



the tower

july 2026



Energizing downtown Rockford and beyond with God's Grace

The Intersection of Church and State

July of 2026 brings with it a national celebration. The foundations of the United States of America were set 250 years ago at the signing of the Declaration of Independence. We celebrate Independence Day every year on the Fourth of July; yet this year our nation hits a milestone—we've been a nation for one-quarter of a millennium.

This year also brings some distinct challenges because of the rise in Christian nationalism: that blurring of lines between allegiance to the flag and allegiance to Christ.

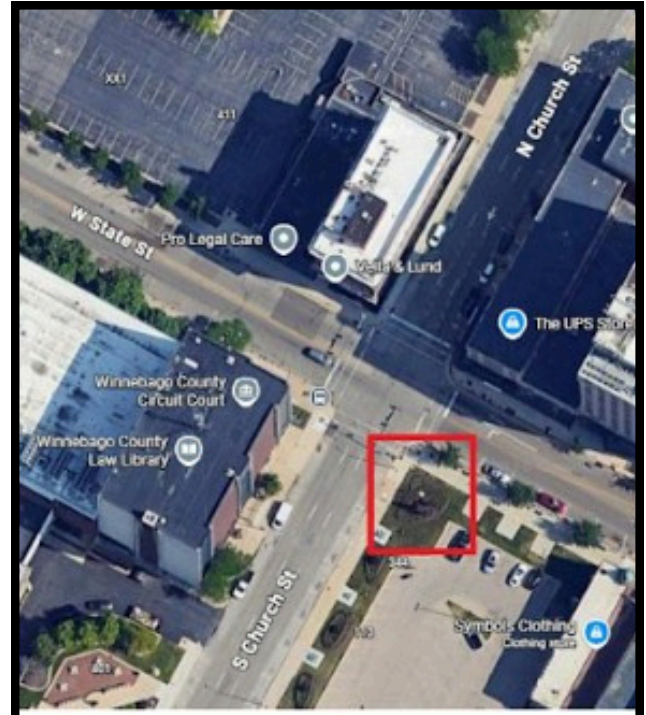
Christian nationalism fuses religious authority with political authority, seeks power and dominance in the political realm. It advances several central themes: Christianity in America should hold a privileged place; separation of church and state should be eliminated; social laws should reflect conservative biblical interpretation. In America, Christian nationalism often serves as camouflage for white supremacy as it seeks dominance over groups and persons who don't align with Christian nationalist norms and ideals.

That's what Christian nationalism is.

What Christian nationalism isn't... it isn't biblical, it isn't Christ-like, it isn't democratic, it isn't American.

At our founding, the leaders of this nation remembered its colonial history—where the voting rolls and church membership rolls were often the same thing. For example, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the vote was limited to adult males who were members in good standing in the Puritan Church. This disenfranchised and marginalized those who didn't fit that mold.

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Your Invitation

Join **Pastor Martha** in prayer for our nation:

July 2, 2026

at 11:00am

at the intersection of
S. Church Street
and W. State Street

The Intersection of Church and State (continued from page 1)

Among the earliest amendments to the Constitution was a Bill of Rights. The Constitution's First Amendment makes this statement:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

This nation established—at its very founding—freedom of religion and separation between church and state. This is the fundamental freedom that Christian nationalism seeks to end.

So what do we do with all this?

As people in these United States, we can petition the Government and as people of God, we can pray.

Your Invitation:

This is your invitation to join me at the intersection of S. Church Street and W State Street at 11:00am on Thursday, July 2, to pray for the preservation of religious freedom, the promotion of equity and justice, and the advancement of the general welfare for all who live in these United States.

In Christ, *Martha*

Moderator's Message

How Old Is Too Old?

When I was asked to enter the moderator tract two years ago, I was seventy-nine. I said, "Yes", thinking I would not live to be eighty-one! I am now the moderator, and I am eighty-one.

I have read several articles recently that dealt with church leadership and age. It is a subject that most churches tend to ignore. I'm not going to ignore it. I found one very encouraging study that found church leaders tend to live twelve to eighteen months longer than other church members! I became a Presbyterian elder when I was twenty-six and have been involved in some form of leadership since then.

Over the years I have seen some people in church leadership function effectively regardless of age, and I realized their effectiveness could be viewed as we view the function of all within an extended family - respect for all ages and understanding each person's unique gifts and limitations.

