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Introduction

“Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.”

– Philippians 1:19

It's only the second year of us writing yearly family update letters ([see last year's letter here](#)), we have completely missed our Easter Day deadline. I wish I could blame the horrible virus which swept through our house the week before the *original* date for our Open House, but (in truth) we were going to miss the deadline to send out invitations and this update later anyway.

Now, our family update letter will be ready *just* in time for Pentecost! The last four months alone contained more than a year's worth of transitions. There are real difficulties in the present, the fingerprints and blessings of providence are more visible in retrospect – even as mysteries remain.

This update is for our friends near and far. You're probably receiving it via a link attached to an invitation to our 2026 Open House. To give away one major change: we moved into a new house last fall (still in Muncie). We're so delighted to have more space to host family and friends!



The fence is new: a toddler and a lumbering 120-pound dog necessitated its installation.

RSVP (For Open House)

Each year, we invite our immediate neighbors, friends, and our whole church family to our home. You're invited! For up-to-date information and registration, see the web address below:

RSVP.ellisbalmer.net

Easter Photo Comparisons

A quick photographic comparison.



Looking Back

– 2025 (May – December)

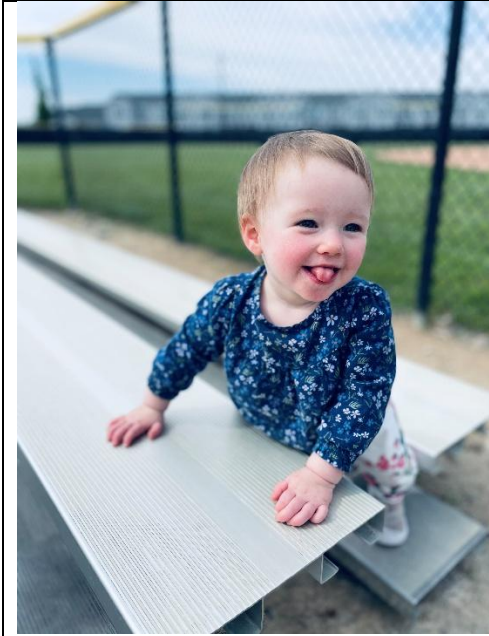
May

As Spring 2025 got into full swing, MJ discovered one of her great loves to this day: the playground. Her social personality bloomed alongside the flowers and her sense of adventure climbed as she learned to climb the steps of various Muncie playgrounds.

Whether seeing friends at t-ball games, or playing in our sunroom, MJ's interests and horizons have continued to grow.

The Summer months also mark both a period of slowdown and of planning for us. Near the end of each May, it has been the habit of both Kendall and Jonathan to go on a planning retreat near Jonathan's folks' home in Northern Kentucky.

This year, we also had a big transition at church. We found out FBCM's beloved Worship Arts Pastor of 11 years, Clif Davis, had accepted a full-time position at Taylor University –continuing his role with students there. We were sad to see him go, though we knew it was where the Lord was leading him and were happy that he had this new opportunity. This also meant a search committee would be formed at our church to find a new worship director.



June



June included camp (for Kendall) with the high school students at Indian Creek Baptist Camp, and the whole family went on a trip to Green Lake Conference Center in Wisconsin, for a Preaching conference. This was one of the only conferences we've been to where childcare was available, so we went as a whole family. It was a good time to meet other American Baptist pastors and MJ enjoyed herself – mostly. There was one time we went on a boat on the lake and did not have enough snacks. MJ was *very* upset then. But, overall, it was a great trip!

July



In July, Kendall and I officiated a wedding of a couple we had baptized on Easter Day of the same year. Their names are Beth and Chance. During pre-marital counseling and baptism class prep, we joked and asked if they had any other major life events they had in mind for this year. It was a joy to join their families for this special occasion. Because there are so many things for us to do at a special event like that, we don't have many photos. But we did get one: here's Moira Jane with her "church uncle" Ed (also the uncle of the groom).

Jonathan's whole side of the family went to Lake Michigan this Summer for a few days. It was tremendous to see Moira Jane learn what cousins were. At first, she called her cousins, Kinsey and Stella, "the babies" before learning they were "cousins."

