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A Publication of the Ellis County Ministerial Alliance  
December 2024

**MERRY  
CHRISTMAS!**





ONE is the official publication of the Ellis County Ministerial Alliance (ECMA) which guides its mission, content, and theme. The ECMA encourage submissions from ECMA congregations. Photographs, stories, testimonies, and other submissions should be directed toward your church leaders or sent via email to

**one@ourecma.com.**

The ECMA ONE Advisory Board will choose appropriate and timely submissions for publication. The columns in ONE represent the views of the author.

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## Topic Articles

Editor's Note: This month our theme focuses on the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke. Our writers provide their perspective on the Announcement of the Birth of Jesus, Mary visiting Elizabeth, the Magnificat, the Birth of Jesus, and the Visitation of the Shepherds. We hope you and your family have a very Merry Christmas!

### Birth of Jesus Foretold: Luke 1:26-56 (ESV):

**26** In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, **27** to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" **29** But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. **30** And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." **34** And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" **35** And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. **36** And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God." **38** And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

### Mary Visits Elizabeth:

**39** In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, **40** and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, **42** and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! **43** And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? **44** For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. **45** And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

**Mary's Song of Praise-The Magnificat:**

**46** And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, **47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, **48** for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; **49** for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. **50** And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. **51** He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; **52** he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; **53** he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. **54** He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, **55** as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." **56** And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

***Let's Live as Love*****Written by:****Rev. Ben Houchen**

The story of Jesus in Luke begins with the story of his mother and her cousin. I think we all know the story. Elizabeth finds out she is pregnant with John (who will be the baptizer), and about the same time Mary finds out she is pregnant with Jesus. Mary goes to see Elizabeth and John "leaped in her womb". Much has been made of this, and still more has been written on this, so I will not belabor those stories further. Instead, I want to draw our attention to Mary's song of praise, also known as the Magnificat. This song sets the stage for us to understand Jesus's ministry in full. And as such, it does not allow us to water down the radical message The Christ will bring.

When we read the teachings of Jesus—and this prayer of Mary in the

Magnificat—we encounter a truth that's unsettling, even revolutionary. There are three major barriers to the Kingdom of God: power, prestige, and possessions. Mary speaks bluntly about these groups: those who sit on thrones and trust in their riches, and those who have used those riches for their own gain and left the hungry to starve. And she proclaims that God has, and is, flipping the tables on the whole notion of what power is. In Mary is the seed of destruction for those in power, for the rich, for the arrogant. This is the truth of God in Christ, and in Mary. This is a truth so radical, in fact, that it was once deemed dangerous enough to be banned from protest marches across the world.

As we move forward into the Gospels, Jesus echoes this same message. If we're honest, much of His teaching is about examining

our attachment to these idols—power, status, and assets. But we miss this in Jesus's teaching all too often, don't we? Because we've been taught to focus on sin as something physical—something we do with our bodies. And while there's truth in that; we sin with our actions, our desires, our appetites. That isn't the whole story here. In fact, I don't think it's even a primary focus for Jesus.

Why? Well, what if God knew that focusing on the body alone would become our obsession? That we would turn this obsession into laws, and those laws into power structures that would oppress rather than revive. Maybe that's why Jesus came in the flesh—God, incarnate, in a human body. To show us that the body itself is good, sacred. This is what Christmas is all about—God in the flesh, entering our world to

## ***Let's Live as Love (Continued)***

redeem it, not through a body corrupted by sin in its very nature, but through a body God declared to be "very good" at the moment of creation, Genesis 1:31 (ESV).

And here's the thing: Jesus clearly didn't make sin all about our bodies. He made it about our hearts, about the idols we cling to—the pursuit of power, prestige, and possessions. Jesus even says something that truly offended the religious elite of his day (as I suspect it would offend many of us who need to hear it today): *"the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the*

*kingdom of God ahead of you,"* Matthew 21:31 (ESV). That's a tough pill to swallow, but it's a reminder that the real danger isn't in the obvious "sins" we see—it's in the idols that blind us to God's Kingdom, the powers and principalities of this world.

