



# Celebrate Florida

The United Church of Christ in Florida

April-May 2023



## UCC Supports New College

In January, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis appointed six new members (considered conservative academics or activists) to the 12-member Board of Trustees at New College of Florida in Sarasota. This change was seen as a move to take the college in a new direction academically. At its January board meeting, the college president was fired and Richard Corcoran (the one-time Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives and recent state Education Commissioner) was installed as its interim president.

What was seen as a refutation of the college's independent reputation created considerable controversy. This has been especially the case within the United Church of Christ as the institution was founded by local civic leaders in 1960 with financial assistance from the Board of Homeland Missions of the UCC.



The February 28 meeting of the college Board generated a large crowd of protestors that included UCC President and General Minister Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer along with clergy and members from several Florida UCC congregations. Rev. Dorhauer spoke before the Board, saying "The long arc of history will grind you into dust and... you will be remembered for the sycophants that you are," he said. "That's what history does." The protest

and his appearance received considerable print and broadcast media coverage that included an opinion piece published in the March 4 *Tampa Bay Times* and one by Rev. Dorhauer in the March 1 *Sun-Sentinel* — who was also interviewed on MSNBC.



### Pastoral Letter from the Conference Minister Regarding New College

REV. JOHN VERTIGAN  
CONFERENCE MINISTER

*Following is a Pastoral Letter from Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan posted on February 1 to the churches of the Florida Conference.*

Perhaps you've been reading about the recent Florida government interruption of life at New College in Sarasota, Florida. A lead article in the *Orlando Sentinel* on February 1, 2023, begins this way:

"Former Florida House Speaker Richard Corcoran is slated to become the next president of embattled New College of Florida, while Gov. Ron DeSantis is pushing to cut diversity, equity and

*...continued on page 2*

### So Proud to Represent the United Church of Christ

LYNN JONES  
CONFERENCE MODERATOR  
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC/SARASOTA



On Tuesday, February 28, several hundred concerned students, parents, alumni and local citizens turned out to protest changes being made at New College of Florida, also known as "The Honors College of Florida" — changes that included a new, dramatically more conservative President and Board of Trustees who later that day voted to abolish the school's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs and eliminate their Office of Outreach & Inclusion Excellence.

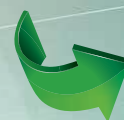
What many don't realize is that 63 years ago it was the United Church of Christ that helped to provide the initial funding that established New College, and since then it has

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inclusion initiatives and curtail faculty tenure on state university campuses. All of these planned changes apparently are intended to further DeSantis' campaign against what he describes as a "far-left" agenda in higher education."

Current and former students, faculty and education experts from around the country are decrying this incursion into higher education by one seeking political points to engage a base of voters who have bought into the so called "anti-woke" movement. It's time for the church to raise our voice, too. It is a different voice that needs a platform you can provide.

Here's something you maybe didn't know: "In 1960 New College was founded as a private liberal arts college in cooperation with the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (Congregational); in 1962, at the campus dedication ceremony on November 18, earth from Harvard was mixed with soil from New College to symbolize the shared Congregationalist origins and high academic ideals of the two institutions."

The history of our United Church of Christ is one of valuing education and encouraging freedom of thought as each generation shapes a sound future for itself and those who will come after them. The Florida government attack on New College is an attack on foundational values that have shaped our United Church of Christ culture for generations. I encourage you to reach out to your legislators and to the governor's office. Make it known that we value the high academic ideals upon which New College was founded and that we object to this hijacking of higher education at New College and on campuses across the state of Florida.

Blessings, Rev. John Vertigan

represented our values of diversity and inclusion, freedom of thought, expression and education. Because of our denomination's influence on the school, the changes noted above feel very personal to many of us. Thus, included in that crowd on February 28 were dozens of clergy and laity from seven



of our local UCC churches (**Venice UCC, St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota, Congregational UCC/Sarasota, Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg, Faith UCC/Dunedin and Spring Hill UCC**) along with Rev. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President of the UCC. We waved signs, chanted along with the New College students and parents, spoke to the press and cheered on the various speakers that included six current students, State House Representative Anna Eskamani from Orlando and Rev. Dorhauer.

As Rev. Dorhauer enthusiastically shared, New College is the very epitome of what it means to be a liberal arts college where students come from around the world to study a variety of diverse subjects, many with multiple majors. He talked about the UCC's support for keeping the school as it has been and was clear in rebuking the changes that have taken place. We were so grateful to have Rev. Dorhauer with us that day to show the commitment to New College and to the values that we hold dear. His presence on campus and his passionate speech helped to further ignite all of us there.

Seeing and hearing the anguish that so many of these students are experiencing was heartbreaking, particularly when you realize that the very place where they feel safe and able to fully live and learn is being threatened by those seeking political gain. Many of the students identify as LGBTQ+ and shared that New College has been a "home away from home" where they have thrived in their college years. I was honored to be there and to stand with my brothers and sisters in Christ as we witnessed this day. As difficult as it was to speak to the New College students, parents and alumni about what they presume may be the future of the school, we listened intently to their concerns and demonstrated our support as best we could.

We are living in challenging times, to say the least, particularly here in Florida. And yet, we in the UCC continue to "Be the Church" far outside the walls of our sanctuaries and in ways that make a difference. Standing together with other UCC members from around the area felt so empowering, and it's at times like this when I am prouder than ever to be a member of the United Church of Christ and to represent my local church and the Florida Conference. When we come together to proclaim the truth that we are all children of God and that no matter who or what may try to stand in the way of any individual's opportunity to live into their full selves, we are there to speak up and take a stand. May we continue to find opportunities together to challenge what is not in keeping with our core values and beliefs, in positive and meaningful ways.

With blessings to you and yours in this time of Lent.



## Celebrate FLORIDA

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## Florida Conference Clergy and UCC Demonstrate at New College

The United Church of Christ General Minister and President spoke as several Florida Conference clergy joined a student protest in Sarasota, Fla., yesterday [February 28] in an effort to keep higher education from being influenced by politics and to support the diversity of a [school the UCC helped found](#).

[New College of Florida](#) is a small state university that was founded after the Board of Home Missions of the Congregational and Christian Churches (later renamed the United Church of Christ) [provided the initial funding](#) to establish a four-year liberal arts college in Sarasota.

“New College of Florida is an institution that was created with the assistance of funding provided by the UCC in 1960,” said the **Rev. Evan Farrar**, pastor of the **Congregational UCC/Sarasota**. “Since that time, it has grown into what the UCC envisioned — an institution that embodies many of the values we hold dear in the UCC — freedom of speech, academic freedom, freedom of thought, and a commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive community.” *From the Sunshine Connection, March 1*



### UCC Voices

From Rev. Dr. John Fairless, Pastor of Venice UCC, in e-blast to church members



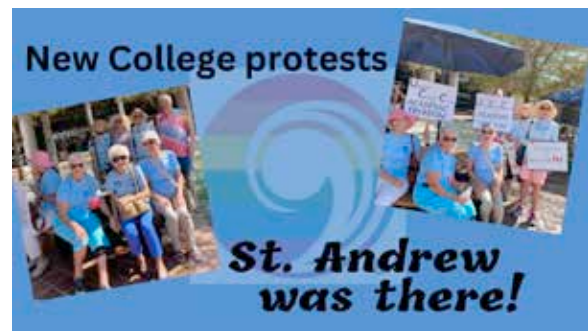
*Pastor John with the Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer*

It was my privilege (I think I can use that word) to join with Rev. Mel Burrowes and Dr. Lynda Weston this week as we represented VUCC at the student demonstration at New College in Sarasota. I hope that you have seen and followed the developments there, as our congregation has deep ties to the formation of the school. The founding vision of our United Church of Christ involvement in the establishment of New College featured access to higher education for ALL students, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual

orientation, or any other exclusive characteristics. These ideals are threatened by the current administration of Gov. Ron DeSantis and the appointments of new trustees and an interim president who seem poised only to advance the governor's agenda, rather than the best interests of the school. Read, stay informed, and get involved in the ongoing developments at New College!

From Rev. Dr. Mary Alice Mulligan, Pastor of St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota, in an e-blast to church members

Can we get together with other churches to act? This was the biggest success so far. The day after our coffee hour conversation, three Sarasota UCC clergy met about the significant interference from the Governor at New College. One of the ministers contacted our General Minister and President, Rev. John Dorhauer, who traveled to Sarasota for the student rally/protest at New College yesterday [February 28] and to attend the Board of Trustees meeting which followed. The area UCC ministers contacted each other about the student protest.



They spread the word in their congregations. Our Conference Moderator, **Lynn Jones**, reported there were eight different congregations present at the student protest on Tuesday. At one point in his remarks, Rev. Dorhauer asked the UCC people who were present at the rally to give a shout out and it was clear there was a big group. St. Andrew carpooled and had at least 10 people present. We talked with folks from **Congregational UCC**, **Faith UCC**, **First Congregational** and **Spring Hill UCC**. The students were so pleased to receive not just community support but support from Christian church people. It was a great day.



*Contingent from Spring Hill UCC*

*...continued on page 4*



**From Rev. Kim Wells, Pastor of Lakewood UCC/  
St. Petersburg, in e-blast to church members**

Many thanks to **Bill Parsons, Dyanne Edds and Emily Bell** for being part of the demonstration at New College on Tuesday. New College was founded in 1960 by the United Church of Christ.

There were about 300 people at the demonstration, many of them from UCC churches. Did this rally change the Governor's mind about policies regarding higher education? Probably not. But it certainly let the students, staff and parents of New College know that the wider community is paying attention and cares about what is happening.



*L to R: Rev. Todd Weber (member, Faith UCC/Dunedin), Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota), Rev. Dr. Mary Alice Mulligan (St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota), Rev. John Dorhauer (UCC General Minister and President), Annika Fuller (Ministry Associate at Congregational UCC/Sarasota and New College student) and Rev. Evan Farrar (Congregational UCC/Sarasota)*

*Rev. John Dorhauer (UCC General Minister and President), Dyanne Edds, Rev. Kim Wells and Rev. Emily Bell*

**“We** stand with the students presently at New College,” said the **Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby**, Pastor of **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota**. **“Rev. Evan Farrar (Congregational UCC/Sarasota)** and I are both blessed to know a few of the New College students. Many of them are in a very difficult situation and are being overlooked. I don’t want to forget that New College made a promise to the existing students to provide a safe space to learn and be who God created each to be. The students are now faced with a difficult choice — do I stay or do I leave. As a parent, this is heartbreaking to me.”

**Libby Harrity**, a Congregational UCC member, is involved in student government. She’s the representative voice of the New College students as the Senate president of the school’s student body. “For over 50 years New College and its unique academic program have thrived in the face of those who may

***First Congregational UCC/Sarasota stands strong for New College***

try to force it into the box that mainstream universities occupy,” Harrity said. “The outpouring of support from the local community and also from the greater UCC has shown me, as an elected student official, the solidarity of our national community.”

From UCC News, February 20 <https://www.ucc.org/ucc-gmp-to-join-student-protest-at-florida-college-with-congregational-roots-overtaken-by-the-governor/>





## Extending an Extravagant UCC Welcome

REV. EVAN FARRAR  
PASTOR, CONGREGATIONAL UCC/SARASOTA

On February 3, **Annika Fuller**, our Ministry Associate, and I sent an e-mail to Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer to alert him to what was happening at New College of Florida. Governor Ron DeSantis had recently appointed an array of conservative members to the college's Board of Trustees with the goal of fundamentally changing the mission and nature of New College – a mission the UCC helped to create when the college was started decades ago.

In my e-mail to Dr. Dorhauer I explained, "Having worked with the national church previously, I know the value of having the national church weigh in directly and personally on a justice issue like this."

Annika, who is a sophomore at New College, added, "Sending a national spokesperson to our next Board of Trustees meeting on February 28 would make a huge impact, not only to the board members, but to the students of New College. We students are really in need of support right now. DeSantis chose New College because of how small it is and because of our unique, quirky, and revolutionary student body."

Less than an hour later, Dr. Dorhauer wrote back saying, "I am outraged by this news." Four days later he informed us he was coming himself to New College to personally represent the UCC. We were delighted by the news!

We then took up the challenge of preparing for Dr. Dorhauer's visit. This included coordinating logistics, collaborating with our UCC colleagues in Bradenton, Sarasota and beyond, and making sure Dr. Dorhauer was able to speak at the protest and the Board of Trustees meeting.

While, in true UCC fashion, this advocacy effort was collaborative we are pleased our small church was a catalyst for Dr. Dorhauer's impactful visit and are deeply thankful he made the effort to be here.



*Dr. Dorhauer was able to speak at the protest and the Board of Trustees meeting*

*L-R- Rev. Dorhauer, Laurie Colton, Rev. Evan and students Annika Fuller and Libby Harrity*

*On behalf of the Florida Conference and all who value academic freedom, we thank you Dr. Dorhauer for your presence and encouraging words.*





BY REV. LESLIE ETHEREDGE  
ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER

## COM Corner

### CALLING ALL ACTIVE AUTHORIZED MINISTERS Our REDI training is now READY!!

What is REDI training you may ask? It stands for Racial, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and is a training that will be offered by the Equius Group (check them out at: <http://equiugroup.biz>) four different times throughout 2023-24.

Active authorized clergy will be REQUIRED to participate in one of the four sessions as this will offer the much-needed training in these areas as we adhere to directives in the UCC Manual on Ministry, "UCC Ministerial Code" and the "Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers in the UCC." Our Florida Conference Board of Directors has approved these offerings and our Committee on Ministry has agreed that completion of one of

the four sessions (eight hours total) will also serve to meet the boundary training requirement for the 2023-25 cycle.

In other words, when you do your training, perhaps in April or September of this year, you will be DONE with your BT requirement for the entire cycle...not that we won't have some great BT offerings out there for you to partake of, also!

The wide scope of information and expertise that Equius offers for this intense and vital education is expensive. The Florida Conference will cover the lion's share of this expense but we will be asking for a buy-in of \$100 from your ministry setting to help offset costs, hoping they will consider it an investment in their clergy.

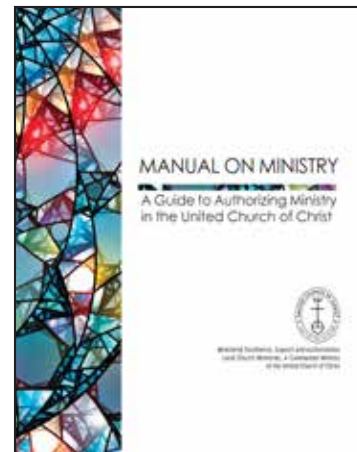
If you want to get this accomplished in 2023, please save the dates/times for one of these options:

Option 1: April 24-25 (9:30am to 1:30pm EDT daily)

Option 2: September 22 (4-8pm EDT) and September 23 (8am-Noon, EDT)

Find registration info coming soon to the *Sunshine Connection* and on the Florida Conference website.

