

Speak Out!



Being the
Community
of Christ

The early church in Jerusalem was a fascinating community. Forged from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the good message about Jesus by the early apostles, this new community was ablaze with the grace and truth of God. Listen to this description:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)



So much has been said or written about this passage, but I want to point out two very simple things. Their encounter with God changed the way they related to one another. Centered in the truth of God, they lived in deep community, gathering for prayer and worship, seeing God work wonders, and living in radical generosity together. Perhaps it was because of this that the second simple thing we see in them is that their encounter with God changed the way they related to others outside the community. I am confident that their life together drew others in not only by proclaiming the good message of Jesus but also by the wonderful way they lived the good message of Jesus in community.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes powerfully about the church in his wonderful book *Life Together*, including this striking statement: "the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation." The life of the church is the good message of Jesus Christ, our Savior. This is the heart of our deep community with one another, and it is also the heart of our community's witness to others.

All through this issue of *Speak Out* we explore what it looks like to be the church community who, like the Jerusalem church in Acts 2, is changed by the message of Jesus to relate with one another in deep community but also to live that community in a way that is winsome to others beyond our community.

Matt Erickson
Senior Pastor, Eastbrook Church

Take a First Step into Connection

Community doesn't just happen — it requires action! Eastbrook offers many spaces and places to interact with and get to know fellow believers; whether you sneak into the back row on a Sunday morning or take the plunge somewhere new, while you're there give one of these tactics a try:

Invite Someone In

Perhaps the easiest of all: say hi to someone new! Turn to your neighbor after Sunday service, ask what they thought about the sermon or if you can pray for them this week.

Serve Side-by-Side

There's nothing like serving together to tighten the bonds within the body of Christ. Not sure where to start? Visit eastbrook.org/serve, where you'll find a listing of "First Serve Opportunities."

Check Out an Event

Our Summer 2025 calendar is full of picnics, retreats, classes, and more. You can find these listed in our seasonal "Connect, Grow, Serve" brochure (find them in the Church Lobby!) or at eastbrook.org/summer2025.



Pastors Emeritus Marc and Nancy Erickson, photographed in their home by beloved friend and fellow Eastbrooker, Deb Farris, who is finishing up a book on their lives. Read their reflections on page 3, and an excerpt of the book on page 5.

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STORY

GOD

Bret & Ashley Kohler



Healthy, Christ-centered marriages form the foundation for healthy families, healthy churches, and healthy communities. Our mission as a church depends on Christ-centered marriages, so that we can pass our faith to the next generation.

Let's meet one Eastbrook couple who tried something new to deepen their marriage connection, and center it more around Christ's intention for that relationship.

Bret Kohler joined Eastbrook four years ago. Prior to that, he actively pushed away anything faith-related for over 20 years. But a breakdown in 2019 ignited in him a search for something bigger; he began researching different religions, posing deep questions to friends, devouring the Bible, attending services here. He was moved, yet still unsure of what he truly believed, until an encounter with God on a walk with his dog changed everything. He accepted Jesus as his savior, and has never turned back.

Bret's wife Ashley started coming to Eastbrook with him about two years ago. She wanted to grow her faith, find

faith-based community and continue learning real-life application from the sermons she heard. Growing up, she had felt religion was forced upon her as a method of threatening bad behavior—which resulted in her never feeling able to truly connect with God.

Despite their individual journeys with the Lord, faith hadn't really been part of the couple's relationship. They wanted to explore it together and weave it more fully into their marriage, home, and the lives of their two small children. So they signed up for "A Weekend to Remember," a marriage retreat hosted this past March by Cru's Family Life Ministry for couples from Wisconsin churches, including Eastbrook.

"We have gone through a lot and have grown so much, but I always wondered what we were leaving on the table by not inviting God into our unity," Bret shares.

At the retreat, hosted in Madison, the Kohlers participated in sessions—individually and as a couple—on different topics. They learned new methods of communication and compassion. They ate dinner together, out of the house and without their kids, their takeaways from the day's learning prompting conversation about how to view one another as gifts from God, and how to reorient their pursuit of one another.

