



FIRST FREE

# 22-23 Annual Report





# A Letter from Pastor Matt

**“Stand at the crossroads and look;  
ask for the ancient paths,  
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,  
and you will find rest for your souls.”  
- Jeremiah 6:16**

**“The way into the future, I argue, is not innovation or a new start for the church. Rather, the road to the future runs through the past.”  
- Robert Webber**

One of the things that drew me to First Free was that it was old. I like old things: a leather chair with a rich patina, an old oak tree that almost reaches the heavens, a vintage motorcycle in a paint color that they just don't make anymore. And here was a church that was older than me, older than my parents, older than my grandparents, even older than my great (and perhaps great great) grandparents. This church's story stretches back to 1880, and as far as U.S. history goes, that's almost Jurassic. It's downright ancient. People have been meeting to encounter the living God in song, Scripture, sacrament, and Spirit in our building on the corner of Ashland and Berwyn for almost 100 years. Of course, our story is actually much more ancient than 1880, stretching all the way back to Jesus of Nazareth, and even to Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of our faith.



I loved that First Free had history, but I also appreciated the equally important openness to contemporary culture and desire to follow where the Holy Spirit is leading today. First Free isn't a museum. Over the years our church's name has changed, our location has changed, and even the very language we use to talk about God has changed from Swedish to English. Over the century we have emphasized different aspects of the faith, holding a different side of the one Gospel diamond up to the light, and refracting a unique ray of truth, goodness and beauty to the surrounding neighborhood.

we're old... yet new.

In the words of Robert Webber, First Free lends itself to being an "ancient-future" church: a church that is rooted in the ancient path, but desiring to offer a fresh demonstration of the Gospel to our neighbors.

I spent much of my first year subtly seeking to lean us further into this direction. We spent the first four months together in our series ***Honest to God: Learning to Pray the Psalms***, and there is no Christian prayer book more ancient than the book of Psalms, which contain the very words Jesus would have often recited in prayer. After this we jumped into the series ***All Things New: Following Jesus as Perpetual Beginners***, where we examined and explored the ever refreshing trajectory of God towards the renewal of all things.

## A Hospitable Strangeness

Every Sunday we've sought to enact the story of God, reminding one another not only of God's continual presence among us, but that we actually get to participate in the Trinitarian activity to redeem and restore the world! We've reinstated intentional moments of liturgy that are both ancient (incorporating prayers and practices of the oldest communities of the Christian faith) and modern (using technology and music and language that is decidedly 21st century). If someone randomly attended our church off the street, they'd be confronted with a hospitable strangeness. Hospitable because of the love, kindness, and accessibility of our community and worship, and strange because we're often embracing ancient practices of the faith like confessing our sin, reciting liturgical prayers aloud, or sitting in silent prayer for five minutes!



## The Table & the Calendar

In worship we're learning to intentionally orient our shared lives around two things: the table and the calendar. In participating in communion every week, we're remembering that the worship service is primarily about encountering Christ at the table, not hearing a good sermon. It is Christ who gathers us, Christ who forgives us, Christ who saves us, and Christ who sends us. Christ is at the center, not me. The table should visually, symbolically, and practically remind us of this all-too-easy-to-forget truth. We also are learning to orient our lives around the Christian calendar, also known as the liturgical year. We tell the story of Christ's birth and life through Advent and Epiphany, his passion, death and resurrection through Lent and Easter, and his sending of the Spirit's empowering presence in Pentecost. All of our present day time becomes caught up in the most compelling ancient story ever told.

## Discernment & Sabbath

The elders have been learning and re-learning how to incorporate the ancient practices of discernment and sabbath in a way that makes sense for today. By leaning into the ancient way of discernment we trust we can more faithfully notice and nurture the innovative movement of the Holy Spirit amongst us. By first practicing sabbath amongst ourselves, we hope to lead the whole church forward in God's gift of rest and sustainable life rhythms.

So together let's continue to journey back to the sometimes awkward and sometimes awe-inspiring ancient practices of the faith so that we can hear the present voice of God more clearly, imagine a creative way forward more faithfully, and respond in love for the sake of our neighbors more obediently.

*Pastor Matt*





Music, melody, rhythm, breath - these are gifts, woven throughout the natural function of the human body. Inflection, beauty, heartbeat, lungs. We were created by our Creator to make music. Not by ourselves for ourselves, but by God and for God. When we engage in this gift, we glorify God, who is worthy of all praise - all... not "our," not "some"... all. This is why we sing.

Our first and foremost goal is to worship God and point all toward Him. Additionally, this year's goal has been to gain consistency in leadership, songs, and service flow on Sunday mornings. To do so, I've taken on the worship leader role weekly and have been collaborating with Pastor Matt to produce services that are liturgical, thematic, intentional, and - above all - glorifying to God. These changes have given more consistency for the congregation in leadership style and song choices, rest to our amazing volunteers, and cohesiveness within the church body.