*From the Sunshine Connection, March 15*



*Become a*

*Friend of the Conference*

*with a generous contribution to*

... strengthen our mutual covenant ... stand us on the front line of prophetic witness and outreach as we preach a gospel of nonviolence ... teach cultural competence in a changing world ... address issues of climate change that threaten our way of life right here in Florida.

Thank you for your prayerful consideration. To contribute, please go to: <https://uccfla-reg.brtapp.com/donate>

### Share The Good News

If you are not mailing us your church newsletter or placing us on your e-mail list to receive it, then we can't share your good news with our other churches.

Please send your electronic newsletters, Facebook posts and e-blasts to [RickCarson1@gmail.com](mailto:RickCarson1@gmail.com)





## Conference Staff Reports

## Reflections from Rev LaTrell



### Conversations In My Head

BY REV. LATRELL HARRISON  
ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER

*Disclaimer: This article may feel disjointed to those reading it. Often the thoughts that run through my mind are not cohesive; they are multiple threads of random thoughts. :)*

*On another note, this is not specific to any church or denomination.*

I read an article about a pastor recently, who was a recipient of a \$50,000 award. During COVID, he gave up his salary so that other church staff could keep their salaries. On October, 2022, the pastor and his family lost their home to a fire. There were two phrases that stood out for me in this article, “finishing differently” and “the importance of investors and partners working together to solve a particular problem.”

My mind immediately began processing cooperative ministry. It’s a conversation I have been having in my head since the pandemic. What will thriving congregations look like post-pandemic? What are the dangers of returning to what was before COVID? Why do we normalize dysfunction? Why are Super Soul Sunday and AA meetings church for some? Will youth soccer league games on Sunday stifle the progress of youth formation programs? Is the church in competition with these things? How often do we look at our vision and mission statements? Are these statements still true for us now?

This article evoked my random thoughts around the terms “cooperative,” “investors” and “partners.” I believe the nucleus for cooperative ministry is the value it finds in collaboration. “Widening the table” opens the flow for a possible path to emerge. There is not one pattern or model to cooperative ministry. I believe there are good models out there; however, I believe it is specific to the local setting and the decisions of the partners who are working together. I believe the wisdom of the room will reveal the next faithful step and the step does not have to be something big.

While I am not going to spend time in this article discussing

ways to do cooperative ministry, I am suggesting understanding your “why” in your local setting. While I believe that the church is not in competition with the things I named earlier, I do believe it is important for us to know and understand our “why.” Our niche will help us remain relevant.

The youth soccer league, AA and Super Soul Sunday know their why. Have we figured out what our niche is? This is an ongoing conversation to have. What I have discovered to be true is: “If we sit in the question long enough, the answer will come.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Movie quote from, *Marry Me*, spoken by Owen Wilson’s character

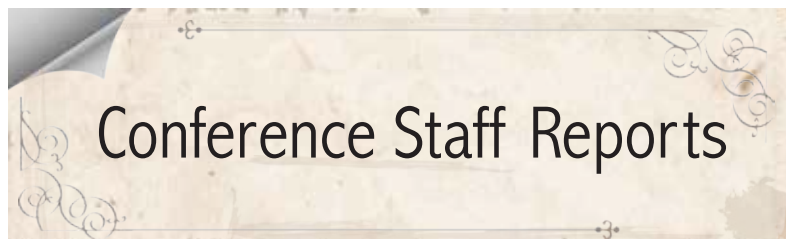


## Holy Week and Easter Blessings

from the Florida Conference staff



BY NEAL WATKINS  
MINISTER FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE



## “And They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our...”

I’ve written quite a bit about my wonderings... and yet I wonder.

This will not be a commentary on being more loving of our God and neighbor so that others might know more of Christ’s love as it is embodied in how we show up in the world. I believe in that. But that’s not what I’m wondering.

I’m wondering: How are our churches known? How is your church known?

In this world, the identities we are known by are claimed by some and unfairly assigned to others. “Identity” is a blessing to some and a curse to others. “Identity” can speak to who we are or it can be the assumptions of those around us that speak more loudly and therefore sound more assured.

So much of how we are known by our neighbors is beyond our control. And yet. The extent to which we are known by our Creator is unparalleled.

I’m wondering: What is it about how we are known by God that impacts your ability to live in to how you show up for your community?



For one thing is certain, they will know us as followers of Christ. And I pray that the impact we have on our communities reflects the faith we have in who God is and who God is calling us to be.

As I continue to work with churches in the midst of the strategic discerning questions that call us to evaluate both the known and the unknown, it occurs to me that what we choose to do, what we choose to no longer do and that which we refuse to do are reflections as much about what/who we know as they are aspirations for how we would like to be known.

May we feel so confident in who God is and who God knows us as that we are liberated to live boldly into the future God is beckoning us towards.

May it be so.

Amen.

### *A Richness of Opportunities*

#### **Your Invitation to be Informed – Inspired – Transformed**

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### *We Are The Light at The Heart of The Community...*



MIAMI SHORES COMMUNITY CHURCH



**Who We Say We Are**  
*The brief text we use on our websites, e-blasts  
and other communications*





## Disaster Trauma Retreat

The Conference Church House hosted a retreat co-sponsored by the UCC Disaster Ministries and the Florida Conference, “*Trauma: How It Can Affect You and Your Faith Community*,” from February 6-7. It was facilitated by Rev. Dr. Martha Jacobs, Senior Minister at First Congregational Church, Chappaqua, NY, and former coordinator for UCC Disaster Ministries Chaplains. Author of *A Clergy Guide to End of Life Issues*, the retreat centered on healing and building skills to provide an understanding of:

- Our own reactions to disasters and traumatic situations and why we react the way we do
- How we can help our faith community handle traumatic situations and scriptural support to help
- How clergy can work with their congregations when disasters/traumatic situations strike in their community

## Church Leadership Training Workshop

The Conference made available notice of a February church leadership training workshop via Zoom that was made possible at no cost by The Center for Transformational Leadership/Southern New England Conference of the UCC. Three sessions were made available: basics for treasurers, moderators and pastor parish relations committee members.

*From the Sunshine Connection, February 1*

## Clergy Retreat

Upcoming Clergy Retreat: “Surely: Things We Can Count On” — Affirmations for an Easter People

From April 27-28 authorized ministers of the Florida Conference are invited to come together under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Carolyne Call, Conference Minister of the Penn Central Conference and a previous guest leader here in the Conference.

We anticipate check-in circles, two workshop/conversation sessions, worship, and the later part of the evening will be yours to do with as you wish wherever you wish.

Registration is required for planning purposes, but there is no cost to attend. Please click [here](#) to register.

*From the Sunshine Connection, March 22*



## Upcoming Governance Workshop

We are excited to offer clergy and lay leadership throughout the Florida Conference the opportunity to learn from UCC General Counsel, Heather E. Kimmel during this in-person half-day workshop on Saturday, June 3. Please save the date and look for more details in upcoming *Sunshine Connections*!

## Church Safety

The Conference is looking to convene a conversation about what local churches are doing, as best practices, to prioritize congregational safety while on their campuses. As we aim to set a time most convenient, please [e-mail Neal Watkins](#) if you are interested in being a part of this discussion.

*From the Sunshine Connection, February 1*

## Church E-Blast Precautions

When your church office sends out e-blasts to those on your mailing lists, it would be a wise practice to send them as blind carbon copies (bcc), which hides and protects the recipients’ e-mail addresses. These addresses might otherwise make their way to unscrupulous persons who will use them for purposes not necessarily faith-full.

## Retelling the “Origin Story”

A book on this history, [Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ](#), will be published in July by the Pilgrim Press. Those interested in doing a Florida Conference-wide book study and discussion next winter are encouraged to purchase/read the book and contact **Rev. Teña Nock** (Associate Pastor, **First United Church of Tampa**). For more reading about the “fifth stream,” [please read here](#).

*From the Suncoast Connection, March 1*

## A Timely Reminder from Faith UCC/Dunedin



## Naples UCC Celebrates Its First 50 Years

Members and friends of Naples UCC enjoyed three days of celebration, March 10-12, as the church honored its 50-year history. The festivities began on Friday, March 10, with Senior Pastor **Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw** interviewing Revs. John Dorhauer, Geoffrey Black and John Thomas — all having served as UCC General Minister and President spanning the last 25 years.

On Saturday morning, there was a Meet- and-Greet in the Gathering Place to mingle with Rev. Dr. Ron Patterson, NUCC pastor emeritus, and his spouse, Charnley Marsden; and former pastors, Rev. Drs. David Kaiser-Cross and Deb Kaiser-Cross, Rev. Beverly Duncan, Rev. Dr. Sharon Harris-Ewing, Rev. Luvvy Kovacik and Rev. Cathy O'Connell.

This was a casual affair and opportunity to catch up with some of the congregation's beloved ministers. Later on Saturday there was a reception with music followed by elegant three-course meal.

The evening program featured comments from honored guests and the premiere of a 50th anniversary video celebrating all that NUCC has been and will be.

The weekend culminated with worship on Sunday morning at 9 and 11am with UCC General Minister and President Rev. John Dorhauer delivering the sermon and a special slate of musical offerings featuring a musical procession of brass quintet and percussion.



## Transitions

**Shawn Proctor**, ORD, UCC/New Smyrna Beach, June 18

**Luis Perez**, INT P, Windermere Union Church, service concluded March 26

**Brad Jagger**, P, Windermere Union Church, service begins April 2

Key: P, Pastor; INT, Interim; ORD, Ordination

A Celebration of Life was held for **Rev. Robert A. McWaid** on Sunday, January 15.

He was the Pastor Emeritus at **First Congregational Church/Orange City** having served there as Pastor from 1985-1999.



*Ordination of Rev. Jeremy Wallace (center with red stole) at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park on January 29*



February 5 was the 20-year celebration of **Riverside UCC/Jacksonville**. It was a wonderful worship celebration with a baptism followed by a time of food and sharing stories and with much energy and vision as they move into the future.





The Sunshine Connection 3-22-23



Members of the Florida Conference Join Coalition of Immokalee Workers in West Palm for the Culmination of "March to Build a New World"

## Become Connected!

The Florida Conference has a weekly e-mail blast, the *Sunshine Connection*, that seeks to be a piece that connects readers to other resources and people throughout the Conference and the wider United Church of Christ and shares news that appears in *Celebrate Florida*.

To sign yourself (or somebody else) up for the Sunshine Connection, simply follow this link! [Click Here](#)

HOWEVER...

Please know that the *Sunshine Connection* doesn't just need readers, it needs contributors!

To share with others what great, exciting or challenging things your church is encountering, please e-mail [NWatkins@uccfla.org](mailto:NWatkins@uccfla.org) to get the conversation started!

## CALENDAR

### APRIL 1

**CM Rev. Vertigan**, Common Global Ministries Board, Cleveland

### APRIL 2

**CM Rev. Vertigan**, JupiterFIRST Church

**ACM Rev. Harrison**, Emmanuel UCC/Sebring

### APRIL 9

**ACM Rev. Harrison**, Cocoa Beach Community Church

### APRIL 11

**ACM Rev. Etheredge**, Community of Practice Facilitator's meeting

### APRIL 16

**ACM Rev. Harrison**, Spring Hill UCC

### APRIL 23

**CM Rev. Vertigan**, Longwood Hills Congregational Church

**ACM Rev. Harrison**, Union Congregational Church/Holly Hill

### APRIL 24-25

**ACM Rev. Etheredge**, REDI training

### APRIL 27-28

**CM Rev. Vertigan and ACM Rev. Etheredge**, Clergy Day Away, Orlando

### APRIL 28

**CM Rev. Vertigan**, Legacy Funds Committee, Orlando

### APRIL 29

**CM Rev. Vertigan and ACM Rev. Etheredge**, Board of Directors meeting, Orlando

### APRIL 30

**CM Rev. Vertigan**, First Congregational Church/Lake Helen

### MAY

**ACM Rev. Etheredge**, Regional COM meetings

### MAY 5-7

**UCC Women's Conference**, Winter Park

### MAY 6

**CM Rev. Vertigan**, UCC Women's Conference, Winter Park

### MAY 7

**ACM Rev. Harrison**, Jensen Beach Community Church

### MAY 14

**CM Rev. Vertigan**, Coral Gables Congregational UCC

**ACM Rev. Harrison**, Delray Beach Cooperative Ministry

### MAY 21

**CM Rev. Vertigan**, Christ Congregational UCC/Miami

**ACM Rev. Harrison**, Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park

### MAY 28

**ACM Rev. Harrison**, Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach

### JUNE 11

**ACM Rev. Harrison**, Church of the Open Door Congregational/Miami

### JUNE 18

**ACM Rev. Etheredge**, UCC/New Smyrna Beach

### JUNE 25

**ACM Rev. Etheredge**, Faith UCC/Dunedin

### JUNE 28 - JULY 7

**CM Rev. Vertigan**, General Synod, Indianapolis

In-person (and virtual) meetings and visits; Calendar subject to change.

Check [uccfla.org](http://uccfla.org) for updates and watch for *Sunshine Connection* messages.

**KEY:** CM, Conference Minister; ACM, Associate Conference Minister

## Banned Books. What's Next?!



**B**anning books seem to be all the rage — “rage,” literally. What’s next, book burning? We’re seeing these actions among office holders from the highest reaches of Tallahassee to our local neighborhood school boards. Books that contain sex and violence need to be off-limits for children (guess that means ending using the Bible as a literary resource)! In last week’s *Sunshine Connection*, **Rev. John Barnette**, Pastor of **Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte**, shared in a ZOOM video interview with **Neal Watkins** some

thoughts on the subject based on his daughter’s public grade school experience in which for several weeks there were no books on her classroom shelves.

In that *SunCon* piece, Neal (our Conference Minister for Congregational Life) told us he is initiating what he calls “First Wednesdays for Action,” an undertaking in response to the question: “How can we, as the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ, get involved and be of support to you and your mission?”

Here are what a couple of our churches are doing in response to the banned book controversy.



