I keep a notebook in my desk drawer and have had the habit of looking in it once a week for the last few years. I grabbed it today in preparation for writing an annual report for this publication. I was surprised and a little dismayed at how I obviously fell out of my routine last year.

The cover page says, “2020 Goals at a Glance,” and the notebook serves as something of a project management tool where I keep track of my professional goals and the steps taken and needing to be taken in order to advance those goals and, thus, the mission and ministry of the Florida Conference.

My first observation was that the cover page still says “2020” as though I haven’t set any goals at all for 2021. That’s just not so, though I clearly haven’t been as organized around the task as in previous years. But there’s more.

In a list of 15 new goals and four carried over from the previous year, the word COVID never appears. I never planned for it (who did!?!) while making preparations for what was to be a certain kind of 2020 for us in common mission.

† I see a National Youth Event that was eventually postponed
† I see a Conference youth trip to civil rights sites in Alabama that was postponed
† I see small but important upgrades to our Conference facilities that have been put on hold
† I see our hope for deepening relationship with the Evangelical United Church of Puerto Rico in a holding pattern
† I see resources we hoped to create and provide to local congregations that moved to the bottom of the to-do list as other needs proved urgent
† I see my own goal of visiting 30 churches in 2020 stymied at seven with the last one on March 1, 2020 followed by a blank page
† In one respect, 2020 was quite a year for shortcomings. But look what the Florida Conference accomplished.
† Our congregations, by and large, transitioned to virtual worship in a time of pandemic and the Conference made some $50,000 in grants that assisted congregations in enhancing their ability to carry on their common life while locking the doors of their treasured buildings.
† Mission and ministry have continued across the state. The energy expended by pastors and lay leaders, Conference professional and support staff, cannot be over stated.
† Search and call practices continued, and new pastors met their new congregations virtually.
† Workshops and gathering opportunities for authorized ministers and lay leaders became a staple of our Conference life until people settled into new routines of their own.
† We held an annual meeting on-line. We began an antiracism ministry that will plant deeper roots in 2021.
† We authorized candidates for ministry and ordained them on YouTube.

By the end of 2020, the people of the Florida Conference had proven themselves nimble and resilient, hopeful and adaptable in the face of constant change and in a long season of loss that is just beginning to show signs of abatement. I am honored to minister among you.

As for me, I’m ready to clean out my goals book, make a new sheet with a 2021 heading and get to work on what promises to be another challenging year in the life of the church. But there will be no sense of shortcomings, only diversions onto other needful paths that the Spirit will show and on which God’s Word will serve as light for the journey.

Thank you for being the United Church of Christ for your community and for doing your faithful best in creating a just world for all.

Be at peace, and be in touch, won’t you.
Conference Staff, Officers, Board and Committee Members and Synod Delegates
(for all or a portion of the 2020 calendar year)

Conference Staff
Rev. John Vertigan - Conference Minister
Rev. Dr. Raymond W. Hargrove - Eastern Regional Minister
Rev. Leslie Etheredge - Western Regional Minister
Neal Watkins - Minister of Faith Formation
Rev. Alan Coe - Disaster Response & Recovery Ministry
Dave Cyril - Communications Director/Office Manager
Beth Shedden - Financial Assistant
Dana Ney – Administrative Assistant

Volunteer Leadership
Mr. Rick Carson - Editor, Celebrate Florida
Mr. Tom Mitchell - Associate Editor, Celebrate Florida
Ms. Lynn Jones (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota) – 3 Great Loves Ambassador
Rev. Dr. Sheila Guillaume (Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach) – 3 Great Loves Ambassador
Ms. Terri Crawford - President, Florida UCC Women

