

the Messenger

VOLUME 32 ISSUE 5
SEPTEMBER 17, 2026

September / October 2026

CONTENTS

From Your Pastor.....	3
A Sweet Night of Fellowship.....	4
Then Sings My Soul: The Songs We Carry With Us.....	5
Medical Mission in Malawi.....	6
Blessings From the Flower Ministry	7
Transformation Sunday School Class.....	7
Montreat and CROSS Missions Recap.....	8
Recently at Riverside: Laser Tag and New Member Dinner.....	9
From Crisis to Stability: Family Promise Turns 20.....	10
Matthew 25 Book Recommendation.....	10
October and November Birthdays.....	11

PAGE 9

New Member Dinner



From Your Pastor

Brian Lays

Dear Riversiders,

Over the past few years, we've tried a lot of new things in an effort to engage our members in ways that are meaningful, convenient, and purposeful. We've offered gatherings in person, on Zoom, and at all times throughout the week. Some initiatives have borne more fruit than others. It's always good to try new things in an effort to follow the energy, discerning where God's Spirit is moving in the life of the church.



We've discovered over the past year that Sunday mornings are prime time at Riverside. I'm thrilled with the growing engagement with Sunday School, children's ministry, choir and handbells, and worship attendance. The fellowship events before or after worship have also been popular, joyous occasions to gather together. As we move into this fall, we are focused on maximizing what Sunday morning can be at RPC, as we believe Sunday morning is the last window of time in our culture (mostly) reserved for church.

While the rest of the week can be busy and spread us thin, Sunday morning is our time to center ourselves on God's Word, share community with fellow people of faith, and establish a purpose for the rest of the week. How essential it is to set aside even one morning a week to worship God and nurture our faith!

The other day, my inquisitive son James asked me why we go to church on Sundays. "Because Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday morning," I said simply. His question reminded me how obvious it is that Sunday mornings are a time for worship. When we remember that Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday morning, what else could be more important than Church?

This fall, I hope you'll join us often for all our offerings throughout the week. But if it's hard to get to things with work and school schedules, or if you don't drive at night, or if you live a ways away, make Sunday morning participation a priority. Tune in online, come to Sunday School, try singing in the choir, lead a prayer or the call to worship, do whatever speaks meaningfully to you. Be a meaningful part of all that God is doing at Riverside!

See you on Sunday!

Pastor Brian

A Sweet Night of Fellowship

Janet Novick

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.” — Acts 2:46–47a

On August 23, our church family came together for an unforgettable evening of joy, laughter, and togetherness at our annual Ice Cream Social and Game Night. Kissling Hall was filled with familiar faces, new neighbors, and friends of all ages, creating an atmosphere that truly reflected the warmth of Christ’s love in community. Thank you to Norma Farnell for her warm welcome and making sure all guests had a nametag.

The feast set the tone for a wonderful night. Everyone enjoyed classic comfort food, piling hot dogs high with delicious chili. But the real star of the table was the incredible spread of homemade ice creams generously whipped up by our talented church members. From traditional vanilla and deep chocolate to creative, fruity churns, there was no shortage of sweet treats to go around!

Additionally, the friendly competition kicked into high gear. Laughter echoed through the building as players took on the hilarious challenge of Granny Pants, twisted themselves into knots on the Twister mat, and tested their precision with towering Jenga blocks. Julie Handley, who gave so much time and talent to planning this event, taught several friends how to play Swoop—which was great fun. For our littlest friends, a special Lego and building corner provided endless hands-on fun, where young builders created masterpieces alongside new pals.

An event this special only happens because of a community willing to serve with glad hearts. A huge, heartfelt thank you goes out to every single volunteer who made the night possible—from those who churned ice cream and cooked food, to those who set up game stations, greeted guests, and stayed late to help with cleanup. Special thanks to Jen and Andrea Hoff for their high energy announcements inviting friends to come out and play. Your generosity and servant hearts transformed a simple evening into a powerful time of Christian fellowship. We are so grateful for our church family!



