

First Friends Celebration & Vision Meeting | August 2025

Ministry Staff Reports

Pete Fowler – Lead Pastor

The last six months have been an exciting time of growth and change! The most noticeable has probably been the uptick in attendance on Sunday mornings. The sanctuary began to feel crowded enough that we decided to move 40 chairs from classrooms into that space and order more for the classrooms. There are other indicators of growth parallel to the raw Sunday attendance numbers. At least two of our ABF groups have grown to the point that they needed more chairs... or even a completely different room! A new small group for Youth Adults is forming (thanks, Autumn!). And, when needs have arisen for people to step up and serve—whether one-time needs or regular volunteer roles—those needs have been met quickly. More and more people are attending to more of our “tables of discipleship” and I couldn’t be happier!

Our new, streamlined leadership structure (and accompanying meeting schedule) was approved in May and has now begun to roll out. I have been eagerly looking forward to this meeting all summer! (Which, I will admit, was not always the case for meetings under the old structure.) There are still details that will need ironed out and adjusted, but I believe this new format and meeting schedule will benefit everyone involved.

The past six months included several memorial services for long-time members and attenders of FFC. Please continue to pray for those who have lost loved ones in recent months. Many of them are still trying to get used to a “new normal” after their loss.

Our staff has been able to attend a few retreat/training events over the last six months. In March, we attended the Missio National Gathering just outside our nation’s capital. In late April, I attended a two-day prayer training event in Canton. In early May, we attended EFC-ER Pastor’s Conference in Nashville. And, in late May, I attended my first EFM Board Meeting since agreeing to join that team. One of the early “fruits” of that relationship has been getting connected with the Liddell family!

I enjoyed the time we spent this spring/summer returning to the “Open Invitation” sermon series for awhile. But, it has also been very enjoyable to sort of “move with the Spirit” and dig into some one-off sermons or pairs of messages. I have gotten some great feedback that helped affirm I was able to help communicate things people needed to hear.

After Labor Day, we'll begin a spiritual formation sermon series called "Changing from the Center" based on the book "What Does Your Soul Love?" I really love digging directly and deeply into formation concepts each fall! Additionally, in the coming months, I want to (with our elders) work on filling out our slate of leadership roles and also identifying liaison "champions" for several of our Hands and Feet partners. On a personal level, please keep me in your prayers as I begin my four-year doctoral program!

It still seems impossible to believe that Mandy and I will be celebrating 25 years of ministry at First Friends on Sunday! God has been so gracious and generous to allow me to serve here. The people of FFC are truly family to us, and we look forward to many more years of learning, laughing, serving, and growing together!

Andy Black – Worship & Administrative Pastor (see also: Tech and Stewardship Reports below)

Music Highlights

23 kids came together to perform a musical entitled *Let's Rock* at the end of March and did an awesome job!

The choir and Quaker Bells came together for a wonderful Easter Sunday!

Our Children's Chime Choir completed its 2nd year, and that has been a blessing to see! Thank you, Kathy Gano, for your passion for music and children!

Hearts 2 Jesus got a fresh start recently as a small group of high school students, and when they have shared in church, it has been wonderfully worshipful. Thank you, Sherry Cvelbar, for your willingness, and your heart for worship!

Sarah Hodgson – Youth Pastor

What we can celebrate in our Gate Student Ministry:

Gatherings:

- met on Wednesdays through the end of the Salem City Schools calendar
- met on Sundays for Bible Fellowship throughout the end of the school year and through the Summer months

Events:

- served at Clothed in Righteousness in Alliance, OH in March
- spent time on retreat at the end of March in Blue Rock, OH
- spent time hiking, painting, skating and having a Nerf war during our first ever Gate Summer Smorgasbord at the start of June
- Were Blessed with Summer Pool/Pond Parties at Fowlers, Reas, Brinks, Salem Country Club (guests of the Santees), and the Ganos/Bahrs
- Attended Friends Camp July 21st-25th at Camp Muskingum: Carrollton, OH

Johnstown Preparation and Mission Trip:

- met for weekly Bible study in the three months leading up to the trip
- participated in That's A Wrap Pepperoni Roll Fundraiser
- built a fence and did park ministry each day during the trip

What we are hoping and casting vision for and from within our Gate Student Ministry:

Gatherings:

- to see students be curious and consistent in their journey following the way of Jesus, engaging in the rhythms of the local church, and seeking accountability with other Jesus-followers.

