

Celebrate Florida

The United Church of Christ in Florida



February–March 2024



My Intention to Retire

REV. JOHN VERTIGAN
CONFERENCE MINISTER

Greetings to the Florida Conference. My recent months have been peppered with time for reflection. I entered the practice of ministry in August 1989 when the 27 members of the Forest Avenue Congregational Church in Bangor, Maine invited me to be their pastor. I have since served 22 years in parish ministry and another 13 in Conference ministry while finding rich blessing and forgiving grace along the way.

It is my intention to retire on July 31, 2024. While I would not trade these last nine-plus years for anything, I have discerned that now is the right time for me to explore the next phase of my life. These years in Florida have been most satisfying and I will remember them with a great deal of joy as well as a little sadness at relationships that will change and routines that will no longer govern my days.

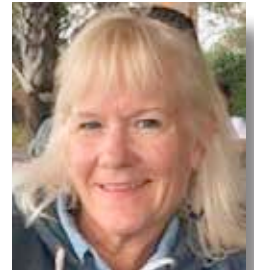
There is work left undone. There always is at times like this and our talented Board and staff are well equipped both to finish some of that work and craft an exciting future for the United Church of Christ in Florida. That future will depend on the ministries of our local churches and settings beyond the parish that are so impactful in the communities where they are grounded. Your witness is powerful and the conference is full of potential as a strategic plan nears implementation and the enthusiastic energy felt in our last annual

...continued on page 2



LYNN JONES
CONFERENCE MODERATOR

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC/SARASOTA



An Important Update

Happy New Year, Florida Conference members and friends! I pray that 2024 is treating you well thus far as we move into a year of change, transition and endless possibility as the United Church of Christ in Florida.

Your Board of Directors leadership has been busy since we were together at the Rosen Plaza Hotel in October for our Annual Gathering. We have already started the process of planning for this year's Annual Gathering and will have information about dates, theme and location out to you in the very near future.

In addition, we are moving through the search process for a new Associate Conference Minister who will be responsible for our churches in the Eastern half of the state and will also be the Conference staff liaison for the Committee on Ministry across the state. It is my hope that we will be announcing our new ACM in the coming weeks.

As you know, our Conference Minister, **Rev. John Vertigan**, has announced his intention to retire effective

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gathering continues to inform our days.

I will spend our remaining time together doing my best to prepare for whatever and whoever comes next in the life of this blessed and beloved community. My prayers for you will continue and I ask your prayers for me. In this we will answer the admonition of scripture to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-17).

Be at peace, and be in touch, won't you.

Blessings



**Celebrate
FLORIDA**
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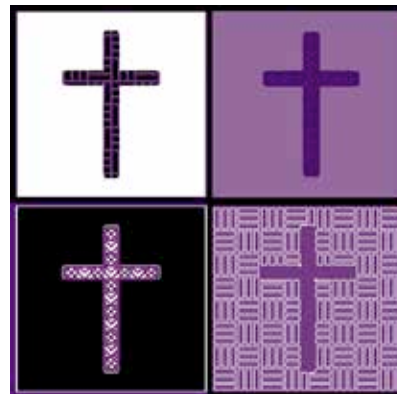
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tive July 31, 2024. I am in the process of assembling a search committee of the Board of Directors that will work with me and our National Search Coordinator to identify a transitional Conference Minister in a timely manner. We are committed to ensuring that this individual will be the right fit for our churches, our staff, our Board and the unique environment that we have here in Florida. I will be sharing regular updates with the Conference as we move forward with this process.

Finally, your Board of Directors is continuing to work on a Strategic Plan for the Florida Conference that will help us all to have a strong vision and clear priorities for the next three-five years. Given the changes in Conference leadership as well as the ongoing challenges we face in our state and in our world, it is clear to me that without a plan, the next few years would be difficult to navigate. As a result, we are committed to taking the feedback we heard from our clergy and laity last year, coupled with the financial resources we have available and the wisdom and experience of some of our key partners from the National setting, to develop a Strategic Plan that will support all of you by helping our local churches to not only survive, but thrive.

I invite you to contact me if you have questions about any of these initiatives, and please know that I will be communicating frequently with the Conference as a whole as we make progress in all of these areas. Thank you, as always, for all you do and for your support of the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ.



Become Connected!

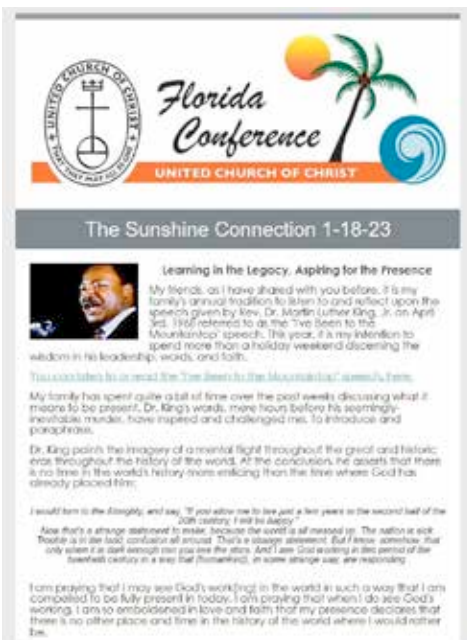
The Florida Conference has a weekly e-mail blast, the *Sunshine Connection*, that seeks to be a piece that connects readers to other resources and people throughout the Conference and the wider United Church of Christ and shares news that appears in *Celebrate Florida*.

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 to get the conversation started!



Florida Conference
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

The Sunshine Connection 1-18-23

Learning in the Legacy, Aspiring for the Presence
My family, as I have shared with you before, is my family's annual tradition to listen to and reflect upon the speech given by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968 referred to as the "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. This year, it is my intention to spend more than a holiday weekend discerning the wisdom in his leadership, words, and faith.

You can take in a great live "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech here.
My family has spent quite a bit of time over the past weeks discussing what it means to be present. Dr. King's words, more than before his seemingly inevitable murder, have inspired and challenged me, to introduce and paraphrase:
Dr. King paints the imagery of a mental flight throughout the great and historic race throughout the history of the world. At the conclusion, he asserts that there is no time in the world's history more enticing than the time where God has already placed him.
I would like to the dignity, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be okay."
Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is all people is in the total confusion of chaos. That's a strange statement. But I know, however, that only when it is all right enough for you see the stars. And I am God sitting in the period of the 20th century in a way that I remember, in some strange way, as reasoning.
I am praying that I may see God's working in the world in such a way that I am compelled to be fully present in today. I am praying that when I do see God's working, I am to be emboldened in love and faith that my presence declares that there is no other place and time in the history of the world where I would rather be.



Beloved Community Includes “Carefrontation”

BY REV. LATRELL HARRISON
ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER

I’ve been reading Terry Real’s *Us: Getting Past You and Me to Build a More Loving Relationship*. Real is known as a renowned therapist and relationship expert. In this book, he coins the phrase “carefrontation.” Carefrontation is an approach that encourages compassionate confrontation to address challenging aspects of relationships. It fosters open communication, empathy and understanding to promote healing, growth and the development of healthier and more fulfilling connections.

Over the years, I have experienced churches that prefer conflict avoidance. For some people I have encountered, to be a loving congregation means to be a church without conflict.

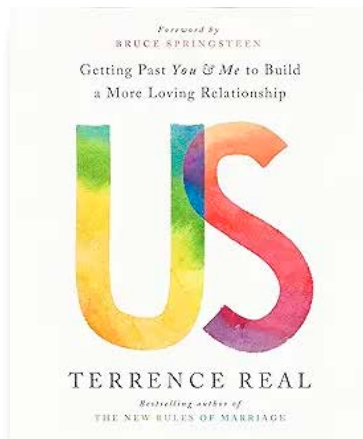
I contend that conflict avoidance harms the integrity of the beloved community and divests congregations of healthy growth patterns. While Real’s book is for couples, many of these principles could be applied to congregations as we build the beloved community. I have adapted some of the language regarding the principles. This list is not exhaustive.

1. Creating a Courageous Space for Honest Dialogue

Carefrontation encourages individuals to engage in open and honest dialogue, creating a care-filled (my term for safe) space for discussing sensitive and challenging topics. It prioritizes empathy and understanding, allowing people to express their concerns, fears and grievances without judgment or hostility. By promoting open conversation, carefrontation provides an opportunity for individuals to voice their perspectives and gain insights into others’ experiences. This open exchange of ideas fosters empathy and builds bridges of understanding in the beloved community.

2. Resolving Conflicts Constructively

Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable in any community. However, carefrontation provides a framework for constructively addressing these conflicts. It encourages individuals to approach conflicts with empathy, seeking resolution rather than resorting to aggression or avoidance. Carefrontation emphasizes active listening, validation of emotions and finding common ground. Through this process, conflicts can be transformed into opportunities for growth and reconciliation, ensuring the beloved community remains a harmonious and supportive environment.



3.



Reflections from Rev LaTrell

Fostering Personal and Collective Growth

Carefrontation challenges individuals to reflect on their actions, biases and attitudes. It encourages self-awareness, accountability and personal growth. By engaging in carefrontation, individuals can confront their limitations and biases, leading to transformative growth on both personal and collective levels. This introspection enables individuals to recognize and dismantle systemic inequalities and injustices present within the beloved community, thus fostering social progress.

4. Building Trust and Strengthening Relationships

In the beloved community, trust is a fundamental building block. Carefrontation plays a crucial role in nurturing trust among community members. By approaching conflicts with care, empathy and respect, individuals feel heard and validated. This genuine approach to conflict resolution fosters trust, strengthens relationships and builds a sense of unity within the community. As trust grows, the beloved community becomes a space where individuals feel care-filled to express themselves and support one another.

A beloved community is a vision of a just and loving society free from discrimination, inequality and violence. Carefrontation is a necessary and powerful tool in realizing this vision. By creating a care-filled space for honest dialogue, resolving conflicts constructively, fostering personal and collective growth, and building trust, carefrontation contributes to the overall well-being and strength of the beloved community. Embracing carefrontation enables individuals to confront difficult conversations with empathy and love, leading to transformation, healing, and the establishment of an authentic beloved community.



Transitions

Jacob Kines, EM, Community Church of Vero Beach, service began January 1

Jim McKenzie, INT P, United Church of Marco Island, service began July 17

Wesley Snedeker, INSTALL, Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach, January 14

Aaron Lauer, INSTALL, UCC/Fort Lauderdale. January 21

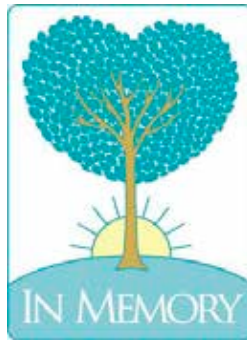
Mark Boyea, INSTALL, Sanibel Congregational UCC, February 18

Bruce Havens, INSTALL, Coral Isles Church/Tavernier, February 4

Geoff Gross, INSTALL, Cocoa Beach Community Church, February 11

Mary Moore, INSTALL, New Vision UCC/Yulee, April 21

KEY:- P, Pastor; INT, Interim; EM, Executive Minister; INSTALL, Installation; ORD, Ordination



Colleen Hafner Passes

Colleen Marie Wegener Hafner, the mother of Pastor **Rev. Dr. Laurinda Hafner (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)**, passed away on Monday afternoon, December 11, surrounded by family and much beloved friends, who she called her chosen children. She was 94 years old and died peacefully, with much love and gratitude filling the room. Colleen was a beloved pillar of **Trinity UCC/St.**



Petersburg where a memorial service was held on Saturday, January 27. Colleen was born in St. Louis and grew up in the Midwest. The daughter of a pastor, she was always an active participant in UCC congregations throughout her life. She graduated from Elmhurst College, where she met her husband of 60 years, the **Rev. Donald Hafner**, Pastor of Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg, who predeceased her. Together they raised three children, the Rev. Dr. Laurinda Hafner (Rick Walters), Dr. Laurin Hafner (Dr. Rona Karasik) and Dr. Lars Hafner (Tara Newsom), first in Indianapolis and later in St. Petersburg. She also enjoyed her grandchildren, Elena, Ciana, Camryn, and Lilly, and her extended family of grandchildren, Sam, Mia, and John Edward.

