FIRST WORD

SPRING 2026

A PUBLICATION OF FIRST EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH

Expressions

Written by Gayle Gilman

Expressions is a small support group under the umbrella of The Faith Community Nurses designed to help people heal physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Expressions started 10 years ago by Delores (Dee) Huanca, RN, MSN.

Like other small groups, Expressions is a support group of believers who seek to help ourselves & each other build our lives on our biblical faith. We follow the example of 1 Thessalonians 5:8 as we encourage one another to "put on that breastplate of faith & love, and the helmet of the hope of our salvation". We do this by listening, prayer, praise, exhortation to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24–25), and applying biblical wisdom to individual circumstances.

Membership in this group is dedicated to people dealing with chronic illnesses; ranging from ongoing physical or mental illness, such as, chronic depression and anxiety. Creativity is foundational for healing brokenness. Recent research has revealed the power of all the art forms for healing debilitating illnesses.

We dedicate part of the meeting to the visual expression of feelings or thoughts. The focus is not on making something beautiful. No experience or artistic skill is necessary, we have even used stick figures! We use art as an expressive tool to foster self awareness and conversation about challenges which often generates delightful and insightful discussions. Just completing these simple projects fosters a sense of wholeness. We provide the art materials at no charge.

Meetings are on Sunday afternoons from 2–4:00 p.m. twice a month andonce a month during the summer months. See the Events page/ calendar on the church website for specific dates.

If interested, please contact Dee Huanca (ddhuanca@msn.com) or one of the Faith Community Nurses (nurses@firstfreechurch.org).

Dee and Gayle Gilman meet with this group twice a month during the school year and once a month in the summers. Dee and Gayle are both retired and really enjoy facilitating this group.

A new ministry in Lithuania

By Luke and Katie Bonawitz, missionaries supported by First Free

Many of you will know and remember Luke and Katie Bonawitz, who until a few years ago were active members here at First Free. Recently, God has called them to a new ministry in Lithuania. We are excited to be able to partner with them as they respond to that call. Below is a small glimpse into their ministry, and how God called them into this work.

Tell us a little bit about the ministry you are starting in Lithuania.

We are inKlusio eduKatum, i.e. to intentionally lead, develop, and transform systems and people so that those with disabilities can be heard, acknowledged, and visible. Jesus modeled these attributes; we desire to do the same: Value those who experience the world in different ways; i.e. individuals with disabilities.

Compelled by the love of Jesus Christ and His call to serve the least of these, our purpose is to reach those who are ignored, overlooked, and unseen—particularly in the former Soviet-era states bordering the Baltic Sea and beyond—where the needs are evident and development is necessary. We believe every person bears the image of God and is worthy of dignity, inclusion, and opportunity, regardless of a physical, emotional, or cognitive disability.

Rooted in the truth of the gospel, our vision is to cultivate Christ-centered inclusion by 1) welcoming and serving families with children with disabilities, 2) sharing the gospel in ways that meet the needs of children with disabilities, and 3) providing concrete opportunities for these families and individuals to experience inclusion—i.e. the way Christ modeled it.

This model of inclusion will extend into broader gathering spaces. In these spaces we will support educators, expand educational initiatives to cultivate awareness, deliver reproducible outcomes, and empower individuals with disabilities by aligning their unique gifts with accommodations that open doors to workplace engagement, i.e., demonstrating dignity, inclusion, and opportunity.

Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.

—Matthew 25:40

Can you tell us how God led you to this calling and ministry?

After 25 years of Katie's work in disability education, an unexpected three-month stay in Ukraine in 2021 stirred a deeper calling in us to serve God in the field of disabilities on a global scale. Since then, the Holy Spirit has led us to help bring people with disabilities out of the sheltered shadows of society and into the light through inclusive efforts, i.e., becoming visible.

Luke felt called to support the integration of people with disabilities into mainstream society, while Katie was led to educate, advocate, and partner with governments, schools, and families.