Events:

- September 6th: Big Day at Malone University: Canton, OH
- October 24th-26th: Fall Retreat: Camp Frederick, Rogers, OH
- November 14th-15th: Craft Show Set-Up and Main Event
- December: Late Night at Church

Possible New Happenings/Events/Groups/Gatherings:

- Integration of Generations: pairings of a Gate student and person from another generation that would communicate, pray, and occasionally meet together for fellowship and/or learning.
- Bible Study led by Sarah *and* a student leadership group
- International Mission Trip

- Scavenger Hunt April 19: Great attendance and response to a more meaningful celebration of the Resurrection
- FFC numbers were up overall. Last meeting was food truck and bounce houses. Kids and parents attended and had a great time.
- Summer recess held on Fridays for the month of July for grades k-6. Time of devotion, craft, snacks and play. Well attended. Great to see kids be kids.
- VBS “Camp Chaos” attended by about 70 kids. Lots of volunteers, which is a great praise! Kids had a wonderful time learning and being together. Had Kast Iron serve root beer floats the last night.
- Sunday school and nursery numbers continue to grow. Lots of kids during kids connection. Love all our kids. Ready and looking forward to what God has planned for the fall.

Autumn Dunn – Director of Connections

The last 6 months have been highlight after highlight! Since I have only been here for 6 months, I would say that There are many things that have happened. I feel like I have adjusted well and have been able to take on my job with more confidence at this point. Here are some things that have been happening.

The welcome bags have been revamped with new bags, redesigned mugs, a book, a letter from Pete and a welcome to the church postcard with other small goodies. There are also welcome bags for just the kids! Any new kid will get their own welcome bag also. I feel if the children are excited and want to come back to church, then the parents will also keep coming back! We also have had quite a few new families joining us on Sunday mornings and they have been also coming back!

We have implemented a new texting app for us to connect with all of the new people that decide to fill out a connect card. It has been a great way to make sure these people feel they have been seen and properly welcomed to our church, along with that I am sure to connect with them weekly and keep the conversation going so no one falls through the cracks! It has also been a great way for them to connect with me with any questions they may have. I feel like I have been able to create some great bonds and relationships with our church family in this way.

On the side of what I regularly do, I have enjoyed planning some fun things for the church and also new members. Between the cookout, a young adult group and our connections lunch, it has been a great time to fellowship!

In the next 6 months, I have been planning the next Connections Lunch to welcome new people who have joined us in the last 6 months!

I also will be getting together with the greeters about possibly being a part of my team to welcome and connect with people on Sunday mornings.

There is a lot of room to grow in the position and how to fine tune what I have currently been doing, along with possibly changing things up that could possibly be a better approach now that I am getting a better feel with how things are going.

I am also excited to see where the young adult group goes from here. It starts in September and I am praying it keeps its momentum and we can have a great place for our young adults to navigate life together!

Thank you for letting me be part of such a great church and trusting me with this position!

Community Life Reports

Rachel Suarez – Hospitality Coordinator

The teacher's appreciation luncheon seemed to go pretty well. Besides that, I don't have much to report from the last 6 months. (At least I can't remember anything else.) As far as plans or vision for the future, I don't really have any. I think it's time for me to pass the baton as the Hospitality Coordinator. Thanks for the opportunity to serve!

Patty Howells – Overseers & Shut-In Coordinator

1.) Autumn Dunn - New staff member (Welcome New Visitors/Event Planner). Blue cards are still available, however a QR code for visitors has been set in place and families are responding. Autumn is connecting with these folks.

2.) We are continuing to hand out Directory papers to be able to add new families to our Online Directory.

3.) The Overseers/Visitation Volunteers took numerous bud vases out to shut-ins. Our supply of vases were low. After putting out a need for vases, the church body has responded with an abundant supply available now. Currently, a family in the church wanting to share their amazing flowers from their garden are bringing in beautiful fresh flowers on Sunday mornings. The vases are being lined up on the foyer desk. We are asking people to please share these flowers with: Shut-ins, those who have recently had surgery, or those going through a difficult time. All are able to share a blessing with others who are hurting. Blessings on this special gifting of this family.

