

Celebrate Florida

The United Church of Christ in Florida



April-May 2024



How Will You Spend These Next 50 Days of Easter?

Rev. John Vertigan
Conference Minister

There were seven of us living together in a little house my dad built in what would become a sprawling suburb after World War II. Five boys (maybe next time we'll have a girl! Repeat.) and two parents squeezed into a space that, by today's standards, would be considered quite small. I was at the age of first memories when we converted the garage into a kitchen and eating space while three of us kids shared what was once the main bedroom in the house until an addition gave my parents some quiet time away from us kids. All of this is to say that there wasn't much room for originality or innovation in my childhood home. The way we did the holidays last year is probably the way we did them the next year, too.

Which brings me to the topic of Easter eggs. Hidden ones, that is. Every year it was the same. One under the keyboard cover on the piano. Another in the corner of a book shelf. At least one on a window sill behind the drapes. And let's not forget that one behind a picture frame on the coffee table. It was like this every spring, and still we hid the eggs and hunted for them anew every time Easter came around. It stopped being exciting at some point and became something we felt obligated to do because the grown-ups had made the effort of helping us make a coloring-the-eggs mess and then hid them under the guise of a bunny who came in the night. Easter became a kind of routine that began with colored eggs, continued on to biting the ears off a chocolate rabbit, squirmed its way through church in an over-full sanctuary (seventh pew on the right) and climaxed in a ham dinner for the ages.



...continued on page 2



Moderator's Musings

LYNN JONES
CONFERENCE MODERATOR
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC/SARASOTA



Change and Challenges

Happy Spring, Florida Conference members and friends. As I write this, it is Palm Sunday and we are entering the holiest week of the year... filled with stories, emotion, anticipation and, ultimately, hope! I have been feeling all of those things as the search committee and I interview prospective candidates for our Transitional Conference Minister position who, we pray, will be in place sometime in August. I can tell you that the candidate pool has been robust, and we have been impressed with those we have chosen to interview thus far. By the time of our next newsletter, I hope to be able to share with you who we have called to join us in the Florida Conference to help transition us on to our next chapter as the United Church of Christ in Florida.



In the meantime, your Board of Directors is in a bit of a transition as well! As you know, **Rev. Michelle Carter** of **Jensen Beach Community Church** has been called as our new Associate Conference Minister. We are thrilled to see Michelle take on that role starting in May, which

...continued on page 2

What's Inside

- "To Our Educators" p3
- "Watch This Space" p4
- "Navigating Change" p5
- "Ways in Which We Benefit One Another" p9
- "The Banned Book 'Banned Wagon'" pp10-11
- Earth Day Sunday p13



- Florida UCC Women Annual Conference p16
- Iftar Meals pp20-21
- "Black History and Anti-Racism" pp21-23
- "A-Wake for Jesus!" p23
- Ash Wednesday and Lent in Our Florida Churches pp34-36

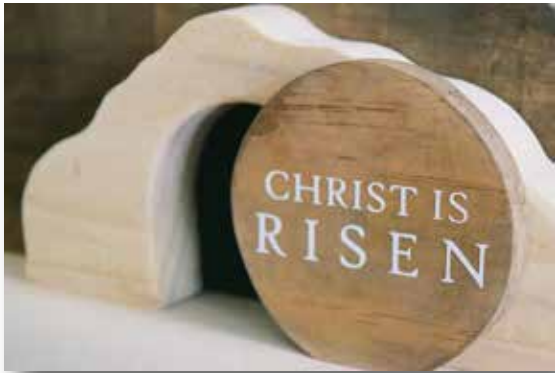
Our Table of Contents is now interactive. Click on title to read.

50 Days of Easter...

(Even at my current age, I still put ketchup on ham.)

Go ahead and say it: "Ketchup on ham?!" but in so doing you miss my point. Easter has become a kind of routine in the church, too. We know the songs to sing, we know where the lilies and hyacinths go, we know what the sermon will be about, we know we will see people around us who we haven't seen since Christmas Eve. Caterpillars into butterflies; eggs into chicks. It sometimes feels like church has become a tiny house to contain God without originality or innovation and we repeat these rituals year in and year out because we are obligated, having made a mess of the world all along the way. The experience of Easter is too often hidden in the routines of the day, and we miss what is meant to be the feast for the ages: resurrection!

Paul said to the Corinthians, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Corinthians 15:26) Jesus defeated the last enemy. What is left for us to fear? Surely, it's a bad news day for the skeptics of our secularizing time who would diminish our Easter faith. But for those of us who have looked past the empty tomb and have experienced



the risen Christ, this is the greatest of mornings. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! And not because we have seen a stone rolled away, but because we have seen the risen Christ and watched our Good Friday tears turn to joy.

How will you spend these next 50 days of Easter* as we move together toward Pentecost. The same as always? Or will your experience of the holiday wash over you with a holy excitement that leads to your own originality, innovation, and inventiveness in showing the world what new and sacred life looks like?

I am excited in the anticipation of what the Florida Conference will do in the year to come. I'll be watching from away come July 31, but one thing I know will remain true even then: I'm still going to put ketchup on my ham.

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

*The Easter Season, also known as the Great Fifty Days, begins at sunset Easter Eve and continues through the Day of Pentecost. Visit [UCC 2024 Easter Series Roadmap](#)

Change and Challenges...

leaves her position of Budget and Finance Chair available at the same time. Additionally, our Treasurer, **Enrique Martinez**, is relocating to Maryland in May with his husband, **Rev. Chance Martinez-Colon (Spring Hill UCC)**, who has been called to a church outside of Baltimore. And...the Board's Personnel Chair, **Rev. Shawn Garvey (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park)**, who has recently taken on several new Board and other responsibilities in and around the Winter Park community, will be stepping down from his Board position at the end of July. We wish all these incredible members and friends nothing but the best in their new endeavors. And it means that we have some exciting positions open on the Board of Directors!

fully and thoughtfully consider if you or anyone in your local church has the time, talent and enthusiasm to be nominated for one of these roles. The Board of Directors meets quarterly, and along with the amazing fellowship that we share, our members feel a distinct calling to serve the church in a broader way. As someone who has served the Conference in various Board positions for the last six years, I can tell you firsthand that I have learned so much about the wider church and have been blessed by each of the relationships I have formed and the work that we have done together. You can reach out to me at moderator@uccfla.org or our Nominating Committee Chair, **Rev. Karen Curtis-Weakley (Hope UCC/Rockledge)**, at revkew@att.net if you have questions or would like to be considered for one of these open roles.

So, this is where you all come in...I would ask that you prayer-



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As you can see, we are in the midst of some changes and transitions here in the Florida Conference. I realize that this can sometimes feel uncomfortable or challenging, but I believe that there is also an energy and excitement around inviting new thinking and ways of doing things into our lives. I know that the Holy Spirit is guiding us each step of the way as we make some key decisions in the next few months, and I pray that we will all stay open to the possibilities that are before us.

With gratitude for all you do to make us the United Church of Christ in Florida.



To Our Educators

BY REV. LATRELL HARRISON
ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER

Dear Educators in Florida, I think of you often. Your dedication and hard work in shaping the minds of our future generations is appreciated. Your impact is immeasurable, and today I write to celebrate you.

I know that being an educator in Florida comes with its own set of challenges, especially with the current circumstances we are facing. From navigating through a global pandemic to dealing with constant changes in policies and standards, your job is not an easy one. But despite all these obstacles, you continue to show up and push forward.

You are making a difference every single day. Your passion and commitment to teaching do not go unnoticed, and your students are better because of you. You represent the best of humanity, and you have support in this faith community.

Keep believing in the power of education and its ability to transform lives. Keep inspiring



Conference Staff Reports



Reflections from Rev LaTrell

your students to dream big and actualize their dreams. Thank you for advocating for what is best for them and never giving up on them, even when times are tough.

You are an integral part of the education system in Florida, and your impact extends far beyond the walls of your classroom. You are shaping future leaders, and that is truly a remarkable feat.

While your job is often a thankless one, you continue to lead with compassion and creativity. You are amazing beings and lights in the world. You are making a profound impact on adult lives as well. Let me know how our faith community can be more intentional in advocating for you.

Thank you for all you do.
Sincerely,
Rev. LaTrell

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 friends, as I have shared with you before, it is my family's annual tradition to listen to and reflect upon the sermons given by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4th. I still returned to his "I've Been to the Promised Land" speech. This year, it is my intention to spend more time on a holiday weekend discerning the wisdom in his leadership, words, and faith.

You can learn more about the "I've Been to the Promised Land" speech here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...](#)

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 joins the imagery of a seminal fight throughout the grief and historic era throughout the history of the world. At the conclusion, he asserts that there is no time in the world's history more enduring than the time where God has already placed him:

I would like to do this, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy."

And that is a strong statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is not there as in the last confusion all around. That's a strong statement. But I have someone that only seem it as dark enough that you see the stars. And I am not writing in the period of the 1960s, but in a time that I'm standing in, in some strange way, are enjoying.

I am praying that I may see God's workings 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 workings, I can be emboldened in love and faith that my presence, because that there is no other place and time in the history of the world where I would rest.

Dear Church,
A search committee was formed, when **Rev. Leslie Etheredge** announced her retirement, and began a time of discernment toward bringing a full time Associate Conference Minister into our staff team and returning to what long-time Conference members will remember as “the regional model.”

Beginning May 1, **Rev. LaTrell Harrison** will provide resourcing and relational outreach to our Western UCC churches as well as coordinating search and call processes Conference-wide.

She will be joined by a new ACM on the east coast and near interior by our newly called partner **Rev. Michelle Carter**. Michelle has been serving the **Jensen Beach Community Church** for seven years; is a member of the Conference Board and most recently chair of the Conference Finance and Budget Committee. In addition to her work with east coast churches, Michelle will be responsible for Committee on Ministry and ministerial authorization and support processes across the Conference.



in serving within local church settings, I’ve been privileged to witness the transformative power of faith communities firsthand. Now, stepping into this role, I am eager to expand my horizons and witness the collective strength of diverse congregations across the state. I see this opportunity not just as a chance to facilitate collaboration and resource-sharing, but also as a platform to provide vital support to local churches facing evolving challenges.

I am wholeheartedly committed to working alongside the Florida Conference staff to empower our congregations and foster a thriving community of faith. Together, we will travel the journey ahead, ready to embrace the possibilities that lie before us.

Embracing Love, Radiating Light, Pursuing Peace,

Rev. Michelle R. Carter

Here’s an introduction to Rev Michelle Carter in her own words:

I am thrilled to embark on this new journey as an Associate Conference Minister in the Florida Conference. My heart is filled with excitement and a boundless sense of possibility.

Having found immense fulfillment and purpose



Navigating Change: The Future of Philanthropy and Ministry Impact in the Florida Conference

BY NEAL WATKINS
MINISTER FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

I’ve been obsessively reading a couple of articles lately. One has been the 2023 philanthropic research publication, *Giving USA*, which cites 2022 charitable giving reflecting a percentage decrease in giving to communities of faith and yet an increase in giving to faith-based mission organizations. The other article was published in *Christian Century* recently, entitled, “Can Inclusive Churches Grow & Thrive?” Here are a couple of paragraphs from that article:

“And the more I saw God in the world, the fewer places I found to worship or serve, to be. I know I’m not alone. The more expansively we see our God, the harder it seems to find communities that share those convictions, and the harder it seems to sustain them when we do find them.

When my spouse was beginning to lead our church toward full affirmation and inclusion, one worry was about who would leave. Would there be enough financial support? From talking to colleagues and hearing the stories of other pastors and communities, I know this fear is not unfounded. I have known few churches that grew when they became affirming or whose giving increased when they centered a gospel of justice and mercy.”

In the light of these reflections, Galatians 3:28 resonates deeply, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This scripture underscores the essence of inclusivity as a foundational Christian value, illuminating the path toward a community where every individual, regardless of their background, is valued and embraced.

Inclusivity within faith communities is not merely a goal; it’s a testament to the impactful work churches undertake. Being an inclusive community of faith reflects a deep commitment to embodying the principles of love, acceptance and unity that are central to the Christian faith. This commitment — echoing the call in 1 John 4:11, “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” — is a powerful form of impact, resonating deeply with younger generations and broader society, which increasingly values diversity and inclusiveness.

Moreover, inclusivity extends the church’s reach and enhances its role as a sanctuary for all, thereby amplifying its impact within

the community. It’s a tangible expression of the church’s mission in action, fostering environments where every individual feels valued and supported. In this light, inclusivity becomes a key metric of a church’s impact, inviting a reevaluation of how we measure and communicate success in our ministries.

Matthew 5:16, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven,” challenges us to manifest the transformative power of our faith through actionable love and inclusion. This directive propels us to

articulate the tangible outcomes of our inclusivity efforts and other ministries, demonstrating how they strengthen the community and foster a broader sense of belonging and support.

These findings suggest a vital strategy for faith communities: articulating the tangible outcomes of their inclusivity efforts and other ministries. By showcasing real-world examples of how inclusivity strengthens the community and fosters a broader sense of belonging and support, churches can more effectively communicate their

impact, thereby encouraging greater philanthropic engagement.

The path forward for the churches of the Florida Conference involves a thoughtful examination of their mission and the impact of our ministries, with a particular emphasis on the role of inclusivity. Demonstrating the impact of inclusivity not only aligns with the values of prospective donors but also serves as a compelling narrative that underscores the church’s broader societal relevance and spiritual mission.

The journey towards greater inclusivity and the effective communication of our churches’ impact is both a challenge and an opportunity. It requires a bold reimagining of how we define and showcase the transformative work of our faith communities. By embracing this shift, we can not only navigate the current philanthropic landscape but also inspire a new generation of donors to invest in a vision of faith that is inclusive, impactful and deeply resonant with the core values of love and unity. In doing so, we uphold and advance the prophetic voice that calls us to serve with love, courage and a profound commitment to justice for all.