Then Sings My Soul: The Songs We Carry With Us

Jared Stellmacher, Director of Music Ministries & Organist

This summer at Riverside, we spent time singing, listening, remembering, and reflecting through our sermon and hymn series, Then Sings My Soul. What began as an opportunity to share and sing some of our congregation's most beloved hymns became something much more meaningful: a chance to think about why these songs matter, the stories they carry, and what they continue to teach us about faith and life together.

Throughout the summer, our worship was shaped by hymns chosen by you. Familiar favorites like Here I Am, Lord, Be Thou My Vision, Amazing Grace, How Great Thou Art, Great Is Thy Faithfulness, and so many others reminded us that hymns are much more than words and notes printed on a page. They become part of the soundtrack of our lives. And as we looked more closely at these familiar hymns, we were reminded just how much is packed into words we sometimes know by heart. Here I Am, Lord reminds us that hearing God's call is only part of the story—we are also called to respond: "Here I am. Send me." And in Amazing Grace, words we have probably sung hundreds of times remind us that none of us has it all figured out. We are people continually being found, changed, and led by grace. Maybe that is part of what makes a great hymn last. We can sing the same words at different points in our lives and somehow hear them differently. The hymn hasn't changed—but we have.

We sing these hymns at baptisms and weddings, around hospital beds and at memorial services. We sing them in seasons of great joy and in moments when words are difficult to find. Sometimes just a few notes can immediately bring us back to a person, a place, or a particular moment in our lives. Over time, these songs become woven into who we are. That may have been one of the greatest gifts of Then Sings My Soul: the reminder that when we sing together, we are doing far more than making music. We are telling the story of our faith. We are remembering who we are. We are proclaiming what we believe—even on the days when it may be difficult. And perhaps most importantly, we are doing it together.

On a personal note, experiencing this series during my first summer at Riverside was especially meaningful. One of the things I have quickly come to love about this congregation is the way you sing! Sitting at the organ and hearing this sanctuary fill with your voices each Sunday is one of the great joys of what I get to do. And hearing the hymns that you chose gave me another way to get to know this community—what you love, what has shaped your faith, and what songs you carry with you. As we move into a new program year, my hope is that we carry the spirit of this summer with us. Let's keep singing boldly. Let's treasure the hymns that have sustained generations before us while continuing to learn new songs and new ways of expressing our faith. And perhaps we can pay a little more attention to the words we sing, too—allowing them to comfort us, challenge us, surprise us, and sometimes speak for us when we cannot find the words ourselves.

The final notes of Then Sings My Soul may have sounded, but the song continues. There is still more to sing, more to learn, and more of God's story for us to tell—together. Then sings my soul, indeed.



Medical Mission in Malawi

Pastor Brian Lays

In February 2024, I joined a group of regional Presbyterians on a trip to the Nkhoma Mission Hospital in the Lilongwe District of Malawi, Africa. The hospital started as a medical outpost 100 years ago, but is now a 250-bed hospital facility. It is owned by the Presbyterian Church of Central Africa, and serves a rural catchment area of some 64,000 people, but patients come from all over Malawi, and even neighboring countries, for treatment. It serves as a training facility for doctors and nurses in the country, and it is an openly Christian hospital, offering daily chapel services on site.

Throughout my trip, I toured hospital facilities, led daily chapel services, and even got to spend time with the moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Central Africa (pictured). The most powerful moment of my trip came when we traveled two hours into the countryside to deliver medicine to suffering patients. One stop was to see a man with leprosy—a disease I associate with biblical times. The man's hut, located well outside the village, of course, was no taller than a doghouse—it didn't need to be, because he was permanently hunched over under the progression of his disease. The man was in gruesome condition, but his joy upon receiving the medication was palpable and contagious.

Next April, I will be leading a mission trip to Malawi with a group from Riverside. I hope you'll consider joining the trip! Malawi is a great place to take a mission trip for a number of reasons. The country has a strong number of Presbyterians, it is English speaking, it is safe, and it has enormous need. It's a very rural country, which is part of the challenge when it comes to healthcare—even if the hospital has an adequate supply of medicine, distributing that medicine to folks throughout the surrounding countryside is a major challenge.