God has moved this year in too many ways to count or number. From people moved to tears through song to Christ turning lives around, the Spirit is powerfully working, moving, and loving on First Free. Praise God!

*Maggie Johnson,*

Director of Music and Youth





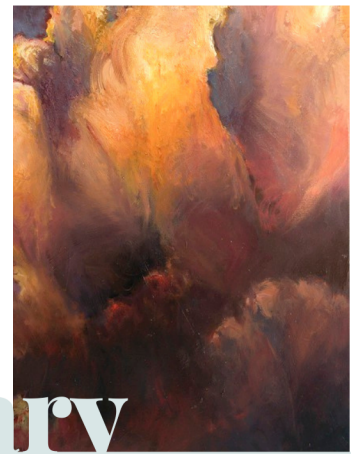


# Welcoming & Hospitality

Our Welcoming & Hospitality team seeks to see the regular attenders more connected with our community and feel more at home on Sunday mornings. We want to make everyone feel welcomed and connected, and make sure they get any help they need. There definitely has been an increase of number in new visitors on Sunday mornings and some attenders/visitors who became a part of FF community, partially because they felt welcomed. We represent Christ as welcoming faces, literally, at the doorstep of God's house.

*Fei Sheh,*

Deacon of Hospitality



# Art in the Sanctuary

Our current art installation is the work of Brooks Anderson. Says Brooks about his work, *"Simply put, my goal in painting is not to copy Nature, but to stand back, pause, and dive in, to reveal its depths, to feel the sacred and profound, to transcribe the essence of what I see spiritually --and to relish in the act of painting - responding to what is happening on the surface, as if this is the first time this vision has been bestowed and revealed."*





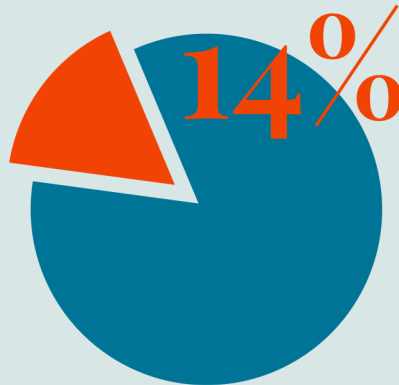
“  
Being in a very difficult season in my life, and not sure if or when I would step into a church again, I was somehow called or drawn to come worship at First Free. At that time the sermon series was on the Psalms. The raw honesty of the sermons in that series struck a significant chord with me, and it was as if I was hearing things for the first time, and connecting to worship in a new way that brought healing. As I made my way into the main floor for worship, I was struck by something else – the power of God through community. I was immediately welcomed, purposefully and lovingly, and was reminded what the Body of Christ is supposed to look like. God is doing an incredible thing here, where the Spirit has room to live and breathe. Thank you!



”  
- Jason

# Children's Ministries

City Kids classes run on Sunday mornings during worship services for kids 4 months to 5th grade. Our mission is to teach tiny disciples what an authentic relationship with the Lord looks like.



of our congregation are children that attend City Kids, in

3 classrooms:

**Nursery:** 4 months to 4 years

**Arctic:** Pre-K to 1st Grade

**Treehouse:** 2nd Grade - 5th Grade

## Average Weekly Attendance

On the 1st - 3rd Sunday of the month, we have classes for all City Kids. On the 4th and 5th Sundays of the month, classes are offered for children up to 1st grade. This creates unity between kids and adults as a whole church community and teaches the importance of Sunday morning worship.

1st - 3rd Sunday:



4th & 5th Sunday:



Kids



Volunteers



**"We will not hide them from their children,  
but tell to the coming generation  
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,  
and the wonders that he has done."**

**- Psalm 78:4**

Welcome, Bekah, Director of  
Children's Ministry, as of October, 2022





The best thing about the kid's program at First Free is how peaceful the volunteers and staff make you feel as you hand your precious gift over to their care. Everyone is so genuine and sincere, it makes it easy to trust their intentions immediately and know that your tiny human is safe. Feelings and emotions are allowed, and I love how it's led with an explorative approach where children are allowed to touch and feel and smell and make noise. Since being here, God has blessed us with rare and precious individuals who allow me to take up space with my emotions and feel safe enough to lean on for a listening ear, a shared worship pew, and nights to connect with others in my season of life. First Free and the members have been a beacon of light in what has been a very dark and lonely experience in Chicago, and I am so joyfully happy to have found this congregation.

- Andrea L.