For too long, we've focused on external sins—the ones we can see and control. But the real battle is fought in the unseen places of the heart and mind. The real Sin is our grasping for power, rather than extending love. This is Jesus's message and once we see it—once we truly see

it—we can't unsee it.

Mary saw it, and, as mothers do, she set the tone of Jesus's life and ministry right there in her song. She had a vision that reached beyond her time, into the very heart of God's Kingdom. And now, we're invited to see it too—to join in that vision and live differently. To live as Love.



*Rev. Ben Houchen is the Priest at St. Michael's and St. Anthony's Episcopal Church in Hays.*

### **The Birth of Jesus: Luke 2:1-7 (NABRE):**

**1** *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus\* that the whole world should be enrolled. 2 This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.*

**3** *So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, 5 to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

### ***Busyness or Joy?***

**Written by:**  
**Cody Marintzer**

This section from the Gospel of Luke shows the busyness of the Roman empire during the coming

of Christ. People were in a hurry back then to get to their ancestral homes, but it wasn't because they wanted to be with family, or that they were getting ready to

welcome the King of the Universe. Instead, it was because of Caesar's census. The purpose of this census was so he could keep up a vast country and military

## ***Busyness or Joy? (Continued)***

and continue his lavish lifestyle. It is in this busyness that Christ comes into the world.

Just as it was back then, we see it much the same today as more and more people are not making room for Christ in their lives but are instead filling it with busyness and earthly desires. The government may not be forcing us into this busyness like Caesar was back then, but the societal zeitgeist surely is. This spirit of our age tells us to spend baby, spend! Busy, busy, busy! Race to the end! And what is all this busyness for? To keep us from entering into the stable with Christ: a place of quiet, a place of solitude, a place of material poverty where we can focus on what really matters, a place of humility. If the spirit of the age and Satan himself can keep us focused on being busy, they can keep us from recognizing Christ. We become like the people walking around with their heads down, incessantly staring at their phones and walking right by the stable of the Lord.

I remember a few years ago, I was walking around

Walmart sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas and I had a revelation of the commercialization of the Christmas holiday. It was an almost out of body experience where time slowed down, and I could observe all the busyness around me while realizing how much of it didn't matter. I am not talking about buying groceries or that gifts are bad things in and of themselves. Instead, I mean that in much of our society, Christmas has turned into just another secular holiday about running yourself ragged and spending a bunch of money on things that are fleeting pleasures and will only leave you unsatisfied in the end.

This year, let us make this Christmastime a renewal of letting Christ come into our lives. Let us rid ourselves of the commercialistic attitude of society and make a dwelling place for Him. Christ came in a humble stable, in a food trough for animals to make Himself as a gift for us. The greatest gift that we can ever receive!

Find a way to slow down this Christmas season and enjoy the coming of Christ. Listen to some good

Christmas music while cooking your favorite dish. Take time to smell the scent of evergreen, a fresh cup of coffee, or fresh baked food from the kitchen, and thank God for all the gifts you have. Turn off all the electronics and spend quality time with your family.

Last, but most important, waste time with Jesus. We waste time on all kinds of things that bring us momentary pleasure. Instead, wasting time with Jesus means doing nothing but spending time with Him, knowing He will bring us true Joy, not the fleeting things of this world. Carve out time every day to spend with Him. Read the stories of His coming. Spend time in a church just having a conversation with him. And sit in quiet contemplation of the savior of the world entering into our humanity.

May God bless You and Merry Christmas!



*Cody Marintzer is the parish life coordinator at St. Nicholas of Myra Church.*

## **The Visit of the Shepherds: Luke 2: 8-20 (NIV):**

**8** And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9** An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." **13** Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, **14** "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." **15** When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." **16** So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. **17** When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. **19** But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

## ***It's All About the Baby***

**Written by:**  
**Rick Clairborn**

I grew up confusing two groups of people, the Shepherds and the Magi. The Shepherds were tending sheep and left immediately after they were told about Jesus. I assume they were fairly close. They left their sheep to go and then returned to them afterward. They told people about Jesus right where they already were.

