

WHY IS THERE NO AMERICAN FLAG IN THE SANCTUARY?

From time to time, at our First Church Campus, we are asked why there is no American flag in our sanctuary—or elsewhere in the church building. The answer is not that we are ashamed of our country, disrespectful toward those who have served, or indifferent to the responsibilities of citizenship. The decision is rooted in what we believe the church and the sanctuary are for.

A sanctuary is a place set apart for the worship of God. Everything within it should direct our attention toward God and toward the story we share as followers of Jesus. The cross, the baptismal font, the communion table, even the pulpit, remind us whose we are and what forms our life together.

A national flag carries a different meaning. It represents a particular country, its government, its history, and its civic identity. Those symbols have appropriate places in public life, but the sanctuary is not a civic hall. When we gather for worship, our primary identity is not American, Republican, Democrat, conservative, liberal, or any other national or political designation. *We gather as the body of Christ.*

The church is also larger than any one nation. Christianity did not begin in the United States, and the gospel does not belong to America. We are connected to followers of Jesus across borders, languages, cultures, and political systems. No nation can claim God as its exclusive possession, and no flag should be placed in a position where it may appear to share the church's allegiance with Christ.

Not having a national flag in the sanctuary does not mean that we cannot be grateful for our country, pray for its leaders, honor veterans, or work for the well-being of our communities. In fact, faithful citizenship requires both gratitude and honest criticism. The church must remain free to celebrate what is just, confront what is harmful, and proclaim that every nation—including our own—is accountable to the ways of justice, mercy, and peace.

Our sanctuary is intentionally centered on Christ. It is a space where people of every nationality and political perspective are invited to worship together, and where our deepest loyalty is not to a nation, but to the God whose love knows no borders.

What About the Pride Flag? Some may ask why a Pride flag may be displayed when an American flag is not. The two symbols do not serve the same purpose. The American flag represents a nation, its government, and a civic allegiance. Our concern about placing it in the sanctuary is that no national identity should appear to stand alongside—or compete with—our allegiance to God.

The Pride flag does not represent a government or ask for national loyalty. In the church, it serves as a visible sign of welcome, safety, and solidarity with LGBTQIA+ people, many of whom have been excluded, condemned, or harmed by Christian communities. It communicates that they do not need to hide who they are in order to enter, worship, serve, or belong.

The Pride flag is displayed because the church has not always made the breadth of God's welcome clear. Where people have been told that the church is not for them, a visible sign can help communicate what our words alone have too often failed to convey.

Our deepest allegiance remains with God, and it is precisely because of that allegiance that we seek to make Christ's welcome visible—especially to those whom the church has historically pushed away.

What's Happening

SUNDAY, JULY 5

9AM - Worship @ Paris (North) Campus
10AM - Worship @ First Church (Downtown) Campus

TUESDAY, JULY 7

9AM - Director's Meeting @ Downtown Campus

WEDNESDAY, JULY 8

11AM - Planning Meeting @ North Campus
12PM - Table Talk: Politics & Following Jesus @ Downtown Campus

THURSDAY, JULY 9

5:30PM - Community Dinner @ Downtown Campus

WORSHIPPING IN THE FELLOWSHIP HALL @ FIRST CHURCH

We know the space may feel a little tight, but with patience, flexibility, and a spirit of hospitality, we can make it work! Please help us welcome one another, make room for guests, and embrace the opportunity to worship together in a more relaxed and connected setting. It may be cozy—but there is room for everyone!

HOLIDAY OFFICE CLOSURE / STAFF AVAILABILITY

The UMMMC office will be closed from Monday, June 29, through Monday, July 6. Regular office hours will resume on Tuesday, July 7. During this time, please call the main office number. Calls and messages will be routed to Pastor Jeremy or the appropriate available person.

Please note the following periods of individual staff unavailability:

- Barbara Erb, Director of Administrative Services, and Gary Erb, Director of Building and Property, will be unavailable from June 30 through July 6.
- Kathy Bell, Director of Congregational Care, will be unavailable from July 2 through July 8.
- Paden Clevenger, Director of Family Ministry and Community Outreach, will be unavailable July 2 through July 5.

Thank you for your patience and understanding during this holiday week.

STAFF CONTACT INFORMATION

Barbara Erb - Director of Administrative Services
barbara@ummecosta.org - (231) 796-7771

Kathy Bell - Director of Congregational Care
kathy@ummecosta.org - (231) 224-6177

Paden Clevenger - Director of Family Ministries & Community Outreach
paden@ummecosta.org - (231) 796-7771

Rev. Jeremy Wicks - Executive Pastor
jeremy@ummecosta.org / (231) 224-6545

To schedule an appointment with Pastor Jeremy, contact Barbara Erb or schedule online @ calendly.com/jeremy-ummecosta

Week of July 5 - July 11, 2026

Family News



UNITED METHODIST MINISTRIES OF MECOSTA COUNTY

304 ELM STREET, BIG RAPIDS MI 49307 • (231) 796-7771 • WWW.UMMECOSTA.ORG

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE HOURS: TUES - FRIDAY, 9AM - 3PM
PASTOR OFFICE HOURS: TUESDAY & THURSDAY, 9AM - 12PM & 12:30PM - 3PM

NORTH CAMPUS - PARIS

109 Lincoln St
Paris, MI 49338
ummecosta.org/paris

Worship Gathering
in-person
Sundays @ 9:30AM

DOWNTOWN CAMPUS - FIRST

304 Elm Street
Big Rapids, MI 49307
bigrapidsfirst.org

Worship Gathering
in-person and online
Sundays @ 10AM

Order of Worship - July 5, 2026

Prelude

Welcome & Announcements

* Call to Worship (Reader / *People*)

We gather to worship God alone. Not a nation. Not a flag. Not a party. Not a leader. Not any power that asks for the devotion that belongs to God.

