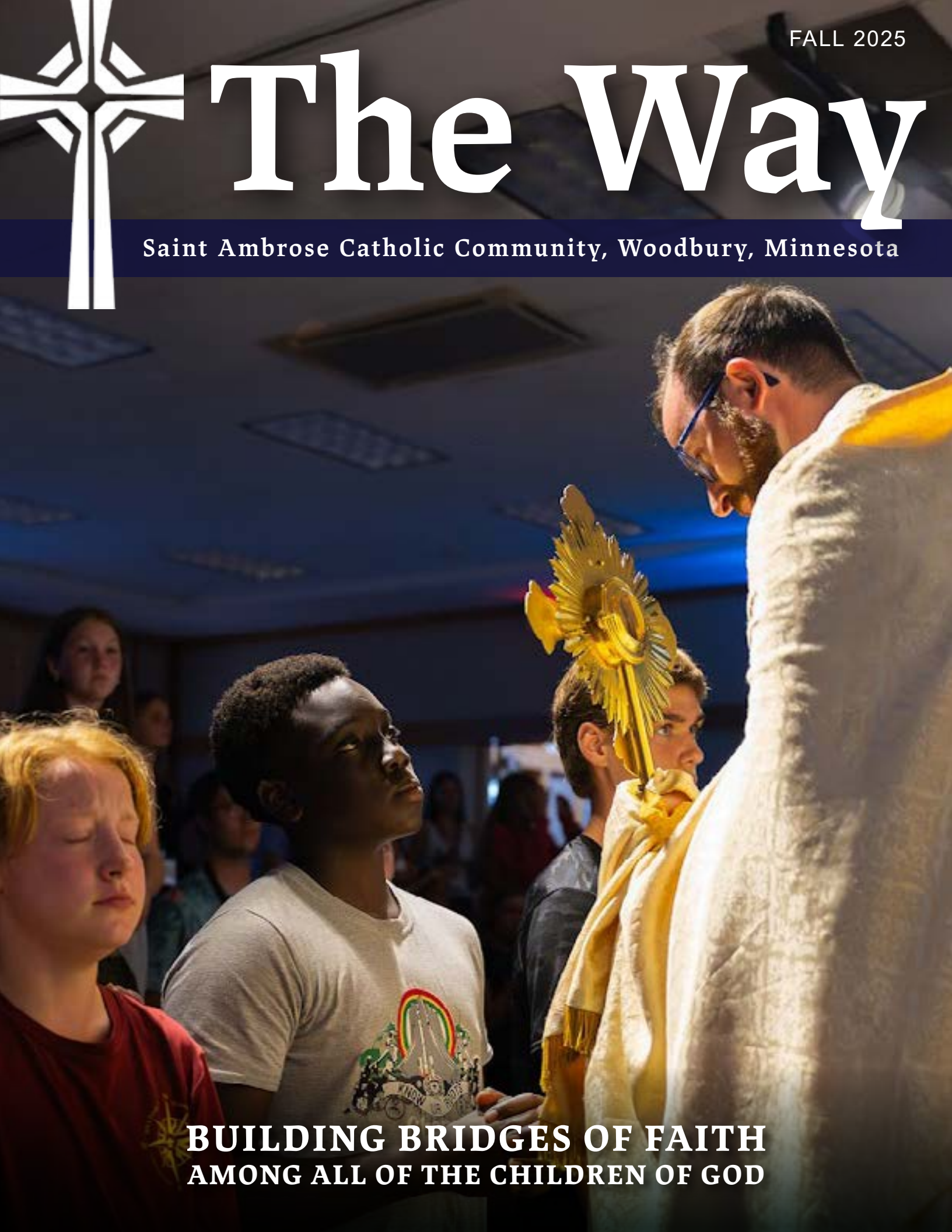
FALL 2025

The Way

Saint Ambrose Catholic Community, Woodbury, Minnesota



BUILDING BRIDGES OF FAITH
AMONG ALL OF THE CHILDREN OF GOD

Be the Bridge

From his first remarks following his election, Pope Leo XIV has worked to connect all people to the love of God. The word *pontiff*—another title for the pope—means "bridge-builder," and our Holy Father has called all of us to join him in this role:

> *We are followers of Christ. Christ goes before us. The world needs his light. Humanity needs him as the bridge that can lead us to God and his love. Help us, one and all, to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace.*

This is no small request! Bringing others to the love of Christ and His Church requires us to step outside of our comfort zone, to let down our guard and risk being authentic and vulnerable to others who desperately need genuine, human interaction and acceptance.

