



Sunday Worship: 9:30 a.m.
Sunday School for All Ages: 11:00 a.m.

For I know the plans
I have for you,
declares the **LORD**
plans to *prosper* you
and not to harm you
plans to give you
hope and a *future*
Jeremiah 29:11

NEW BEGINNINGS – THE 2025 STEWARDSHIP CAMPAIGN

It is that time of year! Time for the leadership and congregation at Olean First Baptist Church to start thinking about the ministries,

programs, and activities we want to undertake in 2026! It's time to kick-off our annual stewardship campaign. This year's theme is "New Beginnings." It is a logical follow-up to our 2024 theme, "He Makes All Things New." Our scripture references are: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17 and "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11.

All you need to do is look around and you can see evidence of some new beginnings happening at our church. Most importantly, we have a new Senior Pastor in Reverend Jim Balson! Pastor Jim's arrival certainly represents a new beginning for our church. He has already begun to suggest some changes we could make to our worship service and other church ministries. He also is committed to visit all members of the congregation... to build relationships with us. You will also notice the upgrades that are being made to our church's exterior. Granted, it has taken *much* longer than we expected, but changes are in progress. The church will have a new, less disheveled appearance... sending a clear message that the church is alive! We also have the new digital sign that will

AT FIRST BAPTIST

Senior Pastor
Jim Balson, Jr.
Admin/Fin. Secretary
Brandie Nichols
Audio Visual Specialist
Casey Sage

Minister of Music
Sue Neely VanBrunt
Keyboards
Penny Sorokes
Custodian
Rachel Green

PHONE: 716- 372-5151
EMAIL: ofbc133@gmail.com
WEBSITE: oleanfirstbaptist.com
FACEBOOK: [oleanfirstbaptistchurch](https://www.facebook.com/oleanfirstbaptistchurch)

be used to announce activities at our church and other Christian events in our area; again, providing evidence of our vibrant ministries. And, finally, as you will read further in this newsletter, the Board of Trustees has hired a new church secretary, who will start on September 29th... yet another new beginning! New beginnings are also great opportunities to take stock of where we've been as a church, honestly access where we are today, and seriously consider the future direction and/or ministries of our church. It is likewise a time for each of us to consider what role we will play in that future. We must decide what commitments of our time, talents, and treasures we will make. In the coming weeks, you will be hearing or reading more about how you can participate in the New Beginnings campaign. We hope you will thoughtfully and prayerfully consider your response. Let's work together so that these new beginnings will lead to a revival and re-energizing of our church so that we can continue to do God's work in our community and beyond.



Nominating Committee to Seek Volunteers

The 2025 Nominating Committee will soon begin the process of electing candidates to our Boards and Committees. **Opportunities Abound!!!** Please prayerfully consider how you can use your spiritual gifts and talents to be of service to our Lord in 2026 as committee members recruit from among our congregation. Consider answering "YES!" to the call.

A PROPERTY UPDATE FROM THE TRUSTEES

Much has happened since the last building update earlier this year. This article provides a high level overview of the progress made. One of the more significant was yet another change in the contractor doing the work on the exterior of the church. Those activities are now being handled by Blaine Reardon, owner of Reardon General Contracting. Mr. Reardon and his crew have removed much of the aggregate on the east side of Fellowship Hallway. Most of those decorative extensions or “fins” will not be replaced. Further, the “fins” on the taller portion of Fellowship Hall will be reduced in size, thereby decreasing the cost of the modifications. Reardon’s company has also sealed the roof, which should significantly reduce the number of leaks we’ll experience this winter.

Another major project is the installation of the new digital sign on South Street. A church member made a sizeable donation toward the purchase of the sign. However, the price of the sign ended up being \$1,300 more than what was donated. Further, the cost to build the concrete foundation, run the electrical wiring, put the sign in place, etc. will exceed \$10,000, leaving the church with an unpaid balance of over \$11,000.