As a child, I also used to think that the Shepherds and the Magi were there at the same time. I am sure that my church did not teach this incorrectly, I just assumed so as a kid. In contrast, it probably took almost two years for the Magi to reach

Jesus. We are not given an exact time frame, but that would make sense because the Magi returned to King Herod to report to him at which time he ordered all boys under two years old to be killed.

I notice different details now that I am officially an "old wise man" myself. First, the Shepherds were afraid. I heard once that there were 365 times that people were told to not be afraid in the bible. That's actually not true.

It happens a lot, which tells the old man in me something. God knows we will be afraid, a lot. I used to think it was sort of a sin to be afraid of something. We are people. The lack of fear in some situations denies the

discernment God Himself designed into us.

What we do with this fear is the issue. Take it to Him... good decision. Try to solve it yourself...not so much. Become paralyzed by it... even worse. God does big things. He can handle our fear and give us peace in spite of it.

The verses even say that this baby meant peace on whom His favor rests. His favor rests on anyone who acknowledges their need for a Savior and who accepts Jesus Christ as their Savior. I think we get that part crossed up a bit. Peace in our life does not mean the absence of pain or trouble - not at all. True peace defies situational problems. True,

## ***It's All About the Baby (Continued)***

authentic peace can only be found in the grace offered by Jesus Christ.

Also, the angels left, then the Shepherds decided to go to Him. They were not commanded to go. They were not forced to go. They had the free will to choose, just like you and I have today. Also, they spread the word. They told other people about Him. It was an inefficient way to spread the word but is apparently the way God wanted it. I like to think of it as hand-to-hand combat. After they saw Jesus they went back to work, where they could tell people what they had witnessed.

The Magi's journey was much longer, it took around

two years. The Magi were wise, they knew they would be walking for a while. They left anyway. The journey God has designed for you can be short or long. He can guide you through any route He wants.

### Reflection Questions:

Have you ever wondered if God was sending you somewhere? What if you are already there? Are you spreading the Word?

What if you knew it was a two-year walk? Would you take the first step?

### Challenge:

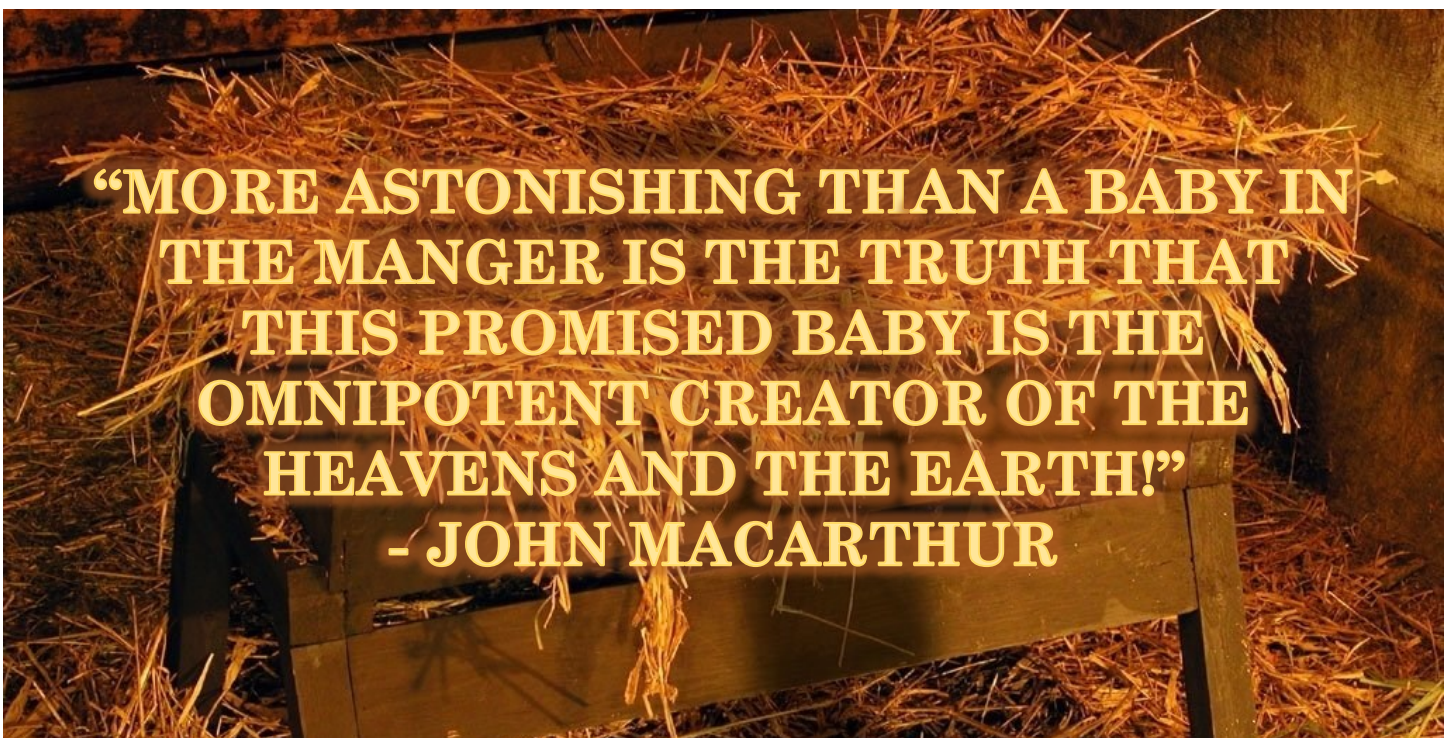
Sometimes God sends us on a journey to show us something. He may want us