4.) As of this report more than 300 contacts have been made by our Beloved Overseers. At Easter, visits were made to most of the shut-ins. Communion was made available. Daily Breads/Ann's beautiful cards and Children's Handmade cards have been delivered. Ann Greenisen has made small lap robes that are available. Music Boxes are also available. This summer we are trying to do in person visits for our "100 Summer Tables." Many of the shut-ins have told me how much they appreciate the cards, phone calls and visits.

5.) Marti Sowash will be stepping away at the end of her term this year. Please be praying that the Lord will fill this position with someone who has a heart for this ministry and able to do in-person visits as well.

Salem First Friends is Blessed to have these family members who are serving this Body at this time. Please keep each one in prayer.

Stephen Hodgson – Tech Coordinator

Tech Intro (Andy Black)

We are blessed to have many individuals who serve in the background on Sunday mornings on the tech team. There have been years in the past where the responsibility fell heavily on a few shoulders. But at the moment, there are enough volunteers that the rhythm is really sustainable, and I'm so grateful for the willingness of these volunteers who are gracious and reliable. Thank you, Stephen Hodgson, for training volunteers, troubleshooting issues as they arise, and constantly evaluating our systems to find what I think is an excellent balance between a high production quality and a level of simplicity and efficiency for our volunteers.

Tech Report (Stephen Hodgson)

- The Sunday morning service live streams regularly have 28-40 live viewers and then generally have over 100 views within 24 hours. YouTube subscribers are up to 434 from 400 in February.

- We trained two new techs (Rich and JR) on the sound booth role early this year and they have been doing great. JR also started training on the video role in August!
- A Confidence Monitor was installed in the chapel so the pastor/speaker/musicians can follow along without turning around.
- We purchased new choir mics in January.
- The sanctuary cameras and video processing gear was upgraded in December. This significantly improved our video quality.

In the next 6 months...

- We'll have to either pay for non-profit discounted Microsoft licensing (count/cost TBD) for Microsoft Office tooling that used to be free, or switch to a competing provider (e.g. Google Workspace).
- We had planned on a major upgrade to our security cameras, access cards, and phone system, but this was put on hold as grant funding was in limbo. We heard very recently that the reimbursement process for grant funds has normalized, so we hope to get moving on those upgrades in the near future.

Karen Brown – Worship Support Coordinator

Worship support would like to report a pretty quiet year so far. We have enjoyed decorating for spring along with Easter and ordering flowers for Easter Sunday, along with providing an area to take photos with family.

Mother's Day and Father's Day were fun being able to pass out cupcakes to all mothers and fathers along with an inspirational scripture.

The summer has been a time of decorations for Memorial Day, 4th of July, and Labor Day. We are getting ready for fall and, before we know it, Christmas.

This month we are working to clean out old decorations and organize our storage room for new decorations and for the drama team.

We organize the greeter lists for Sunday mornings and are happy to welcome some new members to that group at any time. Lastly, we have just been asked to incorporate Coffee Fellowship on Sunday mornings. Again, new members are always welcome to this team.

To God be the glory!

Missional Engagement Reports

Tim Smith – Elder of Missional Engagement

23 of us participated in a Cuba missions trip in April. Over 30 people prayed to receive Christ

We are currently looking into a possible trip in February of '26 to a not yet determined location

We are looking to send teams at a future date to the new Luke 10 mission fields when they have been established

In March, April & May the food bank served an average of 165 people; June and July dropped to an average of 60

We distribute an average of 25 bags of food to the Smith center each month

Kathy Johnson – Global Missions Coordinator

Women's Missionary Fellowship Fall Retreat will be celebrating 50 years of women getting together and encouraging one another through music and special speakers. This year's retreat will be held Oct. 10-12 at the Carlisle Inn in Sugar Creek, Ohio. Reservations are due Sept. 7th or when we reach capacity of 230. Brochures are on the table in the Narthex. We are making registration available on-line through the QR code on the brochure, through Pay-Pal or send a check to the address on the brochure.