Her heart was huge, especially for those in need and was an advocate for the homeless and hungry. She helped bring Habitat for Humanity to St. Petersburg in the early 1970's and sat on the Habitat house selection committee for many years. She was one of the founders of The Magic Closet, an outreach program of Trinity UCC, which provided clothing, housewares, food, and other necessities to those in need. Passionate about women's rights, she often attended rallies and marches well into her 90s. One of her more recent signs said, "I'm over 90 and I can't believe I'm still having to protest this stuff." In 1985, Colleen was honored as Outstanding Laywoman of the Florida Conference of the UCC, receiving that award at the UCC's National General Synod.

She was strong, feisty, faithful and had a great sense of humor. She was ready to meet God — let's just hope God is ready for her.

Memorial gifts are also welcomed to the Arthur Wegner/Donald Hafner Scholarship Fund at Eden Theological Seminary. Named after her father and husband, who both attended Eden Seminary, this scholarship fund supports UCC students who don't have the resources to attend seminary. Gifts can be given through Coral Gables UCC by sending a check directly to the Wegener/Hafner Family Scholarship Fund, c/o Eden Theological Seminary, 475 East Lockwood Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63119.

Anniversary of Ordination

On Sunday, December 3, **Rev. Jim Mory (Union Congregational Church/Tavares)** marked the 45th anniversary of his ordination (at St. Paul UCC/Columbia, IL, in 1978). Conference Minister **Rev. John Vertigan** participated in the anniversary service, and Rev. Jim and wife **Judy** enjoyed the special celebration with church members and friends following the service.



The Installation of Rev. Shawn Proctor (UCC/ New Smyrna Beach) took place on November 12



Coral Gables Celebrates 100 Years

For a congregation that is so proudly an outside-the-box church, we can expect it to have thrown one wingding of a “blowout” to celebrate its 100-year anniversary.

Leading up to the big weekend December 16–17, there were numerous opportunities to recognize all that this church has represented and accomplished during a truly memorable century.

On the special festive weekend, they dressed, dined, drank and danced under the stars on Saturday evening, enjoyed the company of members old and new and demonstrated that they are a church that believes God can blow the lid off any box and turn it into a dance floor, which is exactly what they did.

Then on Sunday morning, they gathered as a worshipping body to give thanks to God for those who had a vision of a church in

this place, to celebrate the faith that has sustained and guided members for 100 years and to recommit themselves to being an alive, faithful, visionary church for the future.



CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 2

ACM Rev. Harrison, United UCC-DoC/St. Augustine

FEBRUARY 4

CM Rev. Vertigan, Coral Isles Church/Tavernier
ACM Rev. Harrison, Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte

FEBRUARY 7–9

CM Rev. Vertigan, UCC Insurance Board Directors meeting, Tucson

FEBRUARY 10

CM Rev. Vertigan, Northeast Region Committee on Ministry

FEBRUARY 11

CM Rev. Vertigan, Cocoa Beach Community Church
ACM Rev. Harrison, United Church in Tallahassee

FEBRUARY 13

CM Rev. Vertigan, Western Region Committee on Ministry

FEBRUARY 17

CM Rev. Vertigan, Southeast Region Committee on Ministry

FEBRUARY 18

CM Rev. Vertigan, New Vision UCC/Yulee

ACM Rev. Harrison, Sanibel Congregational UCC

FEBRUARY 25

CM Rev. Vertigan, Naples UCC

FEBRUARY 27–MARCH 3

CM Rev. Vertigan, Council of Conference Ministers and Insurance Board annual meeting, Cleveland

MARCH 3

ACM Rev. Harrison, Congregational UCC/Sarasota

MARCH 10

ACM Rev. Harrison, First United Church of Tampa

MARCH 24

ACM Rev. Harrison, Seabreeze UCC/Daytona Beach

APRIL 7

ACM Rev. Harrison, Faith Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie

APRIL 11–13

CM Rev. Vertigan, Common Global Ministries Board, Cleveland

APRIL 21

CM Rev. Vertigan, New Vision UCC/Yulee

APRIL 26–28

Florida UCC Women Annual Conference, Fruitland

APRIL 27

CM Rev. Vertigan, Conference Board of Directors, Orlando

APRIL 28

ACM Rev. Harrison, Florida UCC Women Annual Conference, Fruitland

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

Check uccfla.org for updates and watch for *Sunshine Connection* messages.

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



Time for Church 2023 Yearbook Reports

Yep, it's that time again ... time for all UCC churches to gather up their numbers and information and submit their reports for the 2024 *UCC Yearbook*! If you haven't submitted

your reports yet, you still have plenty of time. The Data Hub is open for churches to enter their reports through midnight on March 6. You can find [details and step-by-step instructions here](#).



If you need help completing this [important](#) task, we're here for you! Just e-mail **Dave Cyril** at deyril@uccfla.org, or feel free to call the Florida Conference office during office hours weekdays from 9am-4pm. [Get started today](#).

Insurance Board Webinar

On November 29 at 4pm Conference Minister John Vertigan was joined by Jennifer Perri, a representative from the Insurance Board of the UCC, for a ZOOM webinar gathering during which they shed light in simple terms onto what can be such a confusing issue for many church leaders. Jennifer offered an overview of what's going on in the world of insurance and then took questions to dialogue together regarding the partnership between the insurer and the insured.

Social Gospel Social

Rev. Drew Willard (member, **United Church of Gainesville**) moderated a discussion, "What is Beloved Community?" The conversation was based on the Beatitudes as a study of Matthew 5:1-16. The one hour conversations took place on Zoom on three Wednesday afternoons in January: "Where is the need?" "What does the text say?" and "What are we invited to do?" Rev. Drew may be reached at padre042310@gmail.com.



Scholarships and Grants

Scholarships and grants are available from the national UCC. Please find the *Justice and Local Church Ministries Grant and Scholarship* brochure [attached here](#).

National UCC Officer Steps Down

Traci Blackmon has stepped down as Associate General Minister of the National Church. Following sabbatical and a period of discernment, Rev. Traci Blackmon has resigned from her position as the United Church of Christ's Associate General Minister for Justice and Local Church Ministries (JLCM), effective December 14. Blackmon had been on sabbatical through the fall prior to her resignation.

General Minister and President Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson will make a recommendation to appoint an Acting Associate General Minister, per the UCC bylaws. Blackmon served in

her position for eight years, beginning after she was appointed acting Executive Minister for the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries in 2015 by the UCC Board following the retirement of the Rev. Linda Jaramillo.

Crisis in the Middle East

As we continue to witness the tragic crisis in the Middle East that escalated on October 7 but has roots that are decades long, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ have been active in a variety of ways, including through public witness statements issued together with ecumenical bodies of which our churches are members, advocacy action alerts, and appeals to support our partners in the region. [Here is an index of those efforts](#).

Supporting Equality Florida in Tallahassee

Leaders/members of Florida Conference local churches were invited to join a ZOOM conversation on Thursday, January 18, at 11am to discuss potential logistics for organizing a group effort to join/support [Equality Florida](#) in their upcoming "Pride at the Capitol." Pride at the Capitol is an effort designed to mobilize a community of allies to defeat as many harmful bills as possible while working to mitigate the damage of any passed legislation. Following this conversation, more information will be made available about details and ways to get involved in this movement.




From Sunshine Connection, January 17

Chairs and New Century Hymnals Available

Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach has 55 chairs (with hymnal racks below) that can be connected and are in great condition for churches looking for choir chairs or pew alternatives. For more information, contact [Rev. Dr. Guillermo Marquez-Sterling](#).


St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota has approximately 50 hymnals available to a loving church home! Please e-mail [Rev. Fred Rhines](#) for more information.

From Sunshine Connection, January 10



Florida Conference

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST



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.brtaapp.com/donate>

Preparing Our Final Wishes



For most of us, having end-of-life discussions are probably difficult or uncomfortable. For churches, this is one of the most important gifts that can be provided. Our churches offer Celebration of Life, memorial and funeral services. They recognize All Saints Day every year. Many provide on-going grief support groups for those who need help adjusting to the loss of loved ones. But perhaps one aspect of end-of-life

issues not widely addressed is preparing church members for their own passing.

On this general topic, in recent months **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** has offered a seminar discussion “Leaving the Gift of Guidance: My Funeral/Memorial Service Requests.” The **Beach Church/Pensacola Beach** had a discussion of *The Lost Art of Dying: Reviving Forgotten Wisdom* by Lydia Douglas, and members of **Naples UCC** could engage in a conversation of *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End* by Atul Gawande.

In the current issue of *Celebrate Florida*, we included a brief piece titled “Preparing for One’s Own Celebration of Life.” Two of our churches — Coral Gables Congregational UCC and the **United Church in Tallahassee** — recently shared information that speak to this need. In case you missed it, it follows.

Preparing for One’s Own Celebration of Life

The Legacy Committee at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC**, along with Pastor **Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner**, has prepared a booklet entitled *My Funeral/Memorial Service Requests* to help provide guidance and support offering information about what someone

would like to have at their own memorial/funeral service. Such pre-planning enables an individual to give expression to their faith through choosing and ordering what is to take place. It becomes a witness to one’s life for loved ones and to all those who participate in and attend one’s funeral/memorial service. Planning now for a service eases the burden on loved ones by eliminating the pressure of decision-making, particularly the need of trying to do things “the way you would have wished.”

The **United Church in Tallahassee** shared in a November 7 e-blast a suggested brief list members could use regarding a Celebration of Life wishes.

- Full name
- Birthdate
- Immediate family members, people you’d like to be involved in the service (e.g., for eulogies or Scripture readings)
- Basic Biography, which might include—where you were born, family of origin, schooling, jobs, hobbies, etc)
- Favorite colors
- Special objects/photographs
- Favorite hymns or songs
- Favorite scriptures
- Special readings
- Memorial gifts will go to... Designees of memorial gifts will be listed in the *Celebration of Life* bulletin
- Memorial gifts to UCT will go to the General Fund or to this ministry



Within the past several years, **Sally Cash** at **Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach** has arranged two “Lunch & Learn” programs facilitated by professionals in the field: “Your Hopes and Wishes: How to Plan Your Legacy” and “Make a Plan! It’s a Matter of Life and Death.” Following is the handout provided to attendees:

This article appeared originally in Sunshine Connection on December 6.



My Wishes



- I wish to have my family and friends know that I love them
 - I wish to be forgiven for the times I may have hurt others
 - I wish to have my family and friends know that I forgive them if they hurt me
 - I wish for all my family members to make peace with each other
 - I wish for my family and friends to respect my wishes even if they don't agree with them
 - I wish for my family and friends to get counseling if they have trouble with my death. I want memories of my life to give them joy and not sorrow
 - After my death, I would like my body to be (circle one): Buried Cremated
- If anyone asks how I want to be remembered, please say the following about me:

If there is to be a memorial service for me, I wish for this service to include:

Music: _____

Readings: _____

Other: _____

Rather than sending flowers, I would like people to honor my memory by making a donation to one of my favorite charities:

My Wishes for the Type of Service (check those that apply)

- I would like to have a traditional funeral service, followed by a burial
- I would like to have a visitation before my funeral
- I would like to have a traditional religious funeral service, followed by a burial
- I would like to have only a graveside service, followed by the burial
- I would like to be cremated and have only a service at the crematory
- I would like to be cremated and have my ashes spread _____
- I would like to have a memorial service
- I would like to have a Celebration of Life
- I would like to have a portion of the service honoring my military service

My military branch was: _____

The post commander is: _____

You can reach the commander at: _____

I would like the funeral/Memorial Service to be held at:

Church: _____

Funeral Home: _____

I (have/have not) prearranged details for a casket _____

I would like my final resting place to be: _____

Decisions About the People Involved in the Service

The person I would like to officiate the funeral/memorial service is: _____

My second choice would be: _____

I would like these people to serve as pallbearers: _____

My will and legal documents are stored: _____

A Stimulating Start to the New Year

With the new year underway, we thought it timely to share some news about interesting plans soon to begin in several congregations. But first we note a few important changes that occurred last year within our larger Conference church family. This would include the creation of a cooperative ministry involving **Lakewood UCC/St. Peterburg** and **Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg** with Sunday worship taking place on the Lakewood campus. **Christ Congregational Church/Miami** realized the sale of church property with a 20-year lease-back and has been relieved of the burden of property maintenance. It reports it now has “finances to expand faithful ministry and energized to be creative in discerning what God is calling us to do in this time and place. New Mission and Vision statements helped focus us on who we are and how we’ll act out our faith as a church in the future. **Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park** sold its property to another church, which has resulted in Good Sam observing Sunday worship at 4pm. The change also involves a novel approach to Sunday worship – “worship in two parts” with a 45-60 minute service followed by “unhurried community time” that is inspired by and related to the Sunday theme:



- 1st Sundays of the month are “At the Table Sundays”
- 2nd Sundays are “Justice & Mercy Sundays”
- 3rd Sundays are “Healing Sundays”
- 4th Sundays are “Make a Joyful Noise Sundays”
- 5th Sundays are “Art Together Sundays”

See anything in the following that sounds like something that could appeal to members of your congregation? If so, make a note to check with the church to get more information and learn how the program was received.