If anyone feels moved to donate toward the aggregate and/or digital sign projects, please contact Matt Sage, Chair of the Board of Trustees. This might be something to consider as we kick off our 2025 Stewardship Campaign. Finally, volunteers from Intandem have been working around the church under the direction of Jim Molyneaux and their Intandem Supervisor, Alex Carpenter. These folks have helped clean up the parking lot, worked on the flower beds, and helped organize our remaining space in the carriage house. The Trustees also thank Michael Nutt for his help installing the security cameras, the new monitoring system, and his assistance with the digital sign.

Please contact any member of the Board of Trustees if you have questions about anything in this article.

-The Board of Trustees

OUR NEW ADMIN/FINANCE SECRETARY



The Board of Trustees is pleased to announce the hiring of Brandie L. Nichols as our new Admin/Finance Secretary. Brandie will start on Monday, September 29th and will be responsible for completing the activities previously addressed by the church secretary and the financial liaison. She joins our church staff after holding various finance and administrative positions in the Olean and Bradford area, including with Genesis House in Olean and the Bradford Public Library. Brandie also was a teacher at the Parker Jordan Christian Academy in Wellsville, NY. She will be meeting with Pastor Jim to set her office hours (*which will be provided later*) and receiving training on her new position from Penny Sorokes over the next few weeks.

For those interested, Brandie was chosen from numerous candidates who applied via Indeed. The top two completed a phone and face-to-face interview. The face-to-face interview team included Pastor Jim Balson, Pam Nutt & Jim Sorokes (*from the Trustee’s Personnel Committee*), Penny Sorokes (*our acting secretary & financial liaison*), Sue Neely VanBrunt, and Casey Sage (*the latter two being staff members who must work closely with the Admin/Finance Secretary*). The team was unanimous in selecting Brandie to fill the open position.

Please join us in welcoming Brandie to our church staff and in showing her patience and grace as she gets acclimated to her new job!



OCTOBER BOARD MEETINGS

Tues. Oct 7 @ 6:30 pm: Trustees

Sun., Oct 12 @ Noon: Board of Christian Mission
Diaconate

Mon., Oct. 13 @ 5:30 PM:
Board of Christian Education



A Musical Note

Music for all seasons, for all reasons!

One of the reasons most of us enjoy music, is because of the expression it gives to our thoughts and feelings. We embrace both traditional and new songs that describe our lives during a variety of seasons, for a variety of reasons. Similarly, at Olean FBC we enjoy the music of the seasons of the year as well as the seasons of our life.

We are currently in our Stewardship season. The theme song is "This is a Day of New Beginnings" reminding us that God is making all things new. I hope you will enjoy learning this song as you hear it throughout the month.

In November, we enjoy the music of Thanksgiving and 'Thanksgiving'. Selections will be shared by our Sr. Choir, In One A'Chord Handbell Choir and Kids Bells Choir during worship services and during a special Giving Thanks Music Program on Nov 2nd at 11 am- before the Giving Thanks Dinner.

And then before we know it, the Advent/Christmas season will be here. The Sr. Choir will soon begin practices for this year's cantata "Mary, Did You Know?" based on the popular song by Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene. Maybe you would like to join us on Thursdays, beginning on Oct 16th at 6:30 pm in the Chapel. I sure hope so! The choir would love to have you share in the music, time of sharing and prayer and the fellowship!

'Sing'cerely, Sue Neely VanBrunt, Minister of Music

"Sing to the Lord with grateful praise, make music to our God" . Psalm 147:7



International Ministries' World

Mission Offering Coming

Through International Ministries' World Mission Offering (WMO), every fall thousands across the country celebrate and give financial support to ministries that God is using to transform the world.

For more than two hundred years, International Ministries has combined resilience, adaptability, and creative approaches to cross-cultural ministry with faithfulness to Scripture. We serve alongside our many local partners in ministry around the globe.

During the 2025 World Mission Offering, you can learn more about the work of Global Servants Aaron & Valerie Osterbrock as they train and mentor pastors through Sabah Theological Seminary in Malaysia. You can also see the impact of Global Servant Faye Yarbrough's ministry as she uses her math and science background to tutor children at Teleios Christian School in South Africa.