# Youth Ministries

Our mission is to present the love of God and the transforming power of Jesus Christ to every youth so they may find Him as Savior and be discipled in the Spirit to know Him as Lord. We seek to do this through Youth Group on Sunday nights with games, music, lessons, and small group discussions.

Our current "Back to the Basics" series is taking us... back to the basics of our faith! From creation to the resurrection and beyond, we are studying through the good news of Jesus, in an almost apologetic sort of way, addressing big questions about faith, Jesus, and the Bible.

## Average Youth Group Attendance

September, 2022 through March, 2023



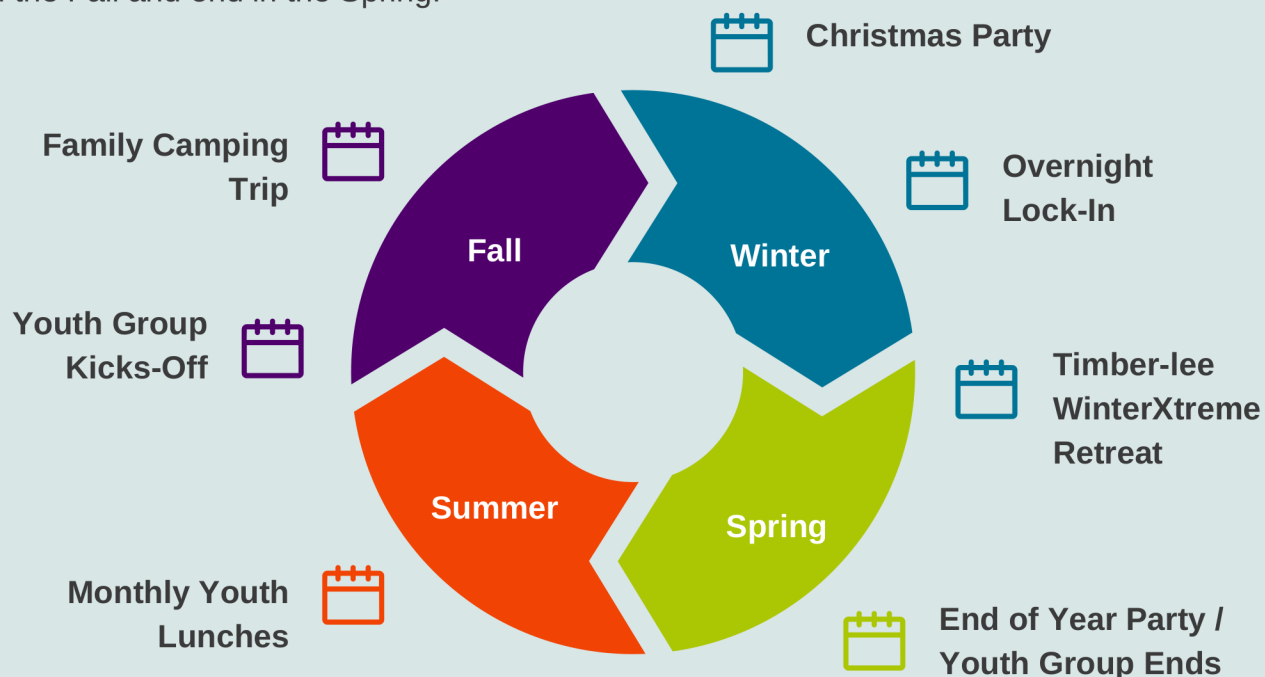
16.3 Youth



5.7 Leaders

## Calendar & Special Events

This year's schedule included tons of special events. Regular Youth Group meetings begin in the Fall and end in the Spring.







"I love all the effort that goes into [youth group]. It's a place to relearn, grow, and develop a bond with Christ, and it's a safe space for everyone, their opinions, and their questions. Special shout out to Andrea, Maggie, Jonathan, the P.C.M.-ers, Mindy, and so many more! You guys do an amazing job of making sure that everyone has fun and feels included here!"

