The Bridge

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AMERICAN AND FOREIGN CHRISTIAN UNION

Friends of
American Church in Paris
American Church in Berlin
Vienna Community Church

Summer 2026

OUR MISSION

The mission of the American and Foreign Christian Union is to support the international, English-speaking, ecumenical churches in Europe whose ministries bear witness to Jesus Christ. In partnership with our member churches, we will strive to develop and manage a strong financial base to further their programs. We will nurture and strengthen our alumni ties and lend support to the pastors, leadership and members of these churches through our care and prayers.

TEACHING FOR FAITH FORMATION

It is August! While most of France is on vacation, I use this time to plan for the autumn and winter months with my youth and young adults, which means I am researching new curricula like crazy. I have found one that I will use with my middle schoolers. It is called *Wonder* (by Meredith Miller), and uses a Montessori-based Godly Play method of wonder to lean into children's questions about the Bible.

Teaching children poses challenges: How do you teach children about the Holocaust? How do you teach children about the slave trade? How do you answer, "Where do babies come from?" The answers to these differ, depending on whether the ages are 3, 10, 17, 30, or 65. We need to have a sense of what is necessary to share without being untruthful. We do not sugarcoat stories, history, and facts, lest we raise a naïve future generation.

One of my youth ministry mentors in the U.S., Mark Oestreicher, taught me that young children's cognitive ability is inherently black-and-white – they cannot yet grasp paradox or nuance. Puberty brings the capacity for abstract thinking, but it takes years to develop the ability to apply it to one's faith quest. As "Mark O" once put it, "God praised a child-like faith, not a childish faith."

So, in addressing Noah's ark, we tell children about the animals, the ark, the rainbow – we do not skip the flood, but we present it concretely. When a teenager revisits the story, the questions become more challenging: "What kind of God would do this?" This is the beginning of critical thinking.

Our job, as a church and as leaders and teachers is to walk alongside young people as their faith matures – rooted in Scripture and unafraid to question, being able to wonder about, marvel at, explore increasingly deeper meanings, and articulate well-known Bible stories. As their faith grows, we hope they will grow closer to God through the Bible stories or in spite of them.

Currently at ACP, children's worship has an average weekly attendance of 40, the youth group 25, and the young adults 22. Thank you for your support of our programs to nurture faith formation and biblical education in children, youth, and young adults!

Rev. Elizabeth Murray, Youth Pastor

A CHURCH GOES BACK TO SCHOOL

Every fall, as the children of our congregation pack their school bags and head back to school, we celebrate learning with a school convocation service. This September, the entire congregation, in a way, goes back to school as well, as the summer concludes a year of visioning – praying, listening, discerning, and asking what God is calling us to become. Call it part of the process of faith formation on a congregational scale.

The summer was marked with a celebration on the Fourth of July, one that people are still talking about. Even our mayor joined us. Our music program rocked. Neighbors from every walk of life joined us in singing, grilling, and discovered that American classic, a novelty on this side of the Atlantic: the root beer float. This event was a renewal of who we are: a community center, a cultural center, and, above all, a place of divine worship. Our doors were wide open inviting all to belong.

Now, as this school year begins, we are confronted with the important homework of putting our vision into action: setting up a strong organizational framework. We know who we want to be. The questions that confront us now are the ones every good student asks: What do we need to get there? And how?

We ask these questions because structure is never the end point – formation is. A trellis exists for the sake of the vine. The framework we are building this year will support continued formation and discipleship for every age: children opening the Bible for the first time, youth wrestling with questions, adults delving deeper into the faith they thought they knew. Vision becomes formation, and formation is organic, a way of life that is passed on.

None of this happens without you. Your prayers, encouragement, and generosity carried us through a year of discernment and a summer of celebration, and will carry us into this season of growth and formation. Every gift becomes a lesson taught, a leader equipped, a door held open.

School is starting. The Book is open. We cannot wait to show you what we learn. Thank you for being part of our formation.

Rev. Ryan D. Birkman, Pastor

GROWING IN FAITH TOGETHER

Most Tuesday afternoons in Vienna, around 1:00 PM, one can find Linda B., organizer of the VCC Women's Bible Study, unlocking the door of the Meeting Point, laden with home-baked goodies. The tea kettle is put on to boil, the laptop connections checked, and Bibles placed around the table. Shortly before 2:00, the other women arrive – from Africa, Austria, France, Korea, Romania, the U.S.; from twenty-something to the more mature; with backgrounds in art, education, law, medicine, and music, among others – each with a witness and story rooted in different faith traditions, each with a desire to know God better through a study of His word. For more than seven years, a kaleidoscope of women has been gathering for Bible study. It is currently led by Faye G., a former VCC attendee, who adeptly and faithfully leads the Bible study from Florida or Scotland, generously sharing her time, talents, faith, and knowledge. The time of meeting has been adjusted to accommodate those who join via Zoom from the U.S. and also allows some to participate during lunch breaks.

Discussions have focused on an overview of the Old Testament, Psalms, Revelation, the Trinity, gifts of the Spirit, Kate Bowler's Advent study, meditation and prayer practices, and other places that the Spirit might lead. Conversation is animated, and the push and pull of growing in faith and understanding is never dull.

Although the study is scheduled to last 1.5 hours, many often linger longer, continuing to discuss a point or share concerns about VCC members in need. The dynamics of this group of women can be described as a faith community characterized by love, caring, and respect. Strong ties have been forged with Christ at the center.

