

The Link to a Place Apart



A YEAR OF TOUCHSTONES



For two people who were never campers or summer staff, Pastor Eric and Kristi Childers are camp friends through and through. “My family moved while I was in middle school, and I missed Campfirmation at both churches that summer,” said Kristi. Kristi’s first visit to Lutheridge was with Eric during candidacy with the NC Synod. “I remember Pastor Tim playing his guitar and singing Holden Evening Prayer. It was beautiful and spoke to me.” Both Eric and Kristi were

students at Lenoir-Rhyne University (College then) and remember people wearing Lutheridge sweatshirts around campus.

Fast forward several years and it was Kristi who fanned a flame of camp in their new congregation where Eric was now the pastor. “I stood up at Mt. Olive in Cherryville and asked if any of the women wanted to go with me to Wild Women,” she said. “My good friend Meredith Gerhard West had made it sound so wonderful. To my surprise, 19 women from the congregation joined me. We went back each year after that, and now St. Matthews goes.”

Eric, now the senior pastor at St. Matthews Lutheran Church in Charleston, SC, has made an intentional effort to shape the youth program there around the camp experience. “When we began looking for a youth director, I intentionally looked for someone with a strong history and connection to Lutheridge,” said Pastor Eric. “I knew someone who had served on staff at Lutheridge would be well trained and shepherded. I knew we would have a common language and they would understand the mission and vision I had for the program. I wanted them to shape youth group time like time at camp. They needed to understand morning watch and what it means to have a meal together.”

Pastor Eric added a requirement for youth to attend camp as part of confirmation. “Now they just go because they want to,” he said. The congregation lifts up Lutheridge and their shared experiences at camp in worship regularly. They share memories in the newsletter. They share highs, lows, and God moments in youth group. “Camp is a year of touchstones for us. We bring the lessons, music, and shared experiences back to St. Matthews each year.

In the fall we look back at our time at camp and it rallies the people around an exciting faith experience,” said Pastor Eric. “Our endowment financially supports all 40 of our campers and staff to go each year... and all staff go... they want to go. That is why when we learned summer camp would be cancelled, the endowment committee decided to gift \$10,000 to camp immediately – before we even knew about the Light the Fire appeal. Camp is an anchor for our congregation and for our whole church. We recognize that it is a ministry that has to be nurtured or it will go away.”

Pastor Eric and Kristi are actively working with the ELCA Foundation’s Regional Gift Planner, Stephanie Burke, to include Lutheridge in their charitable estate plan. “We can’t think of another ministry like camp. The vocation of camp is to shape people of all ages in the Christian faith – it is their calling – their mission. We appreciate that they have not strayed from this. Some organizations wandered away from their faith roots, but Lutheridge is unapologetically a place apart to form faith and develop leaders in that faith.”

Their decision to include Lutheridge was affirmed this summer, when the Childers and 5 other families from St. Matthews decided to come up for a Summer Vacation Package. “The children had trouble understanding that they would not have a counselor to shepherd them,” said Kristi. “After a couple hours of trying to figure out what it meant to not have a counselor, the children naturally slipped into a daily pattern of camp.” The patterns they learned at camp translated into self-guided play of a camp day. “Camp is a critical part of what the church offers our children, youth and families,” said Pastor Eric. “That was a clear witness to us.”