Here is my true inspiration for this article. When Bob Dylan was asked how it felt to be over eighty, he responded, "The best thing about being over eighty is that you outlive the clocks that have been chasing you. It is freedom from the lie that anything was under control. You are hard to program, and you do not chase the parade anymore!"

Bob Langford



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Church Picnic August 23rd!

Come one, come all, to the annual church picnic, plus!

On Sunday, August 23rd, our church family and friends will congregate at the Anna Page Park Shelter (off Springfield Road) for a morning of worship, fellowship, food and fun!

Worship time will begin at 10:30 in the shelter, probably with local birds joining the chorus of our hymns. Coffee and cookies will be available in case your tummy is growling over the smell of the brats and hot dogs grilling.

Deacons Fellowship Team will be hosting and cooking, offering both meat and plant-based sausages and links, potato salad, chips, condiments, lemonade and ice water for dining after the shorter service.

For the potluck portion of our picnic, if your last name begins with A-M, please bring a dessert to share; if it begins with N-Z, please bring a side or salad. Paper goods and cutlery will be provided.

There will be activities for kids of all ages and there's a great playground close by.

Because this is such a large shelter, we can gather rain or shine.

Last year's picnickers seen below, thanks to Greg Makulec's drone.

Come join the happy crowd on August 23 rd!



Podcasts in Review - By Phil Davidson

Unlike Rockford's Memorial Day, July 4th, or Labor Day parades—with marching bands and candy tossed to the kids—this is a “parade” of a different kind. We invite you to enjoy a listing of the nine Second First Conversations podcasts now available on our church website at secondfirst.org or our YouTube channel.

If you haven't listened to them yet, we hope you'll take the time to do so. Let the parade begin!

Podcast One – Federation of Our Two Churches
Guests Sally Hoff and Greg Makulec share the story of the 2012 federation of Second Congregational and First Presbyterian Churches, including how it happened and the differences and similarities between our two denominations.

Podcast Two – A Conversation with Pastor Martha Langford
Learn more about our pastor—her call to ministry and her journey to Second First Church.

Podcast Three – The Hospitality Team
Hospitality Team members Katy Paterson and Arlene Noel talk about Serious Soup and the many other meaningful ways this team serves our church and community.

Podcast Four – Our New Solar Panels
Mark Stratemeyer, coordinator and “guru” of our solar power project, discusses the process, scope, and funding of the system now powering our church.

Podcast Five – Becoming an Open and Affirming Congregation
The Rev. John Dorhauer (pastor of First Congregational UCC in DeKalb) and Lindsey Lancaster (member of Second First's ONA Task Force, now a ministry team) explain the steps, importance, and meaning of becoming an Open and Affirming church.

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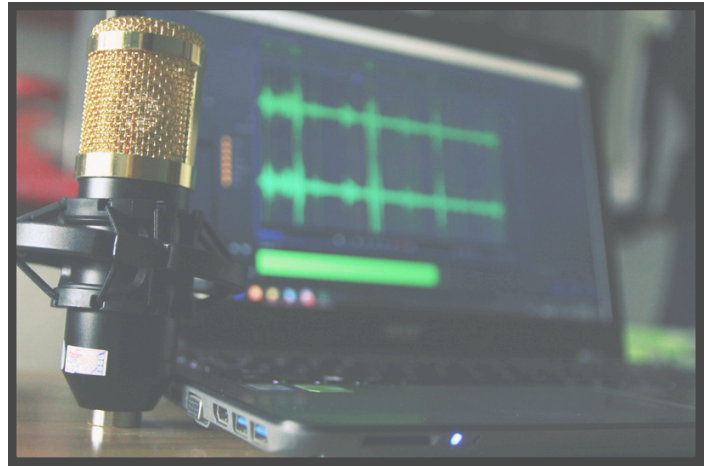
Podcasts in Review (continued from page 3)- By Phil Davidson

Podcast Six – The Overnight Café Associate Pastor for Outreach Becky Erbe and Overnight Café Director Brandon Williams share why the Café was launched, who it serves, how it operates, and more.

Podcast Seven – The Bells of Second First Why do we have three bell groups? What is their history and why are they important to our mission? Valerie Blair, Joyce Zartman, and Sarah Hallberg provide informative and entertaining answers.