"We use that term 'gift' frequently with each other now," Ashley reflects. "My approach to marriage to this point was focused on what I was getting out of it, as opposed to what I was putting into it, and the retreat completely turned that narrative on its head. It was a turning point to approach marriage with a totally new lens."

Since coming home, Bret and Ashley both say they feel God is a constant presence in their partnership and in their home.

They now pray together daily as a family, before they leave in the morning and at dinner. They pray as a couple before bed, and after hard conversations to come back to one another. They purchased their first devotional and plan to keep up with them on a daily basis.

The couple has called their retreat experience "life-changing." It even inspired Bret to get new tattoos—taken from the Weekend to Remember emblem!—to remind himself daily of his covenant with his wife, and of God as their primary support.

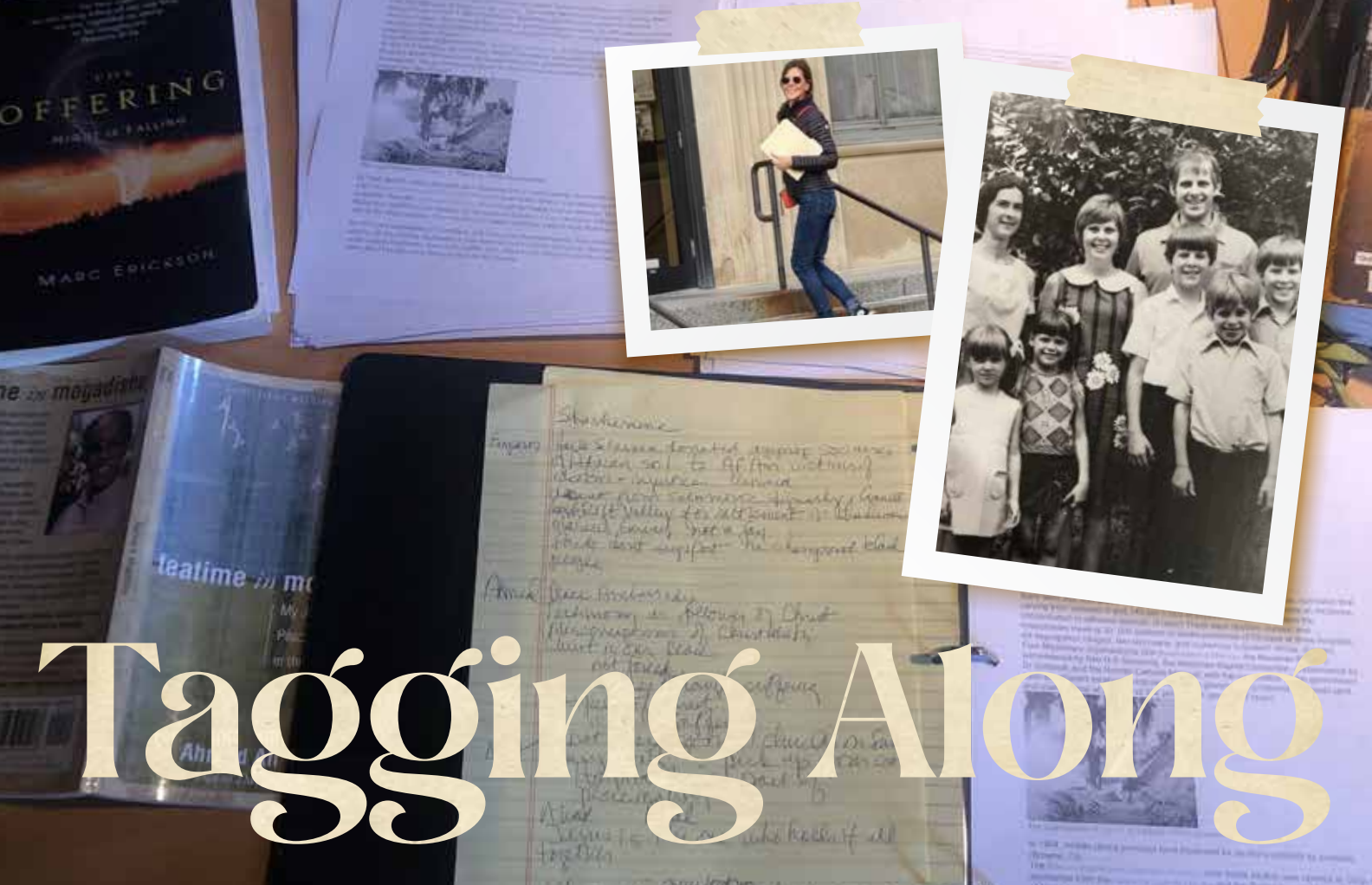
The Kohlers have been together for 14 years, and will be married 8 years in July. Even after all that time—even in the midst of busyness with young children and work demands and life itself—because of their vulnerability and openness to what the retreat offered, Bret and Ashley broke down the barriers of discomfort around talking about faith, and now live with a new perspective: one more focused on God and how He wants them to show up in marriage.