My brother Mark was the best example of this kind of connection when I was growing up. Mark has special needs, but he also has the great gift of being exactly who he is: open, honest, and loving. He could approach people in a way that I could not, and they would open up in ways they wouldn't around anyone else. Walls tumbled down, and masks fell away. People could just *be* around him, because Mark was so authentically himself.

I truly believe a culture of encounter is one of the emerging charisms of our parish community. Many of you are natural bridge-builders, and this issue



Above: Fr. Peter Williams, his father Gary, and his brother Mark pause for a photo together.

of *The Way* features several great examples, including an adult son caring for his elderly father and helping strangers to heal, a husband-and-wife duo that ministers to families navigating autism and provides health care at a clinic in Zambia, and a team of educators at our Catholic school that works to ensure every student has the support they need here at Saint Ambrose.

We are all God's children, and we all deserve to experience His love. I hope these stories inspire you to extend yourselves beyond your current boundaries. Be open. Be authentic. Be the bridge another walks to the heart of Love, which is Jesus!

In Christ,
Fr. Peter Williams
Pastor

On the cover: Fr. Sean Mulcare helps bring a large monstrance with Jesus in the Holy Eucharist to each middle-schooler at Extreme Faith Camp (EFC) this summer. Check out more EFC photos on page 10!

All photos are courtesy of Saint Andrew Catholic Community and its parishioners unless otherwise specified.

BORN TO BE HEALED

Patrick van Leeuwen witnesses to God's power to heal all our 'hurts, hangups, and habits'



Parishioner Patrick van Leeuwen moved to Minnesota to care for his father Peter, but has used the opportunity to spread Celebrate Recovery, a Christian healing ministry at work in his own life.

When Patrick van Leeuwen arrived in Woodbury in May 2023, he never meant to stay.

He had a successful contracting business in southern California, with friends and connections, a home and a church, support systems, and jobs lined up for the foreseeable future. He planned to stay with his aging father, Peter, for 21 days, then return home.

Patrick learned quickly that his dad's health was failing and his bank accounts were nearly empty. The family members trusted to care for Peter had taken advantage of him, and he couldn't be left alone.

"So I called clients, cancelled jobs, and shut down my company, leaving me exposed to great liability," Patrick says. "It took months to get things sorted out here. Dad had been eating primarily McDonalds, but as soon as we got him decent food again, his health improved. I started bringing him to Mass every day because that's the way he loves to worship God. I am fulfilling the commandment to honor your father and mother."

"Twenty-one days turned into more than 830 now. Two and a half years ago, I wasn't sure how long Dad would live, but he just turned 94!"



‘Wind Therapy’ and Personal Healing

Patrick and Peter are well known at Saint Ambrose. Patrick, who calls himself as “Wingnut,” is 6-1 with a goatee and long, silver hair that he calls “chrome.” In any weather, he can be found on his Harley and sometimes takes dad for a ride. Patrick has been riding motorcycles for 42 years. He calls it “wind therapy.”

“Dad used to ride motorcycles, too,” he says. “On his first date with my mom when they were still in the Netherlands, they went for a ride on his motorcycle. They rode across a bridge over one of the canals, and as she lifted off the seat, it scared her, and she said she would never do it again!”

Peter and Polly (Petrus and Apolonia) van Leeuwen immigrated to California from the Netherlands in 1960. Peter had grown up milking cows by hand on Dutch dairy farms during World War II and did the same in the States, until he picked up enough lawn-mowing work to support his family. He was a hard worker and put away enough money to retire comfortably 30 years ago. He and Polly moved to Minnesota 15 years ago at the urging of their daughter and her family.

Patrick, however, stayed in California. A traumatic experience as a teenager had somewhat strained his relationship with his parents, and he was in deep need of healing. Around that time, he became involved in Celebrate Recovery, a Christian healing ministry founded by John and Cheryl Baker of Saddleback Church.

“At first, I got involved to support someone else,” he says. “Then, after hearing the testimony of a man whose life mirrored my own, I decided to pursue it for myself.”