Last year in the April/May issue of *Celebrate Florida*, we told of what Pastor **Rev. Mike MacMillan** had begun at **Faith UCC/Dunedin**. In his weekly e-blast to his congregation’s members, he had observed the sudden rise in our nation of school districts banning more and more books that speak to issues around race/racism, gender, immigration, LGBT identity and other topics. He believed this was being done under the “we don’t want to see reality because it might make someone

uncomfortable” umbrella. So the time seemed right to start a regular section in the church newsletter about “banned books,” and it was called *Banned Book of the Week*. He urged his congregants to send him the names of a “good banned book,” and he encouraged the donation of banned books to the church for a special library offering. To underscore this project, banned books are prominently displayed in a rack in the Narthex.

Here are some of those

books which have been awarded inclusion in the banned book display over the past months: *Woke: A Young Poet’s Call to Justice* by Mahogany L. Brown; *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros; *New Kid* by Jerry Craft; *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison; *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood; *Blind Spot* by Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald; *The Cider House Rules* by John Irving; *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie; *The 1619 Project* created by Nikole Hannah-Jones; *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank; *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* by Susan Kuklin and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman; *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley; *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Ibram X. Kendi; *And I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou; *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer; *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini.

Over at **St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota**, **Rev. Dr. Mary Alice Mulligan**

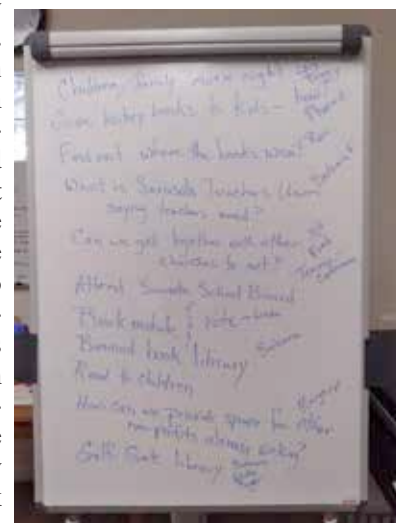
wrote in her recent column for the weekly member e-blast that she had observed an “energized group” at the post-worship coffee hour discussing what the congregation could do to support children’s education “...when books are being removed from school shelves and forbidden, when teachers are threatened with a felony for sharing the wrong book with a child, when people are not allowed to discuss

all forms of family, when teenagers cannot take a national AP African American history class, when a college started with the help of our denomination is threatened with truncated education.” A bunch of ideas were voiced and posted, complete with assignments (just like in school!). Here are the possibilities for action that were cited (note the two we’ve bolded):

- Start a children/family movie night
- Distribute history books to kids
- Find out where the removed books are kept
- Check with the Teachers Union, see what teachers need
- **Reach out to other churches to collaborate on actions**
- Attend School Board meetings/votes
- **Create a banned book library/bookmobile**
- Provide space for groups already working

Rev. Mary Alice encouraged the conversation to keep going. “Ideas are great, but only if they take us someplace. These things will only make a difference if we act.”

*A version of this article originally appeared in the Sunshine Connection, February 15.*





# Visioning: Who Are We?

FROM THE MIDWEEK MESSAGE, FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC/SARASOTA

Last Saturday, February 4, over 60 people gathered for our Leadership Retreat. Led by **Moderator, Nancy Morris; Vice Moderator, Harold Mezile; and Past Moderator, Jim Butterworth** there was time for conversation and connection.

One focus this year is around the question: Who are we? As a group, we explored a variety of ways to respond to that question. Nancy Morris kicked us off with offering 33 events from our 69 years of ministry -- asking people to talk about how those are connected to our core values (see below). Pastor Wes shared some numerical answers to the question, who are we? When Wes came in 2014, we had 484 members and today we have 382 who call our church, "Home." Today, 54% of our church has been here for 10 years or longer and 46% joined since 2014. 22% of our church has been to seminary AND .003% of our membership attending seminary right now (we honor John Ristow our seminary student). We celebrate approximately 13% of our membership is African-American or Hispanic. We celebrate approximately 10% is LGBTQA. We honor that 100% of our church are ministers ~ celebrating the priesthood of all believers.

But numbers only tell part of the story. On Saturday, the attendees talked a bit about our Core Values, Vision Statement and Mission Statement. Our Teams, Covenant Steering Groups, and Church Council will be prayerfully discussing these in the coming months. As the church, you will all be invited into this holy conversation. In February, we are focusing on our Core Values:

- *Worship is at the heart of what we do and who we are*
- *We are an inclusive community and love each other, not despite our differences, but because of them*
- *We are grounded in Sarasota reaching out beyond our walls to neighbors near and far in service*
- *We strive to offer an extravagant welcome to all*
- *We strive to respect each other in our diversity*
- *We are a joyful covenant partner with the United Church of Christ*

Today and this week, please take time to **name and notice what you appreciate about these Core Values** (it is easy for our minds to first want to offer additions or edits or corrections). You are invited to sit with how these words help describe who we have been as a church, are today as a people of faith, and who we pray we will be in the coming years. Please share your responses with the Moderators or Pastor Wes. There will be time for editing as we move forward.

We look forward to the coming year as we continue to find



ways to be salt and light and tell our story with Sarasota and beyond.

*From the Midweek Message, February 8*

P.S. Since writing that e-blast, Rev. Wes has shared that all the Teams/Committees are discussing the congregation's core values. He reports, "It is a rich, rich conversation. I would highly suggest a church start with values! Values are the sails that guide you through the waves and winds of the seas in ministry. Vision tells you where you'd like to go. Mission is our prayerful steps to get there with God's grace."



**Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park** is currently charting a new course. On this past Sunday, the congregation held a lunch and what is called part one of a "discernment" session after worship that was led by **Neal Watkins**, our Conference Minister for Faith Formation. Neal recently held similar visioning gatherings with other Florida churches including **Emmanuel UCC/Sebring, Christ Congregational Church/Miami** and **Faith UCC/Dunedin**.

At **First Congregational Church/Lake Worth**, members will be spending the next couple months "taking time to listen to one another and to our community to discern how we might best live the gospel and participate in God's reign." The plan is to have a series of gatherings of friends and members, facilitated by Jill White from the national setting of the United Church of Christ, to take place on several Saturday mornings beginning on March 11. The first session via Zoom will be for gathering information on what is thought to be the most important priorities for First Congregational during the next five years.

A visioning activity has been underway with the congregation at **Hope UCC/Rockledge**. They recently held "Sink or Swim" table discussions during coffee hour in preparation for monthly visioning seminars for church council and committees after worship that began Sunday, March 19, led by **Neal Watkins**, the Conference Minister for Faith Formation.

*Originally appeared in the Sunshine Connection, February 22.*



## Florida United Church of Christ Women

### 96TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

San Pedro Spiritual Development Center  
95 Bishop Grady Lane  
Winter Park, FL 32792

MAY 5-7, 2023

## Prayer Journey



PATSY McDOWELL (CHURCH OF THE OPEN DOOR CONGREGATIONAL/MIAMI) AND BERT PERRY  
CO-PRESIDENTS

Join Florida UCC women to gather for a restful, spirit-filled weekend of learning and meeting other sisters in Christ from all parts of Florida. Sybil MacBeth, author of the series of books called *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God*, and Kathryn McLean, Veriditas trained Advanced Labyrinth Facilitator, and member of The Labyrinth Society research committee, will present interactive workshops.

Registration deadline is April 1, 2023. More information as well as registration forms can be found on the Florida UCC Women's website: [Register Here](#)

## UCC WOMEN AROUND THE STATE



The Come Alive! women's group at **First Congregational UCC/Winter Park** had an incredible retreat to start the new year. The theme was "Brand New: Building Beacons of Hope!" Twenty-four women enjoyed a weekend away at a resort house that comfortably hosted the group, which enjoyed crafting, yoga, morning watch, guest speakers, walks, taking turns with meal teams, a dinner out and a very memorable lip sync dance party!

The Women's Association at **First Congregational UCC/**

**Sarasota** lunch and program on Tuesday, February 7, featured a fitness instructor who spoke about "Mind, Body, and Spirit." Attendees were encouraged to wear comfortable shoes and clothes for gentle movements anyone can do. On Tuesday, March 7, the program was "Amazing Ancient Egypt," a presentation by church member and former college professor Steve Horowitz.

The women's retreat at the **Community Church of Vero Beach** took place March 10-11.

The Women's Fellowship at **First Congregational Church/Lake Worth** hosted a St. Paddy's Day dinner on Friday, March 17, with guests wearing appropriate attire and dining on either corned beef or lamb stew.

Most of us are familiar with the Bible story of the woman at the well but do we know about Photina, the Samaritan who was that woman? Who was she? What was she like? Did her encounter with Jesus at Jacob's Well have any effect on her? Whatever happened to Photina? The answers to those questions and many others were revealed at the Monday, February 13, meeting of Women's Fellowship at the **United Church of Marco Island**. Marco Island resident and author Mershon Niesner was the guest of the group on Monday, March 13, to discuss her book, *Mom's Gone, Now What?*





Sisters on Sojourn held a (belated) Christmas Party in January at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC**. The Turkish Cooking Club assembled on Saturday, March 4, to cook and bake together some popular Turkish dishes with registration proceeds going to earthquake relief.

Women Engage! at **Naples UCC** met on Thursday, February 16, to share in "Courageous Christianity and the Journey Toward Radical Justice" facilitated by **Janet Nacu**. It was a discussion on a chapter from *How to Fight Racism* by Jemar

Tisby, exploring ways in which we can assist in the fight to eliminate racism in everyday life. The section reviewed and discussed was "How to Make Friends." On Thursday, March 16, the group met in-person and via Zoom to join in a timely conversation discussion of the role Naples UCC plays in the greater Naples religious landscape.

"AWE: A Women's Experience" was a day-long retreat held at the **United Church of Gainesville** on **Saturday, February 25**, in lieu of a Women's Overnight this year.



On Monday, March 6, women at **Venice UCC** took a tour of the Loveland Center, a local facility whose mission is to help individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities live their lives to the fullest.

Pilgrim Women at **Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte** met on Thursday, March 16, to continue their study of the Max Lucado video sessions on GRACE.

## NATIONAL

### **UCC Board Affirms: Karen Georgia Thompson Will be First Woman to Lead UCC if Elected by Synod**

The United Church of Christ is poised to make a historic choice. After [a year-long process](#), the [UCC Board voted March 4](#) to nominate Associate General Minister, the Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, for General Minister and President.

If elected by the [General Synod this summer](#), Thompson would be the first woman — and the first woman of African descent — to lead the denomination. To read the entire article click here: <https://www.ucc.org/search-and-call-gmp/>

Rev. Karen Georgia currently serves as Associate General Minister for Wider Church Ministries and Co-Executive for Global Ministries. She has served in the National Setting of the UCC since 2009, previously as Minister for Racial Justice and Minister for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations. Prior to joining National Setting staff, Rev. Karen Georgia lived in St. Petersburg where she was a



member of **Lakewood UCC**. She then served on the staff of the **Florida Conference** as a church planter in Florida and was in family ministries in New York. She is a highly skilled leader with experience in multiple settings of the UCC and ecumenically. She holds: a Doctor of Ministry, with a dissertation in religious multiplicity among African Caribbean people, from Seattle University; a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary; and a Master of Public Administration from North Carolina Central University.



# Build It...

*and they will come*

**E**mmanuel UCC/Sebring has installed panic buttons in the front and rear of the Sanctuary for added protection against an active shooter incident. This was in conjunction with an active shooter presentation by the Sheriff's department.

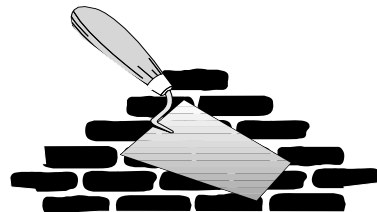
Our churches are updating their ability to livestream Sunday services with the latest technological equipment to supplement in-person worship thereby enhancing church life such as is taking place at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC**.

Over the past couple years, the Men's Group at **Spring Hill UCC** has made several contributions to the church's physical plant. This includes: shelving for the food pantry; electric sign repairs; purchased and installed a new mailbox; provided funds for new campus signage. On Saturday, March 11, volunteers gathered in the front of the church to plant over 50 native wildflowers and bushes.

For the last year a security team at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** has been working to make improvements on Sunday mornings to keep its campus safe. Leadership stresses it has not received any threats but wants to be proactive to provide a safe place to worship. In December, a report was offered to the Church Council that was shared in an informational meeting with the whole church on March 5 following worship.

The Re-Mod Squad at the **United Church of Gainesville** is grateful to those who contributed nearly \$25,000 to the Building Improvements Designated Fund (a soft start-up to the Capital Campaign) to address some long-delayed projects. An air quality problem in Reimer Hall was resolved and repaired when a huge tear was discovered in the ductwork. A "vermin" problem turned out to be squirrels and a pest control company has been hired to seal off entry points and set traps. Other issues being addressed include toilet repairs, stained/damaged ceiling tiles are being replaced, malfunctioning window mechanisms will be replaced along with damaged or missing screens, drainage issues are being addressed, the Courtyard roof is being replaced, benches and tables are being sealed and repaired in the Courtyard, vegetation is being cleared in the parking lot and — perhaps most exciting — solar panels are being installed on the Education Wing and Youth Room. That project has been funded by three families for a total of \$54,000.

**Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg** has two electric vehicle charging stations on the north side of the building for anyone to use.



## Post-Hurricane Ian Reconstruction

**E**xcerpts from a mid-March update from **Paul Short**, chair of the church Trustees at **North Port Community UCC**:

Within a week, mold and mildew were causing health problems for people in the church. NPCUCC started holding worship services in our parking lot and signed a work authorization on October 5 for performance of water mitigation and content related services. The contractor came in with a large team and went right to work. By November 15 water and mold damaged materials had been removed from both buildings and their contents packed in boxes. As a result, most ceilings, flooring and insulation were removed from both buildings.

*The now "all purpose room" (formerly Fellowship Hall) and recent Wednesday evening service there*



When mitigation work was completed in Decker Hall, Sunday worship services were moved into the hall, using temporary lighting and folding chairs. Our church offices were moved into the church's kitchen, which had minimal damage. When mitigation work was completed in the church building, we began using our Fellowship Hall for our worship services. The groups that used Decker Hall are also using the Fellowship Hall.

NPCUCC has \$1,089,279 property insurance coverage on the church building and \$60,000 on its contents. Decker Hall is insured for \$242,279 with no contents coverage. Named storms have a 3% deductible and our 20+ year old roof is covered at "actual cash value," not replacement cost. An insurance claim was submitted shortly after the hurricane. The insurance company provided us with a \$75,000 advance payment, which we paid to our mitigation contractor.