She still asks about her cousins regularly, though we live far enough away from them that seeing them is by no means a weekly occurrence. One time, while in the car we asked her a question, saying "What do you think Moira Jane?" She replied, "I'm not Moira Jane. I'm COUSINS." We suppose that's one way to express she's been thinking of Summer memories!

We would spend the morning together at one of the beaches of Lake Michigan, and the afternoon doing some activity, trading off childcare responsibilities. One day we went shopping out at Saint Joseph (Kendall picked up Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and Jonathan purchased *Why We Love Baseball* by Joe Posnanski). Another day we saw *Superman* in theaters. The girls got ice cream. And despite the pictures where they're crying, they had a great time. We promise! We also took family photos, so we'll include some of them here. We definitely intend to go on another trip

with extended family again, we hope many more times in the future. It was good to have a few days of rest, even as Kendall was rushing to finish a grant proposal with our denomination.



**Lake Michigan
Balmer Family Vacation 2026**

August

Summer continued with the normal pattern of preparing for the fall, and the ongoing work of ministry. August also hosts the largest event all year in downtown Muncie, where First Baptist is located: Fire Up DWNTWN.

The church is a few blocks from the main festivities but on the way for some of those parking. We handed out free cookies to passersby. It was a good opportunity to meet our neighbors. It also helped us gain some new ideas for next time, and we even got away for a couple of hours to enjoy the street festival ourselves.

We also first tried one of our favorite new places in the restaurant and shopping area near Ball State called The Villages – the Little Snack Shop. Jonathan grew to love convenience stores during his time in Korea, and this place is reminiscent of that experience almost exactly. You can make your own ramen on site, and get all sorts of Asian snacks. MJ loves banana milk, Kendall loves a drink called *Milks* and Jonathan is partial to *Chilsung cider* (it's basically South Korean Sprite) and Japanese style prepackaged cakes. If you're in Muncie, or visit Muncie, try it. We have several great new places to eat which have recently opened in town.



**FIRE UP DWNTWN &
Discovering New Neighborhood
Favorites**

September

The fall is the start of our church event calendar, and the time when we begin announcing our congregational watchword and focus for the year – it’s our sort of “north star” as a congregation. This season’s is taken from Isaiah 12:4: we abbreviate it as **“Praise & Proclaim.”**

It was time to announce the plans the whole church had been thinking about, praying about, and planning: re-launching the youth ministry, partnering with Youth for Christ’s City Life program, getting more connected to Muncie Central High School which is mere blocks from our church.



“Dress Like Dad” day at day care.



One night when Jonathan made dinner at Youth City Life meeting.

Now, a rotation of church volunteers make the meals.



Thanks to Aaron Smith (who helped construct a solution for connecting the new TVs to the old and to the new mini PC) and the Palmer grant, the youth room received some significant upgrades.



We also were able to get new materials for youth group recreation: including “9 Square in the Air” and a portable gaga ball pit.

Our church was awarded \$11,700 Palmer Grant from our denomination. Kendall co-wrote the grant with a church member, Molly Flodder. They worked very hard on the proposal! While it took a while for everything to come together after we announced it: but we’re finishing up (now, in May 2026) our first semester going in during lunch multiple times a week to help students. And teachers seemed to really appreciate the “Teacher Appreciation Week” lunch from Chipotle we were able to provide as part of the grant, and this initiative, which we were so excited to announce that Fall. It also allowed the church to make significant upgrades to the youth room! (Thanks to Aaron Smith, who has done several projects around the church to upgrade our audio-viual capabilities).