Podcast Eight – Generations Together: Our Family Christian Education Programs Aubrey Barnett and Sarah Hallberg highlight how Second First is all about the kids and the value of intergenerational Christian education.

Podcast Nine – Pipes of Praise: Our Refurbished Organ Our magnificent organ has been beautifully refurbished and sounds better than ever! Valerie Blair and Bob Bates share the history, the process, and what makes this instrument so special.



Music Notes by Valerie Blair

June 8th we were treated to a fabulous performance on handbells, and almost every other kind of bell, given by the Wesley Bell Ringers on their 60th annual summer tour. This is a group of high school students from Christ United Methodist Church in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Many thanks go around to so many members of our congregation:

- the Hospitality committee, who provided a delicious taco dinner for them before the concert
- the Men's Breakfast crew who shared breakfast with them before they departed.
- Sharon Cowman and Jennifer Archer, for preparing snack bags for the road
- and, mea culpa, thanks to Andrea Akerman, who planned a dinner, and with Anne Baldwin, Karen Hill, and Sharon Cowman, were at the ready to prepare that dinner, and at the last minute learned it was covered, likely because I got wires crossed somewhere.

July music is still being determined, as several people expressed interest in providing special music, but there is still room for volunteers. We are so fortunate to have so many skilled music makers in our midst. Bob Bates will be here on July 12th, when I am having church in the woods with the Tower Hill campers.





July 2026 Calendar

Wednesday, July 1

10:00 AM- Staff Meeting

Thursday, July 2

7:30 PM- El Shaddai

Friday, July 3

Building is Closed

Saturday, July 4

Building is Closed

Sunday, July 5

10:00 AM – Worship Service

10:20 AM – Sunday School

2:00 PM - AGO Patriotic Concert

Monday, July 6

8:00 AM- Park District

11:30 AM- Serious Soup

12:30 PM - Hospitality

Tuesday, July 7

7:00 AM- Men's Prayer Breakfast

8:00 AM- Park District

9:00 AM - Thrift Shop

Wednesday, July 8

8:00 AM- Park District

10:00 AM- Staff Meeting

Thursday, July 9

8:00 AM- Park District

7:30 PM- El Shaddai

Friday, July 10

8:00 AM- Park District

Saturday, July 11

Building is Closed

Sunday, July 12

10:00 AM – Worship Service

10:20 AM – Sunday School

11:15 AM- ONA Meeting

11:15 AM- Deacons/Fellowship

Monday, July 13

8:00 AM- Park District

11:30 AM- Serious Soup

Tuesday, July 14

7:00 AM- Men's Prayer Breakfast

8:00 AM- Park District

Wednesday, July 15

8:00 AM- Park District

10:00 AM- Staff Meeting

6:30 PM- Rockford Urban Ministries (dining room)

5:30 PM- Trustees

Thursday, July 16

7:30 PM- El Shaddai

9:30 AM- Carillons

Friday, July 17

11:00 AM- Youth Magic Waters Trip

Saturday, July 18

9:00 AM- Bridge Clinic

Sunday, July 19

10:00 AM – Worship Service

10:20 AM – Sunday School

11:15 AM- Family Christian Ed

12:00 PM- Youth Pool Party

Monday, July 20

8:00 AM- Park District

11:30 AM- Serious Soup

5:30 PM- Missions (zoom only)