It is now mid-March and we received invoices totaling almost \$565,000 from our mitigation contractor. The insurance company is challenging contractor work hours, whether all of the mitigation work was required and whether some of the damage was caused by flooding, which is not covered by the insurance policy. As a result, we have received no additional funds from the insurance company. The Small Business Administration (SBA) determined that we had insufficient income to repay a Disaster Loan and declined to issue us a loan. We



have submitted a request to FEMA for a Public Grant but have no idea when or if we will receive a grant.

Between member donations, fundraising and financial reserves, we have approximately \$60,000 which we are putting toward a \$102k roof replacement contract. In addition to insurance coverage, we will probably need approximately \$200,000 to completely restore our buildings.

*Editor's Note: The church is seeking financial assistance to help fund reconstruction of their buildings and enable us to continue to do God's work in our community. They have established a GoFundMe link for this purpose.*

A contract has been signed at the **United Church of Marco Island** to include the renovation of Disseler Hall, the refresh of the Courtyard between Disseler and the Administration Building, enhancements to the Memorial Garden and a new access ramp from the south Narthex entrance/egress to the main entrance of Disseler Hall. Some of the permits need to be reviewed and approved by FEMA. It is anticipated that the construction will be completed by the end of this calendar year (2023). A celebration of the start of construction project took place with a "Groundbreaking Ceremony" during worship on Sunday, March 26. As of early February, \$1,085,196 in gifts and pledges had come forth from the congregation in support of this project.

To-date by early March, **Fort Myers Congregational UCC** had incurred \$19,830 in expenses or emergency repairs to the Sanctuary roof, debris removal, temporary A/C fixes and a 50% deposit on the repair of the church sign. It is expected that the total cost of repairs due to Hurricane Ian will exceed \$100,000 including the repair of the Sanctuary roof, gutters, soffit and fascia and the damaged A/C units. Contributions received to-date were \$14,595. An insurance payment of \$3,925 for damages to the shed has been received. The church has applied for a Public Assistance Grant with FEMA and has received approval for two projects to cover \$15,900 of costs for emergency repairs and debris removal. Additional projects for the roof, A/C and sign repairs are ongoing. The insurance loss estimate for the main building was less than the deductible of \$92,620, but the actual costs can be submitted for reconsideration.

In a recent newsletter, **Rev. John Barnette (Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte)** has reported the good news that a February work day at the church completed the restoration of the playgrounds with the outside space being safely opened to Joyful Noise students post-Hurricane Ian destruction. The news for the rest



of the property is not as good. Minor setbacks have slowed the restoration process as they have had to hire a new contractor. But the campus now has a new roof on each building and fascia and soffits are going up. Despite being unable to utilize many areas of the campus, life at the church goes on and they are meeting and finding new ways to fellowship and do ministry. Kings Gate continues allowing the church to rent a space in their clubhouse for Sunday morning worship and Bible study. The conference room is now used to make PB&J sandwiches, practice handbells, learn music at choir practice, hold meetings and meet for Bible studies. It has not been easy, but they have risen to the challenge and continue to be the church.

The roof at **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda** has been repaired, and the new solar panels are on order and should be installed by April. The church has received notification that its new HVAC unit for the Sanctuary should be installed by mid-March.

At **Sanibel Congregational UCC** so much remains in the works in its cleanup and rebuilding at the end of February. Insurance negotiations and FEMA applications are proceeding in an effort to maximize its insurance reimbursement from available Federal programs as they rebuild their campus. The church hosted a visit from Lesli Remaly, a disaster recovery and support expert from the UCC Disaster Ministries, who offered expertise, support and recommendations for the rebuilding, physically, emotionally and spiritually.



Landscapers have been clearing tons of debris from the front and rear parking and surrounding areas, the Memorial Garden and the Periwinkle roadside. Structural engineers are preparing their report regarding roof/truss repair needs, which is needed to proceed with obtaining bids and moving forward with the second-floor repairs. Church leaders are optimistic that bids and permits can facilitate construction beginning in the next few months. Electricity, water, air conditioning and phones are now available in the church offices (along with Internet service) though still not generally safe for members and staff. Estimates for elevator repair were surprisingly costly so they are investigating options for at least one new elevator and considering a ramp as a second floor access. A ramp could have a dual benefit of being lower cost, less complexity and maintenance and could be completed sooner. It is likely that they will not have sufficient insurance coverage for two elevators. They are considered incredibly blessed to have a safe and comfortable "refuge" at the Refuge Church, with many thanks to those who have helped to make this gathering space welcoming and familiar. Between in-person and on-line attendees, the church family has been able to stay connected and spiritually enriched.



## Planning Worship

BY RICK CARSON, EDITOR



**W**hen we enter the Sanctuary on Sunday morning and receive the bulletin, we likely at least give it a quick once-over before the service commences. Or perhaps we got a look at it ahead of time if it was e-blasted to us the day before as some of our congregations now do. Regardless, how much time do we give to consider what goes into the service we're about to experience?

What are some of the various elements and considerations that are reflected in the morning program? Probably the current liturgical season, the lectionary for the date, maybe a recent event of note, the vision of the pastor, perhaps some of what the congregation has come to expect, the church budget, the available talent to utilize, the number of services that morning. That's a lot to consider. So how does what we'll experience for the next hour or so come into being?

Two examples of "worship team" came across my desk this week (well, in e-blasts on my computer). I thought "worship team" an interesting term to explore. Every congregation will be different in how it plans and "does" worship — the logistics, content and creativity — and what follows is how two of our churches go about the task.



In a late February e-blast from the **UCC/Fort Lauderdale**, the acronym WAAM was explained. WAAM stands for Worship Arts & Music Ministry, which organizes the church's worship program and more. Each Tuesday at 10am the UCC Worship Team (i.e., WAAM) meets, led by the Leadership Board Chair. The group consists of the Interim Pastor (**Rev. Emily Jazmobeck**), the Music Director, the Christian Education chair, the Worship coordinator and several others. On the agenda is the scheduling of anointers, audio technicians, co-consecrators, communion servers, greeters, liturgists (i.e., the readers), stewards (i.e., receiving the offering), speakers, ushers and the video tech. The worship service music is also

selected. This planning is not only for the Sunday worship service but also for special services and events. Everything is coordinated around specific scripture or specific days of celebration including chosen music, the Chancel Choir selections, soloists and various musicians. Church members are invited to join this weekly meeting and suggestions are welcomed.

The church, with a membership around 150, has one service on Sunday at 10:30am and an optional service on Thursday morning in conjunction with its Ruth Ministry. This outreach program, which serves a Noon lunch, is for those in the community in need of guidance and support — plus fellowship and a hearty meal.

**Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg** is a congregation of about 35 members, who incorporate creative interaction as a regular part of worship. Having a smaller membership who meet in the Chapel, with comfortable chairs and no pews, Trinity has an ideal, movable setting for small groups to move around and engage within the worship experience. What might be a liability becomes a blessing and meets the relationship needs of many today, especially after COVID. Trinity sees sharing leadership and gifts as biblical and a mark of future church.

The keynote speaker at the Florida Conference's Fall Gathering demonstrated that even the Community Church of Vero Beach's large Sanctuary with pews can welcome meaningful small group interaction when Rev. Dr. Sonja B. Williams invited everyone to move around the Sanctuary and pair up to discuss questions about our own experiences with racism.

The **Rev. Susie Sherwood**, Trinity's Designated Term Pastor, is a part-time Pastor, with the normal duties of a Pastor in worship and congregational care, as well as leading the congregation through the discernment process as to the church's future. Trinity has had a Worship Team for many years which helped with the planning and creative design of worship. The Pastor and the eight members of the Worship Team currently meet

every six weeks in person or via Zoom to discuss the upcoming lectionary themes and church calendar. Pastor Susie plans worship for three weeks of the month with input from the group and usually delivers the Message in church.

Last fall the Church Board decided that since Rev. Susie is part-time, the Worship Team would be responsible for worship one Sunday a month while coordinating with the Pastor, readers/liturgists, A/V and musician, as well as calling upon volunteers from the congregation. The team has also designed special series such as "Creation Month."







- Often a skit is followed by discussion. Recently it was “The Cobbler’s Guest,” (pictured) a Tolstoy story adapted by **Tina Allen** about meeting the Christ in the people we encounter every day and discovering Christ in ourselves in the process.
- Another was of the woman and the unjust judge, fol-

lowed by learning about Emmett Till’s mother’s fight for justice for her son.

- Sometimes the congregation divides into small groups to discuss scripture such as when Jesus asked potential disciples, “What are you looking for?” with the discussion questions asking “What do you think their answers were? What are *you* looking for? Has it changed? How so?”
- Or there may be a creative project like making Native American “God’s Eyes,” wondering how it would be to “see others/life through God’s eyes.”

As part of Black History Month in February and Women’s History Month in March, each week there is a Moment of Sharing when someone discloses a personal story of “the first time I was aware of racism” or “the first time I was aware of discrimination against females.” As part of Women’s History Month, the Worship Team is introducing some lesser-known women in the Bible sitting around a table *a la* Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party” at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. When the congregation embarked on the discernment process in 2022 as a “Pilgrimage to the Beyond!,” a popular part of the process involved working together, getting to know each other better through small group break-out sessions during worship.

*This article originally appeared in the Sunshine Connection, March 15*

## A Special Community Garden

**A**fter two years of planning, **Emmanuel UCC/Sebring** held a dedication service on Monday, March 13, for the Garden of Hope, an all-accessible community garden made possible through a grant by NO KID HUNGRY.

The idea was planted by **Steve Wills** in 2021, inspired by his sister **Cindy**, who became wheelchair-bound after a motorcycle accident on Highway 27. A week after sharing his idea, Emmanuel UCC received an unexpected e-mail from NO KID HUNGRY offering a grant for a food-related program.

Emmanuel responded and by June 15 received a \$26,000 grant, which inspired others to donate, such as Advanced Drainage System, Florida Glass & Mirror, Leisure Acres, Lowe’s, **UCC Florida Conference** and Hobby Hill.

By November 2022 the Garden was built, made up of four standing plots. Two plots are tended to by the “Green Bean Team” from the Ridge Area ARC, whose mission is serving and advocating for individuals with developmental and other disabilities so they may have the opportunity to choose and realize their goals.



One plot is tended to by **Alberta Rolle**. The fourth plot is a herb garden cared for by **Joannie Davis** and **Millie Grime**.

On Monday morning, March 13, **Rev. George Miller** led the Dedication, featuring representatives from NO KID HUNGRY, the Florida UCC Conference, ARC, Leisure Acres as well as Sheriff Blackman, Mayor Shoop, Public Information Officer Scott Dressel and County Commissioners Kevin Robets and Scott Kirouc.

After a time of prayer, the “gardeners” were introduced and greeted with applause. Steve Wills and Michael Griffith, architect of the garden, cut the ribbon.

After the blessing, people put on colorful socks to show their support of Developmental Disability Awareness Week and to pose with the consumers from ARC. Everyone gathered into the Fellowship Hall for light refreshments and the music of **Steve Kempe**.

Next up for the church is an indoor community refrigerator, which will be open one day a week for fresh produce and meats.





## Food, Glorious Food

**Y**es, meals are one of the fuels that keep our churches going. Whether they are potlucks, cook-offs, pancake breakfasts, teas, progressive dinners or Lenten suppers, we church people love our food and our fellowship!

And we also know the importance of sharing food with those who often go without. Here are some examples of members of our Florida churches "breaking bread" together as well as extending the gift of food to others.

**F**ifteen congregants at **Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg** went out to lunch following the January 29 service. People learned new things about each other and were eager to have future such gatherings for conversation and community building.



Lunch in the Garden at **St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota** remains a popular gathering every Thursday Noon. The church continues to provide dinner — most recently on March 13 — for some 18 or so men of Project 180, the housing and recovery program for formerly incarcerated, returning citizens.

**St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota** has been a proud supporter of the local Sarasota CROP Walk for many years. This year participants walked on March 5. The Venice CROP Walk in which **Venice UCC** participates took place on February 26 with the church team of 30 walkers raising \$16,072.

The long-postponed **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** Chili Cook-Off took place on Sunday afternoon, March 26, with the congregation voting on their favorite. **Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour** had theirs on Saturday afternoon, February 18 that featured a band and the youth group ice cream bar.

Saturday, February 18, was the annual church-wide glean-

ing day at **First Congregational Church/Lake Worth**. Members went into fields that had already been harvested or left unharvested to pick fresh produce for food banks in Palm Beach County.

**Coral Gables Congregational UCC** all-church picnic and cookout was on Saturday, March 11 at Tropical. The day included games, music and relay races. The annual church picnic at **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda** took place at Gilchrist Park on Sunday, March 12, following worship. Participants brought foods to share.

Two shifts of volunteers from **Naples UCC** showed up for the Harry Chapin Food Packing event on Wednesday, March 1.

Despite the dislocation brought about by Hurricane Ian, members of **Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte** continue to meet once a month to make 200 individually wrapped PB&J sandwiches to feed

the homeless.

Members from **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** helped feed the homeless at Chapman Partnership on Sunday, February 12.



### Sermon Series

**Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami**

February

**Sermon on the Mount**

**Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg**

January

**A Month of Dreams**

**United Church of Gainesville**

Lent

**The Work of the People**

**First Congregational Church/Lake Worth**

Mid-January to Mid-February

**On the Brink of Everything: Spiritualities of Ages and Stages**

**United Church UCC-Dc/St. Augustine**

Lent

**Sacred Stories: Lessons on Grief, Forgiveness and the Love Story of Jesus**



# SOUPERBOWL



As February 12 was Souper Bowl of Caring and Bring a Friend to Church On The Hill Sunday at Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton, after worship hot bowls of soups provided

by members of the congregation were served with bread and drinks. This was the first meal together at church in three years. Guests heard from a Boca Helping Hands' spokesperson who gave information about food insecurity in the area and how it can be addressed. The event raised \$300 for BHH.

Members of Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park brought canned soup to donate and made soup to share on Souper Bowl Sunday.

The United Church of Marco Island kicked-off a Super-Bowl themed food drive on February 5 to support the Marco Island Our Daily Bread Food Pantry. Congregants could drop off food items in the Narthex in bins designated for either the

Eagles or Chiefs designated bins. On Sunday, February 12 (Super Bowl Sunday), all the food contributed was brought up onto the altar in worship to be blessed as a way of communicating love not only for God



but for neighbors in need. Over 1,730 pounds of food was collected. The church's Mission Committee awarded the food pantry \$50,000 and Rev. Dr. Mark Williams proudly presented Amanda Nelson and Liz Pecora with the check.

First Congregational Church/Lake Worth contributed \$824 to CROS ministries (which provides food to the hungry in Palm Beach and Martin counties) on Souper Bowl of Caring Sunday — \$61 for the Eagles, \$119 for the Chiefs, and \$644 to "I Don't Care!"