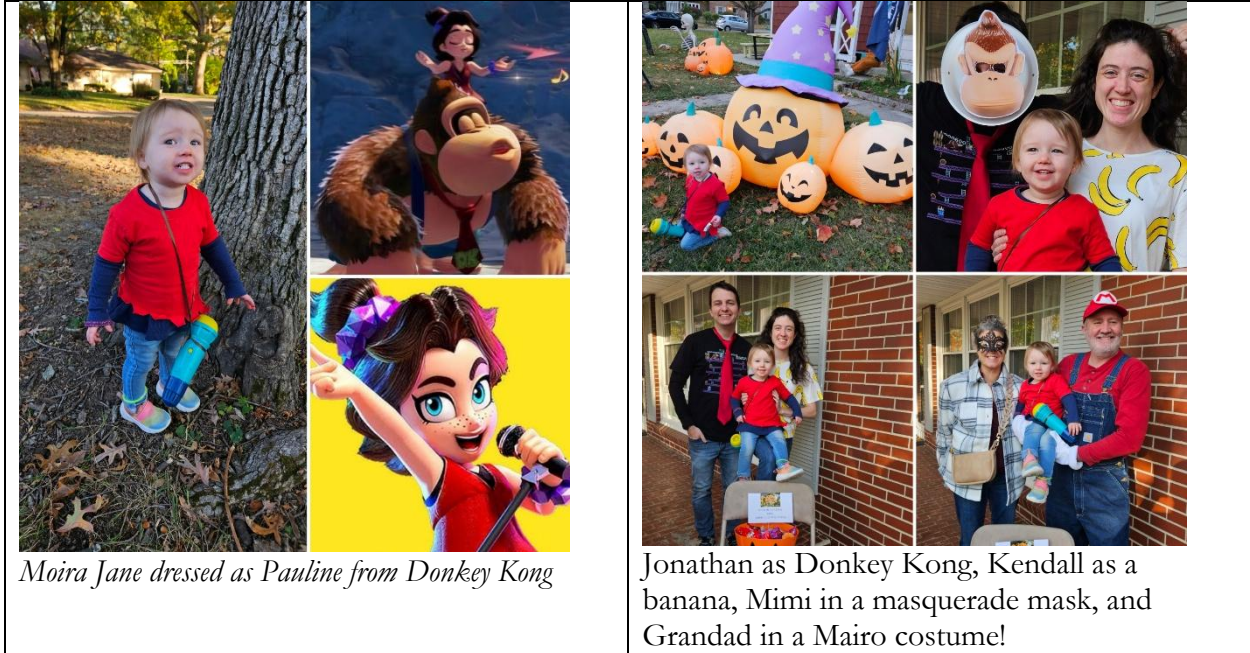


The Palmer grant helped our church fund academic coaching, regular meals for students at our “club night,” youth room upgrades, and a catered “Teacher Appreciation Week” meal!

October

Halloween is on the very last day of the month, but our memories of October seem to all land there. Perhaps it’s because, even today, Moira Jane will ask her daycare workers to “see a picture of me and mommy on Halloween.” She was so incessant in the request that her teacher asked if we could send some Halloween pictures to her phone. One reason Halloween has stuck with Moira Jane so fervently is probably because of why it looms large in many child’s imagination: candy. And, the time spent with her friends and family. The fact that Kendall’s parents, whom MJ calls Grandad and Mimi, were there to contribute. I also think the play dough set that Jonathan’s parents, whom she calls Noni and Avô, which is orange and has plastic spiders and other toys led her to “play Halloween” for months after the holiday had passed also caused the fascination with Halloween.

Jonathan dressed up in a very makeshift homemade Donkey Kong costume. MJ dressed up as the singer Pauline – also from the Donkey Kong series. We did not spend much money on costumes, because much of our money was tied up in trying to buy a new home here in Muncie.



Moira Jane dressed as Pauline from Donkey Kong

Jonathan as Donkey Kong, Kendall as a banana, Mimi in a masquerade mask, and Grandad in a Mairo costume!

Last year’s letter also told of plans for both Kendall and Jonathan to go to Punta Cana, in the Dominican Republic, with an organization that helped Pastors and spouses go on such trips. This did not happen. There was some sort of double-booking, or error. We received a notice that the trip would be cancelled, something the organizer insisted had not happened except once in nearly three decades of organizing the trips (the other being for the Covid-19 pandemic).

But, when I asked if we could have our \$300 deposit back, I received nothing but static from the other end—no response. It saddened us greatly. Before you sign up for a trip, reach out and we’ll tell you if it is with the same organization. I do not mean to besmirch all involved with this organization (so I won’t name them here), but often I fear people do not share these bad experiences because, simply, they can be embarrassing. We certainly wouldn’t want anyone else to go through what we did. It was not catastrophic for us, but we certainly would want friends to avoid a similar situation.