They encourage fellow Eastbrookers, married or not, to pursue growth with God.

"Spiritual or otherwise, take time to reflect on how far you've come in the journey," Ashley says. "One day you'll look back and realize you have been through so much—and that's worth celebrating!" ■

DID YOU KNOW...

Eastbrook is offering a marriage course this summer, right here on campus! "Art of Marriage" will explore techniques for Christ-centered relationship. Sessions run on Sunday mornings beginning in June: learn more at eastbrook.org/summer2025.



Tagging Along

You cannot tell the story of Eastbrook without Pastor Marc and Nancy Erickson.

As Deb Farris learned, there are many stories the Ericksons have helped shape throughout their lives and ministry.

Eastbrook's inaugural senior pastor and his wife have known and called Farris a friend for almost forty years. A longtime Eastbrooker, Farris is also a writer, and in the last few years has worked with Marc and Nancy to weave the tales from their lives into a book: *Just Along for the Ride: The Missionary Journey of Pastor Marc & Nancy Erickson*.

It is a project that tells of unbelievable adventures and an extraordinary God, as the Ericksons followed the call to bring medical care and God's love to people all over the world—including East Africa, China and the Middle East—and to be a part of planting a church in an elementary school on Milwaukee's Eastside in 1980 called Eastbrook.

Beyond the stories themselves, collaborating on the book has been a project that has strengthened a lifelong bond of friendship and mentorship between the author and her subjects. Deb, Marc and Nancy recently sat down to answer some questions about their collaboration, and the lessons they learned along the way.

Because of the deadline, this interview took place while Marc was in the hospital for hip surgery. The responses from Nancy include them both as he listened and contributed.

Can you describe how the idea for this book came about? How did the three of you connect and decide to pursue this project?

Nancy: We met Bill and Dee Wenzler when Eastbrook began meeting at Hartford Avenue School. One of their first prayer requests was for their kids, Ed, Deb, John and Joan. That was in the early '80s. Decades later, because of the connection with our families, Debbie came over and began asking us to tell stories. Then she asked if she could record them. With the joy of recounting our own memories the stories accumulated.

Deb: The more they told, the deeper our relationships grew, with each other and my own relationship with God. I believe it's called discipleship. The same thing had happened when I spent time with my dad writing his stories. What is more meaningful than honoring the lives of those who have paved the way before us?

What was the process like of writing the book together? How would you get together and get into conversation?

Nancy: Pure delight. We got a new family member in our life.

Deb: Just like anyone who gets to know Marc and Nancy! Logistically, four years ago, we began to meet mostly at their house every Monday at 1 o'clock. The first meeting was at our house (my husband Todd and mine) on Shepard, which is where I grew up. It felt like my parents were also along for the ride.

Nancy & Marc, what about Deb made you feel comfortable sharing your stories? Had you been approached before to do something like this?

Nancy: No. Debbie is just pure love. She encouraged us when we didn't think it should be written. And still we don't think there should be a book about us. It's Debbie's...