Officers and Board Members
Rev. Barton Buchanan (Windermere Union Church) - Moderator
Mr. Sumner Hutcheson III (Church of the Open Door Congregational/ Miami) - Vice Moderator
Treasurer Chair - Vacant
Rev. Dr. Dawson Taylor (Naples UCC) - Chair, Personnel Committee
Rev. Steve Heath (Union Congregational Church/Holly Hill) - Chair, Committee on Church & Ministry
Budget & Finance Committee Chair - Vacant
Mr. Michael Downs (Naples UCC) - Chair, Legacy Funds Committee
Rev. John Vertigan (First UCC/Orlando) - Conference Minister
Ms. Lynn Jones (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota) - Registrar
Rev. Paul Werner (St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota)
Rev. Dr. Kathy Rooke (Faith Family UCC/Brandon)
Rev. Alan Coe (Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples)
Ms. Dyanne Edds (Hope UCC/Rockledge)
Rev. Shelly Wilson (United Church of Gainesville)
Ms. Sally Cash (Pass-A-Grille Beach Community UCC/ St. Pete Beach)
Mr. Thaddaeus Elliott (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

Church & Ministry Committee
Rev. Steve Heath, chair (Union Congregational Church/Holly Hill)

Northeast
Rev. Timothy Woodard, chair (Riviera UCC/Palm Bay)
Ms. Sammie Hartwell (UCC/New Smyrna Beach)
Rev. Karen Curtis-Weakley (Hope UCC/Rockledge)
Mr. Tom Besaw (Port Orange UCC)
Ms. Jo Pritchett (First Congregational UCC/Orange City)
Rev. Donna Cooney (United Church UCC-DOC/St. Augustine)
Mr. John Fox (CrossRoads UCC/Melbourne)
Rev. Ed Middleton, Jr. (Cocoa Beach Community Church)
Rev. Mary Moore (Arlington Congregational Church/ Jacksonville)

Southeast
Rev. Jason Fairbanks, chair (First Congregational Church/Lake Worth)
Rev. Dr. Fay Golding (Faith United Church UCC/Tamarac)
Rev. Gregorio Marin (Sunset Congregational Church/Miami)
Rev. Phyllis Parthermer (Jensen Beach Community Church)
Rev. Megan Smith (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)
Ms. Suzanne Lewis (UCC/Fort Lauderdale)
Ms. Joycelyn Patrick (Church of the Palms/Delray Beach)
Mr. Robert “Bob” McDonnold (Faith Congregational Church/ Port St. Lucie)
Mr. William Generette (Miami Shores Community Church)

West
Mr. Joseph P. Ebbing, chair (Faith Family UCC/Brandon)
Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell-Jackson (First United Church of Tampa)
Rev. Deborah Kunkel (Sanibel Congregational UCC)
Rev. Donna Ives (Spring Hill UCC)
Mr. Mark Devore (Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg)
Ms. Kate Howe (Union Congregational Church/Tavares)
Ms. Marty Synnott (Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach)
Rev. Michael MacMillan (Faith UCC/Dunedin)
Rev. George Miller (Emmanuel UCC/Sebring)

Budget & Finance Committee
Chair - Vacant
Mr. Jeff Ruoff (UCC/Fort Lauderdale)
Mrs. Mickey Wich (First Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie)
Rev. Booth Iburg (Eternal Hope UCC/Fort Walton Beach)
Rev. Ken Frey (Union Congregational Church/Tavares)
Rev. Barton Buchanan (Windermere Union Church)
Mr. Michael Downs (Naples UCC)

Legacy Funds Committee
Mr. Michael Downs, chair (Naples UCC)
Mr. Ed Pritchett (Grants & Awards chair) (First Congregational UCC/Orange City)
Mr. Allan March (Planned Giving chair) (United Church of Gainesville)
Ms. Lynn Bunis (Investment Management chair) (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)
Rev. Barton Buchanan (Windermere Union Church)
Rev. Bonnie Lipton - Grants & Awards (member, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)
Rev. John Rohde - Planned Giving (member, Fort Myers Congregational UCC)