The trip will be especially meaningful for medical professionals (doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals) who are able to practice at the hospital and assist with training locals. But anyone else would enjoy the trip as well, which will offer opportunities for manual labor improving facilities, chapel and worship leadership, and the chance to join hospital personnel on medical delivery trips in the countryside—like the one on which I met the man with leprosy. Facilities for guests at the hospital are quite comfortable, and three meals a day are catered for us as well. Please be in touch with me if you'd like more information!

Presbyterian missions have always focused on the well-being of the whole person, including physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. For this reason, they established schools and hospitals as well as churches. Malawi's Nkhoma Mission Hospital is a marvelous example of the amazing legacy Presbyterian mission continues to maintain in many parts of the world. Come see for yourself!



Pastor Brian + Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Central Africa in 2024, the Right Reverend Bizwick Kamzongo Nkhoma.



The praise band at morning chapel, with medical professionals in their white coats beginning the day leading the community in worship and prayer.



Left: The beautiful countryside of Malawi, with lush hills and big sky. Right: Typical medical facilities in rural Malawi, which some people travel for hours and even days to reach for medical care.

Blessings from the Flower Ministry

Debra McEachin

Have you ever wondered what happens to the beautiful sanctuary flower arrangements after Sunday's service is over or why they are an important part of worship. The arrangements are sponsored and paid for by church members in remembrance of family or friends. Volunteers from the flower committee create a design which at times incorporates certain wishes of the sponsor, such as color and type of flowers. The designer goes to a retail location to purchase the flowers to make the arrangement. The flowers are then conditioned. The arrangements are completed and placed in the sanctuary. Every Sunday after the service or planned events, the larger arrangements are taken apart to make three to four smaller ones. Another group of volunteers, usually deacons, delivers the smaller arrangements to members of the congregation who usually are suffering sickness, loss, or have had a memorable event in their lives. The arrangements include a note which reads as follows



These flowers have been in the sanctuary of our church. They have heard the hymns that have been sung, the prayers that have been offered and the sermon that has been preached. Now they come to you, and, in their silent ways, are telling you of God's love and healing power, and the wish of the members of this church that you be blessed with faith, hope, health, and happiness.



As the individual who has the opportunity and challenge to create small arrangements which vary each week based on the different types and colors of flowers and donated vases, I am at times thanked for doing this. I appreciate the thanks, but I feel blessed to have the opportunity to be creative with a purpose. I had a rewarding career of 35 years but no real opportunity for creativity at work. So, the flowers are important because they bring joy and beauty to those visiting the sanctuary to the individuals who receive them and the individuals who make the deliveries. They allow for creativity and give a sense of purpose to all involved. Also, they create a sense of connection with other church members who share a common interest. Not to mention the opportunity to recycle your vases. So, thank you for the opportunity to share the power of flowers.

Transformation Sunday School Class

Emily Heeg

This summer, Riverside hosted a Sunday School class titled *Stories of Transformation*. Transformation is one of Riverside's three core values. Compared with our other two core values, belonging and connecting, transformation can be difficult to define and also difficult to recognize and discuss.

Each Sunday this summer, a member of Riverside shared a story of transformation. Each story gave the class a new perspective on this important core value and how it shapes who we are and informs the work we do together as a community of faith.

"The Spiritual Transformation class this summer was very meaningful to me. One of the things I valued most was hearing other people's stories and gaining insight into the different journeys that have shaped their lives and their faith. Their willingness to share helped me reflect on my own story and reminded me that there is something powerful about allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and authentic with one another. I learned that spiritual transformation is not only about what we believe, but also about how we allow our experiences, our joys, struggles, questions, and even our losses, to shape us and deepen our relationship with God and with each other." - Ileana Perez-Diaz

"I attended the Transformation Sunday School this summer. Being relatively new, we know many people, but not their stories. It was amazing to listen to the faith and life journeys. Members shared their triumphs along with the challenges, spiritual, mental and physical experiences that made them the people they are today. My thanks to all the presenters who were willing to share."

- Ed Luffey

Montreat and CROSS Missions Recap

Montreat, NC and Charlotte, NC

MONTREAT YOUTH CONFERENCE, JULY 2026

WHAT DOES THE CONFERENCE THEME “WONDER AND WANDER” MEAN TO YOU?