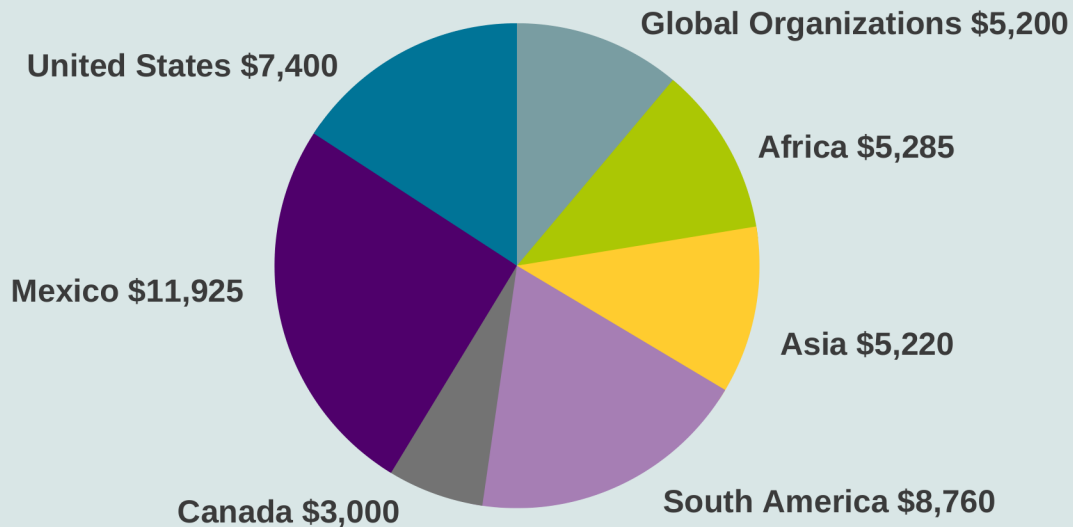


- Miles

# Global Outreach

## Yearly Giving By Location

Over 10 % of our yearly budget is allocated to supporting our global and domestic partners that work solely to share the gospel around the world.



## Locations Our Global Partners Serve



For a list of global partners we support, find a list on our website at [firstfree.com/get-involved/global-outreach](http://firstfree.com/get-involved/global-outreach)



# Serving Our Community

## Organizations & Activities

First Free takes a partnership approach to serving our community. That means we assist or serve within organizations that are already very good at helping. Below are some of the organizations we work with and the ways we serve.

### **Schneider Senior Building**

This is a local Chicago Housing Authority building with apartments for seniors 62 and older.

- Developing relationships with individual residents and assisting with spiritual, relational and social needs.
- Providing food and assisting with the building's Christmas party and other building events

### **Passages Charter School**

Passages is a local school, the majority of whose students are first or second-generation immigrants from many countries.

- Hosting 8th grade graduation in the church sanctuary
- Working in the after school program
- A meeting with the principal is scheduled in June to discuss ways First Free might be able to serve this school in the 23-24 school year.

### **World Relief**

Our largest outreach effort this year was the care of a family of six seeking asylum in the United States in partnership with World Relief. We housed the family in one of First Free's available apartments and our Care team tirelessly provided for the material, spiritual, and financial needs of this family, including:

- Immediate care needs--providing, protecting, listening and connecting to the best of our ability.
- Transportation to doctors visits, school visits, emergency room trips, summer camp celebrations, trips to the beach, and other events.
- Expenses for the children's attendance at local park district summer camps.
- Food, clothing, and housewares as needed
- Providing ESL lessons to the parents
- Games and play for the kids in the space behind the church and in their home.
- Eventually helping them move and transition to new, more permanent housing.



# Crisis & Compassion

Our ministry of Crisis & Compassion (C&C) seeks to meet the physical needs of those in the church body as well as prayer for and outreach to members of our congregation going through difficult times.

**Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.**

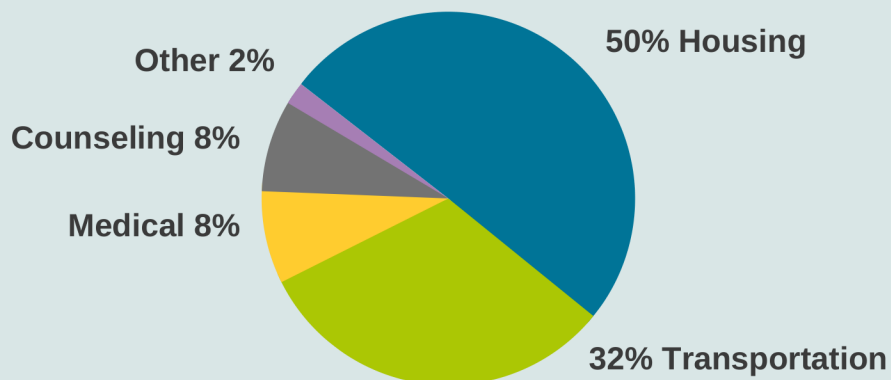
**- James 2:15-17**

## Giving & Receiving

<b>Start of Year Balance</b> Amount in C&C restricted fund as of April 1, 2022	\$ 16,867
<b>Funds Received</b> This year's giving to the C&C fund	<b>\$ 2,825</b>
<b>Funds Disbursed</b> C&C funds used for needs this year	<b>\$ 3,117</b>
<hr/>	
<b>End of Year Balance</b> Amount in C&C restricted fund as of March 31, 2023	\$ 16,574

## Types of Needs Met

Percentage of C&C Funds disbursed per type of need







I've seen God's faithfulness during my 30 years of attending First Free and, during the past year, God has given me a fresh joy. Not being able to attend church during the pandemic was difficult which may be one reason First Free is dearer to me than ever. Returning to weekly attendance and enjoying being led by a new staff who have brought fresh ways of worshiping the Lord has been a huge boost to my soul. I've appreciated the emphasis on integrating worship songs with the message; reading Scripture and liturgies aloud together, and hearing messages that challenge me with deeper interpretations of the passage than I have heard before. I like how Pastor Matt sets the messages in the context of its history as well as in our time and place. These changes have given us a renewed sense of community – we are not just individuals but part of a whole, the Body of Christ!