These stories offer a glimpse into what God is doing through International Ministries' 120+ global servants and 250+ international partners in 70 countries. As you explore the resources available to you at worldmissionoffering.org, we hope you will use them to spread awareness of how we can invest together in this incredible work God is doing around the world.



National Collection Week:

Nov. 17-24, 2025

Work as an Operation Christmas Child Collection Site is still alive and well at Olean First Baptist Church for 2025. Activities have been taking place year-long for the collections, and we will hold some special packing events in late October or early November.



CHURCH FAMILY CHRISTMAS CARD

The FBC Women's Ministry will be providing the annual All Church Family Christmas Card fundraiser on November 2, 9 and 16. This card is meant to save you the expense of buying and mailing Christmas cards to your church family. We encourage everyone to add their names to the card that will be distributed in early December. Optional donations are appreciated and will be accepted each Sunday in the lobby following worship until November 16. The card will be available in your church family mailbox or mailed to our shut-in and long-distance family members.



ANNUAL CUBA CHEESE FUNDRAISER FOR FBC WOMEN'S MINISTRIES

Be sure to check the flyers posted in the church lobby for delicious cheese (and more!) options. These items make great gifts and will be delivered in time for Christmas giving.

**Orders will be taken following worship on
November 2, 9 and 16 Or via email:**

ofbc133@gmail.com.

Last day to order: Nov. 16.

Delivery: Sunday, Dec. 14.

LADIES' FELLOWSHIP OPPORTUNITIES:

A **Soup/Sandwich luncheon** will be held at 11:30 am on Saturday, November 8 @ FBC. We'll be packing care packages to send to our college students. Please bring donations of small items ie: wrapped snacks, candies, school supplies, toiletries, etc to add to the shoeboxes we'll pack

The **Ladies' Christmas Luncheon** at Family Life Ministries will be held on Thursday, December 4.

The group will depart from FBC at 10:15 am returning by 4 pm. The event features bestselling author, speaker, and podcast host Asheritah Ciuciu – a Romanian missionary child. We have sixteen (16) tickets available at \$20 ea. First Come, First Served....sign up on the registration sheet posted on the office window. Tickets must be paid upon reservation.



GIVING THANKS' SUNDAY NOVEMBER 2 WORSHIP, DINNER, AND MUSICAL PROGRAM

During the service of worship on Sunday November 2, we will come together as a family of faith to thank the Lord during our GIVING THANKS SUNDAY.

After hearing a special message from our Pastor, we will demonstrate our thanks to God for the gift of salvation as we gather around the table to celebrate Communion with our Lord. Following the service, everyone will move directly to Fellowship Hall for coffee and juice as we enjoy a few moments of fellowship before a Giving Thanks Music Program led by our Minister of Music, Sue Neely VanBrunt. Music will include songs by our Kids Bells, Sr. Choir, other musicians, and group singing.

By 11:30 am we will begin the GIVING THANKS DINNER of turkey, stuffing, gravy and beverages prepared by the Hospitality Committee and Diaconate. Wonderful side dishes and desserts (or a monetary donation) may be provided by those who are able. Please sign up or call the church office by Oct. 25th. It would be wonderful if you and the entire church family would set aside this morning to come together in thanksgiving!





In Hebrews 3: 7-11 we read, Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore, I was angry with that generation, and said, “They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.” So I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter My Rest.”

The writer is referring to the Israelites when they first approached the Promised Land in Numbers chapters 13 & 14. At that time Moses sent twelve spies to reconnoiter the land and then return with a report. When the spies returned, Ten told grim tales of giants, walled cities, and insurmountable enemies, and warned the Congregation of Israel that it was hopeless to go forward. Two spies tried to encourage the people, remembering God’s presence, power, and promises, saying, “Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it.”(Num. 13:30).