to spread the Word where we are.

Sometimes He sends us on a journey so long that we cannot imagine it until we look back and see how far we have traveled. Celebrating Christmas is fine. Exchanging gifts is fine. Giving away the gifts He has given us is even better. We can lose context very quickly. Go offer peace to someone, tell them about this baby.



*Rick Claiborn is a longtime resident of Hays who loves Jesus, his wife, and their family.*



# Leadership Interviews

## *Doing What She Loves*

**Written by:**

**Terri Braun**

Pastor Brenda Rodger spent her childhood in the Russell area and has deep Lutheran roots. Her great-grandfather was one of the founding fathers of what is now known as United Emmauel Lutheran Church, at Milberger. In her youth, she was always involved in the church. She volunteered for youth groups, taught Sunday school and did everything from being the janitor to mowing the grass.

As an adult, Brenda continued to love her faith and was an active member of her church. In the next season of her life, she found herself married and blessed to have two children (and now has seven grandchildren). Her marriage was not without struggles and ended after 40 years. Brenda entered Options Domestic Services in Hays, Kansas. She had not been employed for 10 years and Options helped her gain her footing and provided hope that she could build a life of her own. From there, her faith journey took a major turn.

Brenda knew that she was called to ministry, but thought it was lay ministry. Her passion for that inspired her to go to school to become a Pastoral Ministry Associate that allows lay persons to be leaders within their church. She graduated, but her mentor, Rev. Delvin Strecker, believed that she needed to go onto seminary. Her response was, "You are crazy."

With his continued encouragement and her

discernment, Brenda went to visit Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa and found herself enrolled. In 2019, at the age of 60, Brenda entered seminary school at Wartburg and was accepted into the TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries) program.

As part of the TEEM program, the churches help to support the student as they gain the theological education and provide them a place for ministry. The First Lutheran Church in Dorrance, Kansas was the first church Brenda pastored. She began there part-time in 2019. Then in 2020, there became a vacancy for a Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Hays, Kansas and she soon became the part-time Pastor for them as well.

During those four years of schooling, Brenda did not know if she was coming or going as it was a very busy and intense program. Her hard work paid off though and she graduated in May 2023. Upon graduation, it is an arrangement between the student and the congregations served that they will be the Pastor's First Call to ministry location.

In the Lutheran church, you can finish your education and not be ordained until you have that First Call. When a Pastor receives that First Call, then Ordination follows. In September 2023, Brenda became an Ordained Minister for Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). She thought it fitting to be ordained in the first church she pastored, the First Lutheran Church in Dorrance, Kansas. Church members, family, and leaders from ELCA, including



(Pictured left to right): Grandchildren Lyla Rodger, Abi Braun, Amelia, Stella, and Cohen Rodger, daughter-in-law Andrea Rodger and son, Sean.

the bishop, were present.