- Cindy



# Buildings & Grounds

We have a facilities team comprised of staff and volunteers that care deeply about First Free and strive to act in a Christ-minded manner to keep all the buildings and grounds of First Free in clean, good working condition to meet the needs of the church, its ministries, tenants and space sharing partners.

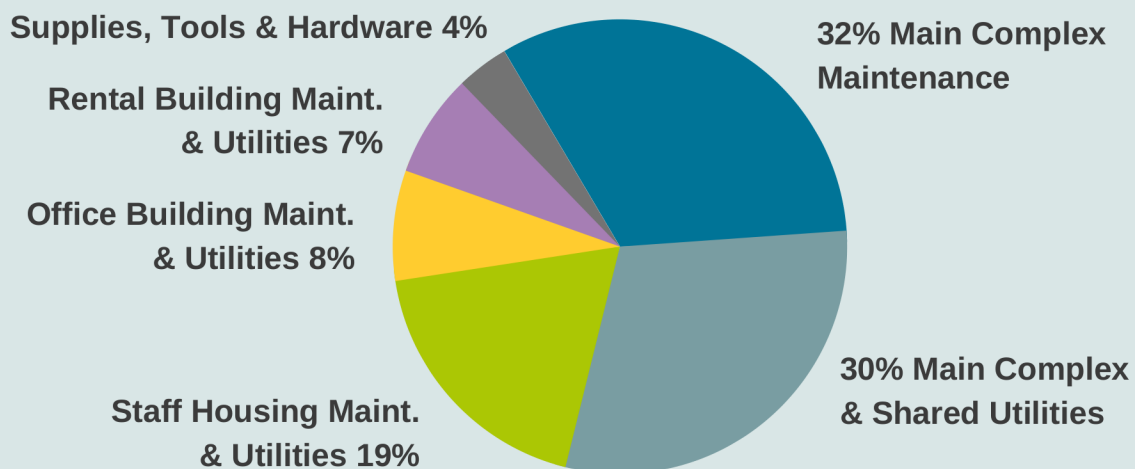
## Significant Repairs this Year

- Caulking and repair of limestone capstone on top of the family life center
- Roof repair above the gym
- Replacement of pumps for the boiler system
- Repair of sanctuary ceiling plaster (ongoing with addition of crown molding)
- Replacement of all Fellowship Hall lights with LED tubes

## Regular Maintenance Activities

- Periodically stripping and waxing floors
- Weekly cleaning of all facility spaces
- Maintaining proper door lock schedules
- Preparation of apartments for new tenants
- Periodic maintenance of staff and tenant apartment buildings (e.g. sourcing a new refrigerator, sourcing a new water heater, replacing locks duplicating keys)
- Regular maintenance and testing of HVAC systems

## Expense Distribution





# Space Sharing

Our space sharing program allows us to open our campus to community, make use of the resources we have, and recoup some of the costs of owning property in Chicago. Making these arrangements involves consideration of First Free Ministry scheduling needs, cleaning, maintenance, security and safety, and ensuring that we and our partners are properly insured.

## Weekly Building Use

by First Free and space sharing partners (excluding offices and housing)



💧 First Free Use    💧 First Free & Partner Use    💧 Partner Use    💧 Not generally used

## Regular Space Sharing Partners This Year

- Iglesia Nuevo Amanecer (New Beginning Church)
- Two weekly Twelve-Step meetings
- AstonRep Theater Company
- Skyline Studios (Childrens Theater Class Provider)
- The Navigators (Global Christian Organization)



# Generosity

First Free Congregants gave a total of \$588,732 to the church across 5 different funds. Unrestricted giving funds most of our expenses. Restricted fund giving goes toward a particular purpose.

## Total Giving \$ 588,732

General Fund (Unrestricted Giving)	\$ 407,272
Mortgage Reduction (Restricted)	\$ 172,365
Crisis & Compassion (Restricted)	\$ 2,825
Sanctuary Improvement (Restricted)	\$ 5,160
Refugee Care (Restricted)	\$ 1,110

# Income & Expenses

Expenses in the past year were about \$5,000 above budget. Income was quite a bit higher than expected due to receipt of more rental and space sharing income.