CALENDAR		
APRIL 4	APRIL 26-28	MAY 12
ONA webinar	Florida UCC Women Annual Conference, Fruitland Park	ACM Rev. Harrison, Community Congregational Church/New Port Richey
APRIL 7	APRIL 27	MAY 19
ACM Rev. Harrison, Faith Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie	CM Rev. Vertigan, Board of Directors, Orlando	CM Rev. Vertigan, Jensen Beach Community Church
APRIL 10-13	APRIL 28	APRIL 28
CM Rev. Vertigan, Common Global Ministries Board, Cleveland	CM Rev. Vertigan, Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach	ACM Rev Harrison, First Congregational Church/Ocala
APRIL 14	MAY 1-2	MAY 28
CM Rev. Vertigan and ACM Rev. Harrison, Community Church/Vero Beach	CM Rev. Vertigan, Co-Lead Authorized Ministers retreat, Orlando	JUNE 9
APRIL 20	MAY 5	JUNE 23
UCC Annual Earth Day Summit	CM Rev. Vertigan, Spring Hill UCC	ACM Rev. Harrison, First Congregational Church/Lake Helen
APRIL 21	APRIL 21	JUNE 25
CM Rev. Vertigan, New Vision UCC/Yulee	ACM Rev. Harrison, Venice UCC	ONA webinar
APRIL 22-23	MAY 7-8	JUNE 30
REDI training	CM Rev. Vertigan, Co-Lead Authorized Ministers retreat, Atlanta	ACM Rev. Harrison, Longwood Hills Congregational Church
APRIL 24	MAY 8-10	
UCC stewardship seminar	CM Rev. Vertigan, Insurance Board Directors meeting, Cleveland	
APRIL 26		
Online webinar “Healthy Conflict for Strong Churches”		

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

Calendar subject to change. Check uccfla.org for updates and watch for *Sunshine Connection* messages.

Transitions

- Chance Martinez-Colon**, P, Spring Hill UCC, service concludes May 5
- Hollie Schmidt**, AP, INSTALL, Plymouth Congregational Church/ Miami, February 18
- Joseph Shore-Goss**, P, Faith UCC/ Bradenton, service began March 16
- Mark Boyea**, P, INSTALL, Sanibel Congregational UCC, February 18
- Michelle Carter**, P, Jensen Beach Community Church, service concludes May 24
- Michelle Carter**, Associate Florida Conference Minister, service begins May 1
- Mary Moore**, P, INSTALL, New Vision UCC/, April 21
- Day Broers-Case**, P, INSTALL, Riviera UCC/First Christian DoC Cooperative Ministry/Melbourne, June 9

KEY: P, PASTOR; AP, ASSOCIATE/ASSISTANT PASTOR; INSTALL, INSTALLATION



Left: Rev. Hollie Schmidt at her Installation with Senior Pastor Rev. Al Bunis at Plymouth Congregational Church/ Miami



Above: Installation of Rev. Geoff Gross on February 11 at Cocoa Beach Community Church with Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan (right)

Cooperative Ministry Affirmed

It's official: **Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg** has voted to merge with **Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg**. The two congregations feel a sense of community and share a like vision in matters of social justice and being Open and Affirming. The churches worship on the Lakewood campus, and Trinity retains space on its former property.



Sanibel is Back!

Sunday, February 18 was a momentous day in the life and history of the **Sanibel Congregational UCC** community. During that morning's worship, the renovated Sanctuary was dedicated through a Litany lead by former Moderator **Diana Day**, surrounded by the members of the Rebuild Team. Then later on they joined in the long-delayed formal Installation of **Rev. Dr. Mark Boyea** as Senior Minister.

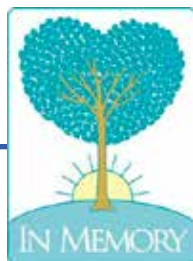


Celebrations at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota

Over recent weeks and upcoming, the church has or will be celebrating three significant events in the life of the congregation: 70 years since the founding of First Congregational UCC; 35 years of **Greg Chestnut** as Minister of Music; 10 years of Pastor **Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby** as Senior Minister.

Chaplain Appointed to Support PATHWAYS Learners, Faculty & Staff

PATHWAYS Theological Education, Inc., has announced the appointment of **Rev. Teña Nock** as Chaplain in support of Learners, Faculty and Staff associated with the program. Rev. Nock is a graduate of PATHWAYS; the Associate Pastor of Digital Ministry at **First United Church of Tampa** and a chaplain at a local hospital. The Chaplain's role will be to provide counseling, consultation, and pastoral care to Learners, Faculty and Staff in covenant with UCC theological principles and as defined in the Ordained Minister's Code. She has already hosted two "Meet the Chaplain" video sessions as opportunities for interested parties to get to know her. Teña may be contacted at chaplain@pathwaystheological.org.



Dr. Franklyn A. Jackson, husband of **Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson (First United Church of Tampa)** passed on February 15. He had been in the hospital since the end of December, after having been diagnosed with lymphoma several years ago. Dr. Franklyn Jackson was a retired educator and administrator. A memorial service was held on March 18.

Bruce Davis, the son of former **Sanibel Congregational UCC** Senior Minister **Rev. Dr. John Danner** and **Linda Bradbury-Danner**, passed on February 12 in Ohio.

"Epic Journey": An Authorized Ministers Retreat

Mark your calendars and prepare your hearts for a spiritual retreat that promises to rejuvenate and inspire! We warmly invite all authorized ministers of the Florida Conference to gather at the Florida Conference Church House, May 1 and 2.



This noon-to-noon retreat will be under the guidance of Rev. Kim Wood, Conference Minister of the Southeast Conference of the UCC, and **Rev. John Vertigan** as they lead us through a journey of reflection, connection and spiritual renewal.

Further details will grace your inbox post-Easter. Let us come together in this time of fellowship and growth, emboldened by our shared faith and commitment in service to Christ's Church and to one another.

From Sunshine Connection, March 20

2024 Annual Gathering

Please save the dates of Thursday, October 17-Saturday, October 19, for our 2024 Annual Gathering in Orlando (with October 17 being our annual pre-gathering event and October 18 and 19 being our annual meeting). We are eager to share with you more details regarding logistics, theme, and opportunities to get involved in the leadership of what we pray and expect will be a transformative time together! Stay tuned... spread the word... and save the date!

"Soulful Conversations" Webinar

The Conference offered a "Soulful Conversations" webinar on Wednesday afternoon, February 28, to help navigate the intersection of faith, spirituality and mental health. The panelists — each possessing unique perspectives rooted in diverse faith traditions and spiritual practices — engaged in a dialogue that transcends



boundaries to discover how spirituality can foster resilience, learn how it guides individuals in building support on their recovery journey and explores the profound connections between matters of the soul and mental wellbeing.

From Sunshine Connection, February 28

Retired Minister Boundary Training

The Conference offered a ZOOMinar on March 14 to address boundary training for retired ministers. Maintaining healthy boundaries is challenging at any stage in ministry and it is particularly tender and difficult attending to boundaries as we transition out of our last call, and while in retirement. *A Sure Foundation, The Ministerial Code* and **Rev. Dr. Bruce Epperly's** new book, *The Jubilee Years*, along with case studies, provided the content of this training.

From Sunshine Connection, February 28



Looking to Hear from the WISE!



The WISE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged) Ministry Team of the Florida Conference is looking to hear from churches/pastors/leaders who are willing to share (via e-mail or ZOOM interview) about the experiences of Florida Conference churches who have established ministries to support the wellbeing of your congregation and/or conversations around mental health for the purposes of sharing broadly during Mental Health Awareness Month. Please [e-mail Neal Watkins](mailto:Neal.Watkins@flc.org) to get connected to this project!

From Sunshine Connection, February 28

REDI Training Now Ready

Our REDI training is now ready! What is REDI training you may ask? It stands for Racial, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and it is a training that all active, authorized clergy with their standing in the Florida Conference of the UCC will be required to complete. The Florida Conference will offer this training two times in 2024. Each training will consist of two four-hour Zoom videoconference sessions on consecutive days. The first training in 2024 will take place Monday, April 22, and Tuesday, April 23, from 9:30am-1:30pm each day. [Click here to learn more or register!](#)

From Sunshine Connection, March 13

2024 UCC Annual Earth Summit

This event will be both in-person and live streamed via Zoom on Saturday, April 20, at 1pm. Along with The Church of Christ at Dartmouth College, cohosts include the UCC's Council for Climate Justice, the National Setting of the UCC and the New Hampshire Conference of the UCC. [Click here 2024 UCC Annual Earth Summit](#)

From Sunshine Connection, February 28





Informing Church Members about the National Church and the Florida Conference

The United Church in Tallahassee recently sent an e-blast about a Zoom session it was having to educate prospective members – and interested current members – about our denomination. It read:

The UCC is a remarkable denomination. (Learn more here: <https://www.ucc.org/>) Our Florida Conference is an amazing collection of progressive churches in Florida. (Learn more here: <https://www.uccfla.org/>) Come tonight to learn more about both groups.

Many of our congregations offer educational gatherings for members about the history and polity of the UCC. Including information about the Florida Conference is also a good idea.



Our Conference Minister was in Cleveland in early March at the UCC Church House for a Council of Conference Ministers, his last meetings with peers with whom he has been privileged to serve. He was honored with a fond farewell from these colleagues from across the country

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Beth Shedden



Beth Shedden is the Financial Administrator for the Florida Conference and we join together in thanksgiving for her number-crunching leadership on this International Women's Day.



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Rev. LaTrell Harrison



On this International Women's Day we celebrate Associate Conference Minister the Rev. LaTrell Harrison who embodies strength, presence and peace to congregations around the Florida Conference.




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.brtapp.com/donate>

WE ARE A CHURCH WHERE EVERYONE IS WELCOMED





A Pastor Reflects

Ways in Which We Benefit One Another

FROM REV. MARY ALICE MULLIGAN, PASTOR OF ST. ANDREW UCC/SARASOTA

Last Sunday evening I joined our Conference Minister, **John Vertigan**, and the Generosity Officer from the U.C.C. National Office of Philanthropy, Dave Sigmund, for dinner. The main agenda item was just to help Rev. Dave get to know clergy in the area. We also enjoyed talking together about the importance of helping congregations learn the value of supporting the church into the future.

About an hour into our Thai food, Rev. Dave pointed out that we were representing the three main manifestations of our church – the local congregation, the Conference, and the national church. We talked about how interrelated we are and how we each need the others. In the local congregation it is easy to ignore the Conference and the national church much of the time unless there is a crisis. Then we remember because we are on the phone calling for advice or guidance or help. We too easily forget the supporting role the Conference can play for the local church. And we forget the services the national church provides for the congregation. And



we forget how important the local congregation is for the ongoing ministry of the Conference and national church.

One of the services the Generosity Officer from the national church can provide the local parish is an estate planning workshop. Trained people can offer guidance and answer questions about more than wills, including annuities, required minimum distributions, setting up tax exempt gifts, and making gifts while one is still alive. Perhaps St. Andrew would like to host one of these workshops for area U.C.C. churches in the future. Until then, let us thank God for the ministries of the Conference and national office. Especially as Rev. Vertigan prepares for retirement, let us hold him in prayer with thanksgiving for his years in Florida and also hold in prayer the search committee as they carry out their important work on our behalf.

From the Minister's Moment in the Midweek Update e-blast of March 13.

Upcoming Webinar: "Healthy Conflict for Strong Churches"

Conflict in any relationship is a given. The Church is no different. However, conflict does not have to be feared. In fact, healthy conflict is a necessary part of overcoming challenges and making decisions. When we create cultures of strong relationships and good self-awareness, conflict invites difficult but important conversations that lead to new awareness and opportunities for growth.

The webinar will take place online on April 26, from 9am-3pm. This work-



shop will be taught by Rev. Dr. Diane Weible, former UCC Conference Minister and founder of Enkei Resolutions, an organization that helps individuals and organizations seeking to move forward, grow and transform.

If you've been looking for practical tools to work with conflict, in a single-day format, [sign up for this seminar here.](#)

From the March 27 Sunshine Connection

The Banned Book “Banned Wagon”

From the March 6 Sunshine Connection

From the time the “banned book” controversy in Florida got underway in March 2022, the public response has been vocal and widespread, including in our Florida churches. To read a summary of how our Florida congregations responded beginning in 2022, scroll down to the three crosses below



The “banned wagon” has been rolling recently. The “Sunday Seminar” at the **United Church of Gainesville** on February 25 was titled “Putting Books in Kids’ Hands” and featured the library media services specialist with the Alachua County Public School. Her presentation covered the schools’ response to banning books in their libraries and how they are maintaining compliance. The **Venice UCC Library** was represented at “The Right to Read Festival: All Books for All People” on Saturday, February 24, presented by the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Venice and the Social Justice Alliance of the Florida Suncoast.

Perhaps the most ambitious recent undertaking is what is occurring at **Cocoa Beach Community Church** where **Rev. Geoff Gross** has established a Banned Book Library. Here is what he reports:

Banned Book Library Grand Opening

Cocoa Beach Community Church (CBCC) held the grand opening ribbon-cutting of its Banned Book Library on Sunday, February 18. It was a success with many books being checked out. A local resident read our article in *Florida Today*, stopped by to show her support and donated a few banned books!



Our guest speaker for the grand opening was Adam Tritt, who teaches English in Palm Bay. He started Foundation 451, a non-profit whose mission is to get banned and challenged books directly into the hands of students and to heighten awareness of the need for a plurality of ideas. Adam discussed why books are being banned, challenges facing teachers, the importance of keeping these books available and ways we could partner to support our common goals.

At the CBCC, we believe that every word, story and whisper of ink carries the potential to transform lives. Our Banned Book Library stands as a testament to intellectual freedom, where the excluded becomes accessible and the suppressed finds its voice. Here’s what to expect:

Banned Treasures: Our shelves cradle books that have danced with controversy, flirted with rebellion and dared to challenge the status quo. From *To Kill a Mockingbird* to *The Color Purple*, these volumes pulse with life, beckoning you to explore.



Two-Week Journeys: Borrow these prohibited gems and embark on a literary odyssey. Whether you’re drawn to dystopian futures, thought provoking social critiques or captivating stories about the LGBTQ+ community, our banned books await your eager eyes.

Guided Exploration: While we champion freedom, we also honor responsibility. Anyone under 16 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian—a shared adventure in the pursuit of knowledge.