Beginning on January 7, **Spring Hill UCC** will enter into a trial period for an expanded faith formation program that includes the following changes:

Fellowship Hour will begin at 9am in Fellowship Hall

At 9:30am, Faith Formation will begin with classes being offered across the campus. For those that prefer, Fellowship Hour will continue until 10am.

At 10:15am, Faith Formation will end for the day, and everyone will transition to worship beginning at 10:30am.

According to the church’s explanation of the new format, here are details of the Adult Faith Formation opportunities that will be provided beginning Sunday, January 7:

UCC-101

One of the adult education offerings this January will be a look at what the United Church of Christ is all about. As this can be pretty stuffy, it will be a light-hearted look at the subject using *The Unofficial Handbook of the United Church of Christ*, written by two young UCC ministers.

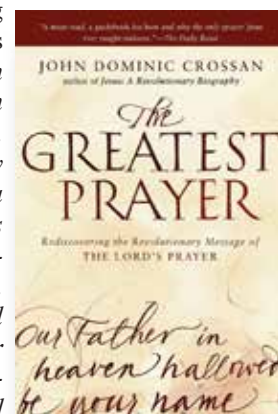


It All Begins With Genesis

While *Genesis* is the most familiar Old Testament text, it is also the most important, and the most misunderstood and misinterpreted text. In this study participants will explore, in detail, the main themes of *Genesis* chapters 1-11 through the lens of the Jewish interpretation. Main themes will focus on the development and comparison of the two different creation stories, the first family, sibling rivalry, the flood as a story of de-creation and re-creation, a mysterious third creation and what really went wrong at the tower of Babel.

Book Discussion

The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord’s Prayer by *John Dominic Crossan*. An expert on the historical Jesus, Crossan provides just the right amount of history, scholarship, and detail to rediscover why this seemingly simple prayer sparked a revolution. Addressing issues of God’s will for us and our response, our responsibilities to one another and to the earth, the theology of our daily bread, the moral responsibilities that come with money, our nation-states, and God’s kingdom, Crossan reveals the enduring meaning and universal significance of the only prayer Jesus ever taught.



These same three discussions will be offered again after the first nine weeks so there will be another opportunity to participate in an additional offering. In addition to these adult Faith Formation opportunities, they will be offering classes for elementary and middle school students from 9:30-10:15am as well. This model of Faith Formation offers opportunities for all ages.



First Congregational UCC will be undertaking a new “Mapping Your Life” series that Pastor **Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby** is calling “The Way-less Way ~ Your Life as a Curriculum.” These will be twice monthly conversations centering around a book with Pastor Wes weaving insights from scripture and inspiration. Participants do not need to attend all the sessions, but there will be a thread that will run from session to session.

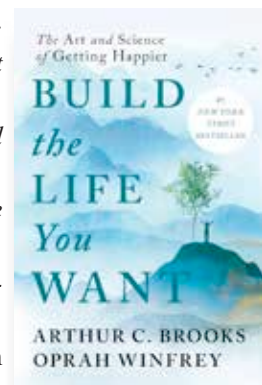
January 8 & 29: *Build the Life You Want* by Arthur C. Brooks and Oprah Winfrey

February 12 & 26: *Hope Leans Forward* by Valerie Brown

March 11 & 25: *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen

April 8 & 22: *No Cure for Being Human* by Kate Bowler

May 13: *The Seventh Story* by Brian McLaren



“Burning Questions” is the title of a two-part Adult Education class led by **Rick Walters** at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** that began on Sunday mornings in December and will



conclude on January 7. The class has been exploring deep questions often asked about faith, the Bible, beliefs, theology and spirituality in a framework that is helpful in bringing understanding to any question participants may have. Questions could even be submitted in advance and be addressed within the time allotted for the class and discussion.



Members of the **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine** are able to participate in an online four-week class on key lessons learned from White antiracist spirituality in action. This is offered by Lynn Burnett, creator of CrossCulturalSolidarity.com and The White Antiracist Ancestry Project.



According to the program's promotional material, participants can start off the new year with a month of inspiration and grounding, by exploring powerful examples of White antiracist spirituality in U.S. history. You don't need to be a religious person to learn from and be inspired by these histories -- this is for anyone seeking to embody a deeper, richer level of White antiracist practice that will sustain your spirit and provide guidance for the long haul. During the month of January, participants will meet each week to explore lessons to be learned from White antiracists throughout history, whose spirituality-in-action strongly embodied the following themes (while these themes may seem simple, each could be explored for a lifetime):

Week 1: Building antiracist community.

Week 2: Using our voice.

Week 3: The wide tapestry of action.

Week 4: Supporting Black & Brown led efforts.

Each 90 minute session on Zoom begins with an opening grounding and discussion followed by breakout groups, a whole group discussion and closing reflections. In order to be accessible to everyone from coast to coast, there are two different sessions. These sessions are exactly the same with participants coming to whichever time works best. An earlier session meets on Tuesdays at 3pm Pacific/6pm Eastern. The dates for those are January 2, 9, 16 and 23. A later session meets on Thursdays at 6pm Pacific/9pm Eastern. The dates for those are January 4, 11, 18 and 25.



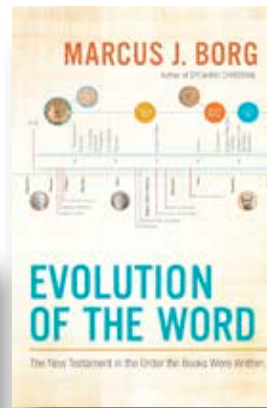
Beginning in late January, **North Port Community UCC** will begin a six week class titled "Faith through the Lens" -- "a journey of faith through the scripture and exploring how to better use your camera



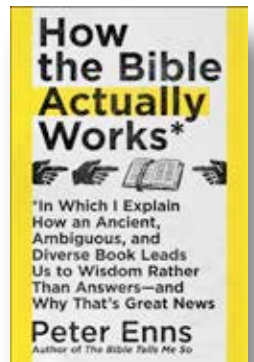
to express your faith through photography." Using the 23rd Psalm, participants will look at understanding your camera (digital, phone or tablet) and its options, fundamentals of photography and a study of the scripture. Meeting days and times will be announced based on options chosen by those who sign up.



Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach is offering a New Testament study in-person and on Zoom beginning January 7 on Sunday mornings (before worship service). It will be read in chronological order (rather than canonical order) while considering the development of early Christian thought in its ancient political, social and geographic context. The study, expected to take most of next year, will utilize the *Evolution of the Word* commentary by Marcus Borg. At **Venice UCC**, congregants



can participate in a new Bible study class on Wednesday mornings beginning on January 17, reading *How the Bible Actually Works* by Dr. Peter Enns. The Adult Faith Formation Wednesday afternoon sessions at **Boynnton Beach Congregational-Church of the Palms UCC/Delray Beach Cooperative Ministry** are beginning on January 3 with a multi-week study of *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* by Brian McLaren and facilitated by **Dr. Don McCullagh**.



at **Boynnton Beach Congregational-Church of the Palms UCC/Delray Beach Cooperative Ministry** are beginning on January 3 with a multi-week study of *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* by Brian McLaren and facilitated by **Dr. Don McCullagh**.



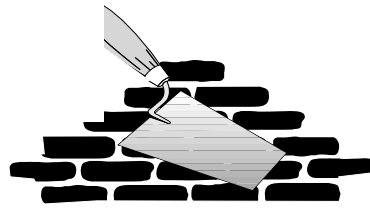
By mid-December, **Sanibel Congregational UCC** had concluded a multi-week Spiritual Exploration Unit titled "Shepherd, Soldier, Sinner, Sovereign: The Life and Times of David." Throughout the Advent and Christmas season, Jesus is described as coming from "The House of David," but what does that mean and more importantly, who *was* David? During the unit, participants considered what is known historically regarding David but most vitally some of the pivotal stories about David that are presented in the Bible. They explored those stories as well as the deeply complex portrait of David and his relationship with God and what they offer as a means of better understanding our own relationship with God. A new Spiritual Exploration Unit will begin this month.



This article appeared originally in Sunshine Connection on January 3.

Build It...

and they will come



The Leadership Council at **Venice UCC** has approved the Technology Team's proposal to add four 86" monitors to the Sanctuary with the express purpose of digitally enhancing in-house services. The proposed placement is designed to preserve the central view and aesthetics of the Sanctuary, with the end result complementing the service but not taking it over.

In mid-December Associate Pastors **Revs. Moira McGuinn** and **Hollie Schmidt** visited **Mary Ellis**, a 90-year member of **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami**, to show her the plans for the new Youth Center at Longshore House, one of the capital campaign projects.

More than a year and a half ago, Mary attended a packed capital campaign feasibility meeting where she stood, removed her oxygen mask and in full voice urged church leaders and members: "Create a youth center!"

Our youth are our future — it's time they have a place of their own!"

The church has since announced that its new youth center will be in Longshore House, with plans for the center already underway. Mary came to Plymouth at age five, and 90 years later, she's still making a difference.

UCC/New Smyrna Beach has received a \$2,500 grant from the Conference to purchase communication equipment for use during worship and is expected to be installed before spring.

There are lots of angels in their midst at the **UCC/Fort Lauderdale**. Thanks to a generous and anonymous donation, the Sanctuary audio visual and cabling has been upgraded.

The **Beach Church/Pensacola Beach** has learned it must replace the HVAC system on the west side of the Sanctuary as it is 15 years old and has reached the end of its life span. The cost will exceed \$25,000.

The **United Church of Gainesville** expelled a big "Whoopee" when it received its first utility bill in November since the installation of solar panels. It was all of \$35 for the electric portion when for that time of year with moderate temperatures it usually runs from \$275-300.

The Community Center at **Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte** was ready for use for the Christmas Eve morning service though post-Hurricane Ian reconstruction is still underway. Attendees were forewarned: "This is not the Sunday for flip flops or high heels. We encourage you to wear sensible shoes with a good grip. The floors have not been refinished." During reconstruction Sunday worship had been being held at the clubhouse at the Kings Gate retirement community.



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.

United Church of Christ

Music and the Arts



Bobby Jo Valentine, an award-winning folk/pop singer – “an explorative, hopeful, spiritual, queer, soulful artist who strives to makes music and poetry that is good medicine for everyone” – was in concert at **Windemere Union Church** on January 21 and at **Fort Myers UCC** on Friday evening, January 26.

He shared his talents the next evening at **Spring Hill UCC**. On Sunday afternoon, January 28, he appeared at **Christ Congregational Church/Miami**. Looks like those interested in hearing him had several available options!

Members at **Sanibel Congregational UCC** who are interested in painting in any medium were welcome to join the art class that began on Tuesday, January 9, from noon to 3pm. A beginner’s watercolor class was being taught at the same time for anyone wishing to learn.

Members and friends at the **United Church of Gainesville** displayed their creative endeavors like painting, sculpture, clay, fabric art, 3D and more on Sunday, November 12, that ran from 11am-1pm. Some art was for sale with 20% of the sales going to the Food4Kids Program.

Members of **Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg** came up with a novel way to thank their musical director **George Mohammed** for his leadership and musical talent in rehearsing the choir and teaching them new music for the Christmas holiday season. On Sunday, November 19, the chancel choir presented their choral selection, “Give Thanks.” With the prompt, “What are you thankful for?” congregants were encouraged to write down their words of gratitude on a large whiteboard brought by **Alan Nuytten**. It was a wonderful visual way to offer the congregation’s appreciation and gratefulness for the many gifts received from a loving God.