For Kendall’s birthday, we made other arrangements. And you know what? We had a great time.



Also in the Fall: we went as a family to a gathering at Indian Creek Baptist Camp. Moira Jane had a great time. Going together as a family to such events has been one of the blessings of Co-Pastoring these last four years.

November

By this time, the church, after months of searching, had called our new Worship Director, Cynthia Smith. She was a church member, an internal candidate, and a vocal professor at Ball State University. We were very excited for her to join the First Baptist Muncie team!



Just before Thanksgiving, we moved into our new house. It was the culmination of several months of searching. We had a conditional offer, and then another home came in for this house from another interested buyer whose offer was not contingent. In a dramatic turn of events, we had 24 hours to try to get financing should we wish to continue with the purchase. Our home had not sold. We went through with it and were approved for a loan. Lucius, our realtor with Viking Realty, had to submit the paperwork with mere minutes to spare before the deadline.



Our Old House at 5100 South Brezewood



Our New House at 224 North Alden in Muncie

We *really* wanted to live in this house. With the offer on track again, we had to hope that our home south of Muncie would sell quickly so we didn't have to pay two mortgages. Thankfully, we received an offer (which went through!) mere days later. It was perhaps ill-advised to try to go forward with no guarantee someone would soon put an offer on our house, but it did work out in the end. We would've been crestfallen had we let this house go, and days later received an offer on our old house.

Before, we lived South of Muncie, not far from Cowan. Now, we live right off of Tillotson, a four lane road in Muncie proper. We're the first home in the neighborhood, and close to Ball Memorial Hospital, walking distance from a coffee shop, a convenience store, a 24-hour pharmacy, a grocery store, and Ball State University.

When we first moved here, we took note of a few things. The first was that the previous owners, residents of this home for forty-years, were intimately involved in ministry as well. A priest of the Episcopal parish very close to First Baptist, retired for many years, had lived here before us with his family. It was a special realization to think that this house would remain the home of ministers, as it had been for decades.

The other is that this neighborhood seemed to be built for employees of the hospital and the university. Little did we know that would soon describe one of us.



The moment Moira Jane met her baby doll at her Sesame Street birthday party.

November is also Moira Jane’s birthday! Friends and family came for a Sesame street themed party. Her big present was her baby doll (and plenty of accessories). She loves putting baby to bed, feeding baby, and talking to baby. When she later saw Santa and was struck by suspicion and silence, Santa asked (as his stock phrase for little toddler girls, I’m sure), “Do you want a baby doll!” Immediately, MJ exploded into speech. Because of MJ’s smaller size, I’m sure Santa was surprised. But the torrent of excited speech about the baby doll she got for her birthday was poured out. That’s our talkative girl. She loves her friends, her music, her art, to climb, and her baby doll and “stuffies.”



Preparing our old house for final sale with some attic work took some time!



MJ was uncertain at first, but soon told Santa ALL about her baby doll.

December

One of the joys of the new home was having more room to host.

We hosted the Church Coordination Team for dinner at our new home in December. It was a trial run for hosting as many of you as can come this Saturday, May 15th, from 1-5 (don't forget to RSVP up near the top of the letter!).

On Christmas Eve, both of our parents and Kendall's sister Lexie were at the new home for Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve is always a workday for us. We often travel on Christmas Day to family. Having family already here, this year, was a real joy.



We prepared for Christmas with a Joseph tree.



We hosted our families for Christmas day.



MJ insists we get the "bus" whenever we go to the grocery store.



Above: After Christmas Day, we were able to visit friends (pictured: Jonathan's high school friends & their spouses and children)



Left: Church Coordination Team Christmas Party at our home.

Christmas candlelight service at church, Chinese food, new pajamas, and gifts under the tree. It was MJ's first time really understanding the concept of presents. She grew so used to every home we visited having a present for her, when we arrived to some house days after Christmas and there were no presents under the tree she exclaimed, "Where did the presents go!?" Later, we went to McDonald's. She had one of her first Happy Meals. Both relieved and elated she shouted, "It's a present!" when the happy meal was placed on the table in front of her.

In addition to many wonderful gifts from grandparents, family, and friends, Moira Jane also received a very special handmade gift from John and Betty Craig, whom have been attending First Baptist Muncie: a hand-crafted rocking horse. It was an incredibly generous gift.