	Actual	Budget
<b>Income</b>	<b>\$ 470,476</b>	<b>\$ 455,500</b>
Unrestricted Giving	\$ 407,272	\$ 404,000
Rental & Other Income	\$ 63,204	\$ 51,500
<b>Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 478,508</b>	<b>\$ 473,700</b>
Staff Resources	\$ 215,314	\$ 214,399
Buildings & Grounds	\$ 97,326	\$ 93,000
Global Outreach	\$ 52,865	\$ 52,865
Finance & Operations	\$ 49,376	\$ 50,290
Mortgage Principle and Interest	\$ 40,820	\$ 45,181
Community	\$ 10,471	\$ 4,000
Worship	\$ 5,342	\$ 6,315
Adult Spiritual Formation	\$ 3,304	\$ 2,000
Children's Ministries	\$ 2,981	\$ 3,300
Youth Ministries	\$ 1,564	\$ 2,350



# 2023-24 Budget

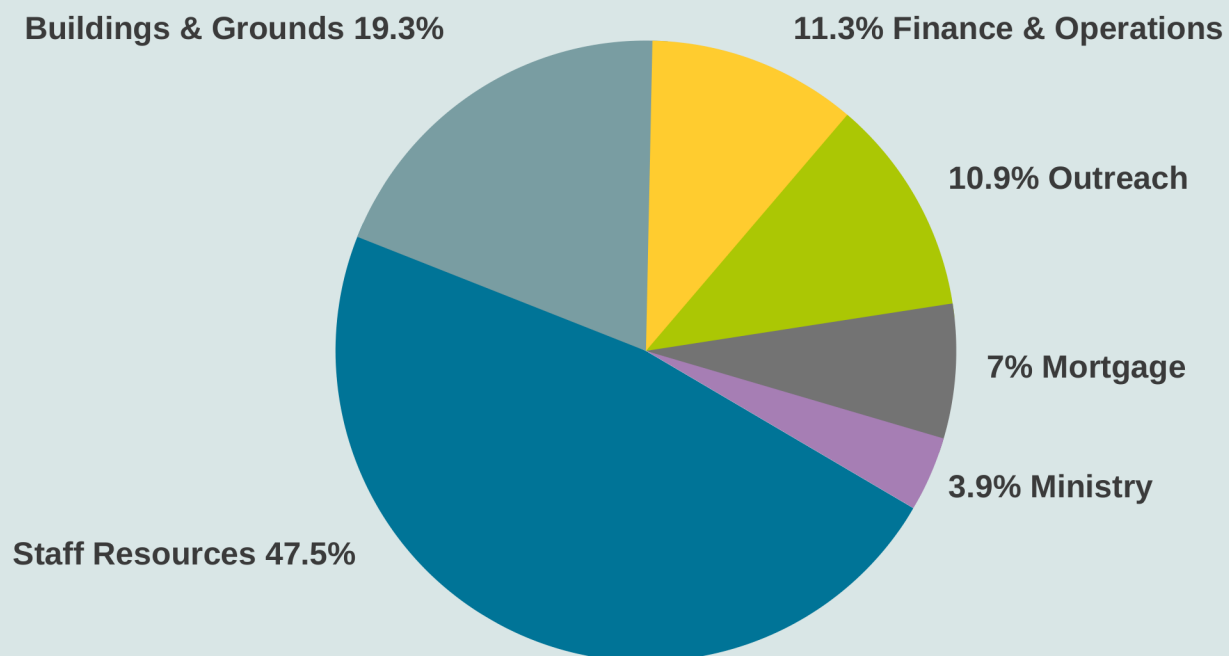
## Expected Income & Budgeted Expenses

for April 1, 2023 - March 31, 2024

	23-24 Budget	22-23 Budget
<b>Expected Income</b>	<b>\$ 486,203</b>	<b>\$ 455,500</b>
Unrestricted Giving	\$ 422,843	\$ 404,000
Rental & Other Income	\$ 63,204	\$ 51,500
<b>Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 486,000</b>	<b>\$ 473,700</b>
Staff Resources	\$ 231,000	\$ 214,399
Buildings & Grounds	\$ 94,000	\$ 93,000
Outreach	\$ 53,000	\$ 52,865
Finance & Operations	\$ 55,000	\$ 50,290
Mortgage Principle and Interest	\$ 34,000	\$ 45,181
Ministry	\$ 19,000	\$ 18,000