Tuesday, July 21

7:00 AM- Men's Prayer Breakfast

8:00 AM- Park District

Wednesday, July 22

8:00 AM- Park District

10:00 AM- Staff Meeting

Thursday, July 23

7:30 PM- El Shaddai

Friday, July 24

Building is Closed

Saturday, July 25

10:30 AM- Kay Blair Celebration of Life

Sunday, July 26

10:00 AM – Worship Service

10:20 AM – Sunday School

6:00 PM- Camerata Emanon Auditions

Monday, July 27

8:00 AM- Park District

11:30 AM- Serious Soup

5:30 PM- Camerata Emanon Auditions

Tuesday, July 28

7:00 AM- Men's Prayer Breakfast

8:00 AM- Park District

Wednesday, July 29

8:00 AM- Park District

10:00 AM- Staff Meeting

Thursday, July 30

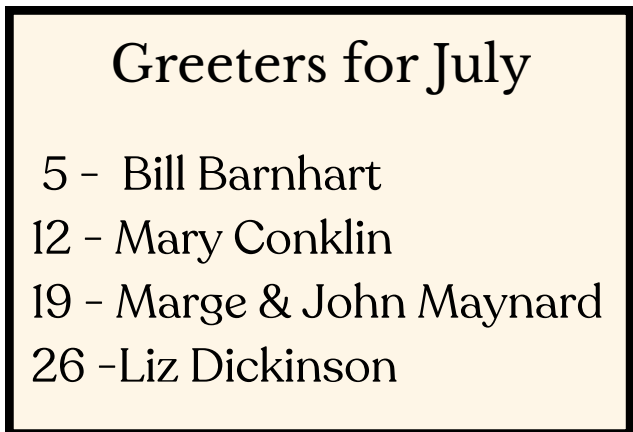
8:00 AM- Park District

7:30 PM- El Shaddai

Friday, July 31

Building is Closed

times/dates/events subject to change



Celebrate Rockford Urban Ministries' growth with the addition of Pastor Sam Stanes to the staff!

On July 15th at 6:30pm, Rockford Urban Ministries is thrilled to celebrate our 64th year of outreach and advocacy by growing our staff and welcoming a new Justice and Public Witness Pastor! Sam Stanes will work with Violet Johnicker and the Board of Directors and all of our member congregations to continue building love for neighbor into public policy in Rockford and beyond, and we need you to make it happen!

General admission tickets for dinner are \$25. Or if you are able to generously support this event at the \$64 level, your gift enables us to reach more people at this critical time in history when civil rights are being threatened and the dangerous influence of Christian nationalism is at an all time high in this country.

The evening's program will feature inspiring speeches and an opportunity to connect with Pastor Sam as we welcome him to Rockford!

Thank you to Second Congregational UCC/First Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) for hosting!

[Click here for tickets!](#)

Or mail a check payable to "Rockford Urban Ministries" to 1404 Brooke Road, Rockford, IL 61103.

ONA Donation drive continues thru August!

HOW can we be supportive of the LGBTQIA+ community? ONA will be collecting donations for the Liam Foundation, our local resource center. Look for our decorated collection boxes. The challenge is on to see how many we can fill! Their needs include: snacks and drinks(personal-sized) hygiene items (trial and regular-sized)- body wash, shampoo, shaving cream, razors, tampons,

Center needs:

paper plates, napkins, plasticware, toilet paper, paper towels, 13 gallon trash bags

Clothing needs:

new socks and underwear, and/or gently used shoes.

Jubilee Summer Soup Kitchen - July 18th

You and your fellow disciples will be preparing a delicious lunch for our neighborhood guests on Saturday July 18. We will gather at 10 am at the Jubilee Center (the little building off the parking lot at Emmanuel Episcopal across the street). Fresh and seasoned helpers are welcome! Contact Marge Maynard if you would like more information.



ONA (Open & Affirming)



THANKS for representing our church during PRIDE month in June! To those who walked in the PRIDE parade or came out to see it, to those who donated items for the Liam Foundation, to the Mission Team for making a financial donation, to those who attended and learned more about the work of the Liam Foundation! We're so proud of our church!



The striped fabric enhancing our sanctuary is part of our celebration. It includes the colors of the original Pride Flag created in 1978 after activist Harvey Milk asked artist Gilbert Baker to design a symbol of gay pride. Each color represents a different part of the LGBTQ+ community: hot pink represents sex, red symbolizes life, orange stands for healing, yellow equals sunlight, green stands for nature, turquoise symbolizes magic and art, indigo represents serenity, while violet symbolizes the spirit of LGBTQ+ people.



Our fabric also includes the colors of the Progress Pride Flag evolved from the Philadelphia Pride Flag and was created by Daniel Quasar. Quasar added a white, pink, and light blue stripe to represent the Trans community. While the black and brown stripes still represent communities of color, the black stripe is also a nod to the thousands of individuals that the community lost during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. Since its creation, the flag has become very popular.

Youth Worship - Noisy Offering!



We are so proud of their generosity, compassion, and commitment to sharing God's love with all of creation. Thank you to everyone who contributed their change and helped our youth learn that even small gifts can make a big impact.



Through their enthusiastic "Noisy Offering" during youth worship, our children collected spare change and raised funds to support Noah's Ark Animal Sanctuary. Today, they were excited to present their donation.

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Our SecondFirst PRIDE Swag is available at
https://stores.inksoft.com/second_first/shop/home

www.secondfirst.org