The season is busy, and cold, but also joyous. There is a reason we never send the family update letter around Christmastime!

– 2026 (January – April)

January

Here is where things surprised us. Not long after coming back for the New Year, things were "off." And we're not talking about the huge snowstorm which descended upon, seemingly, half the United States.

Upon completing a review of last year with the church treasurer, it became clear that things were not all financially well with the church.

We experienced attrition in giving, in attendance, and more than a little due to deaths in our church family. It was no one person or event. In everyone we reached out and talked to, there was no single thing, much less person, to “blame.” But the numbers simply were not adding up. While this was not a complete unheard of – we had been eyeing trends in church giving since we arrived in 2022–our January review, and February news, was catalytic. That is the way of things sometimes: first they happen slowly, then all at once. First Baptist Church Muncie is not unique among churches in facing financial and attendance shortfalls.

We began to meet, host congregational conversations, and pray fervently for God’s leading.

This month, we also took the youth students to a regional gathering with our friends at Terre Haute First Baptist Church. Our students greatly enjoyed it. One of the largest youth ministries there was

Fusion Youth Gathering (American Baptist Churches of Indiana & Kentucky) at Terre Haute First Baptist Church



Zo Baptist Church who traveled all the way from Fort Wayne. Some of our students had never been to a multi-church youth gathering! Not long after that, the big snow storm hit. Because a man named Robert Burton left Jonathan his snow blower, before he moved to Mississippi, Jonathan cleared multiple driveways for neighbors and also went with a Deacon to clear a church member’s drive way. It was FRIGID – we’re grateful we had the snow blower! MJ also made snow cream for the first time. Her dad would not touch the stuff, but for her mom it’s a time-honored tradition!



Making snow cream during the storm.



Playing “Go Fish” as a way to practice basic requests for English language practice at the Khan’s family home.



Removing ice and snow from a church member’s house with Deacon Aaron.

MJ grew to love movies like *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) and *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1989)



February

The early months of the year brought a lot of anxiety, and we asked ourselves a lot of hard questions: had we done something wrong? If so, what? What was the path forward? Were we truly being faithful as Pastors? Why was this happening? It’s no understatement to say we wrestled with God over these questions. We also knew we had to do what was best for the church.

Both of us went to the Church Coordination Team (CCT) Vision retreat with a proposal: because the church could no longer afford both of us as full-time pastors, we proposed we would both begin

looking for jobs. Whichever one of us found a fitting position first would significantly reduce his or her hours worked at the church.

Finally, we would propose two possible amendments to the budget to take place mid-year. It was something no one wanted, but which we all (in time) became convinced was necessary.



Youth Camp Fundraiser – Chili Cook Off 2026

Let us also back up for a second. Whenever we reflect on events, especially unpleasant ones (even if they're in the recent past), we can neglect the fact that they happen at the same time as things which are ordinary and even beautiful. The whole church came together for a camp fundraiser, where the students served, the adults made chili for a cook-off, and all generations gathered in fellowship. This was also the time we learned some exciting news about our family.



Even with all the unknown, we kept up our normal routines.

While even this would be changing soon, MJ continued her pattern of Mondays with Dad, Fridays with mom, and Daycare Tuesday – Thursday.

Monday Skyline was a priority!



The one time of year we wear clerical collars: Ash Wednesday service with High Street United Methodist Church.



At CCT Vision retreat, we had fun. We even made pizzas, as suggested as a reflective activity in the book *Soul Culture* by Matt Snowden and Joshua Hays – which we ask all CCT members to read. But we also talked about very difficult budget matters.