The **Community Church of Vero Beach** held a 100th anniversary Sunday Jazz Brunch on January 14 and 21. The congregation is also experiencing the 100th anniversary exhibit, “Our Journey in Pictures,” on display in the Narthex gallery.

This year will be **Greg Chestnut’s** 35th anniversary of being the Music Minister at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota**. It has been calculated that Greg has played over 1,800 preludes and as many postludes and has conducted the choir to sing over 2,000 anthems.



Peter Bergin, a Michigan-based ragtime concert pianist with a passion for sharing the roots of American music and its rich history, performed at **Naples UCC** on Tuesday evening, January 9.

An early Valentine’s Day “Music for Loves” concert is scheduled for Saturday afternoon, February 10, at **Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach**. It will feature four members of the Chancel Choir; led by **Dale Williams**, Choir Director and Organist/Pianist. The church’s 2024 Concert Series will take place outside on the Pavilion, beginning with: The Mad Beach Band, February 1; Island Boys, February 15; Hits of the Brits, February 29’ and The Black Honkeys, March 14.

Share Your News



We’d LOVE to share YOUR good news with all our churches

PLEASE SEND TO rickcarson1@gmail.com



FILM

“The Polar Express” was shown in the Sanctuary at **Spring Hill UCC** on Friday evening, December 15.

Members of **First United Church of Tampa** were encouraged to read *Killers of the Flower Moon* and then see the movie on Tuesday evening, January 23, and join a discussion afterwards.



Food, Glorious Food

Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte created Thanksgiving 54 food bags with 18 going to teachers, 16 to veterans and 20 to families in the community. In addition to food donations from church members, monetary contributions of almost \$300 covered all the expenses and no Food Pantry funds had to be used to purchase any items.



As of end of 2023, the **United Church of Gainesville** had donated 5,534 pounds of food in the year — over 2.8 tons! — to the food pantries at Gainesville Community Ministry (GCM) and Bread of the Mighty Food Bank.

On Thanksgiving Day between 1-3pm in Fellowship Hall, **Spring Hill UCC** distributed 100 hot Thanksgiving meals to-go for those in need.

Sunday, November 19, was Pie Sunday Fellowship at the **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** when congregants brought pies to enjoy after worship. The Imperial Court of All Florida had a spaghetti dinner fundraiser to benefit Ruth Ministry on Saturday, December 16, and it sponsored a chili cookoff charity event on Sunday, December 17. The church thanks Bona Italian Restaurant for a generous donation from a Give Back Monday, at which 10% of dinners purchased was donated to the Ruth Ministry — \$380!

Yes, 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.

During the last three months of 2023, **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** collected 920lbs of food for the All Faiths Food Bank.

At the **Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton**, contributions of food or funds filled 11 Thanksgiving boxes, a 10% increase over last year. Church youth decorated the boxes instead of using a plain cardboard box.



Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg donated a whopping 4,775 pounds of non-perishable food and personal hygiene items to the St. Pete Free Clinic during 2023.

The Hunger Vigil at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC**, in which Pastor **Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner** remains at the top of the church tower until the goal of food is reached, was once again a success. The first year took into the evening to raise the goal of two tons of food. This year the goal was 12,000, and it didn’t take long for 13,602 pounds to be raised. Much of the food will be available to the church pantry and the rest distributed to other pantries.



The Heifer International donations raised at **Coral Isles Church/Tavernier** were matched 4xs by Heifer International, so its donation ended up being \$800. Two church members matched the contribution so the total donation for Heifer ended up being \$1,000.

Come to the Word Made Flesh “market place” during Fellowship time at **Venice UCC** on December 10 presented new, never-seen-before items fresh from Sierra Leone — Christmas tars and a beautiful variety of greeting cards. All monies raised give hope for better lives for women in the Kroo Bay slum of Freetown.



New Year Traditions



With the coming of the new year, we checked how some of our churches marked this beginning, including the tradition of Epiphany, a feast day noting the visit of the Magi.

At **Sanibel Congregational UCC** they began a new tradition — a carol sing. Although it happened on the last Sunday of 2023, **First Congregational UCC/Winter Park** noted the end of the year on December 31 with “Pajama Day” and carol singing.



It was “bring a cake!” at the **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** to celebrate the end of the 12 days of Christmas with “Three Kings Day” in which members were invited to bring a cake to share.



Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour also celebrated with King Cake. At **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** there was an appearance by the Wise Ones, gifts for the children and a special Epiphany party with a piñata following worship. Congregants at the **United Church of Gainesville** considered the stars

that turn within us as they received an annual “star word” as they entered the Sanctuary and later in the service meditated upon what road they are called to take in the new year. The same tradition was carried out at the **United Church in Tallahassee**. Members were alerted that some of the more “annoying words” had been deleted (like self-control and salvation!). After worship, they gathered in the Sanctuary for a time of sharing star word stories from 2023: “How has your word guided you through the year?” “What have you learned?” How have you grown?” “How eager are you to get a new word (because last year’s word was so annoying)?”

Arrivals at **Christ Congregational Church/Miami** had the opportunity to receive a “star word” as has been their custom the last couple of years. On each of the stars was a word, and congregants were encouraged to trust the word that selects them (but they were free to trade out a word). During 2024 recipients can reflect on how their star word is working in their life, and they are invited to hang it where they’ll see it often. Church leaders are interested in hearing about participants’ experiences with their star words from last year, and those who are comfortable doing so were encouraged to reflect on the impact their word had throughout 2023 and sharing that significance with the church office in one to three sentences.



This article appeared originally in Sunshine Connection on January 17.

*The Mission of Faith Church:
to love God,
to love one another,
and to love our community*

FAITH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH/PORT ST. LUCIE



Who We Say We Are

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

UCC WOMEN AROUND THE STATE



donated items for shut-in seniors (male and female) who are residents of Orchard Place or who receive Meals on Wheels. To ring in the New Year on Tuesday, January 2, the Women's Association hosted Bohdana Puzyk and Katia Shevchuk from the Ukrainian National Women's League of America (UNWLA). The ladies from Ukraine displayed show-and-tell items including embroidery and handmade Ukrainian Easter Eggs and also told of the traditions of Ukrainian Christmas.

The Women's Fellowship Flea Market at **Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg** on Saturday November 4 grossed over \$1,800 in sales.

"Reflections: Friendships and Moonbeams" was the name of the **United Church of Gainesville** women's overnight retreat Saturday, January 19–21, at Camp Weed in Live Oak. Some three dozen women enjoyed sessions for art, music, writing, conversations, yoga and movement and experienced a Taizé service.

On January 18 **Naples UCC** member **Nancy Cherney** gave a presentation on the Blue Zones Project in Southwest Florida and what it means for the church campus to be a Blue Zones certified location. Blue Zones Project® encourages changes in a community that lead to healthier options as small changes contribute to huge benefits for all — lowered healthcare costs, improved productivity and ultimately a higher quality of life.

The Women's Fellowship at **Cocoa Beach Community Church** on Tuesday, January 16, learned from the Brevard Indian River Coalition about issues related to the restoration of the Indian River Lagoon.

The women of the **UCC/New Smyrna Beach** (above) enjoyed a vegetarian potluck at Ladies Night on the River Deck along with Jan Richardson's her wonderful lessons, poetry and painting.



The Anam Cara's fifth annual tea at **Faith UCC/Dunedin** on November 4, was great fun for the 42 women that attended.

This year's tea had a luau theme, hence the name "Teaki." In addition to an amazing feast of Hawaiian-inspired food and drink, they were entertained with a ukulele concert. On Saturday, December 9, they hosted an Advent Day Retreat in the church's Gathering Space attended by 13 women. They explored some of the Mary Archetypes: Virgin, Mother, Mother Earth and Divine

Mother. After sharing stories of their own mothers, and then Communion and meditation, they learned and experienced an old practice for writing poetry called Pantoum. The program was filled with beautiful and meaningful poetry and images for a time of reflection.



The Faith Ladies at **Faith Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie** had Christmas cookie exchange on Saturday, December 9.

It was Christmas Stories time on Saturday, December 9, at **Fort Myers UCC**. On Thursday, January 11, the women traveled to **Sanibel Congregational UCC** to hear Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist, essayist and poet Barbara Kingsolver.

The ladies at **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami** had their women's potluck and carols on Wednesday, December 6.

The **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** Women's Christmas luncheon on December 5 was a senior Christmas box filling event at which they filled and wrapped 100 Christmas boxes with

The women of **Christ Congregational Church/Miami** will be reading *Horse* by Geraldine Brooks for their February meeting.

The Women's Christmas Retreat at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** took place Saturday, January 6, at the Catalonia Guest House. They used the creative images and poetry of Jan Richardson to reflect on the past year, participate in a Native American bowl burning cleansing ritual, practiced massage, shared stories and Communion.



How Do We Worship?

FL UCC Women 2024 Annual Conference



Save the Date

2024 Annual Conference

When: April 26-28

Where: Warren Willis Methodist Center, Fruitland

Theme: "How Do We Worship?"

Mission Study: Children aging out of foster care

For more information and to register go to www.uccwomen.org or www.uccfla.org/

In 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

The Social Ministry Team at **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda** recently read *The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action* by Carter Heyward and also heard guest speaker Rabbi Rick Sherwin talk about the history and theology of Hanukkah.



Brady Sarasota held a “Vigil for Victims of Gun Violence” on Friday, December 8, at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota**, and the church hosted a Florida State Representative speaker on Thursday, January 4, addressing open carry and other gun bills before the legislature.

On January 21 SURE (Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity) hosted a network meeting at the church to receive updates on the work that is occurring in affordable housing, restorative justice in the schools and criminal justice in the state.



On November 4, church members were presented an interactive history lesson on how Indigenous Nations in Florida lost their land over time that was offered by **Windermere Union Church**.

After worship on January 7, members joined a conversation about the church’s recently revised core values: welcome, worship, caring, belonging, justice and faithfulness.



On Thursday evening, December 14, members of **Lake Worth UCC** had an opportunity to hear Sheriff Ric Bradshaw regarding progress in his commitment to collect data on all traffic stops made by sheriff deputies.



A church-wide field trip by members of the **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine** to the White Sands Buddhist Center in Mims will take place on Friday afternoon, February 2.

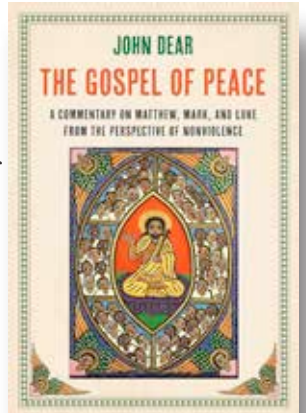


BE THE CHURCH
 Protect the environment. Care for the poor.
 Forgive often. ~~Reject racism.~~
Fight for the powerless.
 Share earthly and spiritual resources.
 Embrace diversity. Love God. Enjoy this life.

Peacemaker, author and Nobel Peace Prize nominee Father John Dear will appear at **Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg** on Sunday afternoon, March 17, to talk about and sign copies of his new book *The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence*.



The Strategic Planning and Relations Committee at **Coral Isles Church/Tavernier** is using a survey of church members to seek input from the congregation as it explores “who we, as CIC, are called to be in the present, short-term and long-term future.”



Members of **Naples UCC** had a chance to explore environmental racism in a presentation on Tuesday afternoon, January 9, by Dr. Robert Bullard, pioneer of the Environmental Justice Movement.



Rev. Dr. Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, President and CEO of Interfaith Alliance, delivered an address, “Mobilizing Against Christian Nationalism,” in the Sanctuary of **Coral Gables Congregational UCCC** on Thursday evening, January 11. The presentation was made possible by Mosaic Miami (formerly Miami Coalition for Christians and Jews).



PAID ADVERTISEMENT

Florida Conference Open Letter Runs in the Tallahassee Democrat and the Orlando Sentinel

Special thanks to those who were involved in the crafting, signing and posting of this action of Public Theology & Witness. We will keep you posted as to where else this letter is shared. A third publication of the open letter is not planned at this time, but it could happen if funding were forthcoming. Donors are invited so if you'd like to see it run in your area newspaper be in touch with Rev. Vertigan to make it happen.

This letter with a Maitland postmark arrived in Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan's mailbox on New Year's Eve after the education statement had appeared in the Orlando Sentinel at the end of December.