The CBCC Banned Book Library invites you to defy convention, question interference of our right to choose what we want to read and engage with the profound narratives that stir hearts and challenge the status quo.

Let the words weave their magic, the ideas collide, and the ink spill—because true freedom lies between the covers of a banned book.



Celebrate Florida checked with Pastor Geoff with a few follow-up questions. Word about the library is being spread through the local newspaper and postings on Facebook by the church and its members. A room that is not currently being used has been repurposed for the library. It is open the first Saturday and third Sunday of the month from Noon-2pm and will be staffed by two volunteers – mostly church members but those from the community may step forward as well. While local reaction to the library has been mostly positive, a post on Facebook asked what kind of church CBCC is, citing various Bible verses about repentance and judgment. The Cocoa Beach Police Department has been notified about the library’s open times – and it helps that the church is next door to the police station.



As part of the opening kick-off, the church has begun a Banned Book Club with *The Color Purple* as its first all-church read. A date will be scheduled for its discussion.



On March 25, 2022, the State of Florida enacted legislation that was signed into law by the Governor that would make certain books in the state’s public school system unavailable to students. The targeted books were largely those with content involving sex or violence. Parents were allowed to register concerns regarding classroom materials as well as books in school libraries and petition local school districts to ban them. The reaction was immediate, causing chaos as teachers and school staff struggled to discern how they legally were required to respond and the consequences if they didn’t.



That spring, **Faith UCC/Dunedin** was quick to voice its opposition to the “censorship.” Not only did the church speak out, but it also proactively responded. What Pastor **Rev. Mike MacMillan** did was to create a book rack containing a number of “banned” books and place it prominently in the Narthex for church members to see and perhaps even choose to read. In addition, every week thereafter in e-blasts to church members, the placement of a new “Banned Book of the Week” would be announced. Church members were encouraged to provide suggested titles to be featured as well as donate them. Among those on the rack are: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison; *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood; *The Cider House Rules* by John

Irving; *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie; *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank; *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. As time went on, Pastor Mike noticed in the media that school districts were banning more and more books that speak to issues around race/racism, gender, immigration, LGBTQ identity and other topics under the “we don’t want see reality because it might make someone uncomfortable” umbrella.

On Tuesday, June 6, 2023, **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** partnered with Books & Books (a locally-owned, independently-minded neighborhood bookshop) and many other community organizations, local authors, librarians, teachers, parents and



concerned citizens, in hosting an event called **FREEDOM**, a celebration of books coming together to witness against book-banning and censoring. There was a give-away of three books recently removed from the shelves of a local elementary school in response to a parent’s complaint. The event received a great deal of national and local media coverage. In her opening welcoming remarks, Pastor **Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner** said:

“We are proud to be a part of a denomination, the United Church of Christ, that has always been about separation of church and state, freewill, the rights of others, and most of all justice. Recently, we declared ourselves a Sanctuary for Banned Books. Folks have asked me why would a church be involved with the safe-keeping of

books that have been challenged, censored or even banned? For us, it is a matter of faith, knowing that when opportunities for critical thinking, intellectual growth, ideas, and imagination are taken away, then you are taking away gifts that The Holy has bestowed upon us for growth, imagination, compassion, wisdom and thoughtfulness. Also, if you are afraid that your faith is so frail, so easily upturned and challenged by a book, then you need to go back and take a look at your own faithfulness and strength of belief. But most of all, we know and respect history here at this church, and we know from the past what eliminating, burning, challenging and banning books causes in societies. It is the rabbit hole into oppression, mistrust, bigotry and single-minded thought which weakens nations and empowers fascism.”



More congregations are on the “banned wagon.” By early 2023 other churches were addressing the topic in various ways including **St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota**, **Christ Congregational Church/Miami**, **Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte**, **UCC/New Smyrna Beach** and **Hope UCC/Rockledge**. The theme of a summer series at **Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park** was “BANNED: Books & the Bible.” In the Miami Beach PRIDE parade in April, marchers from Coral Gables Congregational UCC handed banned books and bookmarks to those in the crowd in a celebration of love, freedom and diversity. The church created a banned book library where members of the church and from the community could have access to banned books. After worship on October 1, members of the church kicked off Banned Books Week by walking to Books & Books to raise awareness about censorship. **Windermere Union Church** also has a “banned book” library – a cart containing banned books available to borrow

Here are a few actions that can be taken by congregations concerned about censorship and the banning of books deemed by some to be too controversial for children and youth at certain school grade levels.

If your church has a library, devote a shelf to books banned by local school districts and publicize their availability in church communications

Organize groups of interested church members to attend local school board meetings, possibly in coordination with other nearby UCC congregations

Collaborate with a local independent bookstore to organize a “banned book” public meeting

If your congregation has a Little Library located on church property, consider including banned books in it that would be available to those in the community unable to access such books [pictured is Rev. Dr. Hafner at Coral Gables Congregational UCC]





Members from **Lake Worth UCC** joined CROS Ministries at Mecca Farms in Boynton on Saturday, February 3, in the biblical mercy practice of gleaning — harvesting passed over produce for those that are hungry in the community. They picked 85 boxes of tomatoes in about 90 minutes. Last season, volunteers with CROS recovered 779,463 pounds of fresh produce from local farms which were distributed to local food programs by distribution partners. The mission of CROS is to serve the hungry in Palm Beach and Martin Counties through community collaborations.

Sanibel Congregational UCC had a vegetarian potluck dinner with the Bat Yam congregation (which shares the campus with SCUCC) on Wednesday, February 7.

Souper Bowl Sunday at **Coral Isles Church/Tavernier** was observed on February 11 with an after-church soup lunch and a chance to vote on the outcome of the Super Bowl. All funds raised will be used by the Barnabas Fund to buy gift cards from local grocery stores for those in need. A total of \$228 was collected, with an anonymous donation of \$22 that brought the total to \$250, equaling 10 food gift cards. **Lake Worth UCC** collected congregants' "extra" coins and cash to support CROS Ministries. The Souper Bowl of Caring at **Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton** featured corn chowder, Greek chicken, lentil with veggies and creamy cheesy spinach all served in a football-themed setting. Donations of \$175 were sent to the St. Joan of Arc Food Pantry.



Here's what was served to the 130+ guests at the Ruth Ministry Thursday lunch on February 29 at the **UCC Fort Lauderdale**.

Chili cook-offs were the "thing" recently. **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami** had theirs on Sunday, February 4, after worship. **First Congregational Church/Lake Helen** enjoyed one on Wednesday, February 28. At the **United Church in Tallahassee**, it was on February 25 following worship.

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.

In the five months of October 2023-February 2024, **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** collected 1,250lbs of food for the All Faiths Food Bank. The first Sunday of each month is set aside for their collection of non-perishable foods for the food bank.

The goal at **Faith Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie** for "Pasta Palooza" during March was to collect 80 jars of pasta sauce and 80 boxes of pasta. On February 9 Faith youth and kidz had a "hot dogs and apple pie" Bingo night fundraiser.

Members from **Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour** volunteered to help feed the unhoused at Chapman Partnership on Saturday, February 24. The last Saturday of every month is the congregation's turn to serve. **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami** provided volunteers on March 14.

Volunteers from **Naples UCC** helped with packing food items at the Harry Chapin Food Bank in two shifts on Wednesday, March 6. On March 15 volunteers helped set up and distribute canned and fresh food to clients of the Grace Place Food Pantry, which serves 300 families weekly.

The **United Church of Gainesville** began 2024 with a generous donation of 635 pounds of food in January and February to help feed our neighbors in need in partnership with Gainesville Community Ministry.

St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota had another successful CROP Hunger Walk on Sunday, March 3, with over a dozen people participating.



PLEASE SHARE YOUR NEWS WITH US

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we are the church

Our readers would Love to Learn About YOU!

EMAIL: RickCarson1@gmail.com

Earth Day Sunday

Join Creation Justice Ministries and the United Church of Christ in observing Earth Day Sunday with this resource!

Everywhere we look in our culture you will find plastic.

It surrounds our food, it makes up our technology and it is a standard element in our household items. Unfortunately, it is also overflowing from our landfills, floating in our waters and polluting our soil. More and more, you can even find it in our own bodies and those of other living creatures. There have even been traces of plastic found in breast milk. Despite the fact that we have learned the harms of plastics, we are steadily increasing our production of the material and integrating it into more and more items. Plastic is everywhere!

One place where you will not find plastic, however, is in the Bible.

Plastic Jesus is a resource designed to help congregations think more deeply about the ways that plastics impact our lives and God's creation. It is also intended to equip people of faith to take actions and practical ways. www.creationjustice.org/plasticjesus.html

Download this resource to find stories of individuals and communities making a positive impact, sermon starters to spark meaningful discussions in your church, worship resources to unite in prayer and reflection, and actionable steps to address the plastic crisis in your life, community and our world.



"Addressing the Plastics Crisis" is a free webinar being offered on Wednesday, April 10, from 1-2pm. To register, click here www.ucc.org/event/earth-sunday-resource-addressing-the-plastics-crisis/

Bill McKibben will keynote the Annual Earth Day Summit — a livestreamed, hybrid event that will be held April 20 at Church of Christ at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. [Register here.](#)

Take future action with a single click. Log in or Sign up for FastAction

From Sunshine Connection, February 7



Seen his shadow, indicating an early spring — but we're not quite there yet! It's still important to protect your church from water leaks (and frozen pipes if you're not in Florida). The discounted water sensor program from the Insurance Board and HSB can detect water damage before it gets bad.

Learn more <https://www.sensorsignup.com/ib-water-sensors/en/home.html>



Music and the Arts



Concert pianist Lindsay Garritson was featured on Sunday afternoon, February 4, at **Naples UCC**. She is an active chamber musician. The Tuesday at Twilight offering on February 20 was a concert with Suzanne Kirton, Joy Yanai and Dr. Alexandra Carlson. A unique concert blend of music and video took place on Saturday afternoon, March 9 with the Seipps/Sheets Trumpet & Organ Duo – instruments coupled visually with specialized videos. On March 10 the Artis-Naples Youth Jazz Orchestra performed.

The **United Church of Gainesville** held another Art in the Library reception recently. The February event was a display of the works of **Sue Littell** and **Janet March**.

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The Valentine Cabaret on Saturday afternoon February 10 at **St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota** was “Our 40 Year Trip” that featured Diane and Dave with music and stories. The admission was free, but the pass-the-hat raised about \$800 for the church’s charitable outreach and missions. The Palmer Ranch Singers presented their spring concert on Sunday afternoon, March 10. It was a salute to the 80th anniversary of D-Day, with patriotic music and songs from the period.



The principal low brass section of the Sarasota Orchestra offered a concert at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** on Sunday evening, January 28. It was held in the candlelight setting of the Reed Chapel and featured a variety of music from the 16th century to present day jazz and pop standards. On March 14 member Rev. Donna Papenhausen led participants in an Artful Prayer session of small sacred spaces by creating and blessing the church’s own tabletop altar to use as a focus for personal prayer time. Attendees brought a base (placement, scarf, some other surface) and assembled their own special elements from nature, photos, souvenirs or other items that suggest people, place or situations they wish to hold in sacred space. The session was in-person and on Zoom.

Peggy Mooers, a member of **First Congregational Church/Lake Helen**, offered an afternoon of short stories and poetry on March 13. She is the author of eight novels — all murder mysteries — but she also writes short fiction and poetry.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC bade goodbye on January 28 to **Dr. Ron Morgan**, its Director of Music Ministry for the past 15 years, with sincerest appreciation and a large parting gift of good wishes. The Alhambra Orchestra was the featured chamber music event on Sunday evening, February 18, with its “A Visit to Italy.” The church’s Community Arts Program (Children & Youth and Creative Strings III) offered a free family concert at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden on Sunday afternoon, March 3. GableStage held a special fundraiser night on Thursday, March 14, to benefit Gables UCC — a dress rehearsal of *The Lehman Trilogy*, an epic piece of storytelling of three actors’ triumphant journey through 163 years of history. And calling all Parrot Heads — put on your finest Hawaiian shirts and flip-flops and join the celebration of the music of tropical troubadour, poet and storyteller Jimmy Buffett. It’s the Gospel According to Jimmy Buffett on Sunday, April 7, a worship service of soul-stirring, thought-provoking, joy-inducing music.



A “chalk talk” was presented at **Sanibel Congregational UCC** as a prelude to the Sanibel Music Festival’s March concerts. On Wednesday, February 28, Florida Gulf Coast University professor Dr. Thomas Cimarusti presented “It’s All About Who You Know: Brahms, Dvorak, and the War of the Romantics.” Due to Hurricane Ian, the Festival was held at Peace Lutheran Church this season, but will return to home base in Sanibel’s Sanctuary next season. On Sunday, March 3, the church began worship with Music Director **Dr. Mackenzie Albert** presenting a “mini-concert” of Schumann’s *Kinderszenen (Scenes from Childhood)* in celebration and thanksgiving for the church’s new Steinway piano.

There will be an old time hymn sing-fest at the **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine** during worship on April 7. Members are invited to submit a favorite with an explanation of why the



hymn has meaning personally. The provenance or origin of the song will be discussed briefly prior to singing.

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During March at **Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami**, in observance of Women’s History Month the music for worship featured music by women composers. Spanning the generations, they sang music by Amy Beach, Jane M. Marshall, Gwyneth Walker and Elaine Hagenberg.



The West Pasco Quilting Guild had a quilt showing at the **Community Congregational Church** on February 16-17, displaying the quilts in the Sanctuary. These works of art will be donated to individuals or groups in need.

During Lent at **Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour**, a concert series was offered on Tuesday evenings in the Tuckfield Chapel. An example was the String Trio Classically Pop on March 5.

The Lenten Poetry & Organ series at the **Community**

Church of Vero Beach on Thursday morning, March 14, featured poet **Patricia Waters** and Director of Music and Fine Arts **Andrew Galuska** on the organ. Jazz Vespers – poetry, prayers and live jazz – took place in the Courtyard on Sunday evening, March 17.



The **Community Church of Vero Beach** has been showing Season 3 of “The Chosen,” an American Christian historical drama television series, on Tuesday afternoons.