Ultimately the people chose to harden their hearts towards God by disbelieving His promise and power. All the way back in Genesis 15:13-16, over 400 years earlier, God had promised Abraham that his descendants would one day be delivered from bondage and would return to the Promised Land that God had given to Abraham and his posterity. These Israelites had seen God’s awesome power repeatedly in the 12 plagues which God sent upon the Egyptians. They had experienced God’s supernatural deliverance at the coast of the Red Sea when Pharaoh’s army was bearing down upon them. They had witnessed the victory God gave when Aaron and Hur held up Moses arms in the battle with the Amalekites. They had been participants in God’s blessings as they drank the water which flowed from a rock. They “knew” so much, but when they let fear rule, they forgot it all and ran away from all the good things God had in store for them. **Unbelief closes the doors to God’s blessings.**

May God help us as a congregation to set aside all fear and move forward together in full confidence and faith in our Triune God, who *has* done and *shall do* the most incredible things! Together *we will* see God’s hand at work, *we will* see the lost, saved. *We will* see the Name of Jesus exalted. *We will* see the people of God growing in Christ-likeness.

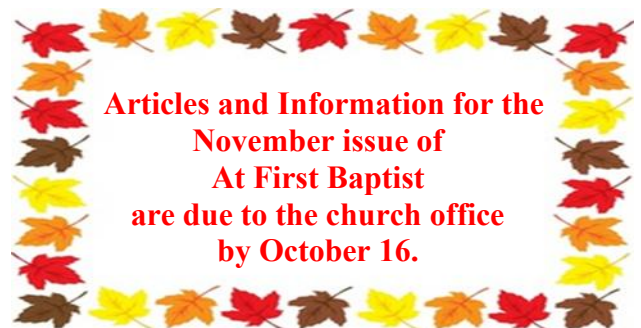


I’m glad to be your Pastor as we move forward together! To God be the Glory!

Pastor Jim

Pastor Jim’s contact info:
pastorbalson@outlook.com
315-398-9658

REMEMBER
OCTOBER IS
PASTOR APPRECIATION MONTH
Please take a moment to express your
gratitude to Pastor Jim for his willingness
to serve God and
our congregation here at
Olean FBC



Articles and Information for the
November issue of
At First Baptist
are due to the church office
by October 16.

LITERACY OF LOVE
Cari Matejka will be leading a mission trip to Uganda in July 2026. If you are interested, please reach out to her for more information at carimatejka1@gmail.com.





THE ASS'T MODERATOR'S MUSINGS

As I write this latest issue of the Musings, I am traveling

home from a trip to Houston where Penny and I attended the 2025 Texas A&M TurboPump Symposium. I've written about this conference in the past and it continues to be one of the highlights of my year. Connecting with old friends, making new acquaintances, giving lectures, teaching classes, and walking around the exhibit hall learning about innovative technologies inspire and uplift me. I return home energized and almost immediately start making plans to attend the conference the following year. But this year's conference was a bit different because I realized that I need to start passing my numerous batons (i.e., presentations, short courses, etc.) to the younger engineers at our company. Maybe it was my recent medical issues or maybe I just came to the realization that I am not getting any younger or maybe it was that still small voice whispering in my ear. Regardless, I knew it was time for me to step aside and let others take the podium... increase their visibility. And so, I publicly announced my intention to scale back my involvement in leadership at the TurboPump Symposium. I still plan to attend the conference in the future... I'd miss it too much if I didn't... but going forward, I'll be more of an observer and/or mentor than in leadership. That will be a very strange feeling for me, but I know it's the right thing to do.

The same is true regarding my leadership roles at Olean First Baptist Church. As I confirmed in the last edition, Penny and I will be moving to our new home in Nags Head, NC sometime in the next few months. As a result, I will be resigning from the Board of Trustees and the position of Assistant Moderator. I will no longer be part of the senior choir or the 3:16 praise team and others will be leading the Seekers Class. Will my departure create some voids? Maybe... but that might be a good thing. For several years now, I have struggled with what role God wanted me to fill at our church. I am a firm believer that He nudges us... or shoves us... in certain directions so that we fulfill His objectives. But recently, it seems that no matter what I tried to do, I was met with frustration, resentment, distrust, and even anger. And so, I asked God, "Is it time to step aside?" And while I never got a direct answer, a series of events led me to ultimately

conclude that the answer is "Yes. It's time to move on." And so, I shall! However, before I do, I plan to share some observations on what I think our church needs to do to survive in the future. Now these will be my thoughts and/or opinions, which doesn't make them right, but I hope the remaining church leaders and the congregation will at least consider them as you map out the church's future direction.