The past year has been discouraging. Our neighbors and fellow Floridians being knocked down, their very existence called into question, our rights being taken away and our freedom to be different turned into a guilt trip that somehow our differences are no longer celebrated, but condemned. Those who advocated hate were winning, with no one advancing our humanity, least of all our religious institutions who seemed to be caving into political interests...hollowing out our churches through their lack of conviction and commitment to principles of love and acceptance. And then, hope arrived.

Sometimes we get inspiration from what we read in articles, or opinions, or leaders taking a stand, and last Thursday hope arrived from an unlikely source: through a full page ad in the *Sentinel* from The United Church of Christ. While we are constantly assailed from hateful rhetoric (and a phrase that ignores the shame that should correct it "double down"), we heard a message of love and acceptance. That it is ok to be different. That we need to teach our children well, with love and not hate, to be brave when confronting our past, and resolute that we will be better. And a whole bunch of congregations were so committed to our well-being that they were willing to say so publicly.

There are great people among us, wonderful support abounds, and if we look for it, we can see that kindness, love and acceptance exist. Here. In Florida.

Wow. This could be an amazing 2024.

An Open Letter to Our Florida Neighbors

including the Governor, the Education Commissioner, and members of the FL State Legislature

The United Church of Christ (UCC) in Florida has been a part of the faith community in Florida since 1884 and a part of our nation since its very beginning. Our faith is rooted in scripture and Jesus' commandment to 'Love our neighbors as we love ourselves' (paraphrase Luke 10:27). Our commitment to education began with our denominational ancestors, who were founders of Harvard College, seminaries and other institutions of higher learning, including six Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU) and more recently, New College.

In addition to supporting institutions of higher learning, we are also invested in supporting our children and youth through public education. It is our love for and our commitment to our children that compels us to write regarding the new education policies being enacted in our state. Again, we follow the words of Jesus, who said, "Let the children alone—let them come to me. The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (The Inclusive Bible). This is often interpreted as a reminder to value the qualities of children and to be open and accepting towards everyone, regardless of their age or status. It also serves as a call to nurture and protect the young ones, allowing them to grow and develop freely, as well as an invitation to welcome the most powerless among us. We believe that love of neighbor means supporting the autonomy of one's faith and education, honoring the dignity of all, and promoting inclusion are ways of defining the beloved community.

To build a beloved community, we must ensure our children are taught the richness and complexities of our collective past, the good as well as the bad. Teaching children a comprehensive understanding of history will foster empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper sense of unity and will empower them to recognize injustice and discrimination and work towards a more equitable future. Yet it seems that our new educational curricula are focused on making students comfortable rather than challenging them to analyze and evaluate. Further, language expressing slavery as a benefit to African Americans is reckless and harmful; in worst cases, leading to acts of violence like what we witnessed in Jacksonville on August 26, 2023.

Moreover, we are concerned about the dropping of the AP African American history curriculum in favor of what seems to be a much less comprehensive one, especially Prager U, which conveys only one viewpoint. To build a beloved community, one that embraces all its members, we must acknowledge the struggles, triumphs, and contributions of every individual and community that has played a part in shaping our state and nation. A beloved community is not built on

obtuseness or the erasure of history. It is built on a strong foundation of knowledge, understanding, and respect for one another. By equipping our children with a holistic view of history, we give them the tools to challenge prejudice and bigotry. We create a generation of leaders who recognize the immense value of embracing diversity and promoting social justice.

Furthermore, we are concerned that our policies and rhetoric toward LGBTQ+ students, parents, teachers, and faculty feel targeted and less safe. We are concerned that books lifting up diversity and the struggle for justice have been taken off library shelves, sometimes as a response to self-censorship because of the political atmosphere that has been created. We are concerned that the mission of New College has been changed and new leadership, some without educational credentials, hurriedly put in place. All of these actions threaten the building of the beloved community.

Just as we are asking you, our educational and political leaders, to remember your responsibilities for the educational policies of our state for all our children and to engage with educators, historians, and community leaders to design an inclusive framework that truly reflects the complexities of our shared past, we acknowledge our own responsibility in the education of our children and youth. We re-commit to providing a safe space for children and youth to learn about one another and about the vision for a Beloved Community.

We express our gratitude to our dedicated educators and librarians and commit to supporting them in helping nurture our children and youth. These educational experts care deeply and play a vital role in shaping the future leaders of our society. They inspire, challenge, and open young minds to the wonders of knowledge. But too many of them now feel under attack and are contemplating leaving their profession and/or the state.

Let us work together to create a beloved community where every child grows up with an understanding and appreciation for the diverse tapestry that has been woven throughout history. In the words of Jesus, "Let the children come."

Sincerely,

The Rev. John D Vertigan, Conference Minister

On Behalf of these Florida Conference UCC Congregations

Faith Family United Church of Christ
Brandon, Florida

Cocoa Beach Community Church
Cocoa Beach, Florida

Coral Gables Congregational United Church of Christ
Coral Gables, Florida

Seabreeze United Church of Christ
Daytona Beach, Florida

Faith United Church of Christ
Dunedin, Florida

United Church of Christ Fort Lauderdale
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

Fort Myers United Church of Christ
Ft. Myers, Florida

Church of the Isles UCC
Indian Rocks Beach, Florida

Arlington Congregational Church
Jacksonville, Florida

Riverside United Church of Christ
Jacksonville, Florida

Jensen Beach Community Church
Jensen Beach, Florida

First Congregational Church, UCC
Lake Helen, Florida

First Congregational Church
Lake Worth, Florida

Longwood Hills Congregational Church, UCC
Longwood, Florida

Christ Congregational Church
Miami, Florida

Miami Beach Community Church
Miami Beach, Florida

Miami Lakes United Church of Christ
Miami Lakes, Florida

Miami Shores Community Church
Miami Shores, Florida

Naples United Church of Christ
Naples, Florida

United Church of Christ of New Smyrna Beach
New Smyrna Beach, Florida

First Church of North Miami, Congregational
North Miami, Florida

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Ocala, Florida

First United Church of Christ
Orlando, Florida

United Church of Christ at the Villages
Oxford, Florida

Good Samaritan Church
Pinellas Park, Florida

First Congregational Church
Port St. Lucie, Florida

Congregational United Church of Christ
Punta Gorda, Florida

Hope United Church of Christ
Rockledge, Florida

The United Church, UCC/DOC
St. Augustine, Florida

Lakewood United Church of Christ
St. Petersburg, Florida

Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church
St. Petersburg, Florida

Trinity United Church of Christ
St. Petersburg, Florida

Sanibel Congregational Church, UCC
Sanibel, Florida

Congregational United Church of Christ
Sarasota, Florida

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Sarasota, Florida

St. Andrew United Church of Christ
Sarasota, Florida

Emmanuel United Church of Christ
Sebring, Florida

Spring Hill United Church of Christ
Spring Hill, Florida

The United Church in Tallahassee
Tallahassee, Florida

First United Church of Tampa
Tampa, Florida

Coral Isles Church United Church of Christ
Tavernier, Florida

Venice United Church of Christ
Venice, Florida

Union Congregational United Church of Christ
West Palm Beach, Florida

First Congregational Church, UCC
Winter Park, Florida

New Vision United Church of Christ
Yulee, Florida



PAID FOR BY THE FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Anti-Racism Ministry



Members and friends of **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** traveled to St. Petersburg to tour the Carter G. Woodson African American Museum and gardens in St. Petersburg.

Sacred Conversations on Race continued at the church with: “My Road Trip through the Whitest Towns in America,” a TED Talk by Rich Benjamin; Sermon by UCC General Minister and President Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson given at the Florida Conference Annual Gathering in October.

On January 24 there was a discussion of *Recitatif* by Toni Morrison.



On February 5 church members at **Venice UCC** will be able to view “Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass: A Walk to Respect,” a production recorded at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. A discussion led by a live panel will follow.

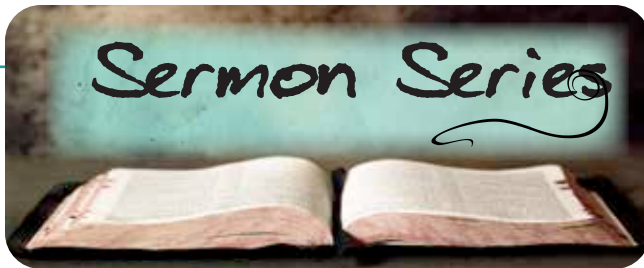


In celebration of Black History Month at **Boynton Beach Congregational UCC-Church of the Palms UCC Cooperative Ministry/Delray Beach**, there will be a showing of the film “Selma” on Thursday afternoon, February 8, followed by a discussion facilitated by **Rev. Todd Petty**.



The **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine** and the St. Augustine Quakers, in collaboration with others, will create and host a series of events honoring the 60th anniversary of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The inaugural events include on Saturday afternoon, January 27, the viewing of the film “Dare Not Walk Along,” which is about the St. Augustine civil rights movement, followed by time for group reflection and a churchwide field trip on Friday, February 2, to the Harry & Harriette Moore Cultural Center, honoring these leading civil rights activists.

The congregation is invited to participate in a four-week online class on key lessons learned from White antiracist spirituality, “White Antiracist Spirituality: Grounding Ourselves in the Historical Legacy” by Lynn Burnett.



United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine
Listening To Life’s Rhythms
 Advent



Stars, Sharks & Seashells (aka Lions, Tigers & Bears)
 Oh My! —
 Searching for the Connection between Fear and Awe
 Epiphany

UCC/Fort Lauderdale
Holy Disruption
 Advent

Lake Worth UCC
How Does a Weary World Rejoice?
 Advent

Who Wrote It, When and Why
 Mid-January-February

Sanibel Congregational UCC
It’s Better to Light a Candle...
 Advent

Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach
Christmas in Five Carols

Advent
Unexpected Mercies: Four Parables
 January

Observing MLK Day



Our congregations observed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in varied ways in worship on Sunday, January 14, and on the holiday that followed on Monday, January 15. Many churches provided information to their members about community events and ecumenical observations that were to take place over the weekend.

At **Sanibel Congregational UCC** the music that Sunday morning included pieces that were favorites of Dr. King. After the service at the **United Church in Tallahassee** there was a civil rights sing-along.

The **UCC/Fort Lauderdale**, like other churches, blended songs, stories and images in commemoration. **Rev. Aaron Lauer** and guest soloist Rashad Webb presented the history of “Amazing Grace” in both song and spoken word. Pastor Aaron told the story of the hymn and its use throughout the civil rights movements in U.S. history and Rashad blessed congregants with his singing of the hymn.



Dr. Rik Stevenson (UF Department of African American Studies) preached “Everybody in the Body is Somebody” for the MLK observance at the **United Church of Gainesville**. The Racial Justice Committee at the church organized church members to join the march from the Bo Diddley Plaza to the MLK Center at Citizens Field on Monday afternoon, January 15.

Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson (First United Church of Tampa) preached the MLK interfaith service at Allen Temple AME Church on Monday afternoon, January 15.



The annual Hunger Vigil at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** that always falls on this weekend collected 14,000lbs of food items by 2pm destined for numerous food pantries in the area, fulfilling the words of Dr. King that “The surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others.”

The theme of MLK weekend at **Venice UCC** was “Toward Racial Reconciliation.” The special guest speaker was Bishop James A. Dixon, founding Pastor of the Greater Faith

Baptist Fellowship and Second Presiding Bishop of the Christian Baptist Fellowship International. He facilitated a workshop on Saturday, January 13, and preached the morning worship on Sunday. The program was part of the United Church of Christ’s *Join the Movement Toward Racial Justice* emphasis.

At a community MLK Jr. Memorial Service on Sunday afternoon, January 14, at Greater Mount Zion AME, **Rev. Kim Wells (Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg)** offered a prayer during the service.

On Friday evening, January 12, in honor of Rev. Dr. MLK, Jr. weekend, **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** welcomed Dr. Keith Hampton for a concert in the Sanctuary, and on Saturday he worked with the choir. On Sunday, January 14, at both services, Dr. Hampton helped lead prayer and the praise of God. On Dr. King Monday, the church participated in a march for unity with their neighbors, beginning at the Robert Taylor Community Center and walking one mile to Dr. King Memorial Park in Sarasota.