General Synod Delegates
Rev. Barton Buchanan (Windermere Union Church)
Mr. Daniel Best (2019 & 2021) (Christ Congregational Church/Miami)
Ms. Dyanne Edds (2019 & 2021) (Hope UCC/Rockledge)
Ms. Lynn Jones (2019 & 2021) (First Congregational UCC/ Sarasota)Ms. Kate Howe (2019 & 2021) (Union Congregational Church/Tavares)
Rev. Ed Middleton, Jr. (2019 & 2021) (Cocoa Beach Community Church)
Mr. John Havens (2019 & 2021) (Arlington Congregational Church/Jacksonville)
have always been extremely curious about technology and engineering. That being said, I was born with more of an artistic mind than an analytical mathematical brain. I can draw a picture of my car much better than explaining to you when it starts to rain my windshield wipers come on automatically. The wipers seem to know just how fast they need to swish back and forth so I have a clear vision of what is ahead of me. I know there were teams of people who engineered my car. They designed and tested every system so when I turn the key, the car will perform. Even though I am highly aware my car was brilliantly designed, what I really need is the windshield wipers to work so I can see where I am going.

I served the Florida Conference as Vice Moderator and Moderator for four years. Before serving in this capacity I knew there were dedicated people working behind the scenes making the ministries of the Florida Conference work. Like my car, I may not have known what was going on behind the scenes, but when the Conference was called upon I needed it to work!

The four years of serving our Conference has given me the behind-the-scenes look into how it is managed. All of our Conference ministers and support staff are professionals to the highest degree. I am humbled by their work ethic and commitment to our churches. Our Conference is thriving during difficult times because of their leadership, our Board of Directors and a commitment from our churches.

I have also witnessed how the Florida Conference UCC is committed to doing ministry and standing up for Peace and Justice issues fearlessly. I will never forget the spontaneous expression of compassion and generosity poured out for the Immokalee farmworkers living in deplorable conditions. Rev. Alan Coe (Mayflower UCC/ Naples) made a presentation at our 2019 Gathering informing us Federal Funds were available to build a housing community for the workers. However, the funds could not be utilized to purchase land to build the community on. The Florida Conference sprang into action. Our Board of Directors allocated $100,000 to be added to donations received from our Florida churches. We purchased the land to assist in the creation of a safe and quality housing community for the workers and their families. Our Conference does so much more than provide the corporate infrastructure to take care of church business. The Conference is committed to making a difference in the lives of the people we serve.

John Lennon’s song lyric, “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans,” became a profound reality for us all this year. Regardless of how well organized our Conference and churches were, no one planned on leading during a pandemic. Were we sure when we turned the key that the vehicle of ministry was going to function? Now, after eight months of shelter in place and no in-person meetings, the answer is a resounding Yes! The Conference and our churches are still running, performing the ministry and tasks they were created to perform.

Over my professional career, I have read many books on management. One common theme I have discovered is individuals and institutions that thrive learn how to adapt to change. The ability to adapt does not happen by accident. In order to thrive during a pandemic, it requires our leaders and congregations to move forward quickly and courageously. Our vision right now may be a bit impaired by the storm of COVID-19, but we, the church, continue to minister.

We are feeding the hungry, giving a cool drink of water to those who have become parched. We are clothing the naked with hope, compassion and doing whatever it takes to meet their needs. We are visiting those in the prison of racial injustice and bigotry and doing what we can to set us all free. We welcome the stranger to our table while making them an honored guest. We are being love in the form of a servant. Our vision at times may be blurred meeting the needs of the day, but we continue to move forward courageously and passionately with a clear vision and purpose to serve humanity and our planet.

Witnessing firsthand how our Florida Conference staff, Board of Directors and our churches are discovering new ways to minister and still thrive is without a doubt one the highlights of my life.

Our vision as a church is clear! We are one of God’s vehicles in sharing the good news, God loves us all! It is our love and commitment to the Divine purpose in this world that drives us. We have especially proven this year we are a people of adaptability, creativity, purpose and vision. We will minister and be a force of healing and hope during one of the most frightening and confusing times in human history. Like my car’s windshield wipers, we just know when it starts raining, we go into action.

Serving the Florida Conference UCC has been a privilege and honor. Thank you for trusting me in this role. I am a stronger and better human being for being a part of the process of making the church a beautiful and powerful reality in this world.
2020 was quite an extraordinary year to say the least. It was a year in which we were challenged to find new ways of being the church in the midst of extreme changes and challenges that have impacted nearly every facet of our lives both individually and communally. Through it all I have been both encouraged and excited by the response of our clergy and local congregations. I am truly grateful for and impressed by the resilience and creative spirit that I see among our churches.

