



Good News from Zion

Connecting People with God's Grace

March 2026

A Message from Pastor Kat

Lent and Wilderness

This month, we are immersed in the season of Lent: a time of self-reflection, of repenting of our errant ways, and of drawing closer to the God who made us and loves us completely. Just as Jesus, after his baptism by John, is driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by Satan, we too enter the wilderness.

The wilderness is a place where it is tough to survive – little water and no food, shifting sands and hot sun. The wilderness is a place where people go in times of desperation – Hagar flees into the wilderness when she is beaten by her mistress, Sarai (Genesis 16:3-8), God's people flee into the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt (Exodus 13:17-20).

The wilderness is also a place where God consistently shows up to provide comfort and guidance. God appears as an angel to Hagar in the wilderness and comforts her in her distress (Genesis 16:7-14), and God appears as a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night to guide the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land (Exodus 13:21-22).

God with Us

During Lent, we are invited to take time in our routines to set aside habits and distractions that separate us from God. We step away from the noise of the world and enter the quiet of the wilderness. There we find God's presence. Perhaps, your intentional time with God is five minutes spent with a cup of tea in the morning, or a walk after dinner in nature, or Tuesday evening meditations at church, or Wednesday evening soup suppers and studies with our ecumenical partners, or Sunday morning worship.

When we are intentional, our sense of God's presence can become more attuned. But, even if your life is too hectic for intentionality this year, know God is with you wherever you find yourself.

As you prepare for the joy of Easter, may you know that God is as close to you now as your next breath, as close as your beating heart – here in the wilderness of Lent and always.

In Christ,
Pastor Kat

Candlelight Meditation Sessions

Candlelight Meditation sessions continue on Tuesday evenings at 7:00 at the church, through March 31st. If you have never tried meditation, we encourage you to come and see what it's all about. Benefits from meditation include stress reduction, improved sleep, better focus, and emotional balance. There is no sign-up required and all are welcome! Sessions last about one hour.



Church Council Highlights



The Church Council met on February 19th. Highlights from that meeting are below.

- The Parish Life committee is hosting a Parents' Night Out on March 13th.
- January giving was lower than expected, most likely due to two Sundays being snowed out.
- Chapter one of Pastor Kat's "A Year of Growing in Faith" program had ten people in attendance. The chapter two sessions will begin on February 26th and run through the end of March.
- Council approved the use of Endowment Mission Outreach funds for an Apple TV unit to be used with the TV in the youth room, and for a \$250 donation to the American Cancer Society in support of Clinton Township Middle School's Relay for Life event.
- Two candidates for the Director of Music position auditioned for the search committee and choirs in early February. Following the auditions the committee met and determined that neither one would be a good fit for Zion. New applicants are actively being sought.
- The Youth & Family bowling trip on February 15th had 7 adults and 5 kids in attendance, and a good time was had by all.
- Vacation Bible School has been scheduled for June 22-26, 2026.
- The Shepherding committee will be sponsoring a new ministry this year — "Once Upon a Lifetime" — with more information to come.
- Somerset Patriots baseball games have been scheduled for May 30th and September 26th.
- The 2026 council retreat was held on January 31st at the CEB. The topic was "Inspired Investment" and the Stewardship committee will be running a series of articles in this year's newsletters with more information.

Thank you to:

- * Cindy Rupprecht, Janet Hornich, and John & Wendy Minerowicz for providing refreshments and hospitality at the February 1st annual meeting.
- * Steve Surhoff for replacing the electric heater in the church bathroom.
- * Tom Held and Janet Hornich for attending the Synod district meeting on February 28th.

The next meeting of the Church Council is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Thursday, March 19th. Meetings are open to all. If you would like to attend an upcoming meeting, please let the Parish Office know and we will send you the link to join.



Lunch Bunch — March 12th

Zion's lively group of retirees meets for lunch on the second Thursday of each month. On March 12th we will gather at Bensi in Whitehouse Station at 12 p.m. Please see the sign-up link emailed from the Parish Office to reserve your place at the table.

Parents Night Out — March 13th

The Parish Life committee invites kids aged 4 and up to attend Parents' **Night Out** on Friday, March 13th, from 5:00-7:30 p.m. This is an event that brings our young people together and gives parents a free date night! We'll play games, have pizza, and watch a movie.



Please register for Parents' Night Out using the sign-up link that was emailed from the Parish Office so we can get a headcount. (It's also an easy way for us to get in touch with everyone in case of inclement weather.) We would also love to have some of the older kids come help out (and they can get some volunteer hours!).

Join the Needles & Hooks Club

Come join us for the launch of Zion's "Needles and Hooks Club". We are updating our crochet classes to include knitting, needlepoint, and whatever else you enjoy. We will still be glad to teach crochet to anyone who is interested in learning. Bring your project and join in fellowship with us. We are meeting at the CEB on Tuesday, March 31st, from 4:00 to 5:30.