The conference theme to me means don't be afraid to be curious, ask questions, try a new thing, go outside your comfort zone. – Haiden Christian

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU ARE TAKING AWAY FROM WORSHIP/KEYNOTE AT MONTREAT?

I really enjoyed thinking about and puzzling over this year's theme, wander and wonder, and then seeing how they applied that theme to some familiar bible verses in keynote and in worship. It prompted me to think about these verses from a new perspective. – Aleydis Lockwood

WHAT IS A HIGHLIGHT THAT YOU REMEMBER FROM THIS TRIP?

One thing that stood out to me this year was the amazing sense of community. Even though I got to see several old friends and I made a few new ones, no one is a stranger at Montreat, and I think that's beautiful. – Aleydis Lockwood



CROSS MISSIONS, JULY 2026

“One thing I'm taking away [from this trip] is being open to change. This trip has taught me that many people work together to change their community, so you also have to be ready to change. If anything, I learned that you have so many chances to help out, and you will need to consider those chances with an open mind.” – Waller Trice

“This week has helped show me the struggles others face in other cities than just our own and how much work needs to be done and how huge the facilities doing the work are.” – Ian Cotchaleovitch

“Mission trips are important to broaden our perspective and hear stories from the people that have completely different experiences from us.” – Will Fackler

“My favorite site was Beds for Kids because I felt like I was making a true difference. I could see someone sleeping in the bed I made this week, while for most sites we helped them, but it's harder to imagine the difference we're making for people. I also liked building the beds and figuring out what pieces, screws, nuts, and bolts to use.” – Ford McKenzie

“My favorite site was the food pantry because I was able to work together with friends to lift up the community as a whole, which I thought was a great message. So what I got out of it was that we as a group can work together to build up individuals and communities.” – Waller Trice



Recently at Riverside

PIZZA, TAG, AND NONSTOP LAUGHS: OUR 3RD–5TH GRADERS TAKE ON LASER TAG! Sunday, August 2 turned into an unforgettable afternoon of fellowship, food, and high-energy fun for our 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders!

The excitement kicked off right after church with a classic pizza lunch in the fellowship hall. Fueled up on cheese, pepperoni, and boundless energy, the group piled into the church van for the main event: a trip to the laser tag arena. Pastor Lauren expertly took the wheel, while I rode along for the trip—which turned out to be one of the highlights of the whole afternoon.

The van ride was filled with non-stop chatter, giggles, and truly outstanding stories from the kids. From hilarious tales about their summer adventures to wild, imaginative scenarios, hearing their unique perspectives made the trip feel like a celebration before we even reached our destination.

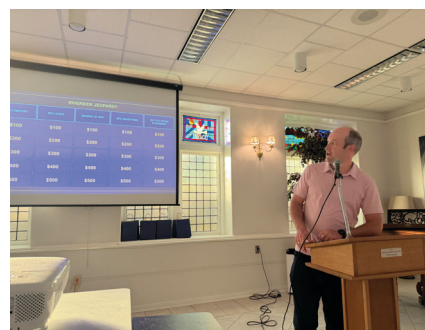


Once we arrived at Cassatt Family Batt Bowl, the real competition began. The kids split into two spirited teams, strapped on their glowing vests, and ducked into the darkened arena. Strategy, teamwork, and plenty of friendly rivalry took over as teammates plotted moves behind neon barriers and cheered for two intense rounds. Events like these are more than just a great time—they are where lasting friendships are built, confidence grows, and our young students experience the joy of belonging to a close-knit community. A huge thank you to Pastor Lauren for driving and to everyone who helped make this Sunday so special.

NEW MEMBER DINNER IN BITTINGER HALL

On September 18, RPC hosted a dinner for all who had joined in the last year. While adult new members ate with members of RPC's staff and session, the children of new members

had a pizza and glow party in the Williams Building. After dinner, Pastor Brian hosted a game of Riverside themed Jeopardy with categories spanning history, staff, ministries, and even a "do you know Riverside?" category! Welcome to Riverside's newest members!