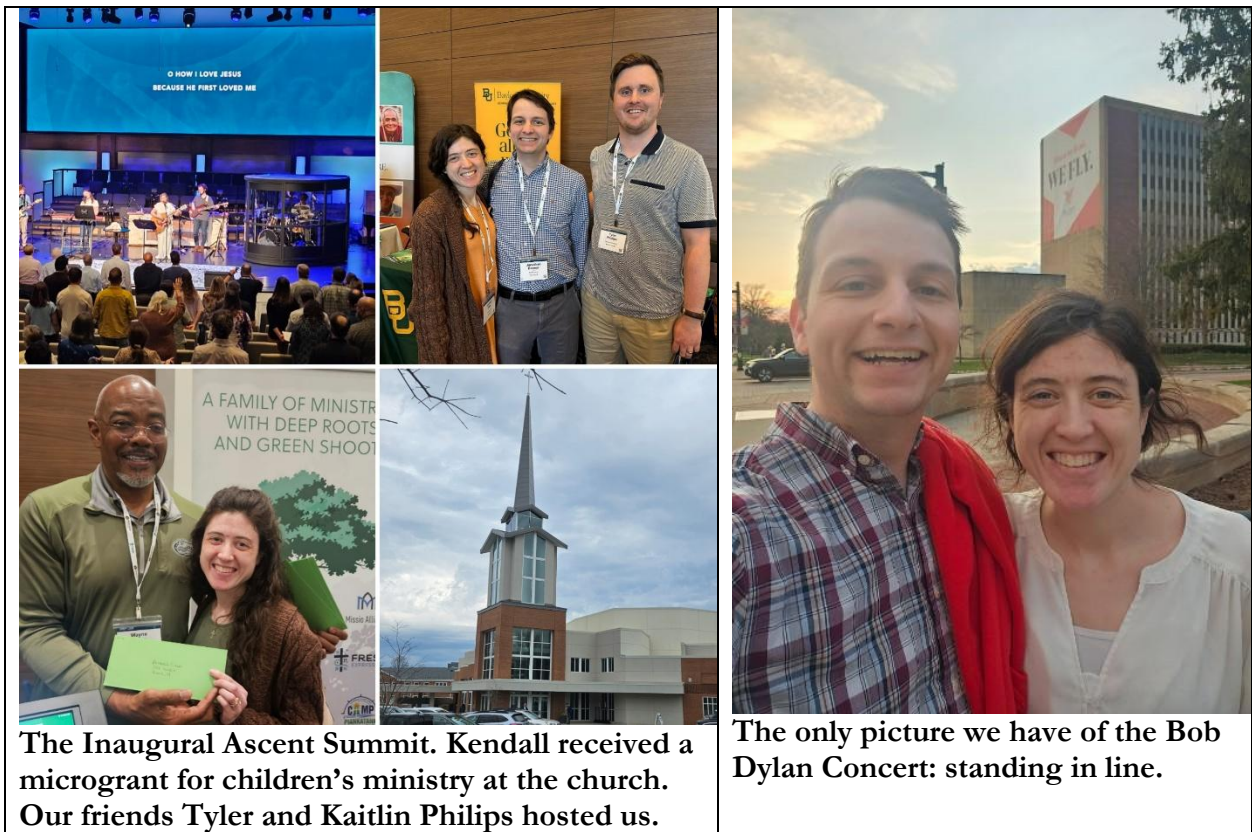
Sickness also hit our home. Alpha did his best to make us feel better.

We also kept up with our normal responsibilities at this time. We alternated teaching youth and preaching. We filled our days with hospital visits and meetings. We studied and we prayed. The Wednesday night meals that church members had begun to provide were now a regular part of youth gatherings. There were times for Bible studies and hosting friends new at old at our home. None of it stops for a crisis. The fact life goes on can feel hectic, but it may ultimately serve as a blessing. You can only focus on a singular problem for so long before it becomes all-consuming.

Kendall had also begun mentoring interns: both a worship and children’s internship, and social work interns. Because Kendall had earned her Master of Social Work (as well as Master of Divinity) three years ago, she was therefore able to mentor social work interns. She began a congregational social work internship program at the church. These interns began gathering resources, learning about the helping process and implementing it, and even hosted a congregational education event on poverty in our city and neighborhood.

March

This month, Kendall and Jonathan had a bit of a respite. We went to the inaugural Ascent Summit, alongside Jonathan’s fellow Cincinnati and our fellow-Pastor Tyler Phillips (Pastor of Berryville Baptist in Virginia). Moira Jane got to spend the week with her Nonni who came to visit. The Ascent Summit was a wonderful time: a real “family reunion” sort of feel full of people dedicated to the great commandment and the great commission in North American and the world. Those from Cuba to Canada were all present. I look forward to getting connected with Ascent as the months go on.