St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota hosted a movie night on Monday, February 19, with a showing of “Zootopia.”



Members of **Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach** recently enjoyed watching “Origin,” based on the book, *Caste*.

Music and the Arts

The Sisters in Faith Quilt Raffle at **Faith Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie** that took place on March 24 will support the church’s many outreach programs.



The Rev. Patrick Rogers Memorial Arts Fund at the **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** will take place in the church Sanctuary on Saturday evening, April 6. “Now That’s What I Call Broadway” will feature popular tunes from memorabilia presented by Christopher Calhoun and Heidi Salonia. The church had a booth at the recent Las Olas Riverwalk Jazz Festival. Church members spread the word about the upcoming Broadway show fundraiser and that the church has various ministries available to the local community.



The 2024 Concert Series at **Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach** took place over four evenings during February and March on the church Pavilion. Patrons brought their own seating on the blocked-off street facing the stage. Proceeds supported the Food Pantry at **Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park**.



Members of **Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach** recently enjoyed watching “Origin,” based on the book, *Caste*.

Rev. Shawn Proctor (UCC/New Smyrna Beach) – also known as the “Pickin’ Pastor” – is reported to have been seen playing at an establishment in Ponce Inlet.





PATSY McDOWELL
(CHURCH OF THE OPEN DOOR
CONGREGATIONAL/MIAMI)
PRESIDENT

Schedule of Activities

Times and activities are subject to change as needed

FRIDAY, April 26			
3pm	Registration and check-in Gathering/Blessing		
5:30-6:45pm	Dinner		
7-7:15pm	Welcome, Introductions & Conference Overview		
7:15-8:30pm	Group Gathering-Evening Activity		
8:30-9pm	Raffle Ticket Sales		
8:30pm	Evening Wrap Up		
SATURDAY, April 27			
7-7:25am	Morning Watch		
7:30-8:45am	Breakfast		
9-10am	Morning Activities, Updates & Announcements	2:30-3:15pm	Plenary Session 2 • Worshiping with Music
10-11am	Plenary Session 1 (Choice) • Worship with Essential Oils • Worship in Prayer	3:15-4pm	Plenary Session 3 (Choice) • Worship in Art • Labyrinth Worship with Meditations
11am-12pm	Business Meeting & Updates	4-4:45pm	Plenary Session 4 (Choice) • Worship in Dance • Worship in Silence
12-1:15pm	Lunch	4:45-5:30pm	Free Time and Raffle Ticket Sales ends
1:15-2:15pm	Mission Study Speaker	5:30-6:45pm	Dinner
2:15-2:30pm	Break	7:30-8:45pm	Evening Program & Activities: Honors, Installation of officers, Lay Women Awards, Comedian, Basket Raffle
		SUNDAY, April 28	
		7:30-8:45am	Breakfast
		8:45-9:45am	Pack-up and Check-out
		10-11:30am	Closing Worship & Departure

How Do We Worship?
Florida UCC Women
97th Annual Conference
Come let us worship and bow down.
Let us kneel before the LORD our maker.
Psalm 95:6 (NLT)

Join us as we gather to explore
alternative worship experiences!
April 26 - 28, 2024

Warren Willis Camp and Conference Center
Fruitland Park, Florida 34743

Registration Information & Conference updates
now available at: www.ucfla.org/meetings

UCC WOMEN AROUND THE STATE

The Anam Cara Women's Circle at Faith UCC/Dunedin presented the film "Call Jane" on Friday, March 8, to mark International Women's Day. The movie is the true story about a network of activists who helped provide underground abortions in the '60s-'70s before Roe v Wade.



Women at the United Church of Gainesville brought photos that have a special meaning for them to a February 2 luncheon to share stories about the photos. There was a Women's Day retreat on March 2 titled "Reflections: Friendships and Moonbeams." It was a full day of fun, creativity, friendship, and worship at UCG. Participants were invited to reflect on treasured friendships and

memories, create new experiences and connections, delve deeper into how friends enhance our lives and reflect on how to be their own best friend.

On February 15 the women's group at Naples UCC engaged in a discussion aimed to better understand young people and youth mental health issues. The group reviewed and discussed material from Dr. Lisa Damour, expert and author of several books, including *The Emotional Lives of Teenagers*. The book study in March was Joan Chittister's *The Gift of Years*, an exploration into the essence of aging and the transformative power of life's later stages. On March 21 the topic for discussion was, "Why is it so hard for white folks to talk about racism?" led by LeAnn Pope. After a long legal career, she retired from the legal profession to pursue a Master of Theology from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. LeAnn's master thesis entitled *From Colorblind to Clearer Vision: A White Christian's Unexpected Journey toward Redemption* is the

culmination of four years of extensive study regarding race, racism and privilege and an honest reflection on her own clouded views on racism—held for decades.

The Men's Fellowship at the Community Congregational Church/New Port Richey hosted a "Women's Appreciation

God is with us while we observe the importance of women and girls.
Let us take God's celebration of all of humanity into the world and share a love that knows no bounds!
Love loudly, love boldly, love all!

Written by Dr. Sherry Warren, Minister for Women's and Gender Justice and Rev. Amy Johnson, Minister for Sexuality Education & Justice

Pathways Theological Education Courses

For [Pathways Theological Education, Inc.](http://PathwaysTheologicalEducation.com) late spring and summer courses, go to the [schedule](#) to find out more and to sign up:



- Small Church Administration begins April 10
- Contemporary Homiletics begins April 10
- Living the Heart of Progressive Christian Theology begins April 10
- Ethics and a Life of Meaning begins May 1
- Stories of Christian Saints and Sinners begins May 8
- Preaching for Special Occasions begins May 8
- UCC History and Polity begins May 8
- Congregational Ministry and the Future Church begins May 15
- What about the Bible begins June 1
- Variety of Belief within Christianity Today begins June 19
- Introduction to Spiritual Health (Pastoral Care) begins June 19
- Practicing Our Faith in the Public Square begins June 26
- Pluralism and Religion in North America begins July 10

From Sunshine Connection, March 20

Luncheon" on Sunday, March 10 following worship.

The UCC Women's Association at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota's monthly lunch and program on Tuesday, February 6, heard from Lt. Col. Matthews about the Sarasota branch of the Salvation Army and the many life-changing programs of the Salvation Army of Sarasota County and how it can be helped. On March 5, offering a new and very special way to pray, the group invited author and teacher Sybil MacBeth to show them how to "Pray in Color." With pen and markers on paper, they learned a versatile and meditative prayer practice that includes praying for others and addressing the daily stresses of life and work. The group also collected new/gently used books aimed for ages birth to age three for Baby Basics of Sarasota. In April the women will hear from yoga instructor Michelle Winton, who will enlighten them and lead them in chair yoga. Attendees are being asked to bring a child size umbrella to benefit School Attendance Support, Inc. Children living in poverty are much more likely to stay home from school if it's raining because they don't have umbrellas. Otherwise, they are teased for arriving soaking wet.

The UCC Women's meeting at North Port Community UCC on Wednesday, February 21, featured a presentation on the Mission Project of sleeping mats for the homeless. Participants were encouraged to bring plastic grocery bags and a pair of scissors. The group is sponsoring a church-wide art/craft exhibit on Sunday, April 14. Artists and collectors who wish to share their work will be able to display it on tables set up in Fellowship Hall.



OPPORTUNITIES

A Richness of Opportunities

REDI training	p7
UCC Annual Earth Day Summit.....	p7
Authorized Ministers Retreat.....	p7
Annual Gathering of the Florida Conference	p7
"Healthy Conflict..." webinar.....	p9
Insurance Board water sensor program.....	p13
"Addressing the Plastics Crisis" webinar	p13
Florida UCC Women annual conference.....	p16
Pathways Theological Education late spring/summer courses	p17
ONA webinar	p26
"A Good Pitch" stewardship seminar	p31
UCC stewardship resources	p31

Your Invitation to be Informed – Inspired – Transformed

Hearts, Hands & Hugs Across the Waters



Ephesiens is the young man at **First Congregational Church/Lake Helen** helps to support at the orphanage Brit's Home orphanage in Grand Goave, Haiti.

Naples UCC will be sending a group of 10 people with People for Guatemala from April 1-7. Church members

are being asked to donate new toothbrushes for the group to take with them for distribution in Guatemala.

The endowment Fund at **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda** made a \$1,000 contribution last December to the Abukloi Foundation, a Christian secondary school in South Sudan whose mission is *Developing a New Generation of Peaceful Leaders in South Sudan through Excellence in Education and Small-business Training*



During 2023, the missionaries that **Sanibel Congregational UCC** were helping support completed their assignments, and the church was assigned two new missionaries through Global Ministries, a joint mission of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the UCC. Their new missionaries are Alex Maldonado-Lizardi and Xiomara Cintron-Garcia, a married couple serving in Colombia with Justapaz: Mennonite Center for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action.

Members of **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** were invited to a presentation about advocacy efforts to support the Haitian people's aspirations for a more democratic and just Haiti. The session on Sunday, March 10, was led by Ariel Dominique, the Executive Director of the Haitian American Foundation for Democracy.



Thanks to the generosity and compassion of their church community, **Christ Congregational Church / Miami** has



raised \$470 towards providing warmth and comfort to those in need through Church World Service (CWS). With these funds, they will be able to sponsor 47 blankets, each one a tangible symbol of their care and solidarity with those facing difficult circumstances around the world.

The **United Church of Gainesville** held its annual Break Fast Feast on Thursday, March 21, sponsored by the Compassion in Action Committee. Partnering with Growing Hope Globally, they fast, however known, and donate what they can to support communities around the world in growing lasting solutions to hunger. Supporters signed up to bring soup, salad or bread to share with 8-10 people. Over the last five years, the church has donated over \$13,251 to the greenhouse project in the western highlands of Guatemala to improve food security for families in that region.

Emmanuel UCC/Sebring is raising funds to help fight hunger in Somalia. According to the World Food Program, an estimated 4.3 million people in the African country are facing crisis levels of food shortages.

On March 8 and 9 the **UCC at The Villages** held its annual indoor yard sale. Over \$4,000 was raised, half of which went to support the World Central Kitchen, founded in 2010 by chef José Andrés. The WCK provides meals to populations affected by natural disasters and armed conflicts.



Venice UCC supports two youth at the MBKG Pannai (Family Village Farm) Home in Kasam, Katpadi Vellore, India. Elavarasi is a 12 year old girl in the 7th grade and Dineshkumar an 11 year old in the 6th grade. They are active in extracurricular activities, reported to be average in their studies and are in the final term of school and soon to take their annual examinations.



Build It... and they will come



As of late February, the new audio/visual system at **Christ Congregational Church/Miami** was in the process of becoming up and running according to Designated Pastor Rev. "Candy" Thomas. The sound equipment was very much improved with new over-the-ear lavaliere microphones for worship leaders to use. There are two large screens on which the worship bulletin and song lyrics are projected, with varied opportunities to enhance worship and share information that now gives a whole, new, modern feel to the Sanctuary. Three cameras will be operating, and when the whole project is complete the tech staff will no longer have to use an iPhone on a tripod to livestream the worship service on Facebook and will be able to zoom in and out and video from various angles. All this will be directed from the command system – a beautiful custom-made, wooden audio/visual booth, which blends in perfectly with the wood in the Sanctuary.



The Strategic Planning Team at the **Beach Church/Pensacola Beach** is encouraging members to be generous with their treasure in specific ways in March and April. One is by making a special contribution beyond regular giving to help cover the cost of replacing the HVAC, which had to be done in January. The hope is to raise \$10,000 by the end of March.

Members of **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** have been updated on recent work being done by the Facilities and Grounds team since the beginning of the year: new A/Cs have been replaced in the Narthex and Sanctuary; a new fire suppression system has been installed over the gas stove; beautiful new plants along on both sides of the Sanctuary windows are starting to grow and bloom; new paper towel dispensers are being installed to help cut down on waste and make for a greener campus; the steeple cross was re-attached.

The **United Church of Gainesville** experienced a break-in and theft on Saturday night January 27, the culmination of a host of recent security issues. Despite cameras and an alarm system for many years, the security system is old and many keys to the UCC facilities were out in the world. The person entered the building through an office window after damaging the gate to the rear of the building, and as it happened the alarm system was on the fritz. Nothing irreplaceable was stolen and no one was hurt. There have been charges filed against the identified person who broke in, but there does not appear to be any motive; they seemed mostly to be looking for access to cash. One of the key components of the

essential improvements list of the proposed capital campaign is updated and improved security for the building. Meanwhile they are moving along with building maintenance and repair. The latest HVAC unit has been installed and passed all inspections, and the showers in the education wing men's and women's restrooms have been replaced.

Hurricane Ian caused significant damage to the building and grounds in 2022 at **Fort Myers UCC**. In 2022 and 2023, the church incurred approximately \$96,000 for hurricane related repair expenses. This included repairs to: the Sanctuary roof and skylights; gutters, soffits and fascia; A/C units; and the church sign. There were also expenses related to clean the debris caused by the hurricane. The good news is that the congregation more than covered these expenses with FEMA proceeds (\$78,600), insurance payments (\$3,900) and member contributions (\$23,700). Thanks to a generous contribution from a church member, they recently were able to finance the much-needed replacement of the office computer. As part of their ongoing technology updates, they are now looking to replace the Finance Coordinator's computer at an estimated cost of \$1,500.

In the March edition of the *Sanibel Light* newsletter, the church trustees at **Sanibel Congregational UCC** updated church members on the progress that has been made in response to Hurricane Ian. "The SCUCC Homecoming and Senior Minister Installation celebration on 18 February was the culmination of countless meetings and thousands of hours of volunteer trustees, deacons, welcoming members and staff who dedicated themselves to clean-up, planning, rebuild, decorating, cooking each week and finally for the banquet we enjoyed. It was wonderful, joyful, and inspiring!" They reported the organ will be arriving in a few months, with speakers that will be placed in the huge speaker-houses in the wall with beautiful screens covering the holes. Once acoustics are addressed, the rest of the paint, paneling and wallpaper will be finished. The pew Bibles and hymnals will be arriving, the Narthex restroom will be finished soon, the food donation box will be rolled out to remind them to serve less fortunate neighbors and railings will be installed where needed on the Chancel.