Deb: It's not mine. It's God's.

Nancy: Absolutely. If we live our life for our own glory, it's useless. If we live for Him, it becomes His story.

Deb, you mentioned that you had some self-doubt going into this. What were your reservations, and how did they shift or resolve as you got into the project?

Deb: Oh, well, that was more after I started. I would wonder, why me? Our lives have been so different, I'm the least likely to write this story. But I was learning God has always used unlikely people. Jacob, Tamar and Rahab, to name just a few. Don't we all feel a little that way at least some of the time?

How would you characterize the relationship you formed during the course of working together?

Nancy: Wonderful.

Deb: It's hard for me to put into words. For one, it felt like I was gifted a new set of parents after I'd lost mine.

Nancy: To take a stand along Bill and Dee is a privilege.

Deb: Well, ditto, to take a stand along their kids: Marc and Mike, Paul, Lisa and Heidi, is too.

What have you learned about one another through this partnership? What have you learned about yourselves? What have you learned about God?

Nancy: Let God do His plan.

Deb: To me, whenever I walked into their house it felt like I was coming home. That was one of the very first stories Marc told me about a man named Yosef, and how being with Marc and Nancy was like home. Isn't that what our faith walks are about? Coming home to ourselves, the true selves God designed us to be? With Him at the hearth, all light and warmth?

Nancy: That goes back to the first week of our marriage. Marc came home with a drunk man and put him to bed in our own bed. People have just added so much to our life together. The parade of people God has sent to us is beyond what we could have ever imagined. You could get a little addicted to that. But you savor every person God sends along the way. Marc and I are

naturally shy people so I honestly can say this: don't worry about who you are. You might be the one He uses, but it's Him. You don't have to be anybody.

Deb: God loves to use the most unlikely men and women. When He uses you, you too might ask, "Why me...? I'm not a writer or whatever." Then watch Him work through you.

Eastbrook is a place with many long-established relationships but also many new followers of Christ who are looking for their place in His body gathered here. What advice or words would you share to encourage those seeking friends or mentors here?

Nancy: Get into small groups and open your heart to the gift of the special people God will introduce you to. We can choose the riches God wants to give us or stay poor. He wants us immersed in the fellowship of growing and pushing each other. And we enjoyed them so much!

Deb: Yeah. That's what happened to me. When I felt disconnected I volunteered to work at The Connecting Point. One thing led to another (like the Women's Ministry, then co-leading our table for Bible study, helping in the One to One Care Ministry...) I couldn't have come up with anything like I've experienced if I gave it my best effort. I've just been along for the ride!

Nancy: The other day when Marc was feeling a little discouraged [about being in the hospital], it was those God sent who encouraged and lifted us both up. He realized, "they're really fighting for me." If we don't trust that God has allowed things in our lives and will use everything for our good, what do we have? I've had one of those "just along for the ride" experiences while we've been [at the hospital]. It hits you all the time, how God is at work behind the scenes. There are answers to prayer everywhere.

Anything else you wish to share with your church family – about relationship, partnership, mentorship, friendship, something else?

Nancy: Try to help. We've tried to teach the church to open themselves more to the love of God, but the church has also taught us how to receive the love of God. It's both. It's two ways. Think of God's great love. How do we respond? How will you? The time together writing this book is just an example of the sweetness of God. I don't know about you, but we just love being together and getting to know each other and how good God is.

Deb: I agree!

"Fear not little flock, I've decided to give you the kingdom." (Luke 2:32) ■

Turn the page to read an excerpt from *Just Along for the Ride: The Missionary Journey of Pastor Marc & Nancy Erickson*, by Deborah W. Farris.

...Finally,
Marc and
Nancy were told
to come to New
York. The plan was to
send them to work
temporarily in Ethiopia
while they waited for an
opening to Somalia.