“Celebrate Recovery isn’t just for drugs and alcohol. It’s for any hurt, hang-up, or habit—grief, loss, anger, codependency, people-pleasing, spending issues, pornography, betrayal, abuse, abandonment, marriage preparation—the list goes on. These are all things people can find hope and healing for through Celebrate Recovery. It’s a discipleship group where we work on ourselves in authentic relationship with God.”

Patrick realized he was desperately seeking camaraderie, validation, and significance—first in the Army, then in the motorcycle culture. Celebrate Recovery helped him establish healthy boundaries and locate his worth in Christ.

“It’s all about Jesus,” he says. “If it wasn’t for Celebrate Recovery, I wouldn’t have the capacity to care for my father, let alone do anything else I do today!”

Minnesota Mission

Following his own healing, Patrick began to minister to others with Celebrate Recovery in California. Almost as soon as he arrived in Minnesota, he began reaching out to area Celebrate Recovery groups to see how he could help. Providentially, the closest location is also one of the original groups in the state.

“When they learned I had been with the original Celebrate Recovery at Saddleback, they were excited to welcome me in,” he says. “I now serve as the ministry leader for Celebrate Recovery Saint Paul, based at Woodbury Lutheran Church. I’m always wearing my Celebrate Recovery shirt, and I always have a red rag in my back pocket—a serenity rag with the entire Serenity Prayer on it, not just the first few lines that 12-step programs have made popular. I give a lot of these out, whenever the Lord leads me.”

More recently, he traveled back to California for the Celebrate Recovery Summit, an annual training conference, and to finally retrieve his truck and tools



On the facing page: Patrick and his father Peter can frequently be found together at Mass at Saint Ambrose. Above, Patrick and a different Fr. Peter at FALLFEST—they have also ridden together on Patrick’s Harley. FALLFEST photos courtesy of Michael Hamerlind Photography.

to resume working as a contractor locally. But his dad is his priority—and he continues to look for ways to spread Celebrate Recovery. The ministry exists in thousands of churches worldwide, but almost none of them are Catholic. Patrick would like to change that.

“Every one of us is broken,” he says. “But I think a lot of people walk into church thinking they have to be all put together. They dress up nice and put on their church masks. They don’t want to reveal who they really are. They think that’s how they need to approach God and God’s people, but that’s not reality. What God desires more than anything is a broken and contrite heart. He wants you as you are, and Celebrate Recovery helps people come to Him!”

WANT TO LEARN MORE? Celebrate Recovery has approximately 15 church groups within roughly 50 miles of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. For information visit **celebraterecovery.com**—or just ask “Wingnut.”



WEINZETTEL HIRED AS DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

Erin and Josh Weinzettel moved home to Minnesota from South Dakota in 2019. Soon after they arrived at Saint Ambrose, they began hosting Extending the Table for young adult couples and families, and they continue to serve on the leadership team. Beginning this summer, Erin became our first Director of Communications. The role unites her professional expertise and love of the faith, enabling her to share the Good News of Christ—and Saint Ambrose—on a full-time basis. Here’s the story, in her own words.

How did this come about? A dedicated communications position had been on Father Peter’s mind for some time as Saint Ambrose continues to flourish. Over the past six months, Father and I have had several conversations about the growing communications needs of the community, which ultimately shaped the role and goals of the position.

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‘Beyond Blessed’

A couple’s leap of faith leads to autism camp, Africa—and back home to Saint Ambrose

Rob and Sharyl Sicoli sit together in their backyard, short on sleep, but in good spirits. They have just returned from a week at an autism summer camp with their son, Joey, where they helped care for more than 50 other adults with autism.

“Most are on multiple meds, many have high needs, and we are the only medical team on site,” says Sharyl. “It’s exhausting, it’s nuts—but we love it. It’s what we’ve been called to do.”

“And in two weeks, I leave for Africa,” Rob says. “We partner with the Dominican Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in northern Zambia. They run several schools and orphanages. However, about 20 years ago, they were called to start a small medical clinic because moms were literally coming to their doorstep in labor, ready to deliver. When we arrived in 2012, they were extremely underresourced, and for several years, we brought all the meds, supplies, and equipment we could carry.”