The walkway roofs have been replaced at **Boynton Beach Congregational Church of the Palms/Delray Beach**. This project was paid for by leftover capital campaign monies.



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

After worship on Sunday, March 3, members of **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** engaged in an Offering of Letters. They wrote letters to their U.S. Representatives to encourage support of the Federal farm bill. The Offering of Letters has also involved Bread for the World to help support domestic and international nutrition programs that offer a hand up to families and a brighter future for children.

SURE (Sarasota United for Responsibility) held its Nehemiah Action assembly at the church on Monday evening, March 18, to address justice on affordable housing with local city and country commissioners and other officials.



On Thursday evening the event was "Take a Walk in My Shoes" in which a panel of individuals of different ethnic, faith and sexual orientation backgrounds shared stories behind their daily struggles against hate.

In partnership with the non-partisan League of Women Voters, the Racial Justice Mission Group and COLLAGE (the congregation's LGBTQ group and its allies) invited the congregation to write postcards to ex-felons to help them get their voting rights restored. This took place after worship on Sunday, March 24.



The Education Ministry at **First United Church of Tampa** will have a discussion of the film "Origins," which will be followed by a Zoom discussion on Thursday, April 4.



Rev. Jen Daysa, Pastor of **Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park**, delivered an e-blast on February 29 to her members about her day with "Pride in the Capital." She participated to help Equality Florida advocate against hateful anti-LGBTQ legislation as part of her church ministry. She wrote: "Going up to Tallahassee and speaking to lawmakers was certainly way out of my comfort zone, but for many years now Jesus has been asking me to step into the uncomfortable and do hard things for the sake of my neighbor, the



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.

sake of love, the sake of justice. As someone recently reminded me, being brave isn't about not being scared, it is about being scared and doing something anyway. Jesus has called me to be brave and I am grateful for that calling and beloved community of faith that encourages me to follow it." She is pictured at the right in the photo.



Coral Gables Congregational UCC is a member of PACT (People Acting for Community Together), a coalition of 40 diverse congregations in Miami-Dade that works to hold officials accountable on justice issues among other concerns. Members of the church participated in a rally on Tuesday evening, March 19, and will gather on Monday evening, April 15, for the Nehemiah Assembly.

On March 2, Senior Pastor **Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner** received the Bridge Builders Award from COSMOS, the Coalition of South Florida Muslim Organizations for "exceptional contribution in promoting peace, tolerance and bridge-building." As part of her acceptance speech, she thanked those who taught and guided her over the years toward an understanding of the importance of interfaith relationships for creating peace.



On Saturday, March 30, a very special film on the immigration crisis facing the country, "America's Family," was screened at the Coral Gables Art Cinema followed by a panel discussion with Pastor Laurie sharing about the role of faith and Gables UCC's work as a sanctuary church. The program was co-sponsored by the church and the Florida Immigration Coalition.

Iftar is the meal that breaks the traditional Muslim fast at sunset during the Islamic month of Ramadan. The church hosted their Turkish Muslim friends for an Iftar meal and the opportunity to promote and facilitate mutual understanding. Over the past years, they have hosted Gables UCC, but this year Gables was the host on Friday, March 22.



The Greater Naples Leadership presented a free community forum on civility in Collier County, "Reduce the Rancor," co-sponsored and hosted by **Naples UCC** on Wednesday afternoon, February 7. Panelists included former Members of Congress Dick Gephardt (D) and Francis Rooney (R) and several local officials and leaders.

The church hosted a League of Women Voters/Collier County presentation, "Plastics 101: Why We Should 'Take a Pass on Plastics'" on Wednesday afternoon, February 21.



St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota joined with three other local churches in an offering of letters for Bread for the World, a Christian advocacy organization urging U.S. decision makers to do all they can to pursue a world without hunger. At two coffee hours in February church members had an opportunity to hand write a letter to a U.S. House member urging them to renew farm bill programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and increase funding for fresh produce within SNAP benefits and international food aid programs.



The Social Justice Team at **Faith UCC/Dunedin** invited immigration attorney Fernando Chavez to join them for worship on Sunday, March 10. He shared stories of immigration challenges and how the congregation can get involved as a faith community.



On Saturday, March 9, 19 members of **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** walked in the annual Florida AIDS Walk to raise funds for HIV/AIDS advocacy, education and research.

Ramadan is the month of fasting and prayer for Muslims worldwide. Each evening at sundown, Muslims break the fast with an Iftar meal. The Turkish Cultural Center hosted an Iftar at the church on Sunday evening, March 24, and invited the congregation to join them. It was a generous opportunity to build interfaith relationships.

Church members will prepare on Thursday evening, April 11, for the justice rally organized by FAST (Faith & Action for Strength Together).



Anti-Racism Ministry

Black History and Anti-Racism

FROM MARCH 20 SUNSHINE CONNECTION

With the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Day celebrated in mid-January and Black History Month observed during February, there was much activity around African American and racism issues taking place in our Florida congregations, including among those that do not have organized anti-racism ministry committees. Here is some of what we learned took place during January and February, as well as into March with those churches that have anti-racism programs. Some of these



may give you ideas to consider for next year's MLK and Black History Month activities or anti-racism programs during the year.



On Sunday mornings from January 14-February 4, **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** had a book study, *Martin Luther King: A Religious Life* by Paul Harvey.

The worship services in February at the **United Church in Tallahassee** were devoted to Black History Month and were titled: UCC Black History — The American Missionary Association; Why Black History Is Important to White People; Celebrating Black Floridians.



Nine members of the **United Church in Tallahassee**, as part of the Capital Area Justice Ministry (a diverse coalition of nearly 20 religious congregations across the Tallahassee area) showed up at the end of February to make a difference on affordable housing issues before the City.



Members from **Fort Myers UCC** participated in the Rally sponsored by LIFE (Lee Interfaith for Empowerment) on Tuesday evening, March 12. On the agenda was a mental health issue and preparing for the Nehemiah Action assembly coming on Tuesday, April 9.



PEACE (People Engaged in Active Community Efforts) will hold its Nehemiah Action assembly representing 20 faith communities with over 1,500 members on Monday evening, April 8, with members attending from **Lake Worth UCC**.



Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour honored African American heritage and Black History Month at a worship service that featured the award-winning Renegade Conservatory, a music and theatre arts program on a mission to make the arts accessible to all children. After worship, the congregation had the chance to work with local Black artists and contribute to a large-format art



piece for the new church. On Tuesday evening, February 27, at the first free concert in its Lenten series, the church presented "Hued Songs" led and directed by Kunya Rowley, accompanied by piano, in a presentation of an array of special music that uplifts Black culture and art.



The 1619 Project, created by Nikole Hannah-Jones, was read and discussed by interested members at St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota in February.

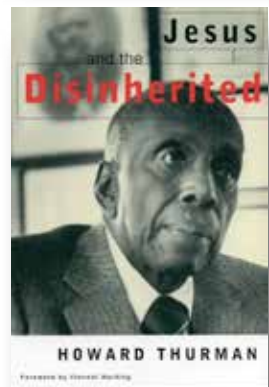
In honor of Black History Month at Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami, the music for worship on February 11 featured a variety of spirituals arranged by Uzee Brown Jr., H.T. Burleigh, Moses Hogan and Hugo Frey.

Members of First Congregational UCC/Sarasota participated in the MLK Walk for Unity. The church provided TED Talks in February and March: "Belonging: A Critical Piece of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion" by Carin Taylor; "The Little Problem I Had



Renting a House" by James A White, Sr; "How Racial Bias Works — and How to Disrupt It" by Jennifer L. Eberhardt; "A Tale of Two Americas — and the Mini-Mart Where They Collided" by Anand Giridharadas.

Famously known as the text that Martin Luther King Jr. sought inspiration from in the days leading up to the Montgomery bus boycott, Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* helped shape the civil rights movement and changed our nation's history forever. Interested



members of Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach read the book, discussing it over four Wednesdays in February and March.

As the national Black History Month theme "Black Resistance" last year explored how African Americans have addressed historic and ongoing disadvantage and oppression, as evidenced by recent events, the Social Justice Ministries Team at Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda recommended several opportunities to consider. Included was the suggestion to explore the Blanchard House display in the church library on "Spying in the Civil War" that describes the heroic contributions of Black women and men in the struggle for freedom from slavery that still affects us today. Also on Saturday, February 3, the Charlotte County NAACP



and Babcock Ranch Community co-sponsored a celebration of Black History Month at Babcock Ranch Founders Square with music, food, and movies embracing cultural diversity. On Sunday, February 18, Richard Patrick, President of the local branch of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRRC) and a friend of the congregation, presented a Social Justice Moment during the worship service. Following the service, he further described the work of the FRRRC in helping returning citizens who have served prison terms to establish themselves in the community and secure their right to vote by paying fees related to their incarceration.

In an e-blast to members, Christ Congregational Church/Miami noted the use of music in the Civil Rights movement was not just happenstance — it was purposeful and served as a vital form of communication and building community. It was the universal voice that pierced through the melodies and lyrics of American popular music and represented the power that music has to make a change. A link was provided to "The Great American Songbook Foundation" [Click Here](#). At a "justice luncheon" in early March, Harold Ford from the NAACP provided enlightening words about the journey toward a more just and inclusive society. He also provided a listing of handpicked books to deepen the understanding of justice, equity and social change.



At Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach, the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass were recognized. Tables in the church were adorned with various Black history-themed items: books, note cards and bios of African Americans and others who have made an impact toward justice and civil rights. These were displayed for the entire month of February.

Venice UCC hosted a Venice Interfaith Community Association presentation on Monday evening, February 5, of "A Walk to Respect," produced by the Patterson Foundation. Featuring portrayals



of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, a panel discussion asked "How can we find our way to understanding? Where can we find common ground?" The staged reading looked at the words spoken and written by these two inspiring leaders.

On March 21 at Naples UCC, the topic for discussion for the Women Engage! group will be, "Why is it so hard for white folks to talk about racism?" led by LeAnn Pope. After a long legal career, she retired from the legal profession to pursue a Master of Theology degree. Her thesis, *From Colorblind to Clearer Vision: A White Christian's Unexpected Journey toward Redemption*, was the culmination of four years of extensive study regarding race, racism and privilege and an honest reflection on her own clouded views on racism—held for decades. Boynton Beach Congregational Church-Church of the Palms/Delray Beach celebrated Black History Month with a showing and discussion of the film "Selma" on February 15.



Sermon Series

United Church of Gainesville
"Reclaiming Righteousness"
January-February
"Lamentations"
Lenten season

Spring Hill UCC
"Ten Values for the Modern Family"
(based on the book by Erin Wathen)
January-February

Lake Worth UCC
"Wandering Heart:
Figuring Out Faith with Peter"
Lenten season

UCC/Fort Lauderdale
"Wandering Heart"
Lenten season

**Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/
St. Pete Beach**
"The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World"
April-May

A-Wake for Jesus!

BY REV. KIM BUCHANAN
UNITED CHURCH IN TALLAHASSEE

Several weeks ago, my friend Tim Lynch volunteered to come play some Irish music with me for our March 17 worship service. Great! I said. Then I read the Scripture for the day: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Jesus isn't talking about wheat, right? He's trying to prepare the disciples for his death. Well, that's cheerful, I thought. But then I thought back to an Irish wake Tim and I attended a couple of weeks ago and got an idea: why not have a wake for Jesus? I know, we're either two weeks early -- if we're following the story of Lent -- or we're 2,000 years late if we're following real time. Either way, won't it be fun to have a wake for Jesus -- to sing songs and tell stories about Jesus' life and experiences we've had with him?

This Sunday, March 17, which also happens to be St. Patrick's Day, we'll have a special service—"A Wake for Jesus"—with Irish music woven through the entire worship service. But if you come early, you'll also be able to hear Tim and Kim playing some tunes. They'll start playing at 9:40 am.

P.S. A-Wake for Jesus! Eulogies for Jesus. At wakes, people share personal stories about the deceased. If you have a personal Jesus story to share, please let me know. I want to share recordings of the congregational hymns and songs for Sunday. If you get a chance, do listen to them. The Irish are known for their love of song!

From the March 7 Gatherings e-blast from the United Church in Tallahassee

BEING CHURCH



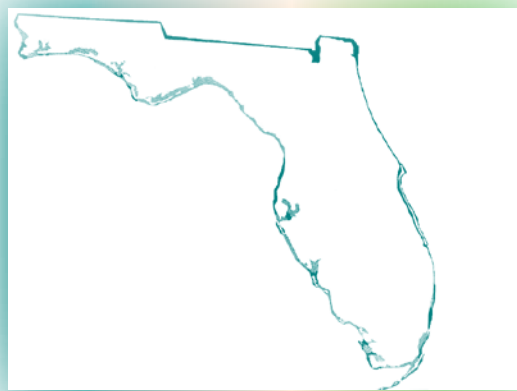
In "Across Florida" our intent is to share with you what is happening at our 90+ churches throughout the state. It is obvious from these entries that there is an exciting vibrancy evident within our congregations.

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.



First United Church of Tampa will be offering an in-person retreat "Forward: A Faith Rekindling Experience for Sacred Travelers" on April 5 and 6. It was held on Zoom the last week in March.

"Breakfast Church" is a happening at several churches. On Sunday, February 18, **Lake Worth UCC** moved its service from the Sanctuary to Fellowship Hall to have some waffles and gather around tables for worship. They talked about Mardi Gras and Lent and what makes us happy and what makes us sad. It was an opportunity to bring the whole family to worship together in a casual atmosphere with something for everyone. Tuesdays mornings at 10am at **Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park** is "Breakfast with Jesus," a Bible study over breakfast. **Community Congregational Church/New Port Richey** has a monthly "breakfast church" (on hold during Lent). **Spring Hill UCC** offers breakfast fellowship at 9am on Sunday as part of its new Faith Formation worship format.