In 2023 and 2024, God opened additional doors in Lithuania, allowing them to advance inclusive education

through collaboration with schools, universities and in partnership with government entities. Through these opportunities, it became increasingly clear that God was calling us to something greater—i.e., to serve the overlooked and ignored full-time in the Baltics and beyond.

We are continually reminded, "that in our hearts, we planned our course, but the Lord is determining our steps." (Proverbs 16:9). We are called to "let light shine out of darkness, and to have God's light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ."[2 Corinthians 4:6]. May we do this faithfully.

If you want to stay in touch with Katie and Luke, please email them at i.e.katieandluke@gmail.com. If you want to hear more about their ministry, they will be sharing during Community Hour on May 17.

> *"We believe every person bears the image of God and is worthy of dignity, inclusion, and opportunity, regardless of a physical, emotional, or cognitive disability."*

HIGHLIGHT ON THE BENEVOLENT FUND

Written by the Caring Commission

At First Free, one of our extraordinary norms is that we want to be a church that responds tangibly to the needs of others. One of the ways we live that out is through our church's Benevolent Fund, which is managed by our Caring Commission. The Benevolent Fund, which is separate from our church's general fund, allows us to provide timely and discrete financial assistance to those in our church family, and occasionally to those in our wider community. Every dollar of giving that is designated specifically for the Benevolent Fund will be used to help care directly and tangibly for others.

When needs come to our attention, we discuss as a commission how we might use benevolent funds to provide help. Over the years, your contributions have been used to provide financial assistance to those inside and outside our church community in a variety of practical ways: helping with rent, car repairs, gas, groceries, medical bills, and much more. We thank you, our church congregation, for your generosity to the Benevolent Fund, which enables us to embody the love of Jesus by providing help in times of need.

God's Goodness in the Grand Canyon

Written by Mark and Mary Ann Mayrand

In our current sermon series, "And It Was Good," we are exploring the fundamental goodness of creation, and the many ways in which it was designed to reveal and reflect the goodness of our God. As part of that project, we invited Mark and Mary Ann Mayrand (former Arizona residents and ongoing Grand Canyon enthusiasts) to share some of the ways the Grand Canyon has brought them joy and displayed God's glory.

Well over 200 times we have stood on the rim of the Grand Canyon. Stood, looked into and across that great abyss, and then begun the long descent into that imposing hole. We always preferred to arrive well before sunrise. Our home was 80 miles from the Canyon, and the heavens would declare the glory of God on every dark drive. Planets, constellations, and the Milky Way shone and delighted us. The first stanza of How Great Thou Art perfectly described our appreciation of God's amazing universe.

As we'd hike down the steep and narrow trail, rounding corners, hugging rock walls, striding along unnatural terraced steps, we would see the colors of the rock wall changing. Layers of wall—brown, red, orange, white—were contoured with fissures and rock. When finally the sun would rise in the east, west facing walls and spires across the canyon would light up. Shadows would be long when looking across the canyon, and cover much of the early morning hike. We'd have to stop and breathe in the beauty.

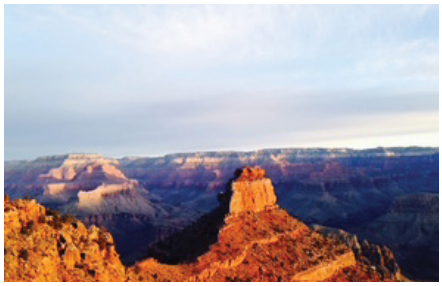
How many different people wondered who directed the sun to rise and travel across the sky to set in the west? We knew! Those stars and that sun were His design, and behaved exactly as He created them to. We were witnesses to the creation glorifying God!