From Crisis to Stability: Family Promise Turns 20

Beth Mixson, Executive Director, Family Promise Jax

When Faith arrived at Family Promise, she had her adorable one-year-old girl and \$5 in her pocket. Shortly after the birth of her daughter she fled an abusive relationship. For a year, she and her daughter bounced from motel to couch surfing to shelter and back again. "Family Promise was an oasis helping me to heal from the trauma of being homeless," said Faith. Today, Faith is a legal assistant, a job offering full benefits and is working toward homeownership. Faith is one of the more than 1,000 families impacted by Family Promise of Jacksonville, celebrating 20 years of service.

Family Promise works with families with children experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Tragically, 30% of America's homeless are families with children. Here, in Duval County, more than 3,400 public school students are experiencing homelessness, and even more are at risk. "Families are often on the edge of the fiscal cliff," said Beth Mixson, executive director. "More than 40% of Duval County residents are living paycheck to paycheck, which means an illness, cancer diagnosis, missed work, or even an auto repair puts their housing at risk."

That's where Family Promise can step in. It's two programs: a temporary shelter and a Family Support prevention and diversion program, designed to stabilize families and provide hope. Both provide case management, community resources, and referrals. The Temporary Shelter is for up to 90 days. Family Promise keeps families together, unlike a dormitory-style shelter. Congregational partners provide groceries and meals for the shelter families. Family Support's goal is keeping families out of an overcrowded shelter system by preventing eviction or assisting with security deposits.

Cardboard City, its major fundraiser, includes The Social Service Maze, a hands-on experience to build understanding of the challenges and barriers that families face. Five high school clubs are involved. RPDS volunteers each year during Project LEADS. To learn more about Family Promise, Cardboard City or ways to help, visit www.familypromisejax.org.

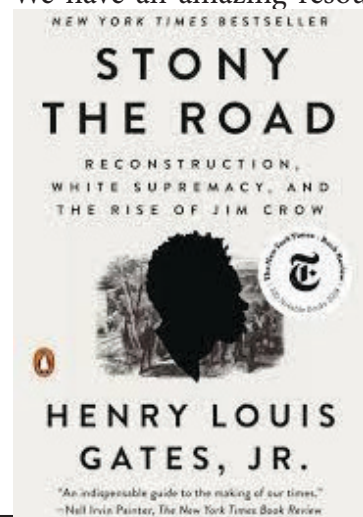


Matthew 25 Lending Library

... focusing on matters of justice and equality

RPC is a Matthew 25 (M25) congregation of the PC(USA). In Matthew 25, Jesus makes clear that what we do and how we treat others matters to God. Matthew 25 provides the foundation and framework for the missions of RPC. The three focus areas of the Matthew 25 initiative include: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating poverty. Responding with wisdom and discernment, we educate ourselves and work together to make our community more compassionate, more inclusive, and more just.

We have an amazing resource that informs and challenges us in our work: the Matthew 25 Lending Library. It is located in the second floor hallway outside of the Church Office. Our Lending Library was established because of the generous donation of Carl and Barbara Zacheis of a very comprehensive collection of books focusing on historical issues of race and inequality and our responses to racism today.



Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow
by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

The author's name is well known due to his remarkable series on public television, where he demonstrates his skill as a lyrical narrative historian. He offers a chilling account of the overthrow of Reconstruction and the rise of American apartheid. Redemption has come only through African American re-invention. He tells the stories from Frederick Douglass to Ida B. Wells to W. E. B. Du Bois.