Venice UCC made available the AARP driving course, with "graduates" receiving a certificate for a \$100 deduction from their auto insurance premium. The church has also offered a CPR/first aid class thanks to the Red Cross and Heart Association, even learning new techniques applied to children. **Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour** scheduled a hands-only CPR training after worship on March 10. **Boynton Beach Congregational-Church of the Palms/Delray Beach** offered AED (automatic external defibrillator) training on Tuesday, February 27.



Following Torah study on Saturday, March 2, **Sanibel Congregational UCC** and the Bat Yam congregation (which shares the SCUCC campus) joined for a meditation and chanting session in Fellowship Hall.

Members and friends at **Naples UCC** come together periodically for fellowship, prayer and walking in nature along Seagate beach and the boardwalk that leads to the Naples Grande.

The **United Church of Gainesville** is undertaking its annual spring/summer small groups program in which members sign up for groups that meet once or over multiple days on subjects ranging from poetry to bowling, gut microbiota to meditative music.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC is offering a special praise worship once a month during its regular chapel service at 9am, adding more contemporary music to that usual program.

Full moon fellowship was on the schedule at the **Beach Church/Pensacola Beach** on Saturday, February 24, an informal time to gather for food and fellowship while watching the moon rise.

Sunday, February 4, was the day for the annual Pet Blessing and Memorial Service (pictured) at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC**, celebrating furry, blessed, four-legged creatures.

The "All Creatures Great & Small Pet Blessing" at **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** took place on Saturday morning, March 23. Forty pet owners brought their leashed or contained pets to be blessed by Pastor **Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby** on the lawn of the church. Cremains also were blessed. Donations were requested of dry cat and dog food for the Meals on Wheels Pet Love program.



Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte has a printed guide regarding arrangements for funeral services and burial that are available from the church office. Completed and returned worksheets may be held by the office to keep for when the information is needed.

Faith UCC/Dunedin is another of our churches to have a weekly meditation offering. Theirs is on Wednesday mornings at 9am for an hour of stillness, rest and centering as meditation is practiced in the Sanctuary using meditative music and singing bowls, focusing on breathing as they meditate in silence for about 45 minutes.



Congregants at the **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** were invited to Elliott Hall on February 25 for Fellowship coffee hour, where funds were collected to Gatorade soak their Pastor-in-Chief, **Rev. Aaron Lauer**.

The congregation at the **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine** was invited to join in a prayer vigil beginning March 19 and ending March 20, an opportunity to engage in praying and listening.

Yard Sales and More

The annual rummage sale on Saturday, February 10, at **Venice UCC** had Fellowship Hall set up like a department store with tables for linens, housewares, shoes and handbags, clothing (all hung on racks or folded on tables), garden, electronics, toys, frames, pictures, jewelry, Christmas and holiday items, books, knick-knacks, furniture on the stage and even a cafe. Over \$4,700 was raised.

The Winter Festival at **Coral Isles Church/Tavernier** took in more than \$32,000 from the food, beverage and bake sales along with auction items, yard sale items, sponsorships and vendor fees.

The annual yard and bake sale at the **United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine** took place on Sunday, March 3, from 11am-1pm.



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

Live or via Zoom, or other livestreaming

"Finding Forgiveness: A Stephen Ministry Perspective," "The Rewards and Challenges of Life as a Parish Minister," "How Do You Know When It Is Time for Your Loved One to Join a Memory Community?" "The Social Gospel in Black & White," "The Spirit of Progressive Theology" and "Why We Should 'Take a Pass on Plastics'" (Naples UCC)

"Wild Florida: An Animal Odyssey," "Sacred Sound and Movement: A Spiritual Healing Journey," "Run-down of the Florida Legislative Session" and "The Crisis in the Middle East" (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

The 1 and 2 Letters of Paul to the Thessalonians and the Gospel of John (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

"The Special Offerings of the United Church of Christ" and "The Radical Teachings of Jesus" (Church of the Palms and Boynton Beach Congregational Church/Delray Beach)

"The Usual Suspects: Judas, Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate" (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

"Who Wrote It, When and Why" (Lake Worth UCC)

"The Exodus Story" (Beach Church/Pensacola Beach)

"Update on Immokalee Fair Housing," "What It Means to be a UCC Member" and "What The Bible Says and Doesn't Say About LGBTQ+" (Venice UCC)

"Life After Jesus Ascended" and "Divorce Care" (Jupiter-FIRST Church)

"Coping with Climate Change," "Prevailing Theological Thoughts and Historical Evidence Surrounding What is Known as Holy Week," "Florida Legislature Session Debriefing" (United Church of Gainesville)

The Letter of Paul to the Philippians (Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach)

"Living Our Faith in the Public Square" (United Church in Tallahassee)

"Lives of the Patriarchs" and "The Greatest Prayer Book Study" (Spring Hill UCC)

"Ask Me About My Time in Prison," "Repentance: What Is It?" and "Putting Books in Kids Hands" (United Church of Gainesville)

Emotional Intelligence workshop (Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour)

Living the Questions 2.0 (Coral Isles Church/Tavernier)

"The Mysteries of Ancient Egypt" and "Medical Mission Trip to Uganda" (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

"Update on NAACP Activities in the Community" (Christ Congregational Church/Miami)

The Gospel of John (Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte)

The Book of Esther (First Congregational Church/Lake Helen)

"Avoiding Verbal Villains: Wisdom for Caring Well" (Community Church of Vero Beach)

LGBTQ+ UPDATE

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota hosted Gina Duncan, nationally recognized speaker and director from TransAction Florida, after worship on Sunday, February 11. She shared her story as a transgender person overcoming adversity along with her advocacy for LGBTQ rights in Florida. Pastor **Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby** was recently the featured speaker at "You Are Not Alone," a four-week program sponsored by Samaritan Counseling Services of the Gulf Coast. The program topic — "A Path to Community for LGBTQIA+ Individuals & Affirming Churches of the Gulf Coast." The COLLAGE group hosted a luncheon on March 10 for Embracing Our Differences, a nonprofit organization sponsored by the church, that uses the power of art and education to celebrate the diversity of humanity. COLLAGE (Coalition of Laity for Lesbian and Gay Equality) is an adult LGBTQ+ social group that welcomes supporters no matter their sexual orientation.

After worship on March 17 at **Venice UCC**, Pastor **Rev. Dr. John Fairless** led a discussion on what the Bible says — and what it doesn't say — about LGBTQ+ folks, helping clear up some important misconceptions.

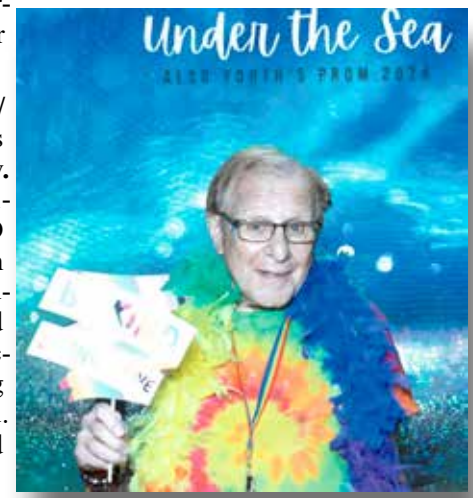
Lakewood UCC-Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg celebrated on March 10 the 25th anniversary of Lakewood becoming ONA.

To acknowledge this, Lakewood/Trinity are raising up Metro Inclusive Health. Trinity UCC has been financially supporting the trans youth program at Metro for many years. As part of their community support, Metro offers "grab and go" food items to people who visit their clinics. At the event, the church presented the organization with donated food items to be given to its clients. Upon the conclusion of the service, there was a ceremony raising the transgender flag at the church sign on busy 54th Avenue.

A spaghetti dinner was in store at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** on Saturday, March 16, for families with LGBTQ+ youth. It was hosted by TransSOCIAL and PFLAG/Miami.

Hope UCC/Rockledge will be lighting a candle for Transgender Day of Visibility during worship on Easter Sunday.

St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota's members **Jim Patrick** and **Rev. Fred Rhines** volunteered at the ALSO Youth 2024 Prom on Saturday night, February 3. It was a good time of music and dancing by all 175 young people who attended. Pictured is Rev. Fred enjoying himself.



THE FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CELEBRATES THE DEFEAT OF ALL BUT ONE ANTI-LGBTQ+ BILL IN THE STATE LEGISLATURE, AFFIRMING OUR COMMITMENT TO INCLUSIVITY AND LOVE. WE STAND IN SOLIDARITY WITH OUR COMMUNITY, WELCOMING ALL ON LIFE'S JOURNEY.



ONA Webinars — Spring/Summer Series

One webinar per month will be offered (February-July) with some classic webinars as well as some new ones to address what we've heard ONA churches say they need support with. Save money by purchasing the series pass or register for them a la carte. Church pricing (based on church size) and individually priced tickets available for both a la carte and series pass. Check out our Events page and scroll through all the options! We hope to see you at a webinar soon.

OPEN SPRING '24 Webinars
7PM-8:30PM EACH NIGHT

- 4/23/24. ONA and the Bible.
- 5/28/24. Beyond The Binary Panel: The spectrum of gender.
- 6/25/24. Unpacking Attraction with the Bible — A Deep Dive into Bisexuality, Pansexuality, and Asexuality.
- 7/30/24. Navigating Ethical Non-Monogamy & the Bible: Open Relationships, Polyamory and More.

BOOKS WE'RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER...

Live or via Zoom, or other livestreaming

The Beekeeper of Aleppo by Christy Lefteri (Church of the Palms and Boynton Beach Congregational Church/Delray Beach)

Apples Never Fall by Liane Moriarty and *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

The Measure by Nikki Erlick, *The Gospel of Mark* by Amy-Jill Levine, *Martin Luther King: A Religious Life* by Paul Harvey and *The Privatization of Everything: How the Plunder of Public Goods Transformed America and How We Can Fight Back* by Donald Cohen and Allen Miiakelian (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

Jesus and the Disinherited by Howard Thurman (Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach)

The Powers that Be by Walter Wink (United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine)

Women Talking by Miriam Toews, *Stealing* by Margaret Verble, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen, *No Cure for Being Human* by Kate Bowler, *Hope Leans Forward: Braving Your Way toward Simplicity, Awakening, and Peace* by Valerie Brown (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

Our Hidden Conversations by Michelle Norris and *Horse* by Geraldine Brooks (Naples UCC)

West with Giraffes by Lynda Rutledge, *The Four Winds* by Kristin Hannah and *The Authenticity Project: A Novel* by Clare Pooley (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)

Jesus and the Dawn of Hope: Walking with Christ through the Holy Week to the Miraculous Easter Morning by Dr. Bruce Hartman (Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

The 1619 Project by Nikole Hannah-Jones (St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota)

Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What You Can Do About It by Brian McLaren. (Lake Worth UCC)

The Story of Arthur Truluv by Elizabeth Berg (Fort Myers UCC)

The Women by Kristin Hannah (Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte)

Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters at the End by Atul Gawande (Faith UCC/Dunedin)

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Society by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows and *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* by James McBride (Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton)

The Lord's Prayer by Adam Hamilton (Spring Hill UCC)



Books & Books and host **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** presented on Monday, February 26, an evening with Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist David Finkel discussing his new book, *An American Dreamer: Life in a Divided Country*, and Dave Lawrence, former publisher of the *Miami Herald* and author of *A Dedicated Life: Journalism, Justice, and a Chance for Every Child*.

Books & Books and Gables UCC are excited to announce that bestselling author Anne Lamott will be in conversation on Saturday, April 20, with Pastor **Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner** to talk about Lamott's highly anticipated twentieth book, *Somehow: Thoughts on Love*. The book explores the transformative power of love in our lives: how it surprises us, forces us to confront uncomfortable truths, reminds us of our humanity, and guides us forward.

Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami had a One-Blood drive on Sunday morning, February 25. Donors received a \$20 eGift card, long sleeve t-shirt and a wellness checkup that included blood pressure, pulse, temperature, iron count and cholesterol screening.

The Community Blood Center blood mobile came to **Naples UCC**



on Friday afternoon, February 16, that involved 25 donors who donated 20 pints of blood, which translates into 60 lives saved. Donors received free cholesterol and mini-health screenings.

The Big Red Bus visited **Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour** after worship on Sunday, January 28. Donors received a \$20 eGift card, a long-sleeve OneBlood t-shirt and a free wellness checkup.



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 **Community Church of Vero Beach** provided volunteers on Thursday, March 28, for a Habitat for Humanity painting project.



The Compassion In Action Committee at the **United Church of Gainesville** invited church members to provide items for the “Gift Bags for the Homeless” project. Volunteers, including from youth groups, transferred donations to colorful handmade cloth bags that would be delivered to neighbors at GRACE Marketplace and St. Francis House.



UCG youth helped fill almost 100 bags. Every year the congregation partners with these local community-based non-profits that serve neighbors who are currently unhoused.

The church hosted an interfaith pot luck on Sunday afternoon, February 25, as an opportunity to learn about other faiths and how to build relationships across different faith traditions. The event was sponsored by the Alachua County Faith Leaders Alliance.

Recently GRACE Marketplace, one of the organizations which serves those experiencing homelessness in Gainesville and that is supported by the church, suffered a fire in the women’s dorm. No one was injured, but there was damage to the space and supplies. A UCGer shared news of the fire, and the list of needed emergency supplies was provided by GRACE staff. The church made available \$500 from the discretionary/benevolent funds to be made available on UCG’s behalf.

The Growing Hope Globally Break-Fast Feast raised \$820 to support communities around the world in growing lasting solutions to hunger.



Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte has partnered with 10 local churches to provide financial support and labor to build one house each year. A dozen painters work on a special Habitat for Humanity home on Saturday, March 9.

The PBJ Makers continue their monthly project of making 200 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the homeless.

The February Mission of the Month was Back Pack Kidz, which the church supported with a gift of \$1,500. The Charlotte County Homeless Coalition was the recipient of a \$4,000 contribution.



Boca Raton Elementary School gratefully received the donation of 35 Christmas gifts for their students from **Rev. Tom Lacey of Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton**. The church also contributed \$500 to a new mission initiative — the Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance. Its mission is to eliminate substandard and overcrowded rental housing for farmworker families and low-income residents of Immokalee.