As one descends the change in vegetation is obvious. At the top of the Canyon, ponderosa, juniper and pinion pines are dark greens against the brown dirt. Hiking in, the plants become more shrubby, and succulents and flowers appear: red Indian paintbrush and brilliant white Datura with huge dark green leaves against red dirt. Prickly pear cactus flowers are red, orange and yellow. The contrasts in the Canyon are captivating. Each plant is perfectly suited to its situation in the canyon. Some plants were good for food, others provide habitat, some have medicinal properties. God, the consummate artist, has provided all as a demonstration of His good creativity.

If a hiker listens well, the tinkle of running water can be heard in a few places on a few trails. Natural springs occur and seep thru the rocks. Moss can be seen, and a few trees provide much needed shade and shelter. Those springs are a reminder that God is faithful to tend His creation.

Big horn sheep, elk, mule deer, squirrels, condors, eagles, hawks, scorpions, tarantulas, rattle snakes, cougar, and countless other fauna were present on our hikes. Imagine rounding an outcropping and finding a big horn sheep blocking the trail. We have experienced a stroll with deer munching the pinion nuts, stopping us in our trek, to admire a buck in rack. It's truly heart stopping to watch a raptor at top speed swoop down upon a rodent, grab it, and fly up to a perch for a meal. God's order in his creation could only have happened intentionally, not accidentally.

Atop the rim, the common noises of civilization are present. But as one descends, the noises dissipate, and silence attends. Hikers speak more quietly. Birdsong can be heard. We hiked without technology, so we could greet other hikers, chat together, meditate, pray (GOD, help me get outta here!). There was never a hike that we didn't praise God for the beauty of His great creation, and the honor of being part of His Canyon, for even a short stroll in the hole. The natural beauty of God's creation stirs our hearts to worship Him, to thank Him for His goodness.



An Update from Japan

By Doug and Cheryl Conrad, missionaries supported by First Free

Doug and Cheryl are former members who served at First Free in many ways over the years. Prior to attending First Free, the Conrads had served as missionaries in Japan. Recently, and to their surprise and delight, God has called them back. We are grateful to have them as partners in the work of the gospel. Here is an update from Japan:

The last month has been packed with activities. Although, we have felt tired out at times, most of the time we are energized by the blessings of this past month! God has gone before in the work of Nishi Omiya EFC.

On March 20, we officially moved into the newly built house and church. Two churches, Higashi Omiya EFC and Kawagoe EFC have been praying for and planning for this new church for almost 10 years. What a joy it must be to see it come together. We watched the building go up and participated at the two churches until the Nishi Omiya church was completed.

Nine Japanese believers joined us from the other churches and make up our core group to start the church. We have been so excited to see how they have worked together and reached out to others. They also have so many skills. We have great musicians, which we especially get excited about, as we would love to be known as a joyful, worshipping church. We have a couple of tech guys that have been preparing power point slides and bulletins. Two women have preschool teaching experience. Another person is prepared to work with Jr. High and High School. So amazing what God has brought together.

Our first official service was on Easter. Four people from the neighborhood joined us. Two of them had not been to church before. We also had a man covered in tattoos, very unusual in Japan. Usually only people in gangs have tattoos. He showed us his large tattoo of Jesus and wanted us to know he believed. We were so pleased by the way our Japanese believers welcomed him. In some Japanese churches, he would have not been welcomed.

We started English classes. We especially enjoyed our adult's English classes. We had good conversations and good questions at the coffee time. One of the students also came to our Easter service. We pray that she continues to have interest in the church and the Bible.

The Children's Easter Festival was a special time of about 15 children and their parents. We had games, crafts, music, treats, and the Easter story. We hope some of the children will come to our children's Bible time or English classes. Currently, our children's classes have had a slow start. We are especially praying for this age group as there are many young families in Nishi Omiya.

Please pray for Doug as he prepare weekly messages to preach in Japanese, prayer meetings, and the music. Pray for Cheryl as she plans children's events, teaches English classes, and plans future activities with ladies. Pray also for future possible activities such as English coffee and chat time, English worship once a month on Sunday nights, and possibly a Ladies English Bible study. Pray for wisdom in good use of our time and for guidance as we lead the core team.