It seems as though more of our clergy and congregations are becoming more comfortable with and adept at using technology as they explore new ways to worship, new ways of being in community, new ways to continue to support the church financially and new ways of reaching out beyond themselves. One of the unexpected “gifts” I’ve experienced during the past year is that I have an opportunity to worship with more congregations virtually than I could have in person.

In the several months prior to the “official” declaration of a pandemic, I:

- Met in person with local church search committees
- Was the guest preacher during worship at several churches in the Eastern Region
- Participated in two different exit interviews with pastors and lay leaders
- Participated in worship services for the ending of Authorized Ministry for three different pastors
- Partipated in a church’s worship service celebrating its 130th anniversary
- Participated in a worship service of closure as a local church moved to a new location
- Participated in a Conference Committee on Church and Ministry (COCAM) meeting in Orlando and a Conference staff retreat

During the pandemic I have participated in the following either virtually or by phone:

- Participated in a virtual service of installation for a local church pastor in the Region. There were — in addition to church members — clergy, family and friends who were able to be present virtually. Even the “guest preacher” delivered the sermon from several states away. None of this is really that unusual given the current climate. What struck me was when the pastor later shared with me how deeply moving it was for them personally that they had friends and family who were able to share in this virtual experience who could not have been physically present under the best of circumstances.

- Participated in a virtual service for a pastor who was retiring. Usually following such a service, people would gather in the church’s fellowship hall for a time of sharing expressions of gratitude, gifts, food and farewells. Since that was not an option during this pandemic, members organized a “drive by.” People came by the pastor’s home and left cards and other expressions of their love and gratitude in a basket that had been placed on the porch of their home.

- Participated in two different exit interviews with pastors and lay leaders.

- Participated in the virtual service of ordination for a former Florida Conference Member in Discernment now serving a congregation in the Southern New England Conference.

- Embarked upon the journey with six congregations that are at various stages of pastoral transitions. One of the six churches has now called a settled pastor. These search processes, whether for interim or settled pastors, have been exclusively virtual experiences because of the unique challenges of the pandemic. The new search and call resources developed by Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization (MESA) in our national offices have been extremely helpful in providing guidance to staff and committees. Each of the respective committees has demonstrated exceptional adaptability and commitment to this significant transition in the life of their respective congregations.

- Participated in weekly “Screen Side Chats” (weekly Zoom meetings with Florida Conference clergy, laity and invited speakers on a variety of topics. These “Chats” were organized by Neal Watkins, Minister of Faith Formation in the Florida Conference).

I would also mention here that at least six congregations in the Region applied for and received PPP grants.

The increasing incorporation of technology into ministry allows me to continue:

- Meeting and having conversations with candidates seeking ministerial authorization in the UCC
- Meeting with and offering pastoral support to clergy and congregations as requested
- Participating in the meetings of the Florida Conference and
Regional Committees on Church and Ministry
† Participating in Conference staff meetings
† Serving on the Daniel Hand Fund Committee. This committee receives applications for grants primarily from the six historically-related colleges of the American Missionary Association (AMA) and makes decisions about granting of funds administered through Local Church Ministries.
† Participating in a MESA-sponsored working group that has been tasked to review and help revise some areas of the UCC profiles system
† Participating in various webinars offered by the national church staff

The Annual Gathering of the Florida Conference and AM 21 (a four day gathering of MESA, National, UCC Conference Search & Call staff and Conference COCAM chairs) — both of which were virtual gatherings — were personal highlights for me during the year.

As I stated earlier, this past year has been replete with change. It seemed to have been filled with one challenge after another and yet we are still here. We, as a people of faith, are still endeavoring to fulfill the call to share the Good News of God’s grace and God’s love for all of God’s creation. And, while doing so, I think that we are in many ways being transformed from what was into what is to be. May we, in the midst of it all, find encouragement in the words of Julian Rush’s hymn, “In the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways … We your people, ours the journey now and ever, now and ever, now and ever more.”