Brenda states that over the years and "through it all, my joy was never taken and praise God that it wasn't." She continues to pastor at both churches: one in Hays the other 40 minutes away. Every Sunday she does a service at 8:30am in Dorrance and then drives to Hays for their 11am service. Coordinating the schedules of the two churches, no doubt, keeps her busy. Although she could choose not to pastor at both churches, she states, "My heart loves the people at both places" and does not even consider that option.

God has a plan for all of us that brings us joy, and He called Brenda to become a Shepherd. She joked that she went "kicking and screaming and fighting, telling God that He has the wrong person" but look at her today. She states that when she wakes up in the morning and goes to work, "I absolutely love what I do every single day." Who knew? God did.

*Terri Braun is Editor of ONE Magazine.*



# Ecumenical Events

**December 2:** Jana's Closet Special Evening Hours, 4:30-6:30 pm at Trinity Lutheran Church (2703 Fort). See *below for more information.*

**December 3:** Text Study, 10:30am at Trinity Lutheran Church (2703 Fort).

**December 3:** Advent Praise and Adoration, 7pm at St. Nicholas of Myra (2901 E. 13th)

**December 4:** Advent Service, 6:30pm at Trinity Lutheran Church (2703 Fort)

**December 5:** Feeding Hays, 6:30-7:00pm-to go spaghetti dinner at St. Michael's Episcopal Church (2900 Canal Blvd). To volunteer to help, contact Ben at 785-259-2851.

**December 10:** Text Study, 10:30am at Trinity Lutheran Church (2703 Fort).

**December 10:** AARP Driving Course 9am-1:30pm at St. Nicholas of Myra (2901 E, 13th). See *below for more information.*

**December 10:** Advent Praise and Adoration, 7pm at St. Nicholas of Myra (2901 E. 13th)

**December 11:** Advent Service, 6:30pm at Trinity Lutheran Church (2703 Fort)

**December 12:** Feeding Hays, 6:30-7:00pm-to go spaghetti dinner at St. Michael's Episcopal Church (2900 Canal Blvd). To volunteer to help, contact Ben at 785-259-2851.

**December 12-13:** A Christmas show called 'A Haunted "Sort Of" Christmas' written and directed by Cheryl Glassman, 7pm at Hays Community Theater (121 E. 8th). See *below for more information.*

**December 14:** A Christmas show called 'A Haunted "Sort Of" Christmas' written and directed by Cheryl Glassman, 2pm at Hays Community Theater (121 E. 8th). See *below for more information.*

**December 17:** Text Study, 10:30am at Trinity Lutheran Church (2703 Fort)

**December 17:** Advent Praise and Adoration, 7pm at St. Nicholas of Myra (2901 E. 13th)

**December 18:** AARP Driving Course 9am-1:30pm at Hays Recreation Commission (1105 Canterbury). See *below for more information.*

**December 18:** Blue Christmas, 6:30pm at Trinity Lutheran Church (2703 Fort)

**December 19:** Laundry Love by First Call for Help, 4 -7pm at 27th and Hall St. Laundromat. Up to 5 free loads of laundry per household per month, sponsored by Sunflower Bank.

**December 19:** Feeding Hays, 6:30-7:00pm-to go spaghetti dinner at St. Michael's Episcopal Church (2900 Canal Blvd). To volunteer to help, contact Ben at 785-259-2851.

**December 24:** Christmas Eve Service, 5 pm at Trinity Lutheran Church (2703 Fort)

**December 26:** Feeding Hays, 6:30-7:00pm-to go spaghetti dinner at St. Michael's Episcopal Church (2900 Canal Blvd). To volunteer to help, contact Ben at 785-259-2851.