Youth & Family Ministry at Zion

by Jaime VanNostrand

In the month of February, we transitioned to a faith formation theme of GOD'S LIGHT! Sunday School students did not meet on the first Sunday of the month as the congregation had a single worship service before the annual congregational meeting, so we kicked things off when we gathered again on Sunday, February 8th.

While the second Sunday of the month would typically be a Service Project Sunday, students instead gathered in their classrooms on February 8 in order to make up for some lost classroom time after several snow cancellations in January. Luckily, our wonderful Sunday School teachers adjusted not only their schedules but their lesson plans as well as they incorporated our Luminaria Service Project into their lesson plans. Together, our students decorated nearly 50 Luminaria bags that will be donated to Clinton Township Middle School's annual Relay for Life. We are grateful to CTMS for giving us the opportunity to share God's light with people who are struggling with cancer.

On February 15, after gathering for classroom time and worship, a group of kids, parents, grandparents, mentors, and mentees, gathered at the Lucky Strike (formerly known as Bowlero) bowling alley for an afternoon of fun and fellowship!



Looking ahead to March, we will continue on to the theme of Getting Ready. This theme will reflect elements of the Lenten season and the ways that we prepare ourselves for special moments with God like celebrating Easter!

Our All-School event on March 1 will explore the Lenten season through music, scripture, and a collaborative art project. This project will show up in Zion's Easter celebrations so keep an eye out for that!

Our service project for the month of March will be wrapped into our annual Egg-stravaganza when students will decorate hard boiled eggs that will then be donated to Faith Kitchen. They will also be serving their own church community by helping to stuff several hundred plastic eggs for Zion's annual Easter Egg Hunt! Students will close out the month with Bible classes on March 15 and 22 before the congregation gathers for single service worship on March 29 to celebrate Palm Sunday!



Easter Egg Hunt — April 4th

Mark your calendar for 10 a.m. on Saturday, April 4th. Zion will once again host our annual **Easter Egg Hunt** with a visit from the Easter Bunny. There will be plenty of crafting opportunities and photos with the Easter Bunny. This event is open to Zion families as well as the local community.

Feed My Starving Children — March 6th & 7th

Zion will host a Feed My Starving Children MobilePack event on March 6th and 7th. The link to register for meal packing was emailed from the Parish Office. Please contact the office if you did not receive the link.

Many hands will be needed to host this event, as we expect over 400 people to come through our doors over two days. If you can help with check-in, set-up, or clean-up, please sign up via the “hosting FMSC” link that was emailed from the Parish Office.



Open Cupboard Food Pantry

The Open Cupboard Food Pantry currently has particular need for the following items:

Peanut butter (creamy or crunchy), canned tuna, canned chicken broth or beef broth, decaffeinated coffee, baby diapers, personal care items such as soap, bodywash, toothpaste, toilet paper & feminine products.

Please place items in the large basket in church narthex or in the bin in the CEB entryway. Thank you!



Faith Kitchen Update

The Zion group gathered at Faith Kitchen on Thursday, February 5th, and prepared a delicious meal of our popular turkey taco soup, green salad, corn bread and bananas. We had a big crowd! The room was filled, and we served 63 plates and 65 take outs. We had great fellowship with our crew of Chris Clark, John McAleer, John & Wendy Minerowicz, and Steve & Barb Surhoff. We enjoyed a delicious apple coffee cake made by Jann McAleer!



Saturday's Faith Kitchen crew of Cindy & Andy Rupprecht, Brian Reilly, Kathy Koch, and Helen Livingston served a meal of meatball sandwiches, Mexican rice, salad, and cookies to 66 grateful guests on February 21st. We also prepared 60 meals to go. We received many thank yous for the "really good meal." Thank you, Zion, for supporting this ministry!



Inspired Investment: Zion's Facilities

From the Stewardship Committee — Issue 1 of an ongoing series

A few weeks ago, Zion's 2026 Church Council held our annual retreat. Led by Pastor Kat, we talked about Zion's identity as a congregation, our strengths, what we choose to focus on, and how we remain true to our mission of Connecting People with God's Grace. We also had an honest conversation about what must be done, practically, to sustain our congregation on its faith journey. We landed on the term: **Inspired Investment** as a theme that can keep us grounded in the realities of running the church while answering the call of Christ.



We're happy to report that we've applied a broad definition to the term "**Investment**" that goes well beyond finance. All of us invest in Zion in unique ways. Generally speaking, we invest in Connecting People with God's Grace through our worship and music, our community-focused social ministry service, and through Christian education. As indicated in the title of this article, this is Issue 1 of an ongoing series. We'll speak to other forms of "**Inspired Investment**" throughout the year with focus on engagement, growth, and other topics.

Let's talk facilities for now. In short, our current level of giving does not leave enough operating reserve to address expected (and unexpected) facility needs in our buildings.

