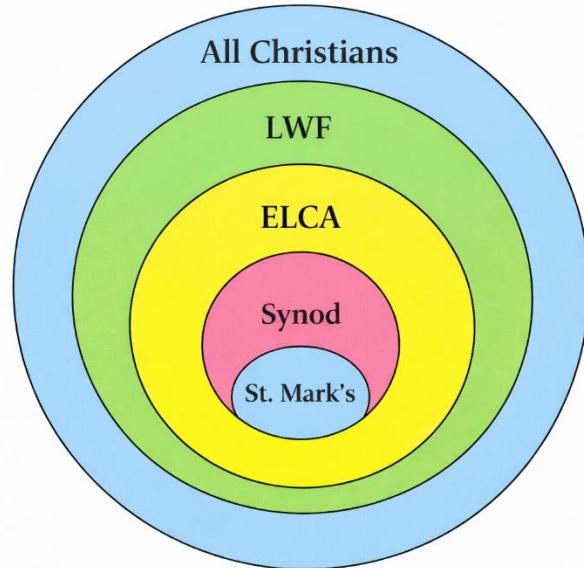
### Conclusion

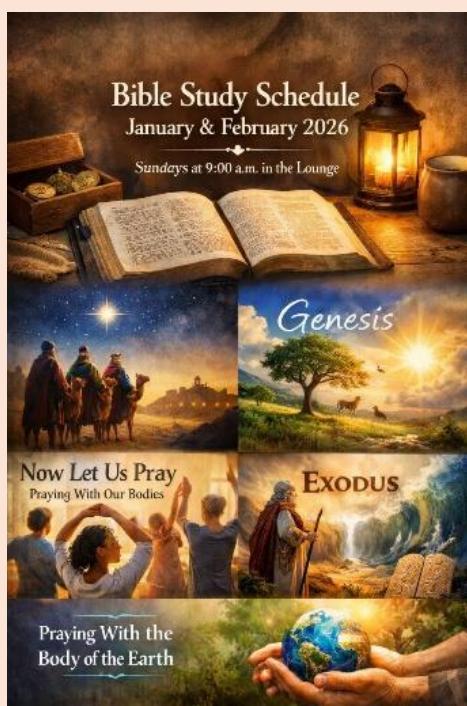
As Paul reminds us, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12).

When we give our time, talents, and offerings at St. Mark's, we aren't just keeping the lights on—we're supporting a regional network, a global church, and a worldwide mission of love. We are ensuring that no one walks their journey of faith alone.

We are truly church together!

Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras





## Bible Study Schedule

### January & February 2026

**Time:** Sundays, 9:00 a.m.

**Location:** The Lounge

Beloved, grace and peace to you. As we enter the new year, we invite you to nourish your spirit through our upcoming Bible Study schedule. Beginning in January, Pastor Niveen Sarras will lead us through a custom-prepared study, alongside Dawn Jones, who will facilitate the *Gather Magazine* series. Whether you are seeking deep theological insight or communal reflection, we invite you to join us each Sunday for study, discussion, and spiritual growth.

#### January 2026

Date	Teacher	Topic
January 4	Pastor Niveen	The Magi in Matthew 2
January 11	Dawn Jones	<i>Now Let Us Pray: Praying With Our Bodies</i>
January 18	Pastor Niveen	The Book of Genesis Part 1
January 25	Dawn Jones	<i>Now Let Us Pray: Praying With Our Bodies</i> (continued)

#### February 2026

Date	Teacher	Topic
February 1	Pastor Niveen	The Book of Genesis (continued)
February 8	Dawn Jones	<i>Now Let Us Pray: Praying With the Body of the Earth</i>
February 15	Pastor Niveen	The Book of Exodus, Part 1
February 22	Dawn Jones	<i>Now Let Us Pray: Praying With the Body of the Earth</i> , Part 2

We look forward to gathering in study, conversation, and faithful reflection during these winter months.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Sarras and Dawn



# Celebrating God's Faithfulness as We Enter 2026

Dear Children of God,

Grace and peace to you as we enter this New Year, 2026. As we step forward together, let us praise and thank the Lord for His faithful presence in our lives. We do not dwell on the challenges of the past year, but we give thanks for God's blessings—seen and unseen.

We thank God in Jesus Christ for the comfort He provided in struggles, for the joy and gifts He granted, and even for the things we asked for that He has not yet given, trusting His perfect wisdom and timing.

The Scriptures remind us:

- “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.” — *Psalm 107:1*
- “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” — *1 Thessalonians 5:16–18*
- “The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.” — *Psalm 126:3*

I invite you to reflect on this translated hymn from the Presbyterian Church in Egypt, which I used to sing with my seminary colleagues in Cairo at the close of the year:

## Refrain:

You crown the year with goodness, Lord,  
Your paths o'erflow with grace;  
My heart shall sing its praise to You,  
And seek Your holy face.

## Stanza 1:

O Savior Christ, to You belongs  
The praise that we impart;  
To You we bring our truest love,  
And offer every heart.  
Your righteousness we shall proclaim,  
Your name we gladly sing;  
Throughout the world's most distant shore,  
Let your high glory ring.

## Stanza 2:

How blest is he whom You have called,  
To dwell within Your gate;  
Where thirsty souls are satisfied,  
And living waters wait.  
O Comfort of the sorrowing,  
Our Hope when hope is gone;  
You lift the fallen from the dust,  
And lead them safely on.



## Stanza 3:

You calm the seas when tempests rise,  
And still the roaring wave;  
The earth beholds Your mighty signs,  
For You are strong to save.  
The mountains stand by Your great power,  
Our weary hearts' delight;  
You are the one who grants our hope,  
And turns to day the night.

## Stanza 4:

The pastures drip with golden grain,  
The hills break forth in song;  
The meadows wear a robe of joy,  
To whom all thanks belong.  
O Sovereign Lord and King of all,  
The nations bow to Thee;  
All earth and sky shall shout Your praise,  
Through all eternity.

May this hymn guide our hearts to thank the Lord for His goodness, grace, and presence throughout 2026. I warmly invite you to join us in worship and fellowship, as together we celebrate God's faithfulness and look forward to the work He will do among us this year.

Yours in Christ,  
Rev. Dr. Niveen Ibrahim Sarras, Ph.D

**Entertainment**

**Dinner**

**Prizes**

*St. Mark's Youth Ministry Team is sponsoring a . . .*

# *Valentine's Dinner*

**Friday, February 13**

**St. Mark's Fellowship Hall**

**Doors open at 5:00 pm. Appetizers at 5:15 pm. Dinner served at 5:45 pm.**

**All are welcome: couples, singles, young, and young at heart. Invite your friends and family.**

**Tickets are \$10/person. Advanced ticket purchase is recommended.**

**Tickets can be purchased at the church during office hours or on Sunday mornings after worship.**

*Proceeds will go to support our Bible Campers.*

**St. Mark's Lutheran Church  
140 S. Green Bay Road  
Neenah, WI 54956**