## Budget Distribution

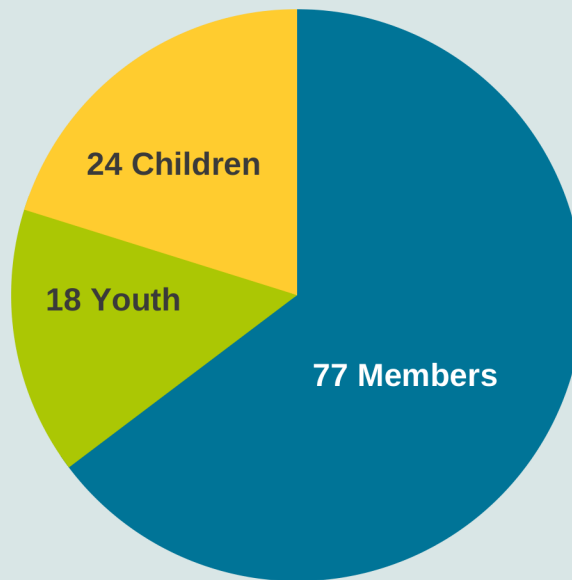
Percentage of budget used for each category of expense



# Membership & Attendance

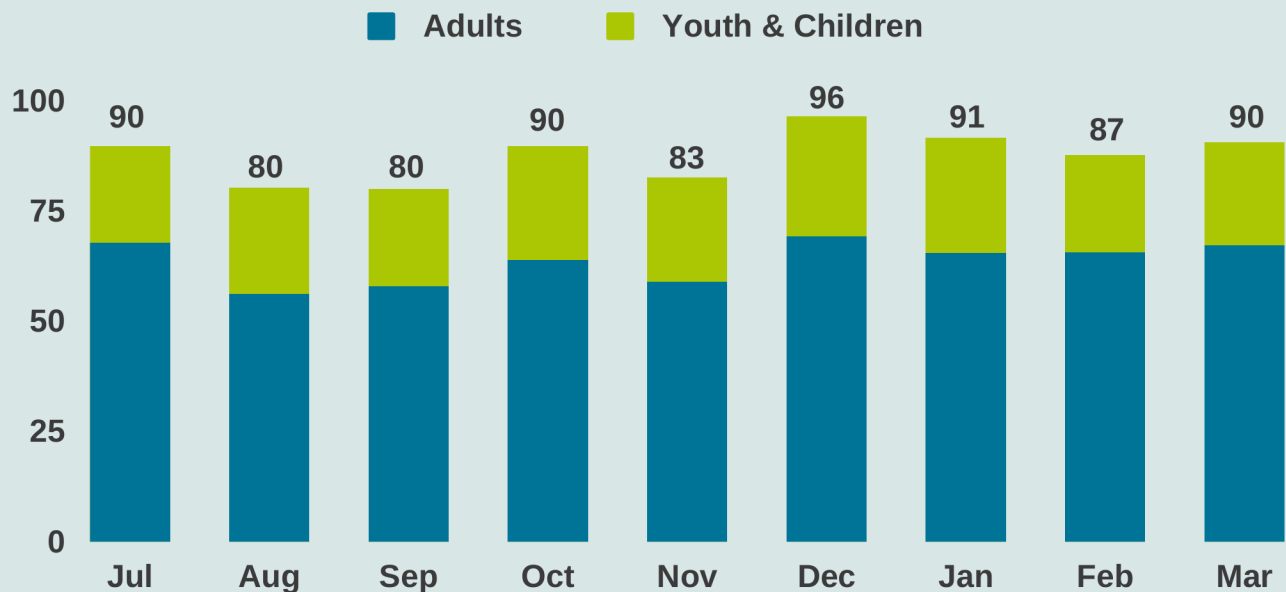
## Members and their Families

As of March 30, 2023 First Free had 77 members.



## Average Sunday Attendance By Month

Sunday attendance averaged by month July 2022 through March 2023. April through June 2022 is not shown because we did not regularly take attendance those months.







## First Free Staff

<b>Aurora Tallacksen</b>	Office & Communications Administrator
<b>Adolfo Ramirez</b>	Facilities Supervisor
<b>Rebekah Andress</b>	Director of Children's Ministry
<b>Matt Tinken</b>	Senior Pastor
<b>Maggie Johnson</b>	Director of Worship and Youth
<b>Fei Sheh</b>	Ministry Intern (through 4/2023)
<b>Francisco Mercado</b>	(not pictured) Custodian

## First Free Deacons

<b>Darlene Conner</b>	Childrens Formation
<b>Cindy Harris</b>	Membership
<b>Andrea Korte</b>	Youth Ministry
<b>Sylvia Lauener</b>	Finance & Administration
<b>Meg Parks</b>	Crisis & Compassion
<b>Fei Sheh</b>	Hospitality
<b>Dan Tallacksen</b>	Facilities



## Elders & Officers

<b>Jonathan Lim</b>	Elder (beginning 10/30/22)
<b>James Snyder</b>	Elder
<b>Jeff Cebulski</b>	Elder, Secretary
<b>Sylvia Lauener</b>	Treasurer
<b>Stephen Lepse</b>	Elder Chair
<b>Matt Tinken</b>	Senior Pastor, Elder

## Elder Chair Report

Let me start out by stating how thankful I am to be working alongside Matt and the rest of the elder team. It has been a privilege to serve with them. A shout out to elder Rachel Einfeldt who stepped away from the board this year but whose wisdom is still felt and utilized as we move forward.