Another opportunity for faith-based reflection and meditation at the VCC is a new initiative called "Journeys of Faith," which is led by Pastor Bekah before the worship service on Sundays. These consist of discussions on topics that weave together aspects of the life of the church, such as the lectionary, the creeds, and the doxology. In a congregation in which members represent many denominations within Christianity, this provides insight into our multiple backgrounds. To coin the title of Debie Thomas's book, we are "a faith of many rooms."

We thank you for your support of these faith-rich ministries!

Rev. Rebekah Davis & Faye Gibson

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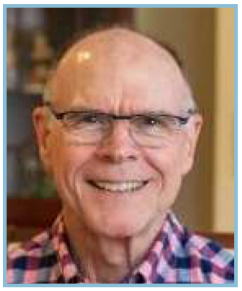
AFCU BOARD MEETING



The Board celebrates the many years of service given by Don and Kathie Eppert on the AFCU Board. Kathie retired a few years ago, and now Don is taking a bow after 30 years. Kris Richardson, AFCU Board President, says:

"Don led several ACP pastoral search teams and acted as a consultant to the church's pastoral search teams. He was the AFCU HR person and in that capacity acted as our representative with the ACP Pastors and ACP HR Committees. He was great to work with, could be relied on to do what he said he was going to do, always willing to help and provided well thought-out input to the Board."

We give him (and Kathie!) our deepest thanks, good wishes and prayers of blessing. Thank you!

Here are Don's reflections of 30 years on the AFCU Board

Although Kathie and I were members of ACP for just two and one-half years (1993-95), that experience influenced my AFCU Board membership for 30 years (1995-2025) and Kathie's for some 20 years. My Human Resources experience has helped each of the member churches over this time period with recruiting pastors, compensation and benefits recommendations, resolving personnel issues and securing financial support. It has been a joy for us to have been a part of AFCU's support for our member churches.

Welcome to New Members

Nathan Coltvet

Nathan is a resident of the Twin Cities, MN, where he and his wife, Beth, have raised 4 children (Adam, Mari, Sophia, Isaac). He grew up as a "pastor's kid" following his parents - Rev Dr Ben and Margit Coltvet to a number of parishes across Canada. He also visited his parents when they served ACB church. He is honored to continue to support AFCU and ACB as his parents have for many years. Professionally, he has spent his entire career in financial services. He has a passion for supporting and serving Christian missions that make a meaningful difference across the world and is excited to serve on the AFCU board with like-minded colleagues.

Diane and Marlin Stoltz

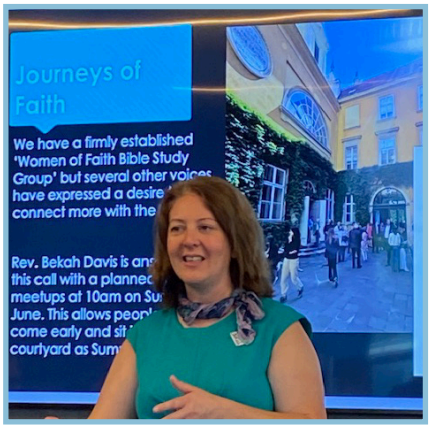
Diane and Marlin Stoltz have been married since 2008 and joined ACPU while living in Paris from 2009 to 2011. They have two wonderful children, Xander (15) and Ari (12), and live in Greensboro, NC. Diane is a former healthcare administrator who keeps busy volunteering at church and serving in a supervisory role with Bible Study Fellowship. Marlin is a former engineering manager who stays active coaching youth soccer teams. Diane and Marlin love traveling and spending as much time as possible with their kids. They are excited to join the AFCU board to support the organization that played such an important role in the early years of their marriage.

AFCU BOARD MEETING

FROM THE AFCU BOARD

Mid-May in Seattle found the AFCU Board convening for its spring meeting, a time to focus on the ministries and needs of the three churches (ACP, ACB, VCC). Highlights included the introduction of the new pastor at the VCC, Bekah Davis, the voting in of new Board members (see below), reports by each of the churches, the AFCU financial report, and a great deal of discussion about ways to proceed with major structural repairs of the American Church in Paris. Joy abounded as old friends from our churches met. New members, Nathan Coltvet, Diane and Marlin Stoltz were welcomed, and others – John Benson and Don Eppert – were thanked for their service. Everyone was excited that all 3 pastors were in attendance and able to meet together for the first time. The Board's next meeting will be in Annapolis, MD., on October 30 and 31, 2026.

ACP BUILDING NEEDS



The cornerstone of the current ACP building was laid 100 years ago in 1927. In April 2026, board members Don Farnan and Neil Hafer visited ACP and had several meetings with local ACP members about the current use of the building. They also conducted a full tour of every floor and room of the church house with architect VIncent Cortes, who is helping AFCU with the renovation ideas and potential planning.

At our May meeting, the Board took a comprehensive look at the future of ACP's remarkable and historic facilities—not simply at the next repair or renovation, but at what will be required to preserve and steward them for the next several decades. These facilities are much more than bricks and mortar: they are the vehicle through which ACP carries out its mission, providing a home for worship, music, feeding the hungry, housing the unhoused, and many other community programs and ministries that reach more than a thousand people each week. The review underscored both the opportunities and the challenges of caring for an aging, heavily used facility. Working together, AFCU and ACP are now evaluating priorities, long-term capital requirements and bold new ways to use the facilities so that this extraordinary place can continue to serve future generations.

For the many alumni and friends whose lives have been touched by ACP, this is ultimately about preserving something very special—and ensuring that the welcome, community, and ministry they experienced in Paris will be there for those who follow.

Don Farnan and Neil Hafer