“We ultimately started a nonprofit, Wellness for Africa, which has amplified the support we can provide. It’s now a full-fledged mission hospital whose motto is ‘We Treat, God Cures.’ I return each year with a medical, surgical, and dental team, and Sharyl has come twice. A beautiful place. It fills our cup.”

Letting the Lord Lead

They never planned to go to Zambia, just like they never planned to go each summer to autism camp. Their daughter Mary was chosen for a trip to Kenya with Visitation School in Mendota Heights, and Sharyl insisted that Rob go along.



Rob and Sharyl Sicoli spend a week each summer as the medical team at autism camp.

“It turned out we couldn’t go to Kenya because of civil unrest,” Rob says. “Somehow we connected with these Zambian nuns; they took a chance on us, and it’s become a wonderful, lasting relationship. We’ve been blessed with the skills and financial ability to do it, so we’re just following God’s lead.”

Rob and Sharyl met at a Buffalo Bills tailgate in 1985. Both are from western New York; Rob was in medical school at the time, and Sharyl was studying to be a nurse. They married, traveling to Cleveland for Rob’s pediatrics residency, then to Milwaukee for his emergency medicine fellowship.

In 1993, he landed a job in Minnesota. They figured they would stay for a year or two, then move back East or someplace warm, like Florida—but God had other plans. Mary (now 30 and a registered nurse) and Joey (age 28) were both born in Minnesota, and the family has been at Saint Ambrose since before the Woodbury church was built.

Rob has been the medical director of the emergency departments at Children’s Minnesota in Minneapolis and Saint Paul for the past 16 years. He is a board member for several organizations that serve adults with developmental disabilities. Sharyl is a nurse and volunteers for several non-profits, but her primary role is caring for Joey—and that has not always been easy.

Stepping Back, Stepping Up

“As a young boy with autism, Joey had difficulty navigating the expectations of attending Mass,” Sharyl recalls. “At times, his behaviors were noisy, disruptive, and often exhausting to manage for him and me. So I backed away, which was really hard for me, especially with our daughter attending school here. I wanted to connect and support her needs, too!”

A few years later, Sharyl found herself back in the pews at Saint Ambrose. That Sunday, Father Peter preached the homily she needed to hear. The theme was *Come and See*.

“He spoke of attending Mass consistently for three months and truly leaning into it, perhaps attending a daily Mass or two, spending time in the Adoration Chapel, having coffee and a doughnut in Fellowship Hall after Mass, or even attending a small-group or committee meeting,” Sharyl says. “And I did—I actively engaged. I took a few steps of courage, and it changed my life!”

Joey was a bit older, and with significant therapy and many prayers, his behaviors were now more manageable, and he had grown more independent. Sharyl found herself able to be present at church functions, made new connections, and uncovered a renewed sense of peace and hope. She says Rob must have noticed the difference.



Joey Sicoli has grown to love coming to Mass every Sunday and gathering the programs from the pews afterward.

“The year 2024 was a tough one for our family—it brought us to our knees,” says Sharyl. “One morning, Joey and I were getting ready to go to church, and Rob said, ‘I’m going with you.’ And he hasn’t stopped!”

Rob grew up Catholic, attending Mass every Sunday. He never disliked church—but he regarded it as a task to be completed each week. Now he’s finding new ways to engage, and Mass is no longer a chore.

“Y’know, you live life, you have a son with special needs, you work with folks living in difficult conditions, and you come to a point where you realize that you don’t really control anything,” he says. “But if you trust in God, He will lead the way, and it’ll work out. That takes a leap of faith.”

“I’ve sat through so many Masses; I’ve heard the gospel several times—but now I’m actually listening and understanding. Now, Mass is like stopping for fuel. By the end of the week, I need it. The homilies speak to me. I enjoy closing my eyes and listening to the choir. I derive comfort from being around people of faith. It’s taken me 50-plus years to finally get it!”