At the top of my list of things to consider is the lack of communications, or maybe more to the point, a lack of the right kinds of communication. Building on a thought from the end of last month's Musings, I now understand that the topic of us leaving the church has been bandied about for several weeks. It was even the subject of much open discussion at one of the recent church gatherings. So how is it that no one felt comfortable enough to ask Penny or me if it was true? It was OK to discuss it with others but not with us? Why is that?

Now, before anyone overreacts, this is just one example of how the rumor mill or grape vine can cause misunderstandings, misinterpretations, hard feelings, or divisions within our church. So, let me ask you directly, if someone has wronged you, do you approach that person directly or do you tell anyone else who will listen about how thoughtless or mean that person is? And if you do the latter, are you expecting that those people will continue to spread your negative comments to others? Or to those who hear negative comments about someone, do you challenge the offended person to approach the accused offender, or do you pass on the negative comments to others? Or perhaps you discover that someone has made a mistake on a report or PowerPoint slide. Do you speak to the person privately and give them a chance to correct their mistake or do you point the mistake out publicly or in a "reply to all" e-mail so that everyone sees the mistake the person made?

These are just two examples of how your response to circumstances can demonstrate grace or malice. In such cases, what would Jesus do?? For an answer, you might want to check Matthew 18:15-17.

And if that doesn't do it for you, try Matthew 5:9.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

-Jim Sorokes

Assistant Moderator





Literacy of Love Update

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” **Jeremiah 29:11.**

Our church family has been small and mighty. Literacy of Love has been blessed by so many of our members through advocacy, prayer, sponsorship and support. Can you imagine that this past summer marked my 13th year working in Uganda?

As I reflect on my most recent journey, my heart is gripped with the overwhelming realization of the Lord's grand guidance. In both correction, redirection and blessings, it's clear to see God's fingerprint in everything. I read a quote by Frederick Buechner that says, “The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” Despite our many challenges, years of devastation, disappointments, and perpetual first-hand encounters with treachery, I feel a deep sense of gladness knowing that we are doing what is pure, right, and noble. Through all the times our journey seemed impossible, when the seeds we planted weren't growing, when the trees we had weren't producing fruit, there has been a deep and unwavering sense of drive and purpose, of passion and devotion.

Something new happened this year. On January 1, the police station called us and asked us to come. There was a young boy who had been abandoned, and they had no idea what to do with him. He appeared to be both deaf and non-verbal and deathly ill with malaria. After years of effort, we finally succeeded in working cooperatively with our district officials who connected us to child welfare where we signed documents to take full custody of this child. We named him Moses (how apropos), gave him a birthday, and brought him home where he received medical care, clothing, a bed, love, and brothers and sisters. Months later, I am pleased to share that Moses is doing well in school, has friends, smiles, laughs, and he even talks. Deaf? Nonverbal? No, just traumatized.

Since that time, the district has sought our help with their most severe cases. We now support other children, like Moses, who were discarded, tortured, abused, and abandoned. We've had an influx of both new children and new sponsors. Among the new ones we help are a few foster families whom we are giving a hand up so they can better provide for the children they kindly care for but receive very little help to manage from the government. When I witnessed our grown leader, Erick, signing documents to bring Moses into our family, when

I counseled children alongside of him, when I listen to him explain how the district wants him to join their counsel, I was struck with surreal realization of the incredible, surreal reality and power of what we are doing, all of us, together, hand-in-hand. Erick was once Moses. Imagine... Who will Moses become some day?