MATTHEW 25

October Birthdays

1
Vishal Jaikaransingh
Fin Williams
Rachel Gaillard

3
Vicky Watkins
Bruce Smathers
Kelly Jenkins
Diane Tuttle

4
John Pence
Will Harbison

6
Tom Lobello
Partner Rosenbloom
Agnes Fredericks

7
Andy Swiercek
Olivia Davis
Cliff Spohr
Margaret Burke
Laura Lambert

8
Vic Hasselblad
Christy Lane

9
Lucy Wallace
Rob Overly

10
Tom Miller
Jeanette Hoffman

11
Salley Todd
Gena Boone

12
Jude McDonald

14
Frances Humes
Kathy Newton
Jan Duncan
Michele Cook

16
Bill Burns
Harper Allen

17
Catherine Hunt

18
Emily Coll
Penny Cunningham

19
Walt Brinkman
Richard Campbell
Judy Wingate
Zipf Pedrick

20
Robert McDougall
Jasper Riley
Susan Black
Camp Charnley
Lilly Hall

21
Kae Harding
Michael Harding
Susan Suggs
Laura Silva

22
Mark Zeigler

23
Will Walker

24
Isy Milne
Piper Spohr
Logan Lays
Kellie Alexander

25
Anne Meyer
Nancy Splane
Bill Proctor
Mary Kress Littlepage
Diane Milne
Dougie Milne
Suzanne Perritt

26
John Grisnik
Honey Moore

27
Wendy Mueller

28
Mike Erdelyi

29
Beth Mixson
Wycke Hampton
Michael Lane
Evelyn Alderman

30
Chris Wrenn
Ryan Walker
Samer Garas
Phil Price

31
Gowie Cassell

November Birthdays

1
Lillybelle Thoburn
Daniel Bergey

2
Sofina Parker

4
Ann Cranford
Brenda Johnson
Ashley Diebenow
Don Queen

5
Henry Wallace

6
Kelly O'Brien
Julie McLaurine
Holly Rosenbloom
Peter Cotchaleovitch
Barry Hall
Courtland Cummings
Henry Andrews
James Lays

7
Pat Gurley
James Rosenbloom
Lauren Scott
Hazel Sinclair

8
Phebe Ball
Tim Akin

10
Marilyn Wood
Lynne Matson
Jessica Shipp

11
Dan Warner
John Stiefel
Dan VanTice
Karen Sullivan

13
Blanche Coffman
Rusty Newton

14
Adelaide Duncan

15
Ryck Archambault
Jennifer Ward

16
David Breedlove
Kate Overly
Chad Rice
Matt Hoff

18
Quentin Lockwood
Alex McLaurine
Kimberly Allen
David Drew

19
Jaimie Smith

20
Bob Gittings
Bill Leuthold
Mary Caroline Gillam
Sadie Hunt
Sena Corbett
Tyler Goff

21
Missy Riley
Steve Diebenow
Cooper Verlander

22
Tom Johnson
Jane Miller
James C Jackson

23
Andy Baker
Charlotte Verlander
Hayden Phillips

24
Val Lyman

25
John Humes
Allison Blanks

26
Ethan Lobello
Elizabeth Meux
Clementine Kuntz
Abel Mehlenbacher
Bennett Mehlenbacher

27
Peter King

28
Neff Jenkins
Michael Brumback

30
Stuart Harbison
Emily Stevenson
Bob Gay
Evelyn Brown
Max Hoff
Trey Sinclair

If we are missing your
birthday, please contact
the Church Office.

Call (904) 355-4585 or email communication@rpcjax.org



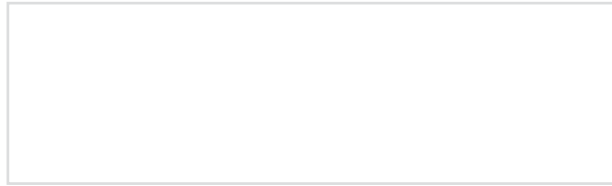
RIVERSIDE
Presbyterian Church

849 Park Street
Jacksonville, FL 32204-3394

Address Service Requested

THE MESSENGER (USPS 466-960) is published bi-monthly by the Riverside Presbyterian Church, 849 Park Street, Jax. FL 32204-3394 (904) 355-4585
Periodicals Postage Paid at Southside Blvd. Business Mail Entry Unit. Jax. FL 32216-9651
POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to THE MESSENGER 849 Park Street; Jax., FL 32204-3394

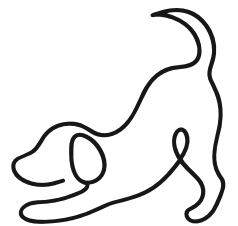
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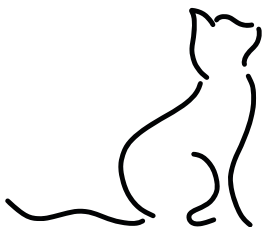
RIVERSIDE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

BLESSING

of the animals



Harden Plaza, near Kissling Hall
Monday, September 28
6:00 - 6:30 pm



*Bring your pet on a
leash or in a crate.
Or bring a photo!*