Rev. Leslie Etheredge
Faith UCC/Dunedin
Western Regional Minister

I can certainly say that it has been a year like no other. I have learned much throughout 2020. So many valuable lessons both personally and professionally make me realize that though it has been a different year it has still been a very worthwhile year. Honestly, in 2020, I have been forced, at times, to look a bit harder for our “Still Speaking God” and for the silver linings that a pandemic brings. Both have been there, however, strengthening me during this incredible tragedy but bringing me perspective and reassurance that I am never alone. In its own strange way, this has been a good exercise.

Though YouTube and Zoom fatigue is real, I am eternally grateful for this technology that has allowed the work of the church and Conference to continue and us to be able to communicate and see each other in safe ways. The amount of e-mails has doubled, and I make more phone calls in lieu of travel. I get to watch many more church services and am blessed by our outstanding preachers in this Conference. Same work…it just looks a little different.

It’s also been a great time for continuing education, boundary training, webinars, virtual meetings and conferences, and I’ve participated in many of these on a local and national level. The offerings have been outstanding. More specifically, work has included:
† Community of Practice coordination for clergy (approximately 1/3 of our active clergy are involved in and benefitting from a COP)
† AM 21 (Authorized Ministry in the 21st century), a four day national event sponsored by the UCC’s MESA (Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization) team
† Search and Call: the placing of Interims, working with search committees, hiring of pastors, working

continued on page 8
with retiring pastors and transitions of any kind; this work is fluid but always consistent.

† Pastoring pastors: I’ve really been intentional about trying to be supportive as we all seek to find our compass in these uncharted waters.

† Committee on Church & Ministry: work that is often such a bright spot as it represents the future of our denomination, being blessed to work with those accepting the call to ministry and actively checking in with all of our clergy to offer care and support.

† Healthy Congregations: A two-day workshop conducted by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center brought fresh ideas to handle conflict, transition and the work of the church.

† Several preaching engagements via YouTube.

† Annual Gathering of the Florida Conference.

† Serving on the planning committee of the UCC Southern Regional Women’s Retreat.

2020 has returned us to basics in many ways. Both the church universal and the churches of the Florida Conference have had to call upon their foundations of faith and community along with their innovative spirits and keen creative senses. I have been both amazed and inspired by forward-looking and courageous pastors and laity alike, who have taken our churches to a whole new level. Who knew we could play bingo on Zoom? Or have Zoom talent shows? Or conduct Zoom annual meetings? Or hire pastors through “drive by” voting? Or even ordain, install and say goodbye to pastors virtually? Yet all of that and more has been accomplished.

I cannot deny that it has been good for us to step out of our comfort zones. The work of the church looks different, and I believe it will continue to stretch and grow as we hopefully embrace vaccines, a new administration in our country and a feeling of hopefulness. We have reached more people, therefore touching lives in ways we never thought possible. Individually and collectively, we are forever changed. Though change is not usually easy, change represents growth and when we’re doing it in the name of Jesus, the Christ, it can’t help but be a good thing. And so says Isaiah.

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

Isaiah 43:19

I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.
## 2020 Budget and Finances

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<th>Budget</th>
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It is a surreal exercise to sit in the early months of 2021 and reflect back as far as this time a year ago. I submit to you that never before has 12 months felt so far away. (Sigh) “Oh to only know then what I know now…”

And yet, I give thanks for the resiliency and creativity of the churches of the Florida Conference, the support and determination of my colleagues throughout the ministries of the Florida Conference and the persistent challenge and guidance from the Spirit. I am grateful to have been afforded the opportunity to continue serving and am humbled by the reality that we were able to partner to continue the exploration of who God is and who God has called us to be — even in, or should I say especially in such times as these.