This summer we hired Eden to weld doors and windows for our construction projects. Jude oversaw the expansion of our medical center. Ssema gave all of our children haircuts before returning to school. Lailah tailored the children's new uniforms. Shalif made us a new shelf for home. Kudrah sewed us ambassador “dolls” and baskets to sell. Prossy shared her new skills in juice-making with our visitors. Matthius beaded rosaries with the crosses our children made with visitor and local potter, Tara. Tom, Resty, and Docus treated our sick children at the clinic. Erick managed our mission trip, and Lu was our driver.

Take a look at LiteracyOfLove.org. Aslan, a newly employed developer, remade it! It's gorgeous. Look at that!!! Our very own tree is producing so many fruits. We employed our own grownups. Our graduates are business owners and helpers who are raising the next generation. They are the ones we are calling on to help us with our needs. Our children are doing well in school. I was fortunate to be there during Visitation Day and meet with every primary child's teacher, look over their report cards, and encourage them. In the photo, you'll see me sitting with Nakato and her teacher. Not long ago, she and her brother were rescued from torture and abandonment. Now, they are in foster care and in quality boarding school. We are also giving a hand to their foster parents to improve their situation, too.

For years, we were pruned before our tree grew any fruit at all. We have been patient in affliction, steadfast in hope, and we've clung to faith in hopes that God would allow us to prosper. We continue to pray like Jabez once did – with hope to expand our territory – not for our own gain but for the glory of God, His people, and to share love in action.

Our needs will always be endless, but our faith will also be endless. Our goal is to replace the car that was stolen from us two years ago. We have lots of renovations needed at our home, too, such as a new toilet. Ours is of disrepute. But, like all other good things, they will come in the right time. These are needs, but our dreams are big! Our faith is bigger, though!

With sincere and heartfelt gratitude, thank you for putting your faith in action. Together we can. Together we are! Praise God for the good work He began through all of us. We will remain “confident that He how began a good work, will carry it to completion.”

THE FAMILY OF GOD

We extend our Love and Sympathy to Jim and Penny Sorokes on the passing of Jim's mother, Helen Sorokes, on September 4.

DIRECTORY UPDATES:

Darlene Selph
10735 Markham Drive
Gowanda, NY 14070



Please let us know in the office when you plan to fly south for the winter months so that you'll continue to receive your church mailings and we won't incur fees for returned mail.

PLEASE KEEP US INFORMED

If you've had an important event in your life such as a birth, death, wedding, or an accomplishment, or if you can provide an update to a prayer concern, please let us know in the church office. We like to acknowledge everyone's special moments but we need your help to make sure that we have the correct information. It is also imperative that you let us know when you or a loved one are going to be in the hospital and would like to be visited. Current privacy laws make it difficult to know who is in the hospital.

Coming Up in November:

- ❖ Music Sunday/Giving Thanks Dinner/Advent Study Kickoff Nov 2
- ❖ Pizza party/Hanging of the Greens Nov. 23

THANK YOU'S.....

Thank you for the many cards and prayers during my recent illness and the passing of my mother. We certainly felt your care and encouragement during those difficult days and your support was very appreciated.

Jim and Penny Sorokes



- | | |
|----|-----------------|
| 1 | Rita Wymer |
| | Nick Porcello |
| 3 | Nancy Balson |
| 6 | Pamela Putt |
| | Gene Felt |
| 7 | Sue Chiapuso |
| 11 | Gayle Rockey |
| 13 | Theron Rust |
| 15 | Jessie Selph |
| 19 | Aaron Geise |
| 20 | Joan Mitchell |
| | Lucas O'Dell |
| 22 | Maunie Ketchner |
| 23 | Ken Boser II |
| | Malerie Keith |
| | Morgan Keith |
| 30 | Jerry Nutt Sr. |
| 31 | Logan Funden |



If you would like to request a **PRAYER SHAWL** for a friend or family member, please enter your request on the sheet posted on the side of the lobby mailboxes.