We give thanks for the places we call home, for neighbors, communities, freedoms, and hopes we share.

But our deepest allegiance is to the kin-dom of God.

A kin-dom larger than every border, more diverse than every nation, and more enduring than every empire.

Jesus refused the power of domination and chose the way of humility, justice, mercy, and love.

So we come to remember who we are: not strangers divided by nationality, race, or politics, but beloved people drawn from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

Let us worship the God whose love cannot be contained by borders and whose reign makes room for all.

* Hymn - "The Church's One Foundation", UMH #545

Children's Message

First Scripture Reading - Luke 4:5-8; & Philippians 3:20 (NRSVUE)

Hymn - "In Christ There Is No East or West", UMH #548

Second Gospel Reading - Revelation 7:9-10 (NRSVUE)

Message - "The Nation-as-God Story"

Celebration of Communion

* The Doxology, UMH #95

* Hymn - "Christ for the World We Sing", UMH #568, vss 1-3

* Blessing and Sending

* Hymn - "Christ for the World We Sing", UMH #568, vs 4

Postlude

* PLEASE RISE IN BODY OR SPIRIT

Welcome to First Church!

Welcome to First Church, the downtown campus of United Methodist Ministries of Mecosta County - we're so glad you're here! This is a community where every person belongs, every story matters, and every question is welcome. If you're new or exploring, we'd love to get to know you. You can learn more about who we are and find helpful information for your first visit at bigrapidsfirst.org.

Need directions? Curious about something? Our welcome team is nearby and ready to help. Truly, we're delighted to worship with you today.

NOTES:



Check In Here

SERVING TODAY - JULY 5

Reader: Barbara Ross

Ushers: Pat & Marion Williamson

Greeter: Nancy Spedowski

Nursery: Sara DeLany, Beth Bejcek

Fellowship Host: Cheryl Richardson

Communion Assistants: Brenda Chaffee, Karen Leiter

Organist: Shirley Jernstadt

Accompanist: Kathy Bell

Tech Team: Ken Draves, Gary Poole

SERVING NEXT WEEK - JULY 12

Reader: Pat Little

Ushers: Colin & Roberta Cline

Greeter: Pete Jensen

Nursery: Sarah DeLany, Char Fitch

Fellowship Host: Pat Little

THINK ABOUT IT - THE NATION-AS-GOD STORY

This week in *The Seventh Story*, we are considering what happens when love of country becomes something more—when a nation, flag, political party, or leader begins to claim the loyalty that belongs to God alone.

There is nothing wrong with loving the place we call home. We can be grateful for our communities, honor those who have served, celebrate what is good, and work for the well-being of our neighbors. But faithfulness requires us to remember that no nation is God. Every nation is capable of both good and harm. Every government must be held accountable. Every political movement must be measured against the life and teachings of Jesus—not the other way around.

When Jesus was offered political power over the kingdoms of the world, he refused to worship at the altar of domination. He would not trade faithfulness for influence. He would not confuse power with salvation.

Our deepest identity is not found in citizenship, party affiliation, or national pride. Scripture reminds us that our citizenship is in heaven and gives us a vision of people from every nation, tribe, people, and language gathered together before God. The church does not exist to make any nation greater. We exist to bear witness to the kin-dom of God—a community where the vulnerable are protected, strangers are welcomed, enemies are not dehumanized, truth matters, and love crosses every border.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Where do I find my deepest sense of identity and security?
- Have I ever excused something in my preferred political party or leader that I would condemn in someone else?
- Do my political convictions reflect the way of Jesus, or have I reshaped Jesus to support what I already believe?
- Whose suffering becomes easier to ignore when national interest is treated as the highest good?

PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK

When you encounter a political message, patriotic symbol, or claim about what is best for the nation, pause and ask: does this reflect the character and way of Jesus? Consider whether it promotes truth or fear, service or domination, human dignity or dehumanization, the common good or the protection of privilege. Then take one faithful step: listen beyond your usual sources, learn from someone whose experience differs from yours, speak against dehumanizing language, or pray for people beyond the borders of your own nation.

PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

God of every nation and every people, keep us from giving any country, party, flag, or leader the devotion that belongs to you. Teach us to love our neighbors without fearing strangers, to seek justice without worshiping power, and to serve the common good without placing our nation above your kin-dom. Shape our loyalties by the life of Jesus, and make us citizens of your boundless reign of mercy, justice, and peace. Amen.

JULY MISSION GIVING: OUR BROTHERS KEEPER

Throughout July, our mission giving will support Our Brother's Keeper, Big Rapids' shelter for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. OBK offers more than a safe place to sleep. Guests receive meals, showers, clean clothing, compassionate support, and assistance as they work toward stable housing and greater self-sufficiency. At a time when the need for emergency housing continues to grow—including among families with children and older adults—this ministry provides safety, dignity, and hope to some of our most vulnerable neighbors.

Thank you for giving generously and helping Our Brother's Keeper remind every guest that they are not alone.

Your generosity makes a difference! To avoid any confusion in our giving systems, please make your checks out to **First Church. Thank you for your continued support!**