Youth at Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami were at church doors at the close of worship on February 12 to collect financial contributions from departing congregants to support the Souper Bowl of Caring.

First UCC/Orlando called for cans of soup on Souper Bowl Sunday to help fill the shelves of its Rebecca's Pantry.

At Souper Bowl Sunday on February 12 Hope UCC/Rockledge collected 270 food items — which included soup — as well as raising \$165 in monetary collections. Everything collected was given to the Central Brevard Sharing Center.

UCC/New Smyrna Beach had a "stock the pantry" drive for the Loaves & Fishes Food Pantry on February 12 and a Super Bowl party that afternoon.



## OPPORTUNITY

### From the Insurance Board

Insurance Board policy holders enjoy access to Our Legal Corner where you can find a convenient legal helpline, services, documents and other resources.

Learn more about this exclusive service by visiting <https://www.insuranceboard.org/legal-corner/>.



# Music and the Arts

**T**hey are making music in the Garden at Faith UCC/Dunedin with a new musical endeavor called the Faith Strings (and Things) Society. They are inviting folks with a guitar, banjo, ukulele, dulcimer, harmonica or other instrument to join the group for some folk songs and that will then be followed by their drum circle. Faith UCC is blessed with a plethora of talented writers, poets, and visual artists and this new “spotlight” section is a space for their artists to share their works in a wider format. With the writing groups going at the church, as well as visual artists that practice their crafts at home, this space is seen as an opportunity to widen their sense of community through the arts. Written pieces, poems and images of some artwork members have created is being solicited to showcase in church newsletters.

The Artis Naples concert at the **United Church of Marco Island** on Friday afternoon, February 10, featured Naples Philharmonic musicians playing Gounod, Hindemith and Haydn. For the first time in years, the church welcomed back its annual Jazz Concert on Sunday afternoon, February 26. The performance featured Emmy-winning vocalist Janet Planet with other returning artists including Tom Washatka on saxophone and John Toussaint on trumpet and pianist John Harmon.



**First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** has welcomed **Dr. Eric Nelson** as its artist in residence. Dr. Nelson is Professor of Music and Director of Choral Studies at Emory University. He is also the conductor and Artistic Director of the Atlanta Master Chorale. Dr. Nelson’s choirs have performed throughout the world, including London, Rome, Krakow, Berlin, Leipzig, Prague, Moscow, Seoul, Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Sydney Opera House. At worship on February 19, he directed the church choir through five anthems, accompanied by special guest musicians.

Jazz Vespers were featured in the Courtyard at the **Community Church of Vero Beach** on Sunday evening, February 26, with poetry, prayers and live jazz – plus refreshments. The Cleveland Institute of Music featured The Astro Quartet dur-

ing worship on March 26. As part of the Viner Series for the Visual Arts, April 2-16 was the “Celebration of Creativity” congregational art show.

Worship on January 29 at **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** was Gospel Music Sunday.

Tuesday@Twilight at **Naples UCC** on February 7 was a concert featuring five musicians. **Drs. Alexandra Carlson and Becky Weese-Rumpf** performed Bach’s *Concerto in D Minor* and Rheinberger’s *Organ Concerto No. 1* on Saturday afternoon, February 18, for the NUCC 50th Anniversary Concert underwritten by **Hank and Louise Leander** in celebration of the church’s first 50 years.



The Jazz Master Series at **St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota** presented “The Birth of the Cool” at the church on Saturday afternoon, February 11. This music was a collaborative effort of Miles Davis, Gil Evans and Gerry Mulligan which culminated in an album that was released in 1957. On Sunday afternoon, March 19, the church hosted the Palmer Ranch Singers for their spring concert, “Why We Sing.”

On Sunday January 29, **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** dedicated its new Mary and Alan Cross organ donated by their children. It was “Go for Baroque” featuring the Alhambra Orchestra on Sunday evening, March 12.





A show of photographs by John Harvey took place in the Library of the **United Church of Gainesville** on Sunday, March 5. "Dances of Universal Peace" are led & (taught) with musical instruction with vocal accompaniment from participants — joyful and inspired from all cultures. The group meets on the second Sunday of each month.

The Weeki Wachee Winds Community Concert Band was back at **Spring Hill UCC** on Saturday afternoon, February 25.

**First UCC/Orlando** had its quilt show on Saturday, March 25. The quilts were displayed in the Sanctuary across the pews. Information was shared with guests about the Apostle Banners that hang on the church walls, and in the Quiet Room vintage sewing machines and other sewing items were displayed to honor the Mary Marthas who for so many years quilted and made lap robes for the community. There was also a bake sale and raffle quilt in Crismon Hall with 12 baskets themed to quilts, sewing and crafts. In addition there was a sale of crafts, fabric and notions and quilting books and magazines.



February 20 was Movie Night at **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda** with a showing of "The Way."

"Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story" was shown at the **Community Church of Vero Beach** on two consecutive Wednesdays in February.

"The North Avenue Irregulars" was featured on Thursday evening, February 16, for Movie Night at **Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg**.

Climate Movie Night at the **United Church of Gainesville** on Sunday evening, March 5, featured "Nature's Best Hope: A Proactive Approach to Earth Stewardship."

## OPPORTUNITIES

### Lest we Forget...

**S**pring Hill UCC held an informational session on Ukrainian refugee help on Friday evening, March 31, with info shared about local families who need work, translators, sponsoring families.

All donations through the UCC will be deposited into the International Disasters fund designated for "Ukraine Relief." Your generous financial support will be used by our partners in the areas of greatest need. One can also mail a check made payable to the United Church of Christ PO Box 71957 Cleveland, OH 44194. Please be sure to note "Ukraine Relief Fund" on your check in the memo section.

[CLICK HERE](#)

Help is also needed for relief to those impacted by the devastating earthquake on the border of Turkey and Syria. The UCC's international partners continue to assess the needs of survivors. They are providing food, blankets, medicine, clothing and shelter. With your financial support the United Church of Christ will be there helping those in need. You may also text UCCDISASTER to 41444.

[CLICK HERE](#)

### Using Music as Fellowship — or FUNDRAISING!

**R**ev. Shawn Garvey, Senior Minister of **First Congregational UCC/Winter Park**, is available to bring a wonderful evening of timeless John Denver music to your church as a fundraiser or just a night of fun and fellowship!

For years, Shawn performed alongside Steve Weisberg, John Denver's lead guitar player from 1973-1977 doing JD tribute shows. He's opened and performed with Livingston Taylor, Marshall Crenshaw, Mary Fahl (formerly with "October Project"), Rick Elias (Rich Mullins and a Ragamuffin Band), and was invited to perform at The Wheeler Opera House in Aspen, Colorado, for the annual John Denver week festivities. He continues to perform around Winter Park at fundraisers, city events, Casa Feliz Historic House Museum's "Music at The Casa" series and the Orlando Science Museum's "Festival of Trees."

If your congregation would like to experience a fun night of music and memories, contact Shawn for more information at [revgarvey@me.com](mailto:revgarvey@me.com) or 321/333-0092.

[Click here](#) for a testimonial from Conference Moderator, Lynn Jones.

*From the Sunshine Connection, February 22*



## Black History Month at UCC Congregations

For Black History Month at **Spring Hill UCC** members viewed the four-episode documentary series “High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America.”

During Black History Month, the **Community Church of Vero Beach** showed the film “Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story” on two consecutive Wednesdays.

At **First Congregational Church/Lake Worth** they observed “28 Days of Antiracism” during the month of February on Facebook with the Lake Worth Interfaith Network.

On Sunday afternoon, February 26, **Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach** hosted a free concert by the Ebony Chorale of the Palm Beaches, highlighting historical Black American music.

The free Lenten concert series at **Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour** led off on Tuesday evening, February 28, with “HUED Songs,” a celebration of Black music, artists, history and culture.

Each week during Black History Month at **Fort Myers Congregational UCC**, the church highlighted courageous Black American who changed history, like Frederick McKinley Jones who pioneered the modern refrigeration system, and Gordon Parks whose photographs chronicled the African-American experience.

In observance of Black History Month at **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami**, the Chancel Choir and soloists featured music by Black composers such as H. Leslie Adams (b.1932), a Black composer who has written for orchestra, chamber ensemble, organ, piano and chorus. His art songs are particularly notable, many with texts by African-American poets.

**Faith UCC/Dunedin** held its Rosa Parks Celebration on Saturday afternoon, February 4. Recommended reading for Black History Month were *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* by David W. Blight (winner of the Pulitzer Prize in History) and *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin.

The Sacred Conversations on Race at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** has been devoted to reading *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, winner of the 2015 Book Award. During March there were discussions each week on important topics facing the

## Thank You

**Rev. Donna Cooney (United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine)**, an originating voice in the creation of the Anti-Racism Ministry in the Florida Conference, has made a decision to step away from leading ARM. The



Conference extends its deep gratitude to Rev. Donna for her leadership in the ministry since its establishment at the 2020 Annual Gathering of the Conference.

The work continues in our congregations, as the stories on these pages attest.



community and country including: “Banning Dr Seuss? *What?!?*”; “Honoring Advocacy,” a prayer by Pixie Lighthorse of the Choctaw Nation; “The Lie That Invented Racism” a TED Talk by John Biewen; “The Difference Between Being ‘Not Racist and Anti-racist’ a TED Talk by Ibram Kendi.

A series of videos created by **David Dunlap**, the Director of Music at **UCC/Fort Lauderdale**, were shown to celebrate Black History

Month including, from UCC history, the 18<sup>th</sup> century poet Phillis Wheatley.

Special guests at Sunday worship at **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda** on February 12 were Richard Patrick and Dr. Darrell Gadsden with the Charlotte Chapter of the NAACP, both of whom were available afterwards to meet with folks who are interested in the NAACP. In the recent “Care of Creation: Stories of Resilience” series at the church, Dr. Martha Bireda, Director of the Blanchard House African American Museum in Punta Gorda, spoke about her “Reflections of a Colored Girl.” After her presentation, the audience broke into small discussion groups and then had a large, combined session at the end.



## BE THE CHURCH

Protect the environment. Care for the poor.

Forgive often. **Reject racism.**

**Fight for the powerless.**

Share earthly and spiritual resources.

Embrace diversity. Love God. Enjoy this life.

**Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw** (Senior Pastor, **Naples UCC**) and Rabbi Adam Miller (Senior Rabbi at Temple Shalom) had a conversation on Tuesday afternoon, March 14, about the rise of antisemitism in our nation, as well as what is happening in Collier County. They also discussed important ways that Christians and Jews can stand together against this insidious hatred.

Beginning on March 16, the church began a three-week series “Rethinking 2,000 years of Patriarchal Tradition.” Participants learned about Eve, Mary Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Jezebel, Esther and others. The stories of these women were cast in new light and how they inform our faith today. The program was facilitated by **Rev. Angela Wells-Bean**.

On Tuesday afternoon, March 21, (including via Zoom) Joe Bonasia, Southwest Florida Amendment chair and campaign communications coordinator, answered questions about the 2024 ballot amendment initiative on Floridians’ Rights to Clean and Healthy Waters. He is working on a petition drive for signatures which needs 900,000 signatures to be placed on the ballot for a vote in 2024.

The Justice Committee sponsored on February 27 a presentation by the executive directors of the Golden Gate Senior Center and HELP (that manages the Collier County Community Land Trust) about advocacy and support programs and some housing projects being built for seniors.



The Social Justice Action Team (formerly Racial Justice Team) at **Faith UCC/Dunedin** was excited to unveil a mural that was painted on a portion of the southeast front wall of the church building. This was the culmination of a year and a half



**I**n the summer of 2016 we asked if it was *Time for Conversations on Race, Religion, Violence, Tolerance, Justice, Inequality*. We have asked you to share with our Florida churches how you as a church family have, are now, or are planning to have such conversations.

As you read through these brief descriptions, do you note any which sound like programs or opportunities you would like to consider for your own congregation? If so, please feel free to contact our Conference staff or the Pastors and staff of those churches to learn about people, curricula, materials and other resources that could be available to you. We will continue to share as we learn more from you. Here are a few more happenings. Please continue to participate in this conversation by contacting us at [RickCarson1@gmail.com](mailto:RickCarson1@gmail.com)

process based on one of the church’s initial objectives to use art to the express their congregational commitment to embrace diversity and inclusion and to share that message with the larger Dunedin community. The Art/Mural workgroup, led by **Lori Lucas**, had met with artists and reviewed multiple submitted proposals over the last year. The winning selection was submitted by Jade Jackson of St. Petersburg. She met the criteria of presenting a mural that would be “provocative yet simple enough to communicate our message as clearly as possible, one that would symbolize diversity, inclusion and equality.” Also, the message would need to be discernible by someone walking or traveling by the front of the church. The walls now sing with the widest embrace of love and community in God.



The **UCC/New Smyrna Beach** has made a commitment to align with F.A.I.T.H. ([Fighting Against Injustice Towards Harmony](#)) to establish a ministry in the church to work towards the designated initiatives: affordable housing, flooding, civil citations/mental health and social justice for all.



On Saturday morning, March 18, the UCC Men’s breakfast series at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** heard a presentation from Barbara Richards, Executive Director, about Project 180, which assists those leaving incarceration to transition back to daily life. Her office is located on the FCUCC campus. **St Andrew UCC/Sarasota** is also actively involved supporting Project 180.



On Saturday, March 11, from 10am-3pm, the Florida Poor People’s Campaign Coordinating Committee met at **Spring Hill UCC** for planning and training with people from all over the state.



There was a large protest in Tallahassee on Wednesday, February 15, over the Governor’s policies affecting Black people, the LGBTQ+ community and migrants. According to the *Tampa Bay Times* (February 16) “**Rev. Kim Buchanan** of the **United Church of Tallahassee**, who is white, told the crowd, “I am descended from enslavers,” and said “learning that history was hard. But if I had not learned about that history, it might have left me, yes, asleep.” She urged the crowd to pray for DeSantis, “who bears great responsibility ... to give him wisdom to do what is right for the common good.”





On Wednesday evening, February 8, in collaboration with Florida International University and Books & Books, **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** hosted “A Conversation with Vandana Shiva,” an environmental activist on “Sowing the Seeds of Hope and Freedom in Times of Extinction and Collapse.” The Sierra Club Miami Group conducted a town hall at the church on Sunday evening, February 12, to meet with the 15 candidates who are running to fill the vacant commission seat for the City of Miami District 2.



The PACT Network Meeting on Sunday, January 29, brought many of church members together to discuss this year’s Nehemiah Action.