We are blessed with what is without a doubt one of the most beautiful churches in the State of New Jersey (and beyond!). Did you know that we worship in a building that is on the National Registry of Historic Places? Our church has been standing on the same site since 1750 (re-built in 1831 after a fire destroyed the original building). Generations of Zion congregants have maintained our church building with loving care. Our most recent update was the conversion of one of the windows in the sanctuary to an emergency exit door. This project, completed at a cost of greater than \$100,000, was finalized in 2025. We think all would agree that it looks like it's been there forever.

Our Christian Education Building, with the addition fully completed in 1997, gave us an outstanding "all purpose" space that perfectly fit our ministries. A library, classrooms for Sunday School, a Great Room that can be split in two, a fully functioning kitchen, and our administrative offices make the CEB the ideal space to bring our mission to life. Frankly speaking, our facilities are the envy of other congregations and a source of pride for us all.

Upkeep on a church re-built in 1831 and a CEB that was renovated over 30 years ago presents us with ongoing challenges.

There are frequent reminders of why we need to remain vigilant with building upkeep – during the recent cold snap, the pipes in the church bathroom froze, as the electric heater for that space was no longer functioning. As for the CEB, we are currently assessing upkeep/replacement for our heating and cooling systems, parking lot, and roof. The parsonage (another very old building) is also facing emerging maintenance issues.

Our congregation's generous giving has sustained us through past challenges, but we are now at risk for potentially falling short of being able to fund ongoing facilities upkeep. Our 2026 budget has projected expenses of \$421,826 to fully fund our ministries. Estimated giving is at \$421,100 – this includes an \$8,100 bequest that helped us close the gap to a small deficit of (\$726). We are confident that our members' ongoing generosity will further close this gap.

So, what happens when we have an unexpected expense in 2026? Using the new sanctuary exit door as the most recent example, unexpected expenses have historically been managed from our Capital Reserve fund that is fueled by rental revenues generated from CEB usage (AA, non-profit clubs and groups, private events, etc.). We have also utilized our Operating Reserve, which is the cushion in our checking account that is necessary to cover a potential gap between income and expenses. The Stewardship committee and Church Council have discussed the possibility of starting a capital campaign to address our facility needs but have decided against it for 2026.

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To illustrate the opportunities to increase our giving to meet these challenges let's take a look at how we gave in 2025 and how we are giving in 2026. In 2025, Zion saw \$43,400 in new/increased giving. This income came from new members as well as current members who gave more than they had in the past. However, this was offset by \$19,300 in terminated/decreased giving (members who left the church and current members who gave less). This created a net gain of \$24,100.

The picture for 2026 is not as good. In terms of pledging and estimates of what non-pledging families will contribute, we project \$22,400 of new/increased giving and \$14,600 of terminated/decreased giving. This would create a net gain of \$7,800.

The Stewardship committee has also reviewed giving "by generation" which gives us some good news and hope for the future. The best news is that Gen-X families have increased their average giving in 2026 by \$400 per year. Baby Boomers are holding steady with a \$50 increase. Millennials, who are coming into their own, also increased by \$50. Finally, as you would expect, the Silent Generation, while still leading in total giving at \$4,700 per family, decreased by \$200 per family.

The Stewardship and Finance committees have completed additional analyses, and we will share them throughout the year. Bottom line: our giving, while generous, does not approach the level that provides a large enough cushion to address our emergent (expected and unexpected) facility needs.

What can you do? If you did not make a pledge for 2026, please consider doing so. If you can grow your giving, please do. Your contributions are an inspired investment in our ministries. You may report any change in your planned giving to our Financial Secretary, John Rustwick, at jrustwick@gmail.com.

FINANCIAL SUMMARY - YTD 2026

GENERAL FUND	INCOME	EXPENSE	DIFFERENCE
January	\$ 23,305.88	\$ (26,589.69)	\$ (3,283.81)
Year To Date Total	\$ 23,305.88	\$ (26,589.69)	\$ (3,283.81)

TD BANK FUNDS	BALANCE	
Checking Account	\$ 166,218.79	02/03/26
Money Market Plus	\$ 128,468.09	01/31/26
Cash On Hand	\$ 294,686.88	
Directed Funds	\$ 214,541.78	01/31/26
Operating Reserve	\$ 75,690.64	01/31/26

ENDOWMENT FUNDS	BALANCE	
CFNJ	\$ 605,506.10	12/31/25
THRIVENT	\$ 559,828.38	01/31/26
TOTAL	\$ 1,165,334.48	

ENDOWMENT MISSION OUTREACH	
Available Funds for 2026	\$ 30,077.00
Feed My Starving Children	\$ (5,000.00)
2026 Endowment Funds Remaining	\$ 25,077.00





venmo

Give to Zion from your phone!

Scan the QR code to be directed to Zion's Venmo.