At **Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda**, the total endowment fund gifts made in 2023 was \$35,071 from the allowable 2023 grant total of \$38,616. The remaining budget of \$3,545 was rolled over into the available funds for gifts in 2024. The four gifts made in December 2023 were: Giving Tree high school student assist program for \$1,700; Venezuelan refugee family support for \$1,000; Immokalee Fair Housing (migrant workers) for \$1,000; Abukloi Foundation/Sudan School for \$1,000.

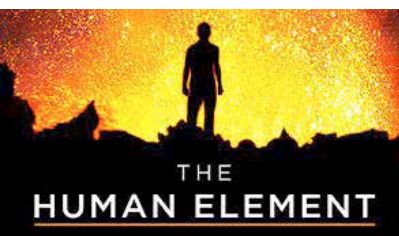


The February donation focus at **Coral Isles Church/Tavernier** was a diaper drive for the Florida Keys Healthy Start program, which the church hosts on its campus. The mission focus for March was “Meal in a Box.” Requested items were things like Tuna Helper (with the tuna), Banquet Homestyle kits, etc. Other food donations were also welcomed, all which were shared with the Burton Methodist Church and Coral Isles High School food pantries.



Naples UCC held a Build Day with Habitat for Humanity of Collier County Saturday morning, February 3, helping build homes in The Whitaker Woods Project.

On Tuesday, March 12, there was a viewing of the documentary “The Human Element.” Sponsored by the Environment Subcommittee, this film highlights the crucial interaction between humans and nature from Chesapeake Bay to the California forests.



In February the Partners in Service Ministry Team at **Jupiter-FIRST Church** and Chasin a Dream hosted a new book drive for babies to 18 year-olds. The Chasin a Dream Foundation is headquartered in Palm Beach County; its goal is to empower families with children facing life-threatening illnesses by providing personalized, transformative support.

Volunteers serve dinner at the Lewis Center in West Palm Beach on the second and third Thursdays of the month. The facility provides temporary housing to individuals who can stay up to 90 days. Meals are provided by local food establishments.



First Congregational UCC/Sarasota participated in the All Faiths Food Bank Hunger Walk on Sunday, March 24, to help end summer hunger. There were one mile and three mile walk options. The \$25 sign up fee included a t-shirt.

The monthly community meal that the church continues to provide at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church feeds those who are hungry and in need of fellowship. The guests are treated to a **Sandy Smith** home-cooked meal, and the home-baked items provided by the First Congregational Church family adds a sweet treat that is heartily enjoyed.



Members at **Venice UCC** filled blue bags with essential items for the unhoused and underserved. They were very happy with all the contents and shared and exchanged items with others.



The church participated in the **Venice CROP Hunger Walk** on Sunday, February 25, a one or three mile route. Walkers and donors collected \$13,707 last year. This year 33 walkers collected \$14,788.27 for the hungry at home and around the world.



On Sunday, March 24, **Barbara Richards** and others from **St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota** along with some men from Project 180 gathered in the kitchen to prep the meal that was delivered to the Project 180 house the next day. Church members contributed the food for 20. The fellowship between these individuals – previously incarcerated men reentering the community — and St. Andrew has been a delight to experience.

In another outreach opportunity, church members provided a meal for the family at Francis House during the fifth weekend in March. This is the same family — a mother and her three children — for which the church bought Christmas gifts.

The church hosted the local CROP Hunger Walk on Sunday afternoon, March 3.



Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach has created a Community Garden to grow fruits, vegetables and herbs in the former playground space. The garden will be phased in slowly, starting small and seeking outside support and involvement. They will begin with grow bags and a small subdivided plot along the side of the building, preparing these spaces for planting and began signups for lots on Saturday, February 24, doing some gardening that day and sharing food and fellowship.

The congregation held its yearly Greenfest on Saturday, March 9, on the church grounds. The community fair focused on environmental sustainability and fellowship featuring vendors, displays and food trucks.



The **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** initiated a conversation on Sunday afternoon February 25, about refugees in South Florida and how someone can be involved in helping them settle in to a new life. Refugee Assistance Alliance helps refugees from the Middle East learn English, develop computer/banking skills and connect with resources in the local community.



On Saturday, March 9, members joined with others in the community for the Florida AIDS Walk and Music Festival held at Fort Lauderdale Beach Park.



Rev. Brooks Berndt, Minister for Environmental Justice Education for Faithful Action Team of United Church of Christ/National Ministries, was at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** on Sunday afternoon, March 17, to address “Climate Hope: Vision and Strategy in Times of Crisis.” He delved into the heart of this crucial matter, exploring innovative solutions, inspiring visions and actionable strategies to address the climate crisis, exploring how each of us can contribute to positive change and become agents of hope in the face of adversity.



3 GREAT LOVES

During January and February, **Pilgrim Congregational UCC/ St. Petersburg** collected 806lbs of food items for the St. Pete Free Clinic.



The **Beach Church/Pensacola Beach** seeks to continue to bless the children at the Navy Point School in Pensacola. In the past few years, the church has helped in December by buying Christmas gifts for children and in August by buying school supplies for teachers to use.

They have now been invited to help by providing funds to help the school buy books for the children to read over the summer. They are budgeting about \$4,000 for that, so any amount the Beach Church and its members can contribute will be a great help.



Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach has celebrated the two year anniversary of its Little Free Libraries, installed near the church entrance. Friends and neighbors have been spotted browsing through the books and many people have remarked on how beautiful the libraries are. They are a welcome addition to the church's Mission and Outreach program because they encourage the love of reading. Hundreds of books have been given away during this time to both adults and children. The children's library is particularly popular and often empty of books. Each week, a volunteer checks the libraries, organizes the books, and refills the shelves.



The Deacons at **Hope UCC/Rockledge** sponsored a dessert/cake "walk" during refreshments after a recent worship service as a fundraiser for the Shepherd's Fund. This discretionary fund overseen by the pastor and a deacon disperses funds to people in need in the congregation. Members of the congregation and community donated the desserts. The local Girl Scouts donated 50 boxes of cookies and three pretty small cakes as a thank to the church for allowing them to use the church's social hall as the cookie depot during February. The event raised \$250.



First UCC/Orlando had a very special gift for the patrons of Rebecca's Pantry, the church's food pantry: 50 reusable fabric grocery tote bags made by member **Dana Ney**. Pastor **Rev. Lynn Blevins** blessed the tote bags during worship on Sunday, March 24. The bags will be distributed to the food pantry patrons over the coming weeks.



The UCC Council for Climate Justice hosted a Climate Action Assembly on March 6 to hear updates on the three endeavors launched for this year: the Freedom from Plastics Campaign, the Electrification Checklist Initiative and the Vote for Climate Hope Campaign. Each of these programs is rooted in recent General Synod resolutions. Climate Action Assemblies are open to all members of the UCC.



March was Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, and to show their support, **Emmanuel UCC/Sebring** had a "Show Us Your Socks Sunday" worship service on March 17 to raise money for Ridge Area Arc. Every year, Ridge Area Arc has a "Show Us Your Socks" campaign in which people throughout the community are encouraged to wear colorful, fun socks to raise awareness and show support for people living with developmental disabilities. Clients of Arc were present at the service to take a special offering from those in attendance who were wearing their fun, outlandish, colorful socks. Since 2022, the church has had a partnership with Ridge Area Arc through their Garden Of Hope, a handicap accessible community garden that is utilized by the consumers of Arc on a weekly basis.



The church's "Lunch Boxes Fight Against Hunger" is off to a good start. More than \$180 was raised in January, and \$617 was raised in February for a total of \$800 so far. The money will be split evenly between the church's Shepherd's Pantry (which serves over 220 families) and the hungry in Somalia (where the World Food Program estimates 4.3 million people face crisis levels of food shortages). The lunch boxes and tin containers have a slot in them so people can place dollars and change in them. The tins have been distributed to local businesses to be placed next to cash registers.

Upcoming Stewardship Virtual Seminar

Rev. Andrew Warner

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

April 24 – "A Good Pitch - Understanding the Hopes of Our Donors to Create Change"

Once upon a time, donors gave out of a sense of obligation and loyalty. Today, most donors care about the impact they make in the world. How do we understand the motivations of our donors? What kind of change do they want to make in the

world? Andrew Warner will talk about five basic ways donors look to create change. We will discuss ways to discuss your congregation's impact on your community.

[Register for A Good Pitch](#)



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 South-east 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](https://cvent.me/YwOoaz)

New Stewardship Materials Available

The United Church of Christ is offering supplies and templates for coordinated stewardship materials for your congregation's annual stewardship efforts.

"Imagine Together" helps people understand the impact our congregations can make in our communities if we generously support them.

The materials include eight complete worship services, hymn suggestions, sermon starters from eight different authors plus additional faith formation sessions for children, youth and adults.

The materials also provide practical tools such as logos, commitment cards, bulletin inserts and letters. Campaign guidance for every step of a year-round or seasonal effort helps leaders make the best use of these robust materials for their specific context and size.

[Click Here for More Information](#)

From the February 7 Sunshine Connection



Year-Round Stewardship Resource

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

"Because of You" is a year-round stewardship resource with

practical tools, sermon and worship guides, and faith formation activities for all ages. Learn more at uccresources.com.

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

YOUTH MINISTRIES...



High school youth (above) at **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** on Friday evening, March 1 had dinner, a project putting together bags filled with food to be handed out from the church food pantry followed by a flashlight scavenger hunt. Saturday evening, March 16, was a special St. Patrick's Day party with festivities like catching a leprechaun, rolling a rainbow and tossing chocolate coins plus plenty of green food and drink.

In case youth in grades 6-12 at **JupiterFIRST Church** were bored during spring break, the church offered options: Sun 3/17 was a work day from 11am-2pm; 3/18 was movie night from 6-8:30; 3/19 was a work day from 11am-2pm; 3/20 was a beach cookout at Carlin Park. The church offered a seven-week parenting program based on the book *The Emotional Lives of Teenagers: Raising Connected, Capable and Compassionate Adolescents* by Lisa Damour. The sessions began on Sunday afternoons starting on February 18.

The teen group at **Naples UCC** experienced fun, faith and fellowship by visiting another youth group. On Sunday afternoon, February 18, they were the guests for dinner of the youth group at North Naples Methodist Church. On Sunday afternoon, March 3 the teens shared the gift of creativity by painting rocks (!) while enjoying burgers, fries and chocolate chip cookies.

The worship service on March 3 at **Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour** was led by church youth (in English and Spanish), who shared their talents and personal stories.



On February 4 at **Plymouth Congregational Church** the middle school youth group (below) helped with the cookie decorating table at the chili cook-off after worship while later in the day the high school group met for games and "Sunday sundaes." On March 3 middle school youth tried their hand at a "Jungle Escape Room" game...they almost made it "out"! On March 10 the two groups enjoyed pickleball and a BBQ after worship.

KIDS CORNER...



Coral Gables Congregational UCC now has two children's choirs. The kindergarten through second grade choir rehearses during Sunday School time and the third through fifth grade choir rehearses from 11:45am-12:30pm on Sundays. The choirs are preparing to sing in worship once a month as well as on Easter Sunday. During February the Sunday Schoolers collected full-size shampoo bottles for their outreach project to benefit families at Lotus House. For March the project was socks for children and adults. Responding to requests for a first

Communion program, Pastor **Rev. Megan Smith** will be teaching a course titled *Touch the Water; Taste the Bread*. This is a unique and age-appropriate course for children to learn and experience the two Sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion. This course will take place on Sunday mornings in place of Sunday School for children in kindergarten, first and second grades. The culmination of this program will be on Pentecost Sunday, May 19 at which time the "program graduates" will partake of Holy Communion with the congregation in a special service.

Our Sincere thanks...

to **Unsplash, Pexels and Pixabay** 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.

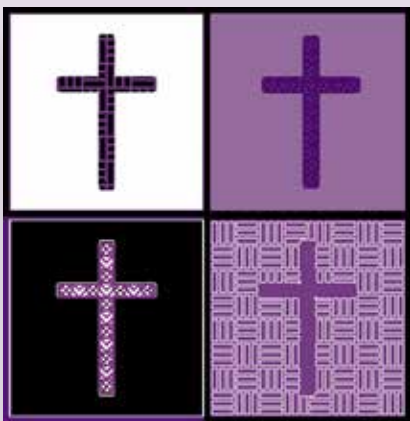
- www.unsplash.com
- www.pexels.com
- www.pixabay.com



Ash Wednesday and Lent in Our Florida Churches

FROM THE FEBRUARY 7 AND MARCH 6 SUNSHINE CONNECTION

The upcoming 40 days of Lent provide our congregations with many opportunities for additional programs and events for church members to open themselves to new and transformational experiences. Beyond a service on Ash Wednesday, our churches often offer creative programming for reflection and exercising spiritual discipline.



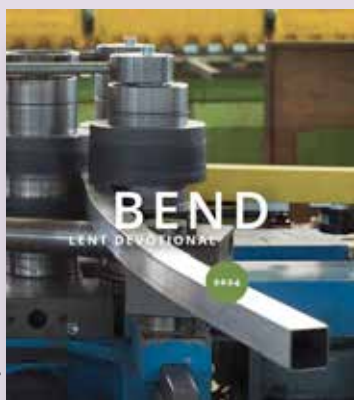
Following is what we have learned from those churches which share their monthly newsletters and weekly e-blasts with us.

What resources are being used? Imposing ashes on the foreheads of beachgoers? Alleluia and King cakes and pancake dinners? Secret “Prayer Pals”? A waterfront service around a fire pit? Prayer stations? Drive through ash imposition?

Scroll down the list and note some of the interesting and novel ways that Ash Wednesday and Lent can be observed and perhaps pick up some ideas you can use next year.