On Wednesday, March 29, there was a presentation, “Book Banning,” by Mitch Kaplan, owner and founder of Books and Books who is on the Board of Directors of the National Coalition against Censorship.

During Lent the church scheduled a series of “teach-ins” on Wednesday evenings via Zoom. At a recent large gathering of church members, much concern was expressed about the various legislation, laws, and policies that restrict books, African-American history, LGBTQ+ rights, women’s rights and so much more in Florida. As people of faith, we seek to witness against any laws which discriminate and hurt people and society. The sessions included “Recent Policy Developments in Florida” and “Whose Religion?”



Seven **Fort Myers Congregational UCC** LIFE network members were at the Fort Myers City Council meeting recently to successfully urge support for more monies in the affordable housing trust fund, \$700,000 to make possible a housing initiative of the Archdiocese of Venice to build housing for people making less than 60% of area median income (AMI) plus \$400,000 to be set aside for rental assistance for those making less than 80% of AMI.

Over three Sunday mornings in March, a class on anti-Semitism was held, looking at how anti-Semitism has manifested itself in church history in both Europe and the US. The hope is that by becoming more aware of this tragedy and sin in our shared past, we can live more faithfully in the years ahead.

The class was facilitated by church member and retired UCC minister **Rev. David Minnick**.



The Christian Education Committee at **Venice UCC** scheduled in February/March a series of four presentations and discussions of “Christian Perspectives on Contemporary American Social Issues” addressing the question “How does my faith impact my thoughts, actions, talent and treasure?” The topics included the death penalty, abortion, the Christian and war and gender inequality.



The **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** held a Prayer Service at 9am on Friday, March 3, to celebrate the World Day of Prayer. This event is a worldwide, ecumenical movement of Christians of many traditions who come together to observe a common day of prayer each year, and who have a continuing relationship in prayer and service. The motto of World Day of Prayer is “*Informed Prayer and Prayerful Action*.” The 2023 worldwide theme is “God’s calling has a meaning and a purpose,” referencing Ephesians 1:15-19



On Monday, March 27, at the Palm Beach County Convention Center, members from **First Congregational Church/Lake Worth** met at a PEACE (People Engaged in Active Community Efforts) Nehemiah Action gathering with other people of faith from across the county to ask public officials to commit to solutions to problems in the community.



A unique series of guest lecturers has been scheduled to speak at **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda** this spring, speaking to how we, as a culture, can adapt and recover from environmental and societal damage. Titled “Care of Creation: Stories of Resilience,” it covers a diverse group of topics ranging from surviving racism to climate change to substance abuse and addiction research. Speakers include: Dr. Martha Birda on reflections of a “colored girl”; Dr. Richard Whitman on healing Charlotte Harbor; Dr. Joseph Pepe, on understanding risk factors from adverse childhood experiences; Dr. Terry Root on the Federal infrastructure legislation.



The **UCC at the Villages** Missions Team hosted the documentary “Live to Lead” in celebration of Herstory month. The documentary was free and open to the public on Wednesday afternoon, March 22, in the church Sanctuary. Leaders committed to making a difference in the world share their inspiring life



stories in this series produced by Prince Harry and Meghan. Featured are interviews with world leaders and influencers, including Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Greta Thunberg, Bryan Stevenson, Jacinda Ardern, Siya Kolisi, Gloria Steinem and Albie Sachs.



## You Are Welcome Here

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH/LAKE WORTH



**Who We Say We Are**

*The brief text we use on our websites, e-blasts and other communications*



## Making Our Voices Heard

BY REV. JASON FAIRBANKS  
PASTOR, FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH/LAKE WORTH

On Saturday, March 18, members of **First Congregational Church/Lake Worth** and Florida Conference Minister **Rev. John Vertigan** joined hundreds of other supporters in accompanying members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers on the last two miles of their five-day march from the sugar cane fields of Pahokee to the center of the Town of Palm Beach.



The route included a march down Worth Avenue, one of the most prestigious shopping

streets in the world that took us right by a Publix grocery store where we stopped. Together we lifted our voices to demand that Publix join the Fair Food program, which insures adequate pay and safety for agricultural workers. Norman Peltz, the CEO of another Fair Food hold out, Wendy's, is a Palm Beach resident. We don't know if he heard us, but he and his neighbors knew we were there.

It was a privilege to be the church and together work for justice.

From March 14-16 members of **Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach** hosted 150 of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers involved in the march.

For more information on the campaign, go to: <https://ciw-online.org/>



*Members from First Congregational Church/Lake Worth*

*Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan expounded on the value and importance of the march*

# Across Florida



In "Across Florida" our intent is to share with you what is happening at our 90+ churches throughout the state. It is obvious from these entries that there is an exciting vibrancy evident within our congregations.

This energy is making a decisive difference in the lives of congregation members and the communities in which they are located while also touching the lives of strangers in far away places.

Through this sharing, you can learn about innovative ideas, creative outreach and stimulating ministry, some of which might be adaptable within your own congregation.

See something that catches your eye or brings a smile to your face? If an idea sounds good and you'd like more information about what they're doing, contact that church.

If we've singled out any of these with the following bright ideas symbol, you might want to consider it for your own church.



In January large quilt was hung in the rear of the Sanctuary at **Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg**. It contains copies of documents and photos tracing the history of the church from its beginning in 1955 until the early 2000s along with signatures of Pilgrim members. The quilt was made by the Pilgrim Quilters and assembled by **Elsie Sakiotis** using items borrowed from the church archives



**Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park** had a contingent go to a St. Petersburg restaurant after church on March 26 to patronize and show support for a Ukrainian-owned business.

**JupiterFIRST Church** has a dementia caregivers support group that meets on Thursday from 1-3pm.

The **United Church of Gainesville** is preparing for its spring small groups program which will offer dozens of opportunities to participate in a variety of one-time or more frequent gatherings during the season.

The Called to Care Prayer Group at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** is composed of some 20 or so "pray-ers" who gather each Wednesday over Zoom to offer up prayers for individuals who request them and for the church, the com-



munity and the wider world. They recently met in person to commemorate three years of sharing weekly prayers together.

The pickleball phenomenon has swept into **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami** where after worship on March 5 the game was played on the basketball court along with lunch to fuel the players.

On Thursday mornings at 10am **First Congregational Church/Lake Worth** sets aside time for virtual chat and fellowship in its "virtual parlor."

**Sanibel Congregational UCC** has initiated a regular new feature, which is planned to happen quarterly. **Rev. Dr. Mark Boyea** will have an "Ask the Minister" Sunday. Instead of his usual Message, Rev. Mark will spend that time answering as many of congregants' Biblical, theological and spiritual questions as time allows. Parishioners will either come ready to ask them on that Sunday or e-mail them to the Pastor.

At **Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg**, Sunday worship on February 12 was a "Celebration of Love." Congregants were invited to share an anniversary, date or number of years since a treasured event in their lives — a "so-God" moment that has blessed them. It could be: the anniversary date of meeting or marriage; of sobriety; of retirement or graduation; of being declared cancer-free; of witnessing the birth of a grandchild; of adopting a pet; of renovating a house from top to bottom to make it your "dream-home;" or a trip that opened your eyes to the world. It was a day to remember, give thanks and share blessings of love.

**Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami** offers an opportunity to nurture one's spirit with a yoga practice ("Yoga in Faith") designed to connect movement with scripture readings as a spiritual practice. It is led by **Kristen Llorca** with a guided inspirational faith message led by **Andrea Burt**. Free community yoga returned to the **UCC/New Smyrna Beach** on Mondays at 9:30am.

On Tuesday afternoons in February via Zoom, members at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** were invited to pay attention to and set an intention toward prayer, an opportunity to both be in prayer and talk about prayer. The sessions were recorded, posted to YouTube and Facebook so they could be watched when convenient. **UCC/New Smyrna Beach** offers Centering Prayer gatherings on Wednesday mornings from 8-9am.



**Spring Hill UCC** threw a “We Love You” banquet on Friday evening, February 10, for widows and widowers.

“Seas the Day” was the name of the gigantic nautical-themed rummage sale held at the **Community Church of Vero Beach** that was held over three days (February 23-28). The annual church yard sale at the **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine** was held



on Saturday, March 11. On Saturday, March 18, **Spring Hill UCC** had its “hidden treasures” yard sale.

The Spring Basket Social will take place at **First Congregational Church/Lake Helen** on Saturday, April 1, at Noon. Contents of each basket will be valued at a minimum of \$20, many based on spring themes like Easter, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, the beach, graduation and bridal showers.

**Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach** has occasional informal “Think & Drink” gatherings at a local micro-brewery for those between 20-33 years of age.

There was an information-only presentation in the Sanctuary of **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda** by the Police Department after worship on March 19 on a safety plan for the church. The Leadership Team will be assessing the information and decide how to proceed.

Charging for parking for a nearby art festival in late January brought in over \$2,200 to the coffers of the **UCC/New Smyrna Beach** and the Christmas bazaar raised over \$1,400.



**Rev. Dr. Sheila Harvey (Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach)** was honored to preach at Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on Sunday, March 19. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pastored the church from 1954 to 1960.

Our churches continue to schedule blood drives for the convenience of church members and neighbors. **Naples UCC** offered one on Friday afternoon, February 10, with donors receiving a free cholesterol screening and mini-health assessment. On February 5 the **United Church of Gainesville** had a LifeSouth blood drive; donors received a \$25 gift card. **Hope UCC/Rockledge** will have their blood drive on Saturday, April 15



## Pet Blessings

**A** Pet Blessing and memorial took place at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC (R)** on Sunday, February 12. The **United Church of Marco Island** (below) had its Blessing of the Pets on Sunday afternoon, March 19.



# LGBTQ

**C**ongregational UCC/Punta Gorda had a booth at the local PRIDE Fest on Saturday, February 25. **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** had a booth at Manatee PRIDE on Saturday, March 11. **First Congregational Church/Lake Worth** participated in Pride at Bryant Park on Saturday, March 25, with a booth and marchers in the parade.

After a six-week campaign to educate and inform the congregation on Open and Affirming, **Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach** adopted ONA on February 12 by a 93% affirmative vote of church members. Beginning in January, each week Pastors **Revs. Drs. Keith Haemmelmann** and **Guillermo Marquez Sterling** delivered sermons on the topic of diversity and inclusion supplemented with witnessing testimony from church members (a young lesbian, a grandmother with a trans-granddaughter and two gay men). Midway through the education period a meeting with the pastors was scheduled for those

wishing to learn more about ONA, scriptural references to homosexuality and related questions. A celebration of the positive



vote was held after the votes had been counted following both services on February 12. PAG becomes UCC ONA congregation #1,806. Last October, **Miami Lakes UCC** became #1,785.

For five weeks during Lent, **Rev. Tom Lacey (Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton)** led a book study on Friday mornings of Matthew Vines *God and the Gay Christian*.

**Coral Gables Congregational UCC** member **C. D. Garske** and Texas LGBTQ+ advocate Molly Carnes shared their experiences as parents of LGBTQ+ children on Sunday, February 26 and the book they are co-authoring, *The Itchy Sweater*. With C.D. focused on research and Molly focused on storytelling, their book will attempt to dismantle the Christian anti-transgender argument. This forum discussed some of the initial findings of their research, the current climate for transgender Americans and why the Christian Church's commitment to peace and justice is needed more than ever.



## Video for Group Discussion: Prophetic Intrusions & Lament

BY NEAL WATKINS, MINISTER FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

**M**any of the videos that are shared through this communication, made available by the Florida Conference's subscription to [TheWorkof-thePeople.com](http://TheWorkof-thePeople.com), are with the intention of private or worship use.

Perhaps this week's video offers a different opportunity.

By clicking the image (R), you will find a 12-minute video made in partnership with the Christian Community Development Association where Soong-Chan Rah exegeses the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations and urges further conversation about the opportunities that churches have to utilize the voices of prophetic interruption and lament.



## OPPORTUNITY

As the local churches of the Florida Conference have conversations about what the next 1, 3, and 5 years could be and bring, it is my prayer that this video might be a tool for small groups that are gathering to discern how God's voice is capable of speaking to and through them.

Please use this video as you feel led. If group facilitation would be of assistance to your church in this conversation, please reach out to me at [NWatkins@uccfla.org](mailto:NWatkins@uccfla.org).

*From the Sunshine Connection, March 15*



## BOOKS WE'RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER...

Live or via Zoom, or other livestreaming

*Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu (Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg)

*To Speak for the Trees* by Diana Beresford-Kroeger and *The Maid, A Novel* by Nita Prose (First Congregational Church/Winter Park)

*The Daughters of Yalta* by Catherine Grace Katz and *The Girl with the Louding Voice* by Abi Daré (Naples UCC)

*Melissa* by Alex Gino and *Joan is Okay* by Weiwei Wang (Fort Myers Congregational UCC)

*On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from The Twentieth Century* by Timothy Snyder (St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota).

*The Love of My Life* by Rosie Walsh and *Sisters in Arms* by Kaia Alderson (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

*The Gimlet Eye: An Aloysius Vega Caper* by John Spencer Perry and *The Book of Lost Friends* by Lisa Wingate (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

*On the Brink of Everything* by Parker Palmer (First Congregational Church/Lake Worth)

*Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus and *The Chosen* by Chaim Potok (First Congregational Church/Lake Helen)

*The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry* by Gabrielle Zevin (Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte)

*Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus, *The Power Worshipers* by Katherine Stewart, *God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Vines and *The Water is Wide* by Pat Conroy (Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton)

*How to Begin When Your World Is Ending* by Rev. Molly Baskette (United Church of Gainesville)

*A Woman of No Importance: The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II* by Sonia Purnell (JupiterFIRST Church)

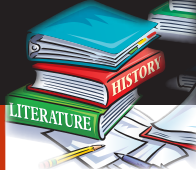
*This Tender Land* by William Kent Krueger and *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)

*Evicted* by Matthew Desmond (Spring Hill UCC)




A book review with author Les Standiford of *Palm Beach, Mar-a-Lago and the Rise of America's Xanadu* took place on February 1 at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC**.

**Star Bradbury's** book launch celebration will be Sunday, April 2, at the **United Church of Gainesville** for her new book *Successfully Navigating Your Parents' Senior Years*.



## BANNED BOOKS

As book banning grows across our state, **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** is responding to these threats against free thought and inclusivity. They will be passing out banned books and bookmarks during the Miami Beach Pride Parade on Sunday, April 16.