The Inaugural Ascent Summit. Kendall received a microgrant for children’s ministry at the church. Our friends Tyler and Kaitlin Philips hosted us.

The only picture we have of the Bob Dylan Concert: standing in line.

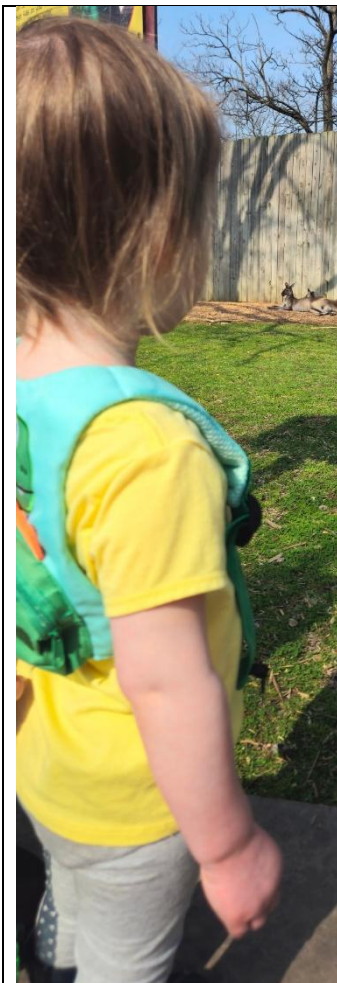
We also got to see Bob Dylan in concert at Emens auditorium at Ball State. Jonathan was living his “big city” dreams right here in Muncie, Indiana. We walked to a “big name” concert from our house, as the event took place at Emens auditorium. We were surprised at how engrossing it was to watch the octogenarian musician with phones locked up in a magnetic pocket (Dylan is very strict

about his “no (smart) phone” policy). We were taken aback at how nervous it made us to do what every parent did before the 2000s: leave the children with a babysitter without a phone in their pocket. Of course, everything ended up splendidly.

April & May (so far)

This was a month of great transition. By this point, we knew that Kendall had been offered the job at Ball State University. She is the inaugural director of the Humanities in Action program. She’ll help Humanities students at the university in the process of securing a paid internship with non-profits, businesses, and organizations around the state. She will also maintain relationships with those organizations and work with a team in the College of Sciences & Humanities to ensure the success of both the program and students. We’re so grateful she was able to find a fitting position so quickly.

This is also the month the whole church learned the news about the church budget, and we began the process of deciding on which mid-year budget amendment we would choose. In the end, we cut around \$50,000 from this year’s budget (and next year’s budget will be even smaller, compared to the originally adopted 2026 budget).



MJ looks with wonder at a Kangaroo.



MJ views a manatee



MJ views Fionz & Fritz (hippos)

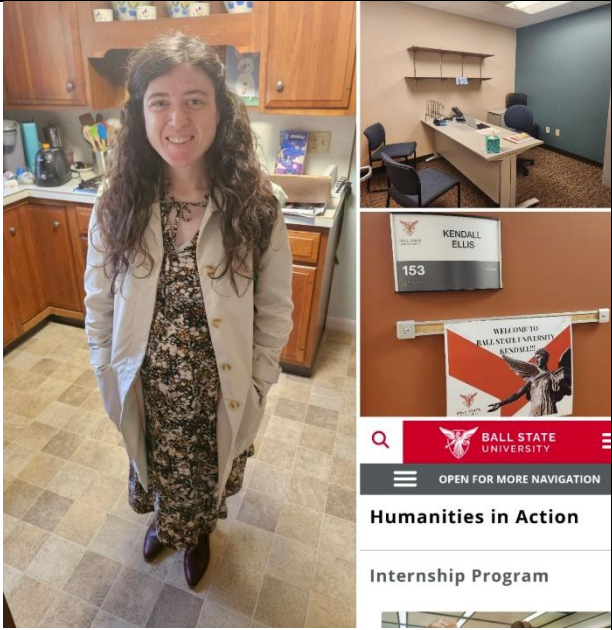


MJ waves, alligator juice cup in hand.