In the next 6 Months...

I would like to see a Missions Fair. This will give our congregation more information about our missionaries and the countries they serve. And, more up-close and personal videos of our missionaries as they become available. Also, the local missions that we support. When their turn comes up on the list, invite them to speak during the S.S. hour so all can learn more about them.

Coming Soon:

Operation Christmas Child workshop to be held on Sept. 11, 2025 at New Life Church in Poland. The time is 6:00-8:30. The special speaker will be Basit Hammond a receiver of an O.C.C. shoebox at the age of 13. Reservations are due by Sept. 6 there are brochures on the information station or call Kathy Johnson 330-853-5288.

Spiritual Formation Reports (see also: Ministry Staff Reports above)

Tim Keen – Senior Ministries Coordinator

Our Prime Time Ministry for older adults continued in 2025. The ministry's goals include fellowship, support, fun, some learning and hopefully some service opportunities. We want our Prime Timers to enjoy their stage in life, keep learning, give back and leave a legacy in some form. The one year mark was reached in February.

The February event was "God's Love" and included a luncheon, special activities and a devotional. Attendance was approx. 35.

The April event was an "Easter Celebration." This included a luncheon, Easter Egg Hunt, other Easter activities and a devotional. Attendance as approximately 43.

A July event included a trip to Amish country with a matinee viewing of "The Road to Damascus" followed by a buffet and shopping. 17 carpooled and enjoyed the day together.

Upcoming plans including celebrating Grandparents in September including looking at the heritage received from our grandparents as well as celebrating our own grandchildren.

We hope to also have an intergenerational event sometime during the school year.

Stewardship Reports

Andy Black & Steve Sigworth – Worship & Administrative Pastor & Elder of Stewardship

Stewardship Commission Highlights:

God is good!! We are so blessed by the way he is moving in the hearts of the people of First Friends Church. This is such a generous community, in their time, and in their finances, and in the way they steward all they have. There are some amazing examples here of what a life of generosity looks like. This is reflected in many ways, but one of those is that our financial needs have been met in 2025, and then some. We have been able to say "yes" to many new endeavors, and that is exciting. Here are some highlights from the Stewardship Commission.

We were able to hire Autumn Dunn in March as our Director of Connections. She has been a huge blessing, and has injected new life into this community. We will be adding a few "line items" to next year's budget to accommodate ministries that she oversees, like more regular "Connections Lunches" and even a new Young Adult Ministry which she began this summer. We are thanking God for Autumn!

Through our Easter Offering, it was our honor to be able to give \$3,500 to EFM, \$1,750 to The Salem Community Food Pantry, and \$1,750 to The Banquet of Salem!

We said goodbye to our Treasurer, Patty Santini, who, after 2.5 years with us, retired to focus on her health. While it was sad to see Patty leave, it has been a joy to welcome and get to know Becky Howell, who was hired in early June to serve as our Treasurer.

We have made some adjustments in order to add 40 additional chairs in the sanctuary, and we subsequently purchased more chairs to replenish where we borrowed from around the building!

We are thrilled to have begun a partnership with a new missionary family, the Liddells! Fred and Jonelle and their two young children are preparing and training to launch a new mission field in Croatia as a part of EFM's Luke 10 Initiative!

We were able to use Walker Scholarship Trust Fund money to help cover tuition costs for Sarah to begin studies at Malone for a Practical Ministry Certificate program.

We will be able to use a limited amount of Walker Scholarship Trust Fund money to help cover tuition costs for Pete to begin studies at Friends University for a Doctorate of Ministry program. We also began a Scholarship Fund for this, as it is our goal to cover at least 80% of his total expenses.

Working with the Trustees, we have accepted a bid to redo our parking lot. That work began last week and will continue this week.

Tentative Dates for Upcoming Meetings:

Elders with Ministry Staff: Oct. 19th at 12:00pm

Elders with Lead Pastor: Nov. 30th at 12:00pm

Congregational Meeting: Dec. 14th at 6:30pm

Elders with Ministry Staff: Jan. 11th at 12:00pm

Celebration & Vision: Feb. 22nd at 6:00pm