Nancy’s brother-in-law, Harold, drove them to New York and said one last goodbye. They spent the night in bunkbeds at headquarters on 47th Street. In the morning, Missions told them, good luck, God bless you, and there was a taxi waiting. It was the day of the twins sixth birthday—their gift was the trip. Paul was two-and-a-half and Lisa was ten months. Once again, they loaded everyone and everything into a taxi and headed to Kennedy airport.

Every item going with them had been weighed and measured. Nancy was told seventy pounds per person. Since the Mission hadn’t answered any of her questions, she had packed one dish per person, one glass, one set of silverware, one pan to cook in, one bed sheet per person and clothes. She didn’t know what would be available in Somalia and now they were being sent to Ethiopia.

At check in she realized no one had told them they had no baggage allowance for the baby. Now they would either have to pay for seventy extra pounds or dispose of seventy pounds. Marc started telling her to get rid of this and get rid of that.

“I can’t!” She groaned. “We’re down to so little! I can’t go around the world with four babies and nothing!” But they couldn’t afford the overage so she started going through everything and then noticed that Marc had at least seventy pounds of medical books in the bags. “Unload some of your books!”

“I cannot go to “Timbuktu” and try to practice medicine without any books!” There would be no library. This was before the Internet. By that point, Nancy thought they might have a divorce. That was the biggest conflict they had ever had.

“Dispose of those sweaters,” he said. She had knit a sweater for each of the children thinking one sweater would suffice in case it got cold. She had knit them with her own hands.

“They weigh next to nothing! And you think I should throw them away?” She began to cry. Walking around the airport to try to work through her emotions while they were waiting for the flight, she spotted a tour group lined up at the counter. They all had yellow vinyl tour bags. She went up to the head of the group.

“Do you happen to have six extra bags I could have?”

“I do.” She looked Nancy over, clearly seeing her distress. “What do you need them for?”

“I really need them,” was all she could manage to say. The woman gave her six bags. Nancy took them and went running back to Marc and the kids and stuffed all the medical books inside. The only thing she hadn’t figured out was that the kids couldn’t lift them. Their flight was called for boarding. There they were, Marc had Lisa on his back in a Gerry pack, Nancy took the boys by their hands, they had their carry-ons, and the extra bags of books.

“Hurry up, hurry up! We’re gonna be late for the flight!” Marc kept hollering. Then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, the whole flight crew came by, and each one picked up a child and a yellow vinyl bag of books.

“Thank you, God,” Nancy kept saying as the crew put them on the airplane.

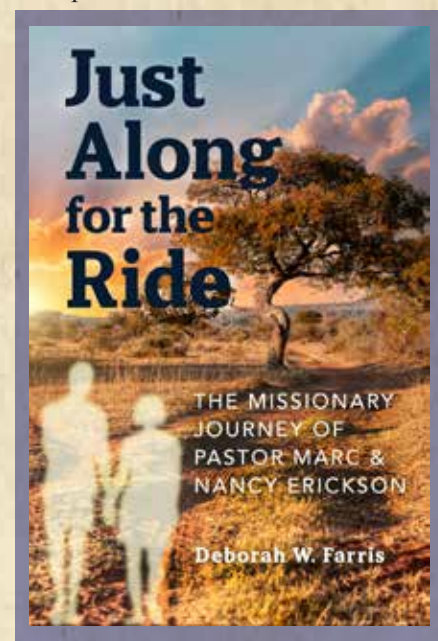
Neither of them had been out of the country before and they hadn’t realized there was a layover in Frankfurt. Missions had given them \$60 to use if they needed something, but that was all the cash they had. They had no credit cards or travelers’ checks. In Frankfurt, the taxi drivers kept coming up to them saying, “Taxi! Come on! Get in!” Marc insisted, no taxi. They sat down and looked at their tickets and found out it was a twenty-hour layover in Frankfurt. One

taxi driver would not leave them alone. As they moved on, he kept pushing and, finally, there they were in his taxi.

“I don’t know what we’re doing, we can’t speak German and we have no money,” Marc said. They didn’t understand what the driver was saying, and he drove them a long way out of town to the edge of the Black Forest where they came upon a beautiful hotel and stopped.