Christ Congregational Church/Miami: Zoom webinar of “WOKE,” the UCC’s Lenten series launch on February 8; using the UCC Stillspeaking Writers’ Group Lenten devotional, *Bend*; Mardi Gras celebration after worship on February 11 with beads, festive decorations and King Cake; Ash Wednesday service at 7pm

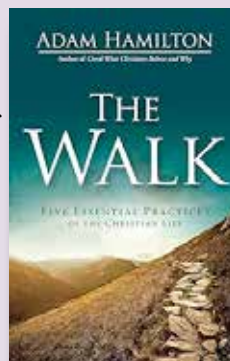


Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour: Mardi Gras Sunday, February 11; Ash Wednesday, various times for quiet prayer and ash distribution in the Chapel; beginning of Lenten concert series, 7:30pm on February 27

Windermere Union Church: Ash Wednesday service at Noon

First Congregational Church/Lake Helen: Ash Wednesday service at 7pm in the Sanctuary with the imposition of ashes

Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte: Bible study on Wednesdays at Noon and 6:30pm using *The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life* by Adam Hamilton; Ash Wednesday service in the Community Center at 6:30pm



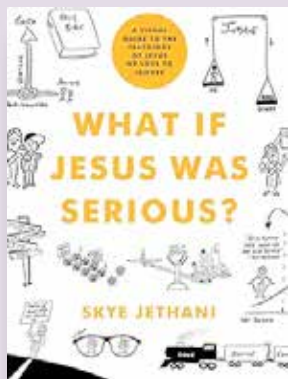
United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine: Lenten series titled “Let Us Pray. Let Us Listen” with readings and resources provided;

worship on Sunday, February 11, will be preparation for Ash Wednesday and on that day an e-blast will encourage recipients to listen to “The Word is Resistance: In the Context of Ashes” podcast (with link provided)

Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach: traditional service in the Chapel at Noon and **Rev. Wesley Snedeker** will be at the 24th Avenue beach access from 3:30–4:30pm to administer ashes to beachgoers; Lenten discussions on Wednesdays using the UCC’s “White Privilege: Let’s Talk” resource

Coral Isles Church/Tavernier: service at 6pm with prayer, music and imposition of ashes

Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami: brief service of prayer, music and imposition of ashes in the Chapel at 6:30pm; Lenten dinners and small group discussion on two Wednesday evenings, with topics being “Love in Action” and “A Prayer for Losers” from the book *What if Jesus was Serious?: A Visual Guide to the Teachings of Jesus We Love to Ignore* by Skye Jethani and Brian Conover



Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton: Ash Wednesday service at Noon

Venice UCC: pancake dinner at 5:30pm on Shrove Tuesday, February 13; “Drive Through” on Ash Wednesday from Noon–1pm with meet-in-the-car five-minute ritual of a brief devotion, prayer and receiving of ashes

United Church of Gainesville: availability of large canvas labyrinth and finger labyrinths daily in the Sanctuary from February 12–15; daily readings from the Lenten reflection booklet on the theme “Lamentations” featuring original artwork, music, photos and writings by UCC members; Lenten contemplative prayer in the Sanctuary from 6–7pm on Tuesdays between February 20–March 19; Lenten vesper services in the Sanctuary on Thursdays from 7–7:30pm on Thursdays between February 22–March 21; Ash Wednesday services at Noon and 6pm in the Sanctuary

UCC/Fort Lauderdale: Mardi Gras Sunday on February 11 with a Dixieland jazz band, a New Orleans style procession, hymn singing and lunch after worship; Lenten coffee and conversation on Sunday mornings at 9:45am in the Chapel using the *Wandering Heart: Figuring Out Faith with Peter* Lenten devotionals as a guide; Ash Wednesday service at 7pm in the Sanctuary

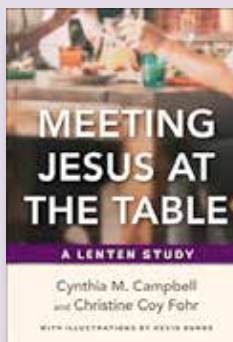


Fort Myers UCC: simple supper at 5:30pm on Ash Wednesday followed by a service with the imposition of ashes.

First United Church of Tampa: Lenten retreat on Friday, March 15, and Saturday, March 16

Naples UCC: Ash Wednesday service with meditation, music and imposition of ashes at Noon in the Sanctuary; suggested that members reduce water usage as a Lenten practice (refrigerator magnets to be provided with suggested ways to do this)

Community Congregational Church/New Port Richey: Lenten book study on Zoom at 7pm on Wednesday evenings using *Meeting Jesus at the Table: A Lenten Study* by Cynthia Campbell and Christine Coy Fohr; “Drive Thru” ash placement on Ash Wednesday from 11am–1pm; secret “Prayer Pal” opportunity during Lent, being a pal for someone and have someone pray for you



Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg: Ash Wednesday service at 7pm at member home in waterfront backyard around a fire, with Communion and imposition of ashes

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota: Each Thursday from 10:30am–Noon there will be a gathering to share stories of faith; traditional Ash Wednesday service at Noon in the Chapel with imposition of ashes and at 5:30pm in Syster Hall a simple soup dinner around tables beginning the Lenten theme of “Connecting Conversations” and ash imposition

Sanibel Congregational UCC: Using the theme “These 40 Days,” consider question “What is this your ‘right time’ for? What is it the ‘necessary time’ for you in your life?”; Ash Wednesday service in the Sanctuary at 7pm with distribution of ashes



Coral Gables Congregational UCC: Mardi Gras worship and celebration on Sunday, February 11 with New Orleans-style lunch and Alleluia cake; Ash Wednesday service in Sanctuary (and online) at 7pm

North Port Community UCC: Lenten Bible study on Peter on Wednesdays beginning with simple supper of soup and bread at 5pm and study from 6–7pm; service on Ash Wednesday at 7pm with imposition of ashes

United Church in Tallahassee: Imposition of ashes and private prayer on Ash Wednesday from Noon–5pm; Ash Wednesday service at 6:30pm

UCC at The Villages: Ash Wednesday service at Noon with symbolic placement of ashes and exploring the significance of making a cross and placing it on the forehead or back of hand.

Beach Church/Pensacola Beach: Imposition of ashes and receiving prayer requests in the Sanctuary on Ash Wednesday between 10am–Noon

St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota: Lenten book study via Zoom on Tuesdays from 5:15–6:30pm using *Standing in the Margin: How Your Congregation Can Minister with the Poor (and Perhaps Recover its Soul in the Process)* by **Rev. Dr. Mary Alice Mulligan** (St. Andrew Pastor) and Rufus Burrow, Jr.; Ash Wednesday service at Noon



Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg: Ash Wednesday service with imposition of ashes at Noon

First Congregational UCC/Winter Park: Ash Wednesday service at 7pm; Lenten Journey retreat being offered after Bible study and worship on Sunday, February 25, to help participants set goals and intentions for their personal journey through Lent

Hope UCC/Rockledge: Sanctuary will be decorated with balloons, lanterns, arrows and clouds following the “uplifting” sermon series theme “What R U Up 2 (in the name of Jesus Christ)?” [from the Worship Design Workshop]; Ash Wednesday service on theme of “Store Up” at 6:30pm

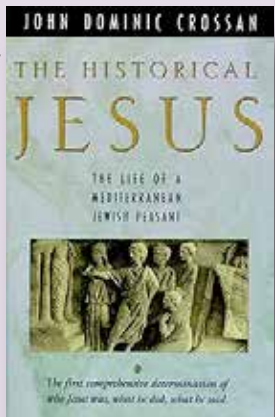
Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach: Lenten study for small group discussions on theme “Gift of the Dark Woods” and making your way through struggles and finding a sense of heaven in the now; Ash Wednesday service at 7pm

Union Congregational Church/Tavares: Service at Noon with imposition of ashes and Sacrament of Communion (livestreamed on Facebook and YouTube)

Faith Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie: Ash Wednesday service at 7pm (also online)

Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda: Ash Wednesday service at 6pm

Lake Worth UCC: Engaging with worship series *Wandering Heart: Figuring Out Faith with Peter* devotional; suggesting participating in class presented by Homebrewed Christianity and the Westar Institute, *The Historical Jesus: The Evolutionary Challenge of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* by Tripp Fuller and John Dominic Crossan

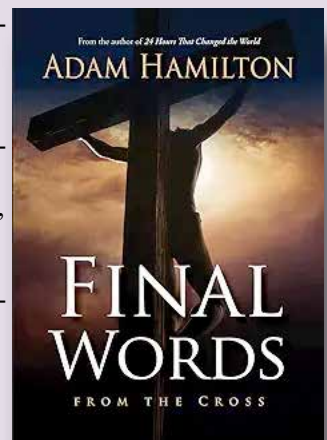


Emmanuel UCC/Sebring: Ash Wednesday service at 7pm

UCC/New Smyrna Beach: Discussions on Saturday mornings at 10am during Lent utilizing “The Historical Jesus” video series by John Dominic Crossan and Tripp Fuller; Ash Wednesday service at 6pm with imposition of ashes

Community Church of Vero Beach: Ashes to Go in the Court-yard on Wednesday from Noon–1pm; Ash Wednesday service in the Sanctuary at 6pm; Lenten organ and poetry every Thursday in the Sanctuary at 11am; Lenten book study every Tuesday at 7pm

JupiterFIRST Church: Lenten study on Wednesdays from 9:30–11am using *Final Words from the Cross* by Adam Hamilton; Prayer stations on Ash Wednesday from Noon–1:30pm and 5:30–6:30pm for interactive, self-guided experiences with family/kids/teens time from 6:30–7:30pm with ash distribution



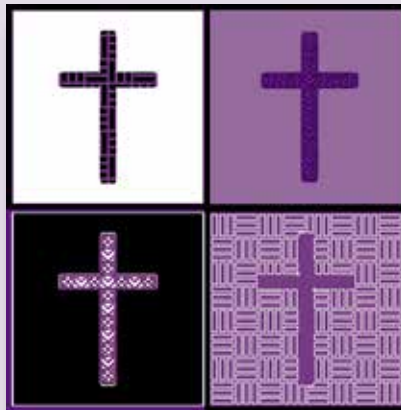
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More Lenten Offerings

FROM MARCH 6 SUNSHINE CONNECTION

In this space on February 7, we provided an overview of the Lenten activities being planned in our Florida churches. From those congregations which send us their e-blasts and newsletters, we learned that most would be holding Ash Wednesday services, many with simple soup suppers and worship that included the imposition of ashes. Numerous Bible studies were being offered as well as book studies, Lenten devotionals of various kinds from different sources, meditative sessions and Sunday sermon series having Lenten themes.



We're almost at the halfway mark through the 40 days of Lent, and since we shared that information in the February 7 *SunCon* we've learned about a few more interesting offerings that are taking place. As you scroll through these as well as those from the earlier overview, perhaps you'll note some worthwhile practices you might want to consider for Lent 2025.



The Lenten meditations e-blasted to members of **Lakewood & Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg** are written by **Rev. Kim Wells** and inspired by themes in the book *Meditations on the Sand* by Alesandro Pronzato

written in 1981. There is an Oasis of Quiet each week during the Lenten season at the Trinity campus, offering an opportunity to engage in prayer and to intentionally engage in reflection — perhaps seeing



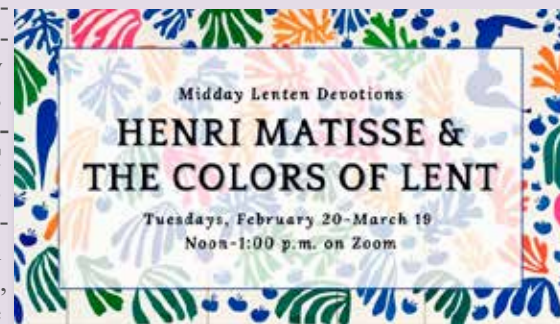
how communal silence can enrich the experience of the sacred. The gatherings are on different days of the week to accommodate varying schedules.

Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach had an Ash Wednesday soup supper and service.

The Sanctuary at **JupiterFIRST Church** is open on Wednesdays during Lent from 11am–1pm for prayer, contemplation and meditation

During the season of Lent, the **UCC/Fort Lauderdale** is offering a Lenten Coffee and Conversation on Sunday mornings at 9:30 in the Chapel before worship. In addition, there is a Monday evening adult education program on Zoom consisting of a series on the meaning of Lent and Easter produced by the Yale Divinity School.

Midday devotions are being shared by **Coral Gables Congregational UCC** on Tuesdays from Noon–1pm via Zoom on the theme, “Henri Matisse & the Colors of Lent.”



Interim Pastor **Rev. Dr. John Fairless** at **Venice UCC** has been producing a daily devotion on YouTube and Facebook that simply says, “Bless This Lent Day 1” and Day 2 and Day 3 and so on. They are about 5–6 minutes long and are taken from a study guide written by Kate Bowler, a minister, author and professor at Duke Divinity School entitled “Bless the Lent We Actually Have.”

Members of **First Congregational UCC/Sarasota** are being encouraged to read the Gospel of Luke from beginning to end during March in preparation for Holy Week. **Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby** offers if that feels like too much, he suggests reading what he believes to be the Gospel in a nutshell: the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the Parable of the Prodigal Family (Luke 15:11-32). For him, these two narratives represent the “Gospel Medicine to our lives.”

A few years ago, **Community Congregational Church/New Port Richey** started a new outreach program feeding a handful of God’s hungry people called Love a Lunch. On a recent Friday, they served lunch to approximately 70. During the weeks of Lent, a jar has been placed at the front of the church for those who wish to make a cash donation to this ministry. Once a donation has been made, the donor is being asked to put their name on one of the “loaves and fishes” cards and place it on the nearby wooden cross. The goal is to cover the cross with these gifts to feed God’s people and to watch the gifts multiply, just as Jesus took a few loaves and fish and fed 5,000.

Naples UCC offers a Lenten Midweek Meditation on Wednesdays at Noon. Each week, participants explore one of “The Six ‘S’ Disciplines of Our Faith: Study, Silence, Submission, Secrecy, Sacrifice, Service” led by Minister for Congregational Care **Rev. Angela Wells-Bean**. In addition, NUCC members **Rev. Katharine Mulhern** and **Ginny Gilmore** offered a reading of *The Five Invitations* by Frank Ostaseski, a meaningful and insightful book of wisdom gleaned from Ostaseski’s vast experience in Hospice work, asking what death and dying can teach us about living fully today. These gatherings are taking place on five Thursdays at 5pm and began on February 15. Also, *Bent*, a book of Lenten devotionals written by the UCC Still Speaking writers, is being made available to church members.