Known and Loved

Joey, too, has come to love Mass. He can’t wait to go each Sunday. He is a joyful and avid giver of the Sign of Peace, and he requests downloads of all the songs the choir sings, maintaining a playlist that brings him joy and comfort during the week. Joey also collects all the programs from all the pews after Mass, is a regular giver to the parish offertory, and made his own donation to the rectory project to support a new home for the priests. Although he could not attend Saint Ambrose Catholic School with his sister, he did complete his sacraments—

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EXCEPTIONAL LEARNING FOR ALL GOD'S CHILDREN

Saint Ambrose invests in helping students of every ability gain an outstanding Catholic education

Even at a thriving parish, parents of students with exceptional learning needs can find it difficult to get the support their children require. Often, the solution is to transport students to the public school for part of the day or forego Catholic education altogether. Saint Ambrose, however, is investing in staff and resources to support exceptional learners in-house. For Assistant Principal Dianna Helmberger and Learning Specialist Beth Salmon, this mission is personal.



Assistant Principal Dianna Helmberger and Learning Specialist Beth Salmon are two of the Saint Ambrose educators dedicated to meeting the needs of all learners.

Firsthand Experience

"I really hated school as a child—probably because I did not fit the typical 'good student' mold," Dianna says. "But I loved learning and was always curious about things. That love drove me to pursue a career in education. When my oldest child was just four years old, he was diagnosed with cancer and needed additional support. Walking that journey opened my eyes to the importance of compassion, flexibility, and individualized care. Later, we learned my children also have dyslexia. I have seen firsthand the importance of patience, encouragement, and teaching kids to speak up for what they need."

"I have always had a passion for those who learned differently, which includes all of us!" says Beth. "My son has dyslexia, which was not acknowledged when he was in school. He was told to pay attention and work harder, which led to self-confidence issues and frustration. My interest in encouraging change led me to contemplate a leadership role in which I could help children and teachers. When the learning specialist position opened, I welcomed the opportunity!"

Investing in All Learners

For schools without access to public funding, the biggest challenge is balancing individual needs and available resources. Saint Ambrose has invested in a wide range of support for learners, including three Learning Specialists (Leah Kaeppe and Stephanie Shippy, along with Beth), who collaborate with classroom teachers, parents, counselors, and Enrichment Coordinator Megan Toninato to walk with students on their learning journey. In some cases, they also work with external specialists and therapists as well as South Washington County Special Education Services to ensure that students receive comprehensive support.

The challenges of serving all learners are not limited to those who need additional learning support. Saint Ambrose also strives to enrich the experience of students who require more of a challenge. Since each student is a child of God, it's important that they and their families feel at home here.

"Every child is a gift and deserves to learn," Beth says. "We offer a variety of opportunities and supports in and out of the classroom. Each child has unique gifts, and our teachers learn all they can about our students so they have a personal connection. Every student needs the encouragement and time to succeed academically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. Finding the right balance to meet those needs within the context of a day can be taxing, but we are up for the challenge!"

Good Tree, Good Fruit

Dianna and Beth regard Saint Ambrose Catholic School as a family, and they aren't the only ones. Parents consistently speak of the school community as *family* and *home*, the result of close-knit collaboration that is bearing good fruit.

"The benefits of this work are incredible and very tangible," Beth says. "There is nothing like having a student tell you that, because of your patience and extra time you have given them, they finally understand math! Or having a student who has struggled with reading raise their hand and offer to read in the classroom or at Mass. When parents realize that their children are loved and cared for, that they are part of a team who wants the best for them, they feel confident to send their children here each day!"

"This community has always felt like a family to me," Dianna says. "Just like any family, not everyone is perfect, but we love each other anyway and see the beauty and goodness in each person. Every student, every parent, every staff member is valued, cared for, and celebrated for the unique way God created them. Our educators and staff love these children as if they were their own and serve as their biggest cheerleaders, coaches, and advocates. Every time I see a student overcome a challenge or hear a parent express gratitude for the care their child receives, I am reminded this is holy work."

Dianna Helmberger is married with three children who attend and received sacraments through Saint Ambrose Catholic School. She has worked here since 2006. Beth Salmon has been on staff since the school opened in 2000. Her daughter, her son, and her two grandchildren have all received their sacraments here.

PARTNERS IN LEARNING: We are grateful to the Catholic Schools Center of Excellence (CSCOE) for providing meaningful tools to enhance student learning in Catholic schools. Learn more at **cscoe-mn.org**.

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both First Communion and Confirmation—at the church with the strong support of the parish.