“Just stay here,” Marc said. “I’ve got to find someone who speaks English.” He went inside while the taxi driver was putting all their things in the hotel and Nancy was wondering what was going on. Finally, they were taken to a room. Everything was beautiful, it was perfectly kept and sanitized. There was even paper over the sanitized toilet. Marc said not to touch a thing then went to the lobby to look for assistance. He knew he couldn’t pay for this hotel. By the time he returned to say he couldn’t find anyone who spoke English, they had all laid down on the beds on top of the bedspreads and closed their eyes. That’s how they spent the night.

The next morning, they went down to the lobby and let staff know that they hadn’t touched anything. But the desk person told them it had all been covered. The hotel and breakfast were part of their ticket! So they ate breakfast, got back in the taxi and flew on to Addis Ababa, the Capital of Ethiopia. ■



If it's your first visit to Eastbrook for Sunday morning worship, the first face you'll likely see upon entering the lobby is Victoria McAfee. You'll know it's her by the wide, warm smile or the stream of people stopping by the Welcome Desk to give her a squeeze. Victoria is Eastbrook's Church Engagement Coordinator, a role that suits her friendly personality. Relation and connection are two of her primary responsibilities as she seeks to fuel an invitational culture here at Eastbrook. We invite you to get to know her below!

When and how did you first come to Eastbrook?

It's been almost 30 years! My first husband was a pastor, we had been in Milwaukee four years when we first made contact with Pastor Marc [Erickson] and invited him and his wife Nancy over for lunch. Nancy told me about Weekday Morning Prayer and the Women's ministry. I had just written a book, and Nancy wanted me to come to present it to the women in the church. I did, and a few years later Dolores Wenzler—who started Living Waters here—read my book and told me that what I had written about was what she was trying to do in Living Waters [Eastbrook's ministry for seeking wholeness in relationships]. By that time, I had divorced and separated, so I started doing Living Waters.

How did you start working in your current role?

A few years ago, I was in school and needed a job, so I worked for a few years as an online host for Sunday services. Then this job opened up and it felt like a good fit.

We're having this conversation between services on a Sunday morning, and as we're talking people keep coming up to give you a hug! What about this role feels like the right ministry for you?

Before I became a Christian, I was very shy. I used to hide behind my mother's skirt as a child. But when I became a Christian, I realized people need to know about Jesus! By grace you are saved, it's what Jesus did on the Cross for you—it's not because you're a good person and go to church every day. I just couldn't believe that people couldn't understand that for the first few years! I was telling everybody my testimony, so concerned that people didn't understand! I was pretty obnoxious

those first few years! But that's how I came to really love people.

As I grow in the Lord, I realize how much the Lord loves people. And the more He pours love into me, the more I feel like a fountain—sometimes I'm overflowing! I guess that's why the job fits. He's poured so many experiences into me, and for a long time I was ashamed about some of the dark times I've been through. But now when I share those, people come and say, 'that's happened to me too,' and they start pouring out their story. So now I'm seeing it as, God gave me this journey so that I could minister to more people.

How has the way you share about the Lord evolved over your life with Him?

People need to know the Lord. If you're not in the circle, how can you get to know people? I did "friendship evangelism" for a long time. Now, I'm just trying to connect with people, and relying on the Holy Spirit to tell me who to talk to.

I've been a Christian since I was 12, but only in the last 10 years have I begun understanding the Holy Spirit. I'm understanding that now, I don't have to come up with all the answers or figure everything out. Holy Spirit, you are here working, you brought this person for whatever reason, now give me the wisdom if I'm supposed to say something—or not. The older I get, the more I realize I really don't have the answers. I just have to trust the Holy Spirit.

What's your favorite thing about your job?

Being that first face people see on a Sunday morning. Especially when people come in who haven't been here before, I feel like I can be the first to open their hearts and make them feel welcome and comfortable, so that by the time they get in the Worship Hall and hear the Gospel, they're more open.

What is the biggest challenge in a role like yours?