**AUTUMN SHOWS US
HOW BEAUTIFUL IT
IS TO LET THINGS
GO.**



HE 'NEVER MET A STRANGER'

By Deb Wuethrich

For years, I've heard the statement that certain people "never met a stranger." I never

quite understood what it meant. Like, to me, we encounter people all the time. Some we know. Some we don't. They're strangers when you first meet them. Right?

Now, I think I understand.

We at Olean First Baptist Church have just said farewell to the man who served us as an Interim Pastor for 18 months. It was by his example of interacting with and paying value to everyone he meets that the core of the old saying finally took root. Pastor Ivan Crossno pastored a Baptist church in Cheektowaga for several decades before deciding to retire, stating that he believed his congregation was ready for a younger person to shepherd them. When he learned Olean First Baptist was in need of temporary leadership while the church continued a search for a new senior pastor, Pastor Ivan felt a call, stepped up and said, "I could do that."

I don't think he expected it would be for 18 months, but thankfully, we will be welcoming a new senior pastor, Rev. Jim Balson, with an Installation Ceremony on Sept. 28 at 3 p.m. Still, Pastor Ivan took things in stride right from the beginning. He didn't just drive down to Olean on Sundays—he chose to stay several days each week. He wanted to get to know the community. To explore good relationships within First Baptist. His wife, Bev, who was still working at the start of his tenure, frequently spent time here, too.

Many of us at First Baptist soon recognized he was a good fit for the position. He calls himself a country boy, having grown up in Arkansas. Even though he has resided in the Buffalo area for many years, those who encounter Pastor Ivan see a personable, authentic and caring personality. He's funny, too, often poking fun at himself.

An early indication of his "never met a stranger" personality came to the forefront as he hit the ground running at our church. He would often ask others, "Who can I call or visit?" right from the get-go, then followed through. It didn't matter that these were folks he'd never met before. Pastor Ivan could enter a conversation and before it was over, people felt like they'd been chatting for years.

One time, I was on a team to deliver Home Communion to shut-ins. Pastor Ivan was part of our three-person team. Before we got down to the ritual of our purpose, Pastor Ivan was telling stories about his younger days in Arkansas, how he once was bit by a spider and almost died. How he'd encountered big snakes. How he disliked crawling under his mother's house to fix something, but did it anyway. Something in the telling was always an adventure!

His outgoing personality and deep respect and caring for people taught us early on that Pastor Ivan wasn't going to just show up on Sundays, preach a sermon and go home. He immersed himself in the Olean community and linked with the GOAC (Greater Olean Association of Churches), getting to know other pastors and the community they serve.

He sat in on board meetings. Knowing he wouldn't be in the position for the long-haul didn't prevent him from having ideas, or making suggestions on practices he'd seen at his own and other churches. Pastor Ivan enjoyed our church's and community's history and traditions, and various ministry outreaches.

He didn't hesitate to go have breakfast or lunch with the members of his church. In fact, Green Acres became a favorite haunt. Once, I was present when he said, "Now don't tell Bev!" when he ordered something he thought she might not wholly approve in her quest to keep him healthy.

Through stories of his country boy roots, we learned of his love for biscuits. Good biscuits. He admitted that in fact, he was on a quest for the best biscuits out there, but deemed most any biscuit pretty good. That's why his farewell fellowship time at First Baptist included biscuits, with strawberries and whip cream. We, who were never strangers to him, now know the way to his heart. In the pulpit, he shared folksy stories while never shying away from truth that people needed to hear. In his final sermon, Pastor Ivan mentioned that he'd gained eight pounds since coming to Olean. It was probably the biscuits, church meals and eating out with friends. In his "real" retirement, he might have to re-engage in hobbies such as a repeat climb of Kilimanjaro or hiking in the Adirondacks to compensate.

Seriously, our church could not have asked for a more caring pastor to fill the gap in Olean until a new senior pastor could be hired. The folks who were never strangers to him sang along with the choir on Sunday, an "until we meet again" farewell song. The word "biscuit" was inserted for manna. Some of us couldn't say goodbye. We just said, "So long for now. Don't be a stranger."