They are also creating a banned book library at the church where members of the church and community can have access to banned books. They are collecting banned books, which can be dropped off at a Banned Books Drop Box in Fellowship Hall. (pictured, Associate Pastor **Rev. Aaron Lauer**)

Another addition to the Banned Books display at **Faith UCC/ Dunedin**: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison.

In the United Church of Christ

# "BE THE CHURCH"

is more than just a catchy phrase...

**BE THE CHURCH**

Protect the environment.  
**Care for the poor.**  
**FORGIVE OFTEN.**  
**REJECT RACISM.**  
 Fight for the powerless.  
 Make earthly and spiritual enemies.  
**EMBRACE DIVERSITY.**  
**LOVE GOD.**  
**Enjoy this life.**

## DISCUSSIONS /SEMINARS/PRESENTATIONS WE'RE HAVING...

Live or via Zoom, or other livestreaming

"The Resurrection of Christ," "Rethinking 2,000 years of Patriarchal Tradition," "Poet Billy Collins," "Whatever Became of Sin?" "A Country Divided: American Fundamentalism, the Modernist Controversy and Their Ongoing Influence," "Law and Religion," "Frederick Douglass," "The Suffragette: Elizabeth Cady Stanton" (Naples UCC)

"Wait! What?! : Finding Meaning For Today In Jesus' Parables" (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

The Gnostic Gospels (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park)

The Gospel of Matthew (UCC/New Smyrna Beach)

*The Triumph of Christianity* by Dr. Bart Ehrman Great Courses series (Faith UCC/Dunedin)

"Whose Religion?" "LGBTQ+ Concerns in Education," "Elimination of AP African-American History and CRT in Education," "Book Banning," "An Introduction to the Practice of Mindfulness," "Cancer Prevention Made Easy: The Trash and the Truth," "God in Everyday Life: Good Intentions" (Germany Ministry group), Bible study of *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church* by Wilda Gafney (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

"Giving and Receiving Seminar," "Navajo Code Talkers," "Personal Safety and Online Fraud and Scams" and "Astronomy Lecture: Voyage to Mars" (United Church of Marco Island)

Book of Romans (St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota)

"The Magic, Mission & Mystery of San Miguel de Al-

lende" and "What's Ailing the Lagoon and What is a Prescription for Healing" (Community Church of Vero Beach)

"Adverse Childhood Experiences and Impact on Future Violence," "Regenerative Agriculture" and "Care for Creation: Stories of Resilience" (Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda)

"Project 180" (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

"Senior Living Options in Gainesville," "Generational Farming and Farmland Retention," "What IS a Chaplain?" "The Criminal Justice System in Our Community and Beyond," "How Sermons Play a Role in Our Shared Desire for Spirituality" (United Church of Gainesville)

"Immokalee Housing Update" and "Christian Perspectives on Contemporary American Social Issues: The Christian Faces War...Yes or No? and "Gender Inequality" (Venice UCC)

"The Muslim Fast of Ramadan" and "The Sermon on the Mount" (United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine)

The Book of Ezekiel and "The Homeless Coalition" (Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte)

"The Apostle Paul" (Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton)

"Why are There So Many Different Religious Denominations?" (Spring Hill UCC)

"Sermon on the Mount" and "The Life and Times of Jesus Christ" (JupiterFIRST Church)

## Our Sincere thanks...

... to Unsplash and Pexels with their talented artists and photographers for the many generic photos and images used in this issue. We appreciate the generosity of these free services.

[www.unsplash.com](https://www.unsplash.com)

[www.pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)





# DISASTER RESPONSE & RECOVERY



REV. ALAN COE, MAYFLOWER UCC/NAPLES  
COORDINATOR,  
DISASTER RESPONSE & RECOVERY MINISTRY

In 2001 the National Setting of the United Church of Christ had a restructuring, and out of that came a focus on a volunteer national disaster response. Some conferences within the denomination had done disaster response on their own prior to 2001. Those were areas that had periodic disaster events such as river flooding. In 2001 Conference Ministers and boards were tasked with finding individuals who would volunteer as Conference Disaster Coordinators (CDC). I was living and serving in south Texas at the time and answered the call to be the CDC for the South Central Conference, which is Texas, Louisiana and the very southern part of Mississippi.

After 22 years of doing this ministry in Texas, New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and for the last 10 years in Florida, I informed **Rev. John Vertigan** and the Conference Board of Directors that I am resigning from this position. I told the Board I would work with them and the Conference Minister in the transition time as a person(s) are identified who will take on this role in the Florida Conference. If you are interested in the position, please contact me ([acoe@uccfla.org](mailto:acoe@uccfla.org)) and/or Rev. John ([jvertigan@uccfla.org](mailto:jvertigan@uccfla.org)).

On a different topic, long-term recovery efforts are beginning across the affected Florida counties from the hurricanes of 2022. This will be an opportunity for you to volunteer time on a local level and represent the UCC on a long-term recovery committee. If you live in one of the 26 counties that were declared a Federal disaster area, there is a long-term recovery committee at work forming in your county.



L to R, Lori Merenda (Chair of Collier Disaster Alliance), Lesli Remaly, Ashley Jones (Salvation Army) Rev. Al Coe



Recently the UCC Minister for Disaster Response and Recovery Lesli Remaly and I visited several of the affected counties talking with long-term recovery committees and identifying locations where volunteer groups will be able to come to the state and work and be housed. In this effort we are working in partnership with the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and the United Methodist Committee on Relief.

Click [here](#) for a link to Lesli Remaly's report on her visit to Florida.

There will be work for volunteer groups for some time to come. It is estimated that recovery for some people will take four to five years so there will be ample time to plan a volunteer work trip. Once the locations to house people are up and running, work projects are identified and funding is in place to complete work projects, the opportunity will be listed on [ucc.org](http://ucc.org) on the disaster response page.

## Disaster Cleanup, Restoration and Rebuilding Continue in Southwest Florida



Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC is continuing monthly Saturday volunteer visits to the Fort Myers area to assist with post-hurricane cleanup



*While the 3 Great Loves initiative is no longer an active focus of the national church, Celebrate Florida will continue to raise up what our local congregations are doing on behalf of*

***Creation, Children and Neighbors***

***Keep your 3 Great Loves stories coming to us at [rickcarson1@gmail.com](mailto:rickcarson1@gmail.com).***

**Naples UCC** held a Build Day with Habitat for Humanity of Collier County on Saturday morning, February 4, helping build homes in The Whitaker Woods Project. They continued at this project on Saturday, March 4.



The Communion Sunday offering in February at **First UCC/Orlando** was devoted to Russell Home for Atypical Children. The home is the only private, non-profit facility of its kind for severely disabled children in Central Florida.



This year's mission trip at **First Congregational UCC/Winter Park** will take 23 FCCWP members in June to South Dakota. The mission is to help support Sustainable Structures for Agriculture and wind protection for the people of the Pine Ridge Reservation. A fundraiser was held on Sunday, February 12, serving mimosas and delectable Valentine treats.

The church collected travel-sized toiletries, women's clothing and duffle bags for the Aspire Women and Children Residential treatment program. Volunteers also deliver food four times a month from a nearby Panera to the Orlando Rescue Mission



The church utilizes space on the first floor of its Music Building to store books for Facilitating Learning for Youth, Inc. (FLY), a nonprofit dedicated to providing books for children to own and keep at home. Starting in March, teachers from Title 1 schools (schools that have a high

percentage of students living in poverty) in Orange County came to the church to pick up books to distribute to their students. The church also has metal cabinets on casters that can go out as "Little Free Libraries."



In early February the CIA (Compassion-in-Action) Committee at the **United Church of Gainesville** collected donations for "Gift Bags for the Homeless" project. The items were put into colorful handmade cloth bags that were provided to Grace Marketplace (a one-stop homeless resource center) and St. Francis House (an emergency shelter).

The Community Weatherization Coalition (CWC) is a local non-profit that UCC members helped to found, and several UCC members serve as active volunteers. During CWC's three-part Spring Energy Coach training, volunteers learn how to save local families money on their utility expenses and empowering residents with dozens of conservation tips. A training meeting was held on March 22.

A Spring Fling free family carnival will be hosted on Saturday morning, April 1. The sensor-friendly, trauma-informed accessible event will have carnival games, sensory play, crafts, a quiet space as well as a parent respite space.



On February 23 **Spring Hill UCC** hosted a seminar on youth mental health first aid offered by the local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. On Friday, March 3, NAMI held a FaithNet Education program at the church to help foster a supportive environment for all in places of worship.



**Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami** volunteers helped paint a home in Coconut Grove on Saturday morning, February 25, through Rebuilding Together.



Members from **Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park** provided the meal on Wednesday evening, February 15, for AIDS Partnership.



Members of **Venice UCC** filled Valentine gift bags during February with necessity items for unhoused seniors, and the bags were made available for distribution at the "community dinner" offered every Tuesday at the Indian Mound in Englewood, the Bible Church which offers dinner and food pantry items every Thursday and Christ United Methodist Church which offers lunch every Friday at the Train Depot.

A request has been made asking members to save takeout plastic utensils. If the pre-packaged knife, fork, salt, pepper and napkin aren't used, you're asked to bring it to church and drop it off in a bin marked "PLASTICWARE." On Tuesday nights a group of neighbors and friends feed anyone who comes to the Indian Mound in Englewood. They have not missed a Tuesday dinner in seven years and are in need of plasticware.





**First Congregational Church/Orange City** reports success with its ongoing mission of a youth clothing bank located at the church. It has provided many families with free clothing, especially during periods of cold weather, along with toiletries and snacks.



The **United Church of Marco Island** has raised over \$1.5 million for Habitat for Humanity over the years. On Sunday, February 5, the church met Sabrina's family who recently went through the Habitat process and are moving into their new home in Whitaker Woods. On Sunday, March 5, the church announced the results of its February Habitat for Humanity fundraiser, this year raising \$91,914 in celebration of its 45-year partnership with Habitat.

On Sunday, January 29, the Marco Island Noontime Rotary Organization awarded the church and its

Bargain Basket with their annual "Spirit of Marco Island Award." The award was given in honor of the \$544,000 it gave to the community in 2022. The Noontime Rotary noted the extraordinary fruit that a dual

philanthropic strategy (a church operating a Christian business) can yield. In a day and age where cornering, divvying, and separation are the norm, the Rotary heralded United Church and the Bargain Basket as a model of giving that has worked so well, in part, because of the ways in which the church has lived deeply into our Christian virtues of collaboration, togetherness.

The mission of the Neighborhood Health Clinic is to deliver quality medical care to low-income, working but uninsured adults, using a professional volunteer staff and funded by donors. The Clinic provides more than 25 specialties in the downtown Naples campus, treating the multitude of health conditions faced by local patients. All services are provided at no cost to the patients. UCMi has a proud partnership with the Clinic, donating over \$52,000 to it over the last few years.

Recently, this generosity has allowed the church to be the sponsor of a brand new physical therapy room.

Thanks to the generosity of **Cheryl Ballenger, Paula Carlson, Judy**



**Daye, Judy Hattendorf, Carol Peterson, Ginny Rapp and Barb Rassler**, UCMi baked 20 "Bob's Big Boy Strawberry Pies" for the Camp Able fundraiser table at the February 17 Strawberry Festival held at the Methodist Church. These 20 pies sold for \$380 which will financially help support Camp Able this July. Camp Able on Marco Island is a special camping experience specifically created to provide a unique environment for persons with diverse abilities and gifts.



The Mission Team at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** received \$15,802 for the Christmas Love Offering with additional funds from the missions budget bringing the total to \$20,000. The need is great this year due to both the hurricanes and economy. They also were able to increase the donations to five of the recipient charities by using the Flanzer Trust, which matches donations dollar for dollar, bringing the total amount donated to \$28,500.

Orchard Place of Sarasota, which was founded by the church in 1993 as an affordable housing solution in Sarasota, continues to receive support from the church for the residents. Items provided include toiletries, DVDs, books and puzzles.

The church's compost pilot program recognizes the problem of food waste generating methane gas in landfills and attempts to mitigate that problem. As of early January, participants in the pilot program report having diverted 448 lbs of organic material from the landfill — almost ¼ ton.



Associate Pastor **Rev. Aaron Lauer** and Board of Justice and Witness member **Karen Connolly** at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** delivered 50 bags of food from the MLK Hunger Vigil to MUJER in South Dade. MUJER is a social service agency in Naranja that provides direct assistance and advocacy to sexual abuse survivors and their families. MUJER is a long-time partner of Gables UCC on issues of immigration and women's rights.



Youth and parents from **JupiterFIRST Church** joined to help paint at Real Life Children's Ranch on Saturday, February 25



## For There Is Neither Jew Nor Greek, Male Nor Female...

The Revs. Oliver W. Wells (National Baptist) and **Clarice Mitchell** (UCC) have known each other for 13 years through their ecumenical lectionary group. They definitely agree on two things: abiding faith in God and the love of brothers and sisters in Christ.

At a recent lectionary group meeting, Rev. Oliver told the group his congregation had been given 48 hours by its landlord to vacate. He went on to say the congregation had prayed that God would provide a solution.

After the meeting, Rev. Clarice had the strongest feeling that she should call Rev. Oliver and offer her church, **Cocoa Beach Community UCC**. She did. Rev. Oliver's congregation is holding its church service at CBCUCC while searching for a new church home. The congregation at Cocoa Beach is delighted with the arrangement. In fact, from their perspective, it was a fantastic way to top off their Black History Month celebration.



The Endowment Team at **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda** received two requests for grants in February. The Social Justice Ministries Team requested \$3,000 for expenses related to the church's "Care for Creation: Stories of Resilience" series being presented in February and March. The request will also be used for expenses related to an Earth Day celebration at the church. The second request was submitted by Valerie's House/Charlotte County for \$5,000 to be used to rent a permanent "house" to call their own. Valerie's House provides children and care givers with peer grief support and one-on-one professional counselling to people who have lost a loved one. The grants given for 2023 is now \$8,000 with other requests anticipated throughout the year.



There will be an opportunity to have paper documents securely shredded at **Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach** on April 15 and 16. This is being done by the Louise Graham Regeneration Center, a local non-profit which provides employment for developmentally disabled adults. Monetary donations for the service will help fund an upcoming adult mission trip to Kentucky.



**Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg** is collecting toiletries for Celebrate Outreach, a local ministry with people who are living without shelter in the city. An average of 135 people are served each week on Saturday and Sunday.