That I can't help everybody. You greet them, you connect with them, I follow up, sometimes call or text them. Sometimes they still don't respond, and it's okay to let them go. But especially if I've



GET TO KNOW AN EASTBROOKER: Victoria McAfee

talked to them, I want them to know, I'm still here for you! Keep me updated!

I've been doing this job since last fall, and I think what God has shown me is that I need to disciple more people who have the gift of the love for people and challenge them to spread that love around. I've also thought about having greeters in the seats, not just at the door—which really should be all of us, if you're a day old in the Lord! I don't want people to just come in, sit down, worship, and go home. Greet people! Talk to them, pray with them.

How would you encourage your fellow Eastbrookers to take that next step to connect with one another?

You should have a circle—within your family, within your neighborhood, within the church community. Everybody should have people they're relating to. It takes a minute to get that exchange, where you feel like people are pouring into you and in turn you can pour out of the overflow. The lady who led me to the Lord said, "He has no hands but your hands, He has no feet but your feet." He's given us the responsibility to be who He is in the world. He's put it on us. ■

Looking for an opportunity to "be who He is"? Victoria's ministry is always seeking volunteers to help on Sunday mornings. Find those and other opportunities by signing up for the monthly Top Serving Needs email at eastbrook.org/serve.

Striking the Right Note

by Rachel Shuster

Mary Trager insists that her ministry at Eastbrook is small. But for the people to whom she ministers, even something small can mean so much.

When someone within our church community dies, Trager writes a handwritten note to their family. It's something she has been doing for two, maybe three years. Trager estimates that she's written close to 100 letters in that time.

Grief is a process Trager herself knows all too well. She lost her husband in 2010, followed only a year later by the death of her mother. Back in her early married life, she suffered a miscarriage and received a stack of letters from some students with whom she had worked at her church — a stack she still has in her possession all these years later.

"It really is the little things — a note, a plate of cookies, your presence," she shares. "It's a time when you're not even thinking clearly, it's hard to hold conversations with people. So all of those little things really are meaningful."

Having benefitted from the kindness of others in this way, it felt like the right opportunity to give back here at Eastbrook. In prayer about where to serve, the Lord laid GriefShare on her heart. As its name suggests, GriefShare is a support group for folks who have experienced the death of someone

close. Mary herself had gone through the program twice — her second time here at Eastbrook, where she met Ric and Nancy Peterson, who lead the program and gratefully handed her this service opportunity.

In her notes, Mary invites the recipient to the next session of GriefShare scheduled on Eastbrook's calendar, introducing them to a support network should they choose to seek one out.

"It's a place to go where you feel like you aren't alone in your journey of grief. I found it to be very helpful in the whole processing of it. For me, it was really knowing that everybody grieves differently. There are some common denominators, but not everybody has the same experience."

The message she writes vary, based on her prayers to the Holy Spirit for guidance. Often, she'll offer the Lord's comfort and the church's support. If a particular scripture comes to mind, she might share that as well. Nothing elaborate, very simple.

"I often don't know them personally, but they are a brother or sister in Christ. I know we have that in common," she smiles.

Trager describes herself as an introvert, happiest at home with her dog. She says this pastoral care ministry opportunity feels like a good fit given that aspect of her personality. However, she also serves in one of Eastbrook's most

extroverted ministries, as a monthly greeter at the Connecting Point.

She encourages others to seek out service opportunities as a means of connecting with fellow believers — because there are many ways to do so, both in front of others and behind the scenes.

"It takes courage to reach out, but if you're feeling the pull of the Holy Spirit to be involved in some small way, let the Holy Spirit guide you!" she says. "I think the Holy Spirit nudges us. Be brave, listen to how you're being nudged. I'm sure there are a lot of other things in the church that are small. Look for something that you can just plug into. Even some of the more 'mundane' things are still important."

"After all, all of the parts work together." ■



Connection through service isn't just something we do to express our love for others, it's also part of the way that God has uniquely created us. Learn more about how God has created you to serve through the Spiritual Gifts assessment, offered online at eastbrook.org/serve.