This first year of Matt's ministry was a chance for him to get to know the church and community, while also building into staff and redeveloping the Sunday worship services. The plan was to provide Matt with 6 months to better understand FF and its people before we began future planning in earnest.



## Spiritual Direction Retreat

The elders, along with a few key leaders and staff members attended a 2 ½ day training in spiritual discernment. The Ruth Haley Barton-lead retreat included teaching and spiritual discernment sessions. These were the main take-aways we felt God directing us to:

1. We will not excessively focus on the church's construction loan debt in the next 18 months or conduct a fund-raising campaign, but instead will focus on the spiritual formation of our leaders and congregants. If as a church we are becoming spiritually healthier, then God will work out issues of finances and growth. Interestingly enough, with only a brief mention of the loan debt on a few occasions, we have seen a few significant gifts given to this fund over the past year. God indeed will provide!
2. While we will get involved in outreach opportunities in our community once again, the focus on healthy spiritual development as leaders and congregants will remain a primary focus. We recognize that there are volunteers at FF that serve in multiple ministries, and we sense a level of exhaustion and burnout. We would like to explore ways to make serving sustainable and life-giving as we look towards how God is growing our church.

## Other Activities & Changes

### Tov Study

We finished up a study on "A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing.

### Sabbath Study

We have just finished A video and discussion series on practicing the Sabbath. Pastor Matt has challenged the elders to make sabbath a part of their week and we will in-turn be challenging the congregation to do the same.

### Regular Q&As

An expanded number of after-church Question and Answer sessions are now offered to discuss issues in depth without extending Ministry Community Meetings. These Q&As will address big picture issues such as annual budgets and new ministry initiatives

## **Elder Newsletter**

We have reinstituted elder email updates to the congregation to inform members of what the elders are working on between quarterly Ministry Community Meetings.

## **Shorter MCMs**

The feedback we have been receiving from many is to keep the MCM's shorter and to focus these gatherings on how God is working among us. As in recent MCM's, we will have time to discuss issues in small groups over lunch and will include stories and reports of how God is working.

## **Elder Prayer**

The elders have reinstituted after church elder prayer sessions where those with burdens and concerns can be lifted up by the elders.

## **Staffing Changes**

Rebekah was hired in October to lead our children's ministries and we are so grateful to have her. In addition, Maggie will begin in a full-time role this summer, splitting time between youth and worship. Growing healthy disciples will be a primary focus at First Free. As such, while it is much easier to use lay folks to lead adult discipleship programs, we have found it harder to find lay leaders/deacons who have the time available to lead our children and youth discipleship programs (hence the great need for staffing in these areas).

## **On Staying & Going**

During Easter week I read through the final chapters of all four gospels. Jesus final words in each gospel are well known to most of you:

**“Go and make disciples of all nations..... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded” (Matthew 28:19)**

**“go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation”  
(Mark 16:15)**

**“stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49)**

**“feed my sheep.....follow me”  
(Christ's words to Peter in John 21:17,19)**



Note that there is a vital place and reason for 'staying' before going out (for the apostles in Luke account, it was for the receiving of the Holy Spirit, followed by the building of a community via teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer). I don't know about you, but I'm more a 'go' type of person than a 'stay' type of person. Yet these last 6 years have, by necessity, involved a lot of 'staying'. I am thankful that First Free is now in a relatively stable place after a number of years of pastoral changes and COVID lockdowns. While it has been frustrating to have limits on our discipleship and ministry efforts; at the same time, I sense that God has used--and will use--these past years to grow us closer as a body, to help us understand the purposes he has for us, and to be ready to make the changes needed when called to do so.

Part of what we are discerning as elders is what our specific focus should be in upcoming years. What local outreach or people groups is God calling us to serve in Andersonville? How can we equip our congregants to be a kingdom witness to their neighbors where they live? how do we limit/streamline the amount of activity that goes on at First Free in order that people have the time to do ongoing kingdom work in the community? What does effective adult discipleship and practicing of the sabbath look like at church? What kind of model do we incorporate into our church to facilitate incarnational, missional, small groups to reach those who will not step foot in our church?

I am looking forward to seeing where God leads us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen Lepse." The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Stephen" and "Lepse" being capitalized and prominent.

Elder Chair



Images courtesy of Hawa Images [hawaimages.com](http://hawaimages.com)