*Where You Feel  
You Belong From  
the First Sunday On!*

SEABREEZE UCC/DAYTONA BEACH



**Who We Say We Are**  
*The brief text we use on our websites, e-blasts  
and other communications*





# Upcoming Stewardship Webinars

Selected 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesdays

7:30pm-8:30pm ET

**Rev. Andrew Warner**

*Generosity Outreach Officer, Common Services, Philanthropy  
United Church of Christ*



**April 26**

## Rethinking What God Calls Volunteers to Do

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels of Union UCC in Green Bay, WI, and Rev. Elena Larssen of the National Ministries will reflect on ways to engage volunteers and hear God's call to something new when you can't find volunteers.

They will help us think about ways to make more dynamic volunteer experiences.

[Registration for Rethinking Volunteers](#)



## Year-Round

## Stewardship Resource

Promoting generosity throughout the year is the best way to teach giving and generate financial support for your ministry and mission.

"Because of You" is a year-round stewardship resource with practical tools, sermon and worship guides, and faith formation activities for all ages. Learn more at [uccresources.com](http://uccresources.com).

For Stewardship and Generosity Resources visit <https://www.ucc.org/stewardship-resources-materials/>

## Cultivating Generous Congregations Seminar

The CGC Seminar for pastors and leaders offers an opportunity to explore faithful, practical and tested ways to promote generosity in our congregations. Be sure to recruit at least a team of two for this program. Changing the culture of your congregation requires more than one dedicated leader.

This is a pre-Synod seminar that will be held in person on June 29 at First Congregational Church (7171 N. Pennsylvania Street, Indianapolis, IN 46240) from 9am-5pm with lunch provided and on June 30 from 9am-Noon. An online session will be held on June 7 from 6pm-7:30pm CT.



The registration fee is \$300 (per team of two) and \$150 for each additional team member. Individuals without a team may register for \$200.

Learn more or [Register](#) for CGC Seminar.



From Friday, March 3-Sunday, March 5, students of the Florida Conference gathered at **JupiterFIRST Church** to build relationships, reflect and explore the unique ways they are called into Discipleship as they prepare to affirm their baptismal vows through the rite of Confirmation.

In addition to beach games, a meditation walk, journaling and a rousing lecture on the history and polity of the UCC, the youth enjoyed the opportunity to get to know other students from around the state and uplift the ways in which they are of similar hearts but unique minds and spirits. The retreat was organized and facilitated by **Neal Watkins**, our Conference Minister for Faith Formation.



*Church goes at Naples UCC on February 12 were able to purchase salsa and chips from the high school entrepreneurs*

The Soul Café at the **Community Church of Vero Beach** is the youth-led café worship. It began February 1, and the free-will offerings benefit the youth mission trip.

Youth ages 13 and older at **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami** met after worship on February 12 (Souper Bowl of Caring Sunday) to share lunch and discuss ways to help their neighbors who struggle with hunger.

For their “A Journey Through Lent,” children four year old-5th grade at **First Congregational UCC/Winter Park** were asked “What is God saying? How does God speak to us?” So they went on walks to find out. For four weeks during Lent the children took walks to different locations in the area to learn, listen and see how God may be speaking to them. All while they also had silly fun.

The annual Noodles and Doodles fundraiser at the **United Church of Gainesville** was held on March 26, an art sale and pasta dinner fundraiser to support Youth United as they prepare for their summer work tour. This year they are headed to West Virginia to work alongside Appalachia Service Project to assist homeowners with projects that will benefit their health and safety.



# KIDS CORNER

The RIPPLES group (tots through elementary age) at **Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach** enjoyed a family camping weekend March 24-26 at the nearby Fort DeSoto County Park.



During four weeks of Lent, the children (four years of age to 5th grade) at **First Congregational UCC/Winter Park** went on walks to different locations in the area to learn, listen and see how God may be speaking to them — asking “What is God saying? How does God speak to us?”

**JupiterFIRST Church** has “Story Time at the Playground” every Monday morning from 9:30-10am.



The Sunday School children and youth at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** supported the women, children and LGBT+ youth at the Lotus House Homeless Shelter in Overtown by collecting full-size shampoo bottles in February (in January the item was deodorant). In March, they are collecting socks for both children and adults.



# LENT

FAST • GIVE • PRAY

## How We Celebrated Lent

Here is a sampling of what we've learned about happenings at some of our Florida churches. If you notice new and interesting aspects of how the season was observed, consider adding them to yours for next year. We'll do an overview of Holy Week and Easter in the next issue.



### Bal Harbour — Church by the Sea

- Lenten Tuesday Evening Concert series

### Boca Raton — Church on the Hill Congregational UCC

- Lenten book study *God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Vines

### Coral Gables — Coral Gables Congregational UCC

- Ash Wednesday – Trilingual worship at 7pm in Sanctuary and online
- Each Sunday, the preacher of the day will use a piece of art as a way to share the designated scripture. Throughout the week, there will be opportunities for further study, enrichment and spiritual growth using art.
- Members of the congregation and guests were invited to paint a brush stroke onto canvases each week or every time they visit the church; the stroke is to be representative of your personal prayer for



forgiveness, of grief, of abiding pain, or hurt, of gratitude, or hope.

- Midday devotions on Tuesdays at noon – “Vincent Van Gogh & the Beauty of Lent”
- Lenten Teach-ins on Wednesdays in March at 7pm on Zoom to discuss subjects of public interest

### Fort Lauderdale – UCC Fort Lauderdale

- Ash Wednesday service at 7pm in Sanctuary
- Lenten theme – “The Desert Shall Bloom: Stories of Growth & Healing in Life’s Barren Places”



### Fort Myers — Fort Myers Congregational UCC

- Ash Wednesday simple soup supper at 5:30pm

### Gainesville — United Church of Gainesville

- Ash Wednesday services at Noon and 6pm in the Sanctuary with eight interactive stations
- Lenten theme – “The Work of the People”
- Lenten devotional booklet created by church members
- Contemplative prayers on Wednesdays from 6-7pm
- Lenten Lectio Divina/Lectio Vita on Thursdays from 7-8pm on Zoom

### Jupiter — JupiterFIRST Church

- Ash Wednesday stations Noon-1:30pm and 5:30-7:30pm
- Kids/teens and families Ash Wednesday Experience 7-7:30pm
- Sermon on the Mount studies Wednesday mornings
- “Life and Times of Jesus Christ” Tuesday evenings





# LENT

## Lake Helen — First Congregational UCC

- Ash Wednesday light supper of soup and crackers and service in Parish House
- Lenten Bible study “The End if the Beginning” Monday mornings at 11am

## Lake Worth — First Congregational Church

- Ash Wednesday service at 6:30pm in the Parlor
- Lenten study *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily* by Sister Joan Chittister in-person and on Zoom

## Marco Island — United Church of Marco Island

- Ash Wednesday service at 9am in the Sanctuary

## Miami — Christ Congregational Church

- Mardi Gras celebration Sunday, February 19, after worship

## Miami — Plymouth Congregational Church

- Ash Wednesday service of worship taking place around the table sharing a simple meal of soup and bread.

## Naples — Naples UCC

- Ash Wednesday imposition of ashes and special reading at 7:30am in the Chapel; imposition of ashes at Noon in the Sanctuary with homily and music
- Opportunity to take a pledge to sacrifice using plastics during Lent by following suggested steps

## New Smyrna Beach — UCC New Smyrna Beach

- Ash Wednesday service at 6pm with imposition of ashes

## North Port — North Port Community UCC

- Ash Wednesday service at 7pm
- Lenten Bible study on Wednesdays from 6-7pm

## Orlando — First UCC

- Ash Wednesday service at 6:30pm

## Pinellas Park — Good Samaritan Church

- Imposition of ashes on first Sunday of Lent
- Lenten theme — “Seeking” Who Will You Listen To?”
- Devotional: “Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith: Art, Reflections & Poetry for the Season of Lent” from A Sanctified Art
- Lent in the Park — Seeking God in Nature tours: To-cobago Sacred Lands, Sunday, February 26; Boyd Hill Nature Preserve, Friday, March 24

- “Lent in Art” virtual Zoom art tour and discussion weekly on Monday mornings at 10am

## Port Charlotte — Pilgrim UCC

- Ash Wednesday service at 6pm
- Lenten Bible study *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner’s Guide to Holy Week* by Amy-Jill Levine on Wednesdays at Noon and 6:30pm

## Punta Gorda — Congregational UCC

- Ash Wednesday service at 6pm

## Rockledge — Hope UCC

- Ash Wednesday service at 6:30pm
- Lenten theme: “Looking for Love” from the Worship Design Workshop
- Lenten study/discussion *Empty Altars: American Saints in a Cynical Age* podcast by Diane Butler Bass and Tripp Fuller each Wednesday on Zoom
- Took Lenten Fast challenge from Naples UCC to avoid use of single-use plastics

## Sanibel — Sanibel Congregational UCC

- Ash Wednesday service at 10am at Refuge Church with distribution of ashes
- Lenten theme – “Questioning Jesus”

## Sarasota — First Congregational UCC

- Ash Wednesday quiet meditation at Noon in the Chapel; traditional pancake meal at 5:30 followed by service in the Sanctuary and online at 6:30pm
- Bible study of each of four Gospels on four Thursdays

## Sarasota — St. Andrew UCC

- Ash Wednesday service on Facebook Live at Noon
- Bible study of the Letter to the Romans on Tuesdays at 5:15 on Zoom

## Sebring — Emmanuel UCC

- Lenten season dedicated to Back Bay Mission with collection of t-shirts, underwear and socks



## Spring Hill — Spring Hill UCC

- Friday Night Dinner church series at 6:30pm, thinking about and discussing the ways food and community are intimately connected

# LENT

## St. Augustine — United Church UCC-DoC

- Lenten book study at 5pm on Zoom beginning March 1 first and third Wednesdays discussing *Finding Refuge: Heart Work for Healing Collective Grief* by Michelle Cassandra Johnson
- Lenten worship theme was “Sacred Stories: Lessons on Grief, Forgiveness & the Love Story of Jesus”

## St. Pete Beach —

### Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC

- Ash Wednesday service was at 7pm
- Encouraged prayer ritual with suggested weekly mantras to be practiced three times daily in five- minute segments
- Beatitudes at the Beach Sundays in March at 6m
- Beatitudes Lunch Study Wednesdays in March at Noon

## St. Petersburg — Lakewood UCC

- Ash Wednesday service on Wednesday, February 22 at 7pm around a fire at a member’s home

## St. Petersburg — Pilgrim Congregational UCC

- Ash Wednesday service at Noon with the imposition of ashes
- Bible study and spiritual reflections on Wednesdays at Noon

## St. Petersburg — Trinity UCC

- Ash Wednesday service at 6:30pm with an outdoor fire-side service at a member’s home
- Shared in Lenten activities of other nearby UCC churches

## Tampa — First United Church of Tampa

- Ash Wednesday service at 7pm in person at the Quaker Meeting House and on line
- Lenten study on forgiveness on the four Tuesdays in March using Marjorie Thompson’s book, *Forgiveness: A Lenten Study*

## Venice — Venice UCC

- Ash Wednesday drive-through blessing between Noon-1pm under the canopy between Naar Hall and the Courtyard with imposition of ashes, a brief word from scripture and a prayer

## Vero Beach — The Community Church

- “Lenten Reflections on Living Deeply” on Monday evenings
- “Writing Together: A Spiritual Practice for Lent” on Mondays at 3:30pm in-person and Wednesdays at 3:30pm on Zoom
- Lenten Poetry & Organ series on Thursdays at 11am



## The Villages — UCC at The Villages

- Held a Mardi Gras Dance Night and Social on February 25.

## Winter Park — First Congregational Church

- Ash Wednesday service at 7pm
- Lenten study series on the Gnostic Gospels at Noon on Sundays after worship and lunch
- For children, a walk on Sundays after worship and lunch to explore what God is saying and how God speaks to us



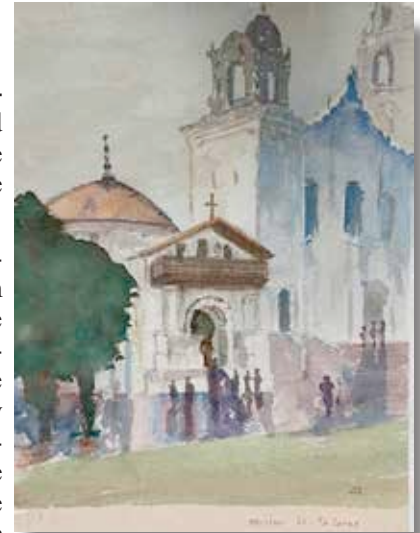
*Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday at Coral Gables Congregational UCC*





## Art Enhances the Lenten Experience

As we are in the season of Lent, art is currently being featured as an integral part of Lent at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota, Coral Gables Congregational UCC** and **Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park**. At First Congregational it is part of the Artful Prayer program. For two hours on Thursday mornings during March, a team of facilitators will be providing participants with various art supplies to use expressing and exploring God's sacred presence. At Coral Gables "The Art of Lent" series (pictured) employs art as a source of prayer, meditation, study and devotion using paintings to enhance the Sunday worship scripture passages and at other opportunities during the week. The "Lent in Art" program at Good Sam offers virtual art tours and discussions via Zoom on Monday mornings.



The **United Church of Gainesville** annually compiles a Lenten devotional with daily readings, beginning on Ash Wednesday, February 22, and concluding with Easter Sunday. This year's is titled *The Work of the People* (<https://ucgainesville.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Lenten-Book-2023.pdf>). The 54-page booklet contains artwork and photos by church members to complement poems and reflections by the pastors and church members along with pieces from noted writers and figures (including Mary Oliver, Emily Dickenson, Dorothy Day and Anne Lamott), scripture passages and book excerpts. The cover painting of Mission St. Dolores (pictured) by **Sue Littell** and other images included are works

by church members; **Diana Tonnessen** created artwork included in the devotional, which are also used as banners.

Supplementing the devotional booklet is an interactive art practice observed at Sunday worship during Lent. The congregation's Lively Arts Committee has designed stained glass-like art hangings that are along the sides of the Sanctuary. Each bears the focus word for every Sunday in Lent, and congregants are being asked to add color and bring them to life.



Each Sunday a question appears in the bulletin that relates to the theme of the day. As worshippers depart the Sanctuary, they find a table with pens, markers and colored paper. Congregants are invited to respond to the question of the day by writing a word or phrase or drawing a picture on a piece of colored paper. The papers will be added to the week's artwork colorfully representing The Work of the People, which is the Lenten theme. The first question this week was "What do you need to move forward?"



*This article originally appeared in the Sunshine Connection, March 1*

Watch for a recap in our next issue of Holy Week and Easter happenings in our Florida congregations.

To be included, please send us your high resolution photos and accompanying text to

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Easter blessings and safe travels,

*Rick, Tom and Sharon*