The Justice Committee at **Naples UCC** celebrated Rev. Dr. King, Jr. at Cambier Park on January 15 at noon. The celebration began with a parade at 11am followed by children’s activities, entertainment, vendors and food.

It was announced during worship at **Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach** that there would be an all-church read of *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson with a discussion to come later in February.

The Comma, the weekly e-blast from **Lake Worth UCC**, provided a list of the many events that were being held in the larger community’s 30th annual MLK celebration. It also included this message:



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the 5th UCC General Synod in 1965. The University of Memphis has the manuscript of the speech, unique in its handwritten edits. You can see a digital copy [here](#).

In their notes on the speech, UM writes:

Dr. King was invited by the predominately-white United Church of Christ to speak on the topic “Man in a Revolutionary World” and in the speech he urged the white churches to join with the black churches in the civil rights movement. He said it was the church’s role to take the moral lead and condemn racial segregation and discrimination, which many white churches had supported historically. He acknowledged that changes in the law were important but the hardest task was to change people’s thinking and that was a great responsibility of the church.

“It is not enough for the religious institutions to be active in the realm of ideas;” Rev. King proclaimed to the synod, “they must move out into the arena of life and do battle for their sanctities.”

This appeared originally in Sunshine Connection on January 24.

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.



As December 1 is World AIDS Day, **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** provided information for near-by places that provide HIV-testing and medical care. **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** reminded church members in an e-blast that HIV/AIDS remains a major global public health issue. **Lakewood UCC-Trinity UCC Cooperative Ministry/St. Petersburg** suggested members say a prayer for those living with HIV/AIDS and consider getting tested. Retired TV news anchor and **Naples UCC** member **John Bachman** interviewed fellow NUCC member **Marcia Davis** on December 10 between services about her global teaching profession and how it intersected with her faith. Her career included lengthy stays in Dubai, United Arab Emirates and Bogota, Columbia.

Several congregations recently had fundraisers. The **United Church of Tampa** had a garage sale in November that netted \$333 and an afternoon music concert (right) that collected \$800. A November flea market at **Cocoa Beach Community Church** brought in \$2,500. The annual Women’s Fellowship Flea Market at **Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg** (pictured) raised almost \$1,900 with remaining merchandise that did not sell going to the Salvation Army. The Cake and Ice Cream fundraiser at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** raised over \$2,000 for Family Promise, an agency that serves families at risk of or experiencing homelessness. **Jessia** at **Community Congregational Church/New Port Richey** brought her cupcake truck to the church’s parking lot and sold cupcakes, making over \$2,000 for the church. The “Giving Tuesday” event at **Coral Isles Church/Tavernier** raised \$3,326.



New year retreats are at hand. A new year re-set mini-retreat took place on Saturday morning at the **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine**, reflecting back on 2023 and planning a path of 2024 using the YearCompass (pictured) as their guide. **North Port Community UCC** will have a faith retreat at DaySpring in Parrish from Thursday afternoon, February 29-noon on Saturday, March 2, in the theme “Joy in the Lord: The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength.”



The **United Church of Gainesville** has received a grant of \$59,689.20 to enable one of its ministers, **Rev. Bromleigh McCleneghan**, to participate in the 2023 National Clergy Renewal Program. UCG is one of 177 congregations across the United States selected to participate in this competitive grant program, which is funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and administered by Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis.

A Life Line screening was offered at the **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** on Monday, January 8. The screening goes beyond regular checkups with a non-invasive look inside arteries for signs of plaque buildup and more.

Coral Isles Church/Tavernier is currently working with **Neal Watkins**, the Conference Minister for Congregational Life, in developing a new Strategic Plan. The Church Council at **Union Congregational Church/Tavares** has designated 2024 as a time to re-evaluate the purpose and mission of the church, looking at the mission and vision that motivates its decisions and actions. This process began on January 7 with a fellowship potluck and meeting that followed morning worship. Neal led more than 50 attendees through a process of discernment.

Rev. Wesley Snedeker (Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach) is launching a monthly service of prayer, scripture and song at the Gulf beach access across the church. It will take place on the last Sunday of every month at 4:45pm, intended primarily for folks who work or have other commitments and cannot make it to Sanctuary worship at 10am on Sundays.

On Thursday morning, February 1, the **Beach Church/Pensacola Beach** will be hosting its second annual free Tech Savvy workshop with personal 20 minute sessions with participants to address specific questions related to iPhones, iPads or Android devices.





L-R: Kevin McCoy, Church World Service; Liz Sharpe, Coordinator of CROP for VUCC; Pastor John Fairless

Kevin McCoy, a Community Engagement Specialist for Church World Service (CWS), came to Venice UCC to present an award naming VUCC a "Legacy Congregation" for 31 years of service, not just for CROP, but also for other CWS events in which the church has participated in the past. VUCC

was one of only four churches in Florida to receive the award.

Third grade teacher **Mary Martinez**, a member of **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami**, was on NBC's "Today Show" to share about her football-themed lesson plans.



The **Community Congregational Church/New Port Richey** held a January Jubilee fundraiser on Saturday afternoon, January 20. It was a day of games, food and raffles. There was a \$10 entry fee or \$5 with a non-perishable food donation.



The UCC/New Smyrna Beach celebrated its mortgage burning on Sunday, October 29 followed by a potluck

Last February Jack Chandler, a member of the Finance Committee at the UCC at The Villages, burned the church mortgage



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

Live or via Zoom, or other livestreaming

"Final Words from the Cross," "Say Yes: A Liturgy on Not Giving Up on Yourself" and "Surviving the Holidays" (JupiterFIRST Church)

Letter of Paul to the Romans, "Local Health and Aging Resources" and "Spiritual Direction: Soul Friends" (UCC/New Smyrna Beach)

"The History and Theology of Hanukkah" (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park)

"Crossing into the Promised Land" (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

The Book of Proverbs (Congregational Community Church/New Port Richey)

Gospel of Mark (First Congregational Church/Lake Helen)
"Burning Questions" and "Preparing for Birth" (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

"Children of Abraham" (UCC/Fort Lauderdale)

"White Antiracist Spirituality: Grounding Ourselves in the Historical Legacy" (United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine)

"The Healing Ministry of Christ" (Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg)

"Gun Bills Before the Florida Legislature" and "The Myster-

ies of Egypt" (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

The Book of Genesis (Spring Hill UCC)

"Word and Deed: Ethical Living in the Book of James" (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

"Environmental Racism: 10 Egregious Examples," The Book of Ecclesiastes and "Finding Joy in Life: Sharing a Stephen Minister's Perspective" (Naples UCC)

"Beginnings: Highlights from the Book of Genesis" (Cocoa Beach Community Church)

"Shadows of Emmett Till," "The History and Context of the Current Crisis in Israel/Palestine" and "The Real Cost of War" (United Church of Gainesville)

"The Bible: Looking at the Sources" and "Memories: Why We Stay This Way" (Venice UCC)

"The Radical Teachings of Jesus" (Boynton Beach Congregational UCC-Church of the Palms UCC Cooperative Ministry/Delray Beach)

"Breakfast with Jesus" (Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park)

"Our Evolution of the Word New Testament" (Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach)



First Congregational UCC/Sarasota observed the Transgender Day of Remembrance on November 26, both during the worship services and in the Memorial Garden afterwards.

A letter, signed by congregants, was sent to the Florida Governor expressing support of Transgender medical care.

Coral Isles Church/Tavernier screened the film “1946” after worship on January 7. What if the word “homosexual” was never meant to be in the Bible?

The feature documentary “1946” follows the story of tireless researchers who trace the origins of the anti-gay movement among Christians to a grave mistranslation of the Bible.

It chronicles the discovery of never-before-seen archives at Yale University which unveil astonishing new revelations, and casts significant doubt on any biblical basis for LGBTQIA+ prejudice.

Upcoming Stewardship Virtual Seminar

Rev. Andrew Warner

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



Cultivating Generous Congregations Spring 2024

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 virtual seminar hosted by the South Central and Southeast Conferences on February 19, March 4, March 18, April 8, April 22, and May 6 from 7:30-9pm EASTERN.

The registration fee is \$300 (per team of two) and \$50 for each additional team member. Register Today - <https://cvent.me/YwOoaz>



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 forma-

tion activities for all ages. Learn more at uccresources.com.

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

BOOKS WE'RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER...

Live or via Zoom, or other livestreaming

Holy Disruption by Tracy S. Daub (UCC/Fort Lauderdale)

Becoming Conscious: The Enneagrams' Forgotten Passageway by Joseph Benton Howell (UCC/New Smyrna Beach)

We Make the Road by Walking by Brian McLaren and *Saving Us* by Katharine Hayhoe (Boynton Beach Congregational-Church of the Palms Cooperative Ministry/Delray Beach)

Unsheltered by Barbara Kingsolver and *The Girl With the Louding Voice* by Abi Dare' (Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton)

The Unofficial Handbook of the United Church of Christ by Quinn Caldwell and Curtis Preston and *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer* by John Dominic Crossan (Spring Hill UCC)

The Prayer Jars Trilogy: The Hope Jar by Wanda Brunstetter and *The Fight of Our Lives: My Time with Zelenskyy* by Julia Mendel (Cocoa Beach Community Church)

How the Bible Actually Works by Dr. Peter Enns (Venice UCC)

The Dalai Lama: His Essential Wisdom edited by Carol Kell Gangi (Faith UCC/Dunedin)

The Memory Keeper of Kyiv by Erin Littekin and *Feathers of Hope* by Sharon Garlough Brown (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Hacks by Rebecca Skloot (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park)

Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus and *Poverty by America* by Matthew Desmond (Naples UCC)

Praying the Psalms by Walter Brueggemann and *Hello Beautiful* by Ann Napolitano (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store by James McBride (Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte)

Final Words from the Cross by Adam Hamilton and *Remarkably Bright Creatures* by Shelby Van Pelt (JupiterFIRST Church)

Liturgy of the Ordinary by Tish Harrison Warren (Beach Church/Pensacola Beach)

The Measure by Nikki Erlick (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)



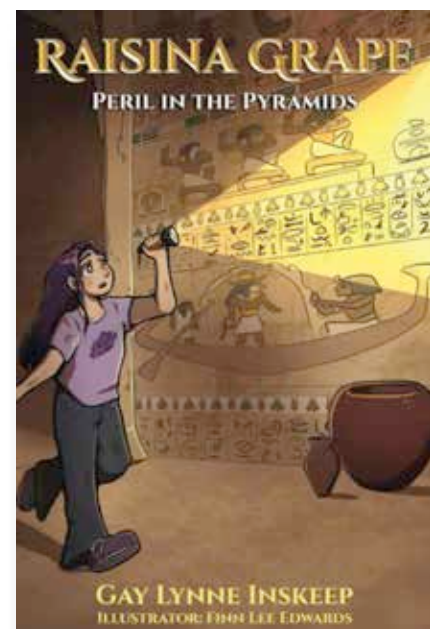
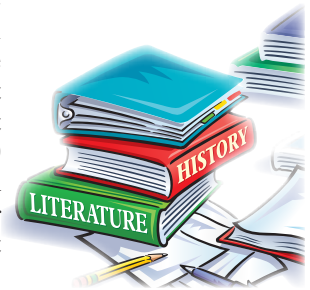
Gay Inskip, a member of **Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg**, has authored a new children/teens book, *Raisina Grape: Peril in the Pyramids*.

Twelve-year old Raisina Grape heads to Egypt to find a rare purple diamond that has been stolen. She uses her intuition and ingenuity to solve mysteries while experiencing new cultures and making new friends.

BANNED BOOKS

Cocoa Beach Community Church is opening its doors for parents and students to be welcomed into its literary space. The plan is to be open on the first Saturdays and third Sundays from Noon-2:00pm. The church will have an open house on February 18. Brevard schoolteacher Adam Triit will join them that day. Adam is an Advanced Placement English teacher, author, college instructor and says he has been collecting books banned from Brevard since 2022. He founded a nonprofit organization called "Foundation 451" to help purchase used copies (locally, whenever available) to distribute to age-appropriate students at various locations in the county. "We did this to increase access to a broad range of ideas," he said. CBCC's Banned Book Club is kicking off its opening with a read of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

The Racial Justice Committee at the **United Church of Gainesville** had an excellent turnout at its banned books event on October 8 at which 20 people signed up to read a banned book and later join in a discussion about the books.