We also finally had that fence installed. Being able to let out the toddler and the dog to run around without watching the toddler like a hawk or having to put the dog out on the line, a very welcome change. Leaving the sun room door open on a warm day, and letting MJ or Alpha (the dog) play in the sun room or in the yard without worry is a welcome change. One of our neighbors has also begun doing “free play Fridays.” We’ve participated in some and MJ loves living in a place within walking distance to a park or neighborhood friends. During Spring break, Moira Jane also went to the Cincinnati Zoo, which she thoroughly enjoyed.



Moira Jane’s first movie in theaters: *The Super Mario Galaxy Movie* (2026)



Kendall’s first day as Program Director of the Humanities in Action Program at Ball State University.

Starting in May, Moira Jane went to day care full time. It's been a hard transition for her to wake up without her mom at home, as Mom's new job starts at 7:30 AM. It's also been hard for her not to have a full day with Mom and a full day with Dad. The flexibility of both working at the same place, had allowed Kendall and I to make us both working full time to co-exist with part-time daycare. While these things are no more, MJ – and the whole family – is still finding new joys. To help us to intentionally spend some time together, Kendall and I have started going to half-priced movies on Tuesday evenings.

And Moira Jane also saw her first movie in theaters. For months, she has loved watching movies at home. Her favorite is the 1988 Studio Ghibli film *My Neighbor Totoro*. She will look for the little sister Mei around the house. In the past, she has laughed when it rains because there is a scene where a storm scares Satsuki and her sister Mei and their father tells them if they laugh, whatever scares them will go away. It's wonderful to see her imagination come to life. Even if that means she is now scared of the dark, when mere months ago she never thought about it.

In Sickness & In Health

We received wonderful news this year! Last year's letter brought news of Kendall's hospitalization due to Crohn's. This year, we have much better news.

For a while, Kendall has been seeing an excellent gastroenterologist named Dr. Douglass Rex – whom we received a strong recommendation from by Brian Green. We're grateful for his recommendation, not least because for the first time since she was diagnosed at age 18, Kendall is free of active disease. Kendall still has Crohn's disease, but this is the healthiest she has been for years and years. For that we are grateful to God for patient and attentive physicians and the advances in medicine.

A Major, And Unexpected, Career Transition

The video announcement can be found at: <https://youtu.be/8FDbF5nbBT4>



Our Family Is Growing!

If you caught the end of the video, or read under the February heading, you saw it: we're expecting our second child! This is exciting news! Sometime in early November, a second child will join our family. No, we do not know if the child will be a boy or a girl. We do not plan on finding out until the birth either. We can confirm that the child's middle name will be Ellis (Kendall's last name) just like Moira Jane's, regardless of sex.

But we're delighted to share this good news and know that all of you will welcome this newest member of our family just as you have welcomed Moira Jane.

A Good & Final Word

"Those who will never be fooled can never be delighted, because without self-forgetfulness there can be no delight, and this is a great and grievous loss." – Alan Jacobs

Cynicism is a terrible ally, though it often poses as one. It suggests that if we're guarded enough, we can stop ourselves from being hurt. But the truth is: to have the things in life really worth having: friendship and love and true community and commitment, we must allow that possibility. To do things like sharing a joke, a meal, or your time with those we love, or may come to love, is to invite the possibility we could end up fooled or duped or, yes, hurt.

If you have received this letter, it's because at some point in our lives we have crossed paths.

It is tempting to present an image of our lives which is pristine. Or, if it's not pristine, at least marketable – to be “messy” and “real” is fine in modern society, so long as it's a brand which can present such messiness in a way that comes packaged as a consumable solution to a problem.

By contrast, we know this letter is neither marketable nor pristine. But we do hope it, as honestly as is possible (we're never fully reliable narrators of our own lives), presents to you something of how we are doing.

And we hope that you are doing well, in turn. But, even if you're not, may you know there is a home at the corner of Gilbert and Alden Road, just off Tillotson, in Muncie – a house full of Balmers and Ellises whom would love to have you as our guest.

May the Lord God bless and keep you.

In the warmth of Christ's peace,

Jonathan Balmer, Kendall Ellis, Moira Jane Ellis Balmer, & [Baby Sibling Name To-Be-Determined]