"To find Joey accepted and welcomed here is everything to us," Sharyl says. "To look out across the congregation and see other families and individuals with similar struggles is comforting in a strange way. It makes us not feel so alone. As Deacon John once said, we need to share and grow with faith-filled people!"

To that end, the Sicolis are actively seeking to connect with other families of children with special needs, to help them find their footing and their home at Saint Ambrose.

"We try to connect with these families as much as possible. We have learned to be much more open about Joey's diagnosis and struggles. We've allowed ourselves to be more vulnerable," Sharyl says. "We truly believe that we need to help make the road a little bit better for the next family. We can learn from one another, cry with each other, lift each other up in prayer, and share the joys of our faith."

"Our journey has meaning and beauty," she says. "Raising a child with special needs is a calling. As you navigate the grief process, you can come to a place of acceptance. You can find faith, joy, and hope even through the struggles. I want Joey and Mary to have a home long after we're gone, and we've found one at Saint Ambrose!"

LOOKING FOR SUPPORT? Recently, a committed group of families has been discussing support for the special-needs community at Saint Ambrose, including attending Mass, receiving the sacraments, visiting the Adoration chapel, or a offering special Mass or blessing each year. If you are interested in learning more or sharing ideas, please leave your name and contact information at the parish office at 651-768-3030.

LEARN MORE: For more information about summer camps for people with autism, visit **ausm.org/ausm-summer-camps**. To learn more about Wellness for Africa, go to **wellnessforafrica.org**.













EFC DRAWS YOUTH TO CHRIST!

In late July, three busses of middle-school campers, high-school leaders, and adults headed to Trinity Woods Catholic Camp and Retreat Center in Trego, Wisconsin, for Extreme Faith Camp (EFC). EFC is a parish-led, discipleship-based summer camp for rising 6th- through 9th-grade students. We enjoy a week of outdoor adventures, deep prayer, and the beauty of daily Mass, Adoration, and Reconciliation. EFC fuels our youth ministry, as teens encounter Christ in a new way and grow in relationship with each other and their leaders. EFC 2026 will be July 27-31—more information will be available in December!

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What will you be doing? As Director of Communications, I'm responsible for developing and leading a comprehensive strategy to share the mission, values, and activities of Saint Ambrose, its Early Childhood Education Center, and Saint Ambrose School with parishioners, school families, prospective families, and the wider community. My role is to build awareness, foster engagement, and deepen the Catholic identity of our parish and schools. In addition, I'll be supporting Father Peter in pastoral support, serving as a key point of contact to help ensure his vision and priorities are clearly communicated. I'll assist with coordination and relationship-building, walking alongside him in his ministry to strengthen parish life and outreach.

What appeals to you about working for the church? What drew me to this position was the opportunity to promote the faith, community, and mission that form the very center of my life and family. From the people I've met to the transformative ministries at work, I'm eager to share how God is moving through our community and inspire others to live their faith more fully.

What else should people know about you? Many of my best ideas come to me while I'm out running. I love early morning runs. It's my time to think, pray, and dream big.

Erin and Josh have been married nearly 12 years and have two young daughters, Kennedy and Etta. Previously, Erin oversaw international and national marketing efforts and brand development for Travel South Dakota. Prior to that, she worked for an advertising agency, managing accounts in travel and tourism, economic development, and health care.



WELCOME BACK, SWARM!





Classes for Saint Ambrose Catholic School students resumed on Tuesday, August 26. Photos courtesy of Hilda Birdie Photography

Saint Ambrose
CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

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SUNDAY MASS
Saturday Vigil 4:00 pm
Sunday 8:30 am (livestream), 11:00 am, 5:00 pm

WEEKDAY MASS
Monday-Friday 8:00 am (livestream)
Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday 5:00 pm
Saturday 8:00 am

RECONCILIATION
Monday-Friday 7:30-7:55 am
Tuesday, Wedneday, Thursday 4:15-4:55 pm
Saturday 8:30-9:30 am, 2:30-3:30 pm
Sunday 4:00-4:45 pm

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Swing by FALLFEST 2025!

Friday, September 19th, 5:30-10 pm, with live music by Top Shelf at 6 pm

Saturday, September 20th, 11 am-10 pm, with live music by Good for Gary at 6 pm

Scan the QR code for complete details or visit saintambrosecatholic.org/fallfest-2025