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.



The extra dry summer was hard on the vegetation on the campus of **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota**. However, the Green Team has been faithfully watering the new plantings so things look good in the butterfly garden. There are new coffee bushes and some of the other new native plants are two blue Stoke's Asters and another Starry Rosin. Encouraging signs of growth are visible on the Slash Pine in front and the Southern Magnolia.



Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami joined the Rebuilding Together Miami team to paint a home in West Coconut Grove on Saturday, December 2. On Thursday, December 14 and January 11, groups from the church served dinner at the Chapman Partnership.



The Women's Fellowship at **Venice UCC** hosted a first aid and CPR class on Friday, January 26. The class took approximately four hours and at the end of the class participants received a certificate. On February 16 the AARP Driving Course will be offered, and with the certificate received from this class, the participant's auto insurance company will deduct \$100 from one's premium.



On the first official day of winter and the shortest day of the year, 15 Upper Keys residents – including members of **Coral Isles Church/Tavernier** – gathered for an interfaith service to remember nine individuals who did not have a home and who died in the Keys in 2023. A candle was lit for each person as their name was called out. Candles were also lit for the 11 veterans who died in the Keys this year and didn't have enough money to pay for burial. A final candle was lit for people without housing in the Keys who may have died but are unknown. The candles were displayed on a piece of cardboard, evoking the image of the only bed many unhoused people have. The Keys Jewish Community Center led the group in the Kaddish and a song of remembrance. This was the 18th year that this service has been celebrated in the Upper Keys. The group prayed that next year the service would be a celebration of an end to homelessness in the Keys.



In honor of the 100th anniversary of the **Community Church of Vero Beach** and in honor of the church's well-known dedication to the volunteer spirit, the congregation was challenged to carry out a combined 100 days or more of volunteer service at any of the dozens of agencies that help the many less fortunate people in the community. Interested members decided how often they wanted to volunteer and where. One option was a Habitat painting project on Friday morning, December 8.



Naples UCC held a Build Day with Habitat for Humanity of Collier County on Saturday morning, January 6, helping build homes in The Whitaker Woods Project directly across from Youth Haven.

On Wednesday afternoon, January 10, the church hosted a "Youth Mental Health" forum that was open to the community and featured a panel of health and educational experts from the area.



The recent donation by **Christ Congregational Church/Miami** of \$800 worth of \$25 gift cards and \$250 worth of essential food to the Children’s Partnership School at Miami Southridge Senior High School families resonated deeply with the church’s ethos. In thanking the church, the high school wrote “Were it not for your generous donation, we would have had to spend \$1,050 to provide the students with these resources had it not been for the donation you provided.”



The **Cocoa Beach Community Church** Mission and Outreach Committee is participating in the annual Point in Time Count. On the first three Sundays in January, the church collected socks and underwear to deliver to the Brevard Homeless Coalition. They in turn will distribute the socks and underwear in their annual count of homeless individuals in Brevard County. Point in Time allows various nonprofits to apply for federal funds to help the homeless. Members from the church went to the Courtney Springs Assisted Living Facility on Friday, January 12, to share birthday snacks and music.



Michelle Henessey, Chair of the **United Church of Marco Island** Mission Committee, presented a generous grant of \$10,000 to **Pat Rutledge**, Chief Executive Officer of the Marco Island Historical Society. The funds will be used to conserve a precious artifact from the Deltona Era of Marco Island’s history, a bronze sculpture of gulls in flight that flew above the Deltona Sales Office in the 1960s. The sculpture was rescued from destruction by the Marco Island Historical Society and Museum.

In 2023 the church supported a new local mission – **WyldLife**, a Young Life program on the island specifically for middle school



students to help them grow in friendship and faith. Pictured is the **UCMI Craft Ladies**, who used a portion of their bazaar proceeds to purchase English and bi-lingual Bibles for the group.



Sunday, December 17, was **Loose Change Sunday** at **Union Congregational Church/Tavares**. Congregants were encouraged to bring any loose coins they had been saving for this special offering taken supporting the Shepherd’s Fund. This fund helps church members and others in the community who are experiencing a financial crisis such as needing gas for their car, food, help meeting their rent or medications, etc. They celebrated the sound of the \$342.45 worth of coins made as they were passed around in the containers provided.



On Sunday January 21, interested members of **St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota** gathered in the church kitchen to prepare for the **Project 180** meal that would be served in one of their houses the next day. Men from **Project 180** expressed an interest in helping with prep and were invited to join the group.



The camaraderie between those who have participated in this service of love is delightful to see and a joy to be a part of. **Project 180** is a non-profit organization that helps formerly incarcerated citizens reintegrate into community life by offering services such as housing, education and employment.



...continued on next page



A New Issue of *The Steward*

The Insurance Board has released the Winter issue of *The Steward*.

Matthew 16:3

“Red sky in the morning means foul weather all day. You know how to interpret the weather signs in the sky, but you don’t know how to interpret the signs of the times!”

The topics covered in this issue include:

- Climate Change and the Impact on Insurance Coverage
- Climate Corner
- Actions Churches Can Take to Mitigate Climate Change Severity
- Agent Corner
- Claims Lessons Learned from Climate-Related Perils
- Rising Concerns Over Severe Convective Storms were raised

Here is a brief excerpt from one of the articles you’ll read in this issue:

There was a time when climate change for some appeared to be a myth or a conspiracy theory, however with the increase in the number of natural disasters, the melting of glaciers, the frequency of wildfires, and the increase in drought, fewer are questioning the existence of climate change and global warming. Nationwide and globally, the insurance industry has been significantly impacted by climate change...

[Click Here for the Winter Issue of the Steward](#)

From the Sunshine Connection, December 20

November was National Homeless Awareness Month, and the City of Fort Lauderdale made a proclamation acknowledging UCC/Fort Lauderdale’s Ruth’s Ministry for all that it does to assist those in need in the community.

UCC’s liaison **Paula Yukna** accepted the proclamation on behalf of Ruth Ministry. She is also a member of the City of Fort Lauderdale’s Homeless Advisory Board and is one of Ruth Ministry’s coordinators.

Thanks were extended to Zona Fresca for donating over 100 meals to the Ruth Ministry lunch program.

On Saturday, December 9, church volunteers completed another successful quarterly Adopt-a-Street trash pick-up, collecting 26 pounds of trash and garbage.



Volunteers from **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** served an evening meal at the Chapman Partnership on Sunday, December 10.



In February, **First Congregational UCC/Winter Park** will be collecting toiletries and hygiene products for Aspire Women's Center.



The UCC at The Villages had a busy year in 2023. The church presented seven different films for education and discussion afterwards on subjects including loneliness, racial profiling, climate change, Medicare, gun violence and women leaders.

In addition to its usual collections for multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's, Martin Luther King scholarships, it contributed to the World Central Kitchen and Turkey earthquake relief — \$23,000 was donated by the church for these activities.

Collections were also taken for food and clothing, suitcases and toiletries for women's shelters. Church members saved newspapers for recycling and soda can tabs and collected 313 pounds of plastic to be recycled and sent to Winn-Dixie.



Little Libraries have become popular attractions in many neighborhood front yards and even some churches.

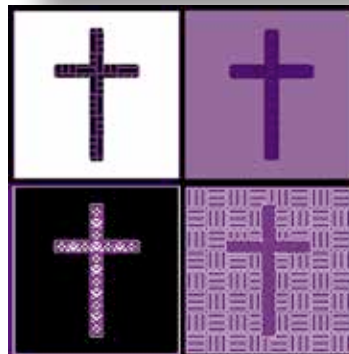
Will Little Pantries like this one at Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte be next?



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 • www.pexels.com • www.pixabay.com



YOUTH MINISTRIES...



Own This Space!

Upcoming Event: Youth Feedback Needed

The Southern Regional Youth Event Steering Committee wants to hear from our youth ages 12–17.

We are elevating our youth voices in the planning of an event designed to engage the needs, wants, and interest of youth! As we move the needle in youth ministry reimagining the possibilities, we want to make sure that you not only have a seat at the table but that you own this space.

Please complete a short three question survey to assist the steering committee in some preliminary planning using the link below. The next steps will be to invite many of the youth to some planning conversations as we lay out a format for the regional event.

(Please forward the link below to any youth in your church who might be interested)

Survey Link: <https://forms.gle/eo1sjHNqcrJbT48e7>

From Sunshine Connection

The Middle and High School youth groups at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** enjoyed Christmas parties on Friday, December 1, and Friday, December 8. On Sunday mornings in January the two groups had Breakfast & the Bible classes.

The Teen Youth Group at **Naples UCC** had its Christmas party on Sunday afternoon, December 17, with a cute or ugly Christmas sweater contest and holiday games.

In January **Cocoa Beach Community Church** hosted two groups who stayed overnight on its campus.

On Friday, January 12–14, the **United Church of Gainesville** was present with a total of 25 adults and youth.

In January the **United Church of Gainesville** is offering the *Our Whole Lives* (OWL) gender and sexuality education programming designed for high school students in grades 10–12. A mandatory parents' meeting was held on Sunday, January 7.



High school youth group Christmas Party at Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami



KIDS CORNER...



Thank You

For the Christmas pageant this year at **Fort Myers UCC**, the Sunday School Children created boxes full of toiletries and necessities to give to the homeless and food banks.

In January the Sunday School children and youth at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** supported the Lotus House Homeless Shelter in Overtown by collecting new personal deodorants for the women, children and LGBT+ youth residents.

BEING CHURCH

Building Back Better

As our congregations respond to the changing climate and destructive storms, new expensive technologies that promise future efficiencies and savings, reimagined functional inner spaces and more, we can all benefit from the experiences of our colleagues in the Conference as well as those of other Florida churches.



With **Sanibel Congregational UCC** finishing its rebuilding from the devastating impact it suffered from Hurricane Ian, church leaders asked in a recent communication with members, “Can we build back greener?” Here is how the church’s Green Team answered that question and we share their thoughts with our other congregations, which

may benefit from their experience. Hurricane Ian was a disaster for SCUCC; it is also an opportunity. Others who haven’t been similarly impacted can also consider such changes.

“Can We Build Back Greener?”

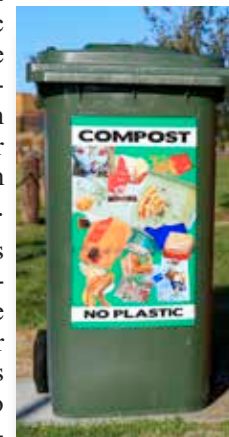
Sanibel Congregational UCC is a Creation Justice church based on our covenant in which we promise to “do all we can to protect as well the birds, animals and plants on this fragile barrier island” as well as to “serve and support each other.”

The Green Team is seeking to help the church carry out this promise by returning to our previous practices in some ways — such as recycling — and going beyond them in others — such as increasing our care in buying products like paper products. Although we will not be having our annual electronic recycling drop-off this year because we think most of what would usually be recycled was probably lost in Hurricane Ian, we want to re-establish our normal recycling practice. Our office manager has

ordered new recycling bins and will put signs on them indicating what is recyclable in Lee County. She has also ordered toilet paper, paper towels and napkins that are made from 100% recycled paper and neither contain chemicals involved in fragrance nor have been bleached with chlorine.

We would like to minimize the use of plastic, especially single use, so rather than using bottled water, Jenny has also bought pitchers that filter our tap water. Moreover, we are in discussion with the Deacons about using our efficient dishwasher to wash dishes after meals and coffee hour if we can get volunteers willing to try this. Another topic for discussion with Deacons is whether we could have Communion by intinction (dipping individual pieces of bread in a common cup) or buy glass Communion cups rather than using single-use plastic Communion cups, which are not recyclable in Lee County.

We have started discussing with Trustees replanting native plants and maybe buying a small composter to turn food waste into compost for the plants. An even bigger discussion underway with the Trustees is whether/when we can raise the money to put solar panels on our roof. After the service on Sunday, February 25, at which the Rabbi Sunny Schnitzer from Bat Yam [which shares the SHUCC campus] will preach, the Green Team plans to have a Lunch-and-Learn in the hope of giving both congregations a chance to hear about proposals and ask questions. We will also hear from church members who have had the personal experience of having rooftop solar panels.