In the first quarter of 2020, several churches were going through what was becoming a more formalized process of spiritual discernment with their lay leaders and pastors (CrossRoads UCC/Melbourne, Hope UCC/Rockledge, Christ Congregational UCC/Miami). Much planning had gone into the launching of a programmatic “menu” of sorts that was designed to convey to the local churches of the Conference the various possibilities at their disposal for Faith Formation exploration that was intended to address several of the issues raised in prior months: worship development, stewardship, confirmation/membership, millennial engagement, progressive discipleship and more.

As the opportunities to visit and participate in worship services throughout the Conference continued, a major point of emphasis, particularly in late February and early March, had been the finishing of the logistics for a Youth Summer Mission Trip to the National Memorial for Peace & Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. This experience was a culmination of many hours of conversations held by the Youth Ministry Task Force of the Florida Conference that began with the awareness that “mission trips” under the most traditional models offered their share of benefits and challenges.

It was our intention to offer a collaborative experience that offered opportunities for community building, faith formation and safe exploration while also modeling for our students and churches a different approach to immersive servanthood. In addition to the travel logistics, much effort had been spent developing a “curriculum” by which students would develop relationships, demonstrate commitment and begin to open to what anti-racism looked like in their context. In the five days before travel restrictions were placed on Conference staff (and everywhere else), I visited two churches (Coral Gables Congregational UCC, First Congregational UCC/Winter Park) to present to students and parents some of the vision and details for this trip.

I raise these things (above) because it is important to me that much of this work resume as our world becomes a safer place to interact in person. And yet, like for most of you I’m sure, this pandemic crisis has allowed opportunities for me to see how much interaction can continue (and be fruitful!) while we are distant.

While our initial interactions were collegial/pastoral in nature, offering supportive presence through e-mails, texts, phone calls and “FaceTimes,” overtime, a programmatic structure took shape. Initially, the biggest need for our local churches seemed to be relational (thanks be to God!) and therefore our weekly “ScreenSide Chats” were less-structured times to check-in and “touch base.” As the shock of our new reality lessened, as a Conference, lay leaders and clergy alike were asking, “So what do we do now?” Thus, we aimed to provide a space that offered programmatic resources while also space to just “be” amongst colleagues and friends.

The Youth Ministry Task Force met weekly on Sunday evenings for Communion and Conversations to support one another, compare notes and wonder through resources in a now entirely virtual world. ScreenSide Chats, our weekly time for community with clergy, Conference staff and lay leadership sought to provide a balance of Conference resources, national guests and opportunities to uplift and learn from one another. Covering such topics as digital worship...
technology (several times!), the Just Peace Network, COVID safety protocols, productive and supportive pastor/moderator relationships, authentic hospitality (even in digital communities), ministering with special attention to mental health, self-care and much, much more.

Additionally, we began offering a once-a-week Lectionary Hour Zoom Bible Study, which offered a chance for the reflection upon the week’s lectionary scripture. This sharing of worship resources was in an intentional and safe space for pastors throughout the Conference to also be in supportive community in the presence of one another.

One challenge of ministry (and life) has been that “Zoom fatigue” limits the ways in which we can be creative and nourishing in community without also being exhausting or isolating. Therefore, what we found was that personal relationships took precedent over screen-driven programs. It is not that programming becomes less significant — it is simply that relationships are the foundations of program and not the other way around.

I continue to provide “pastoral” support to ministers and faith formation leaders of the Conference. Interestingly and excitingly, I have also spoken with pastors and worship leaders/music ministers of the Conference. There seems to be a great energy about trying to do emotive music of several styles with an increasing (in my opinion) awareness towards theological integrity. This is a very good thing. However, many of the networks that might’ve existed a decade — or even ten months ago — are nonexistent or different. As of late, I have done my best to foster conversations and make connections between similarly interested individuals throughout the Conference, but I have been wondering as of late if it is time to revisit the idea of intentionally convening (even digitally) specialized ministries and leaders within the Conference for an opportunity to ask questions of one another, share resources and collectively explore where God is leading us next.