**December 31:** Text Study, 10:30am at Trinity Lutheran Church (2703 Fort)

Merry  
Christmas

Happy  
New Year

## Ecumenical Events: Additional Details



### “A Haunted ‘Sort of’ Christmas”

Christmas show called ‘A Haunted “Sort of” Christmas” written and directed by Cheryl Glassman by Hays Community Theater. Show dates are Dec 12th & 13th at 7pm and Dec 14th at 2pm at Hays Community Theater (121 E. 8th) \$10 a ticket. Each person attending is asked to bring at least one nonperishable food item to be distributed to local food banks. Tickets will be available at [www.hctks.com](http://www.hctks.com)

### Jana’s Closet Special Hours

Northwest Kansas Community: Jana's Closet is a program of Trinity Lutheran Church with the purpose of providing free, “gently used” professional clothing to any woman who needs it.

The closet has everything from slacks and skirts to blouses and blazers as well as dresses, heels, and accessories. They are located at Trinity Lutheran Church on 27th and Fort Street in Hays, Kansas.



### AARP Driving Course



This AARP smart driver course is designed to save you money on auto insurance.

There are two monthly classes in Ellis County in December. The first class, at St. Nicholas of Myra Catholic Church; The second class will be at the Hays Recreation Center. The dates for these classes are December 10, 2024, and the second December 18, 2024; each class will convene from 9:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. There will be a formal 30-minute break, for Q&A and any snack or lunch that you have brought with you.

This course will be instructed by Jonathan E. McCottry, Sr. He can be reached at (785) 639-2571; [jemccsr@gmail.com](mailto:jemccsr@gmail.com); or PO Box 923. To reserve a seat please call the Registration Number (785-639-2571) or drop by St. Nicholas of Myra Catholic Church (2901 E 13th Street, Hays, KS 67601) where Ramona Weigel can accept Cash, Check or Money Orders – made out to AARP. Bring your check to the Hays Recreation Center at the time of the meeting. There will be a formal 30-minute break, for Q&A and any snack or lunch that you have brought with you.

Please bring a valid Driver License number and, if applicable, your AARP Membership Card. Cost is \$20 for AARP members and \$25 for non-Members. Space is limited, seats are available on a first come first serve basis.

## **NOTICE: Help Needed!**



### **Cold Weather Shelter Needs Volunteers**

Ellis County Ministerial Alliance has been hard at work getting everything arranged to open our first Cold Weather Shelter. This will be open to those that are currently sleeping outside or in their vehicles. We are in BIG NEED of volunteer help. Come to a training session and see what it is all about.

No strings attached, if you go through the training and decide that it isn't something you want to commit to, not a problem! Visit <https://www.ourecma.com/hayscoldshelter> for more information or to sign up for training!

### **Part-time Pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Hays, KS**

A part-time Pastor position will soon be available for the Presbyterian Church of Hays, KS. As one of the oldest churches in Hays, KS, the congregation numbers hold steady at just under 100 members. The part-time Pastor will have a desire to help and encourage the church members to continue to carry out God's mission for our community. We are looking for individuals who are self-motivated with good communication skills that will engage with and empower our members to discern God's calling.



A few of the responsibilities of the part-time Pastor will include working in concert with congregation members in leading worship, providing pastoral care and moderating session and church activities. The part-time Pastor will also work alongside our part-time administrative assistant and as needed, the part-time Pastor will perform weddings, funerals and baptisms.



For more information, please contact Melanie Hancock, General Presbyter with the Presbytery of Northern Kansas at 785-825-1654. You can send your resume to Melanie at Presbytery of Northern KS, PO Box 3287, Salina, KS 67402-3287.



First Call for Help had a successful Carnival Night: Homes 4 the Holidays fundraiser. It was held on November 12th at the Hays Recreation Commission. Over 170 kids came to enjoy the inflatable fun. Thanks to all the volunteers and sponsors that made this event possible.



On November 23, volunteers stood outside Walmart and both Dillons for the Annual Thanksgiving Food Drive. Thanks to the stores, volunteers, and the people who purchased items to make this food drive successful! These groceries will be given out at the ECMA's Thanksgiving Day Feast to those who want some.



(Pictured from left to right): Patty, Linda, Darlene, and Connie (in cart) from the organization Women Who Lead.