How We Celebrated Advent and Christmas



The Christmas Eve Candlelight service at **Emmanuel UCC/Sebring** honored the five women who were murdered at SunTrust Bank on January 23, 2019. Five candles were lit at the outset of worship followed by music and scripture, with congregants lighting their candles and singing “Silent Night” to conclude the service.



The Anam Cara Women’s Circle at **Faith UCC/Dunedin** had an Advent gathering titled “Abiding in the Womb: An Advent Retreat with Mary the Mother Archetype.”

On Sunday, December 3, members of **Christ Congregational Church/Miami** were invited to share what Christmas means to them by holding up a sign they completed that finished the sentence, “To me, Christmas means...”



The weekly *Sunshine Connection* messages from **Neal Watkins** that are e-blasted to readers on Wednesday mornings also contain articles that appear in the bi-monthly *Celebrate Florida* newsletter/magazine, which you have before you now. It recently contained two articles about Advent (December 20) and Christmas (January 10) in our Florida congregations, which are included here if you missed them.

In those overviews of holiday activities, you will note our churches were involved in all sorts of activities that included but were not limited to: Salvation Army kettle bell ringing, caroling shut-ins at their residences or assisted living facilities, preparing gift bags for the homeless, Christmas luncheons and dinner parties, choir cantatas, children’s pageants, cookie exchanges, concerts, craft fairs, wreath-making and ornament workshops, holiday parades, Bible studies and devotionals, joint services with other churches, movie nights and more.

When it came to special Christmas offerings, our churches demonstrated generous outreach into the community and beyond as they shared their gifts in varied ways with the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, homeless shelters, AIDS Ministries, Guardian ad Litem, Angel Trees and Secret Shepherds, food baskets, Church World Service blankets, Christmas Fund for Veterans of the Cross, local schools, Palestine Children’s Relief Fund and family services agencies to name just a few recipients.

The children’s pageant “Bethlehem, the Morning After” written by and starring the kids at the **United Church of Gainesville** on December 17 featured the All Church Band and a supporting cast of live animals, including a camel, donkey and goats.



For each Sunday in Advent, **Hope UCC/Rockledge** had “The Gift of Presence,” a children’s message in which a large gift-wrapped human represented the gifts of

Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. On Christmas

Eve morning worship at 10am, the gift “package” was Love, and at the Christmas Eve Candlelight service at 6:30 pm, all four gifts appeared, and the final gift of light was welcomed as the Christ candle was lit.



An Advent Sampler

Advent is coming to an end as we anticipate and prepare for the “reason for the season” in just a few days. We thought it would be joy-full to share some of the varied happenings which have taken place in our Florida congregations or what is planned over the next few days ahead of Christmas Eve services.



Congregants from **Cocoa Beach Community Church** visited the Courtney Springs Village retirement community in Merritt Island on Thursday, December 14, to share refreshments, sing Christmas carols, tell Christmas stories and jokes.

On December 3, members at **Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour** engaged in wreath-making and savored a hot cocoa bar and a week later enjoyed an outdoor brunch and a cookie and ornament-decorating workshop.

Many churches have themes for their Sunday sermons during Advent. At the **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** it is “A Season of Holy Disruption.” “Waiting for Salvation: Listening to Life’s Rhythms” is the theme at the **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine** and **Sanibel Congregational UCC** (echoing Eleanor Roosevelt) has “It’s Better to Light a Candle...”



The annual German Christmas Market at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** was a popular place on December 3 where there was good food, great fellowship, creative vendors and lots of fun.

North Port Community UCC, Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte and **Faith Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie** had members volunteer to serve as Salvation Army bell ringers at local Publix markets.



Members and friends gathered at **Christ Congregational Church/Miami** on December 10 for a “Green Christmas Crafts and Cocoa-filled Laughs” get-together to create eco-friendly decorations using recycled materials.

The **Community Church of Vero Beach** held a “Christmas Celebration Concert” on Sunday evening, December 10, that featured the Chancel Choir, Community Ringers, Women’s Quartet, Tapestry Brass, C2 Worship Band and Community Quartet. A free-will offering was taken.

Members of **Coral Isles Church/Tavernier** will be joining with other local residents for the annual memorial service remembering neighbors who died homeless during the past year.

Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach had carolers in festive attire singing at the nearby Merry Pier ahead of the annual boat parade on Saturday evening, December 9.

South Florida’s premier brass band, the Orchid City Brass Band, performed before hundreds in the Sanctuary at **JupiterFIRST Church** with a free community Christmas concert on December 17 entitled, “The Night Before Christmas.”

Lake Worth UCC participated in the 57th Annual Lake Worth Beach Christmas Hollywood-themed Parade on Saturday, December 9. The church featured a larger-than-life Clarence (from “It’s A Wonderful Life”) puppet.

The Christmas Bazaar at the **UCC/New Smyrna Beach** on Saturday, December 9, offered hundreds of handmade items and baked goods as well as a luncheon.

The Annual Christmas Pageant at **Windermere Union Church** took place on December 3 and featured Mary and Joseph, angels, wise people and the animals of the barn.

First Congregational UCC/Winter Park’s annual “A John Denver Christmas” dinner and concert featured **Rev. Shawn Garvey** and took place on Friday, December 15.





**A JOHN DENVER
CHRISTMAS**
dinner and concert
Featuring Rev. Shawn Garvey

Spreading Christmas Joy



Our Florida congregations are generous during the year in their outreach into the community and to those in need beyond. Habitat for Humanity, food

pantries, homeless shelters, schools, migrant workers and more benefit. Christmas presents a special opportunity to give back, and our churches do so in a variety of ways.

Following is what we learned about how some of our churches spread joy this past Christmas. While it is almost a year until Christmas comes again, perhaps this will give you ideas for 2024.

Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour delivered wrapped Angel Tree gifts to children in migrant farm working families at the Redlands Christian Migrant Association in Sebring.



Coral Gables Congregational UCC pledged to provide 250 Angel Tree gift to residents of the Lotus House Homeless Shelter.

The Sunday School children at **Fort Myers UCC** used their Christmas pageant to create boxes full of toilet-

ries and necessities to give to local homeless agencies and food banks.

The **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** had several giving opportunities. The Ruth Ministry collected food items with their Reverse Advent Calendar. The ministry also handed stockings to church members to fill and bring back for their Thursday lunch guests, which resulted in a collection of scores of men's briefs, women's panties, socks, t-shirts and shoes. The Angel Tree was an opportunity to purchase gifts for children affected by HIV/AIDS served by the Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church (Coconut Grove) AIDS Ministry.



The **United Church of Gainesville** received a special offering at the Christmas Eve service to help fund support for UCG members and others in the community who are affected in times of crisis or transition. There also was an Angel Tree to provide gifts that were given to the Rawlings Elementary School gift market for parents

to shop for gifts to give to their children for a very nominal price.

Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach had its annual Christmas party for residents of Pinellas Hope, a Catholic Charities program that provides emergency and permanent housing



for homeless adults on the streets of Clearwater. The church also serves meals during the year at the agency's community center.

JupiterFIRST Church had its Secret Shepherd program that provided gift wish requests from over 300 children named from six local agencies.

The tradition at **Lake Worth UCC** is to direct its Christmas offering outside the walls of the church. This year they supported the Dollars for Scholars program at Lake Worth Community High School, a nonprofit foundation that supports academic success in the community and is part of Scholarship America's national network of locally-based, volunteer-driven Dollars for Scholars chapters.

At the **United Church of Marco Island**, 100% of offerings marked "Christmas Offering" went directly to the Marco Island Academy lunch program. Of the 304 students enrolled at MIA, 29% are considered economically disadvantaged. In order to support the growth of these students, MIA provides a "Food for Thought" free lunch program. The funds given to this program are restricted and used only to provide free lunches to those who qualify. The meals are issued in complete confidentiality so that no student has to face the embarrassment of being classified as economically disadvantaged.

Santa Claus visited 176 children in foster homes thanks to **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami** members and Plymouth Preschool families who filled Christmas boxes. Empty boxes, which included a wish list, were distributed and the filled boxes were collected in early December.

Naples UCC consolidated its two Christmas offerings on Christmas Eve with both going to the Angel Tree and the Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross through the Pension Boards of the UCC. Gifts went to babies and families who participate in the Baby Basics program at NUCC plus the teen parenting program at Immokalee and Collier County schools. Volunteers from the church participated in its annual Christmas morning breakfast at Youth Haven, including a home-made breakfast feast, decorations, crafts and fellowship. Youth Haven provides home, hope and healing to abused and neglected children and teens in Southwest Florida.

Congregational Community Church/New Port Richey offered a "Giving Gift Tree" with articles to donate to the friends of the church's Love A Lunch program with articles such as black ankle socks, travel size toothbrushes and toothpaste, deodorant and feminine products.

Members of the **UCC/New Smyrna Beach** selected cards from an adorned Christmas tree with the name, age and gift wish of a child to “adopt” for the holiday through the Gifts of Love Food Bank.

Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte made up 30 gift bags for teachers and veterans, with the bags including fixings to go with Christmas hams. The church choir had the opportunity to celebrate Christmas with folks at the Parkside Assisted Living facility on the evening of December 13 with carol singing.



Faith Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie participated in Samaritan Purse’s Operation Christmas Child, filling shoeboxes with small toys, hygiene items and school supplies as a means of reaching out to children overseas in their own communities.



Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda collected gift cards for Charlotte High School students.

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota concentrates its giving at Christmas on local charities (while the Easter focus is for national and worldwide charities). With each Love Offering the church chose one organization that supports each of its three covenants: Betty J. Johnson Library, Racial Justice Covenant; ALSO Youth, Open and Affirming Covenant; Partners for Green Places, Creation Justice Covenant. In addition, 70 tags on the Angel Tree provided gifts for the Salvation Army.

St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota supported a family being helped by Francis House -- a mother and her three children. Francis House is a shelter for single mothers.

The **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine** fulfilled the wishes of a community group working in Putnam County with books (for all reading levels) focused on Black history, as well as feminine hygiene products.

At **Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg** the holiday Giving Tree supported a family with six children in need with specific requested items as well as gift cards to offset the cost of incidentals and holiday food for the family.

The offering at the Christmas Eve service at **Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg** was dedicated to helping the children of Gaza and Palestine. Over \$1,200 was forwarded to the Palestine Children’s Relief Fund, which is supported by the UCC. In addition, financial donations were received for 62 Christmas hams for the Good Samaritan Food Pantry at **Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park** as well as donations for the Maximo Elementary School holiday gift shop for three specific families.

The Angel Tree at **Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach** supported disadvantaged children in the county in addition to hardcover picture books for the young students in the church’s Tutoring Angels program



Members at **Spring Hill UCC** assisted some of the students at Spring Hill Elementary School as well as senior residents at a local assisted living facility, providing them with items on their wish lists.

The **United Church in Tallahassee** sponsored a Big Bend Cares client family with 10 children who vary in age from 1 to 12 years old, providing them with gifts that otherwise would have been an impossible financial burden and emotional strain.

Members of **Union Congregational Church/Tavares** provided gifts to the children in the Guardian Ad Litem program. The church’s quilters group also makes quilts all year to give to the children in foster care at Christmas.

Gifts on the Angel Tree at **Coral Isles Church/Tavernier** went to children at Wesley House Family Services, an agency dedicated to protecting and nurturing children and strengthening families across Monroe County.

Windermere Union Church collected gifts for low-income teenagers at Matthew’s Hope Ministry, which needed donations for their annual Christmas party. The agency serves homeless men, women and children in the community by meeting basic needs.

The Angel Tree at **First Congregational UCC/Winter Park** benefited children at Great Oaks Children’s Home and LGBTQ youth at the Zebra Coalition.

The Pension Boards-United Church of Christ’s Christmas Fund for Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund is one of the UCC’s special mission offerings. This conduit enables the Pension Boards to provide pension supplements, health premium subsidies, emergency assistance to active or retired clergy families and Christmas gift checks to hundreds of retirees and to those who are disabled.

Among our Florida congregations that donated to the fund included: Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton, Cocoa Beach Community Church, Faith UCC/Dunedin, First Congregational Church/Lake Helen, Sanibel Congregational UCC, St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota, Union Congregational Church/Tavares and, Venice UCC.