The biggest growth/change in my position over the last several months has been towards the developing anti-racism ministry work and team throughout the Florida Conference. What began as a ScreenSide Conversation following the lynchings of Ahmad Arbury and George Floyd became a weekly Sacred Conversation led by Rev. Donna Cooney (United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine), who for two years has taken part in the facilitator training under the direction of Rev. Dr. Velda Love (of the national UCC). These weekly conversations continue every Thursday at 1pm and are attended by clergy and laity throughout the Conference.

In August, a group of clergy and laity throughout the Conference worked towards a resolution that was unanimously passed at our annual Gathering, which formulated an Anti-Racism Ministry (ARM) Team. This team has met weekly nearly every week following the annual meeting, and I would like you to know several things:

This group remains open to members throughout the Florida Conference.

We see it as an incumbent responsibility to be visible enough so to as to inform, inspire, educate and update so that our members of the Conference are aware that work continues and opportunities are available. It is also an opportunity for our churches to network and share resources in this urgent work. AND, the ARM Team feels strongly that its primary responsibility is to serve as an example of proper training. Thus it is spending a great deal of time in training and conversations so as to clearly identify, understand, label and transform the myths, traditions and evils of racism on an individual basis so that change is real, permanent and great. Dr. Love has said on more than one occasion that each individual is “responsible for (their) own work.”

One of our primary focuses in the coming months, in addition to individual training, will be to provide ways for our churches to share and celebrate the anti-racism work they are doing, too.

Several members throughout the Conference have either completed or are participating in a Facilitator Training program under the Sacred Conversations to End Racism and are available as resources to help facilitate conversations throughout the Conference. I have attended both the Summer Intensive and now the Facilitator Training. I hope and prayerfully expect that this will be a useful opportunity for our local churches as early as this spring.

This ARM team meets three weeks per month to train, develop relationships and raise topics of wondering and concern.

I am so thankful and humbled to be afforded the opportunity to serve with such amazing people in a time where the Spirit is so active and needed.
Report from the Coordinator for Disaster Response & Recovery Ministry

Rev. Alan Coe
Mayflower UCC/Naples

In the last 12 months, the pandemic made everything change. Fortunately, in the State of Florida our last hurricane season was quiet. Pray that the upcoming season is the same. With travel restrictions in place, few if any volunteer groups did any work on disaster recovery sites anywhere in the United States. Some small groups did day trips, but these were not UCC groups. As far as I know, the UCC nationally still is not recommending any type of volunteer work trip.

Conferences I attend and organizations at which I represent the UCC in the state have all been virtual meetings or cancelled. Most recently the Governor’s Hurricane Conference held in early May has been cancelled for 2021. The Florida Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (FLVOAD) meets virtually on a quarterly basis. One of its meetings is normally held at the Governor’s Hurricane Conference. I currently serve as Chair-elect of the FLVOAD. I also represent the UCC Disaster Ministry at National VOAD, serving on the Housing Committee.

The UCC nationally hired a new Minister for Disaster Recovery, Lesli Remaly. The position had been vacant for over one year, and Lesli just began her work this February. A native Floridian, her father was a UCC pastor in Florida and she most recently worked for Church World Service and FEMA.

The assets of the Florida Disaster Ministry are four cargo trailers that are equipped with a variety of tools and equipment to be used in disaster recovery. Two trailers are in Volusia County, one in Bay County and the other in Collier County. All four trailers saw use by volunteer groups. The trailers were not brought to work sites, but volunteers were able to use tools from the trailers. I intended to sell two of the trailers last year and consolidate the contents, but the pandemic put a hold on that. I hope to accomplish that in 2021.

Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance (IFHA) I was asked to get involved with the IFHA at its inception as a local representative for the UCC Disaster Ministry. Since the initial informal gatherings, a non-profit was created, and land has been purchased to build over 100 safe, secure apartments for farmworker families and others in the community. The purchase of the land was accomplished in part because of a $200,000 donation from the Florida Conference, local churches in Florida and the National Setting. Thanks to Rev. John Vertigan for his work in making that happen.

Currently the IFHA is beginning a capital campaign to raise funds so work may begin on the infrastructure of the project. The cost to complete the project is around $18,000,000. Once the building begins, portions of the work may be done in phases.
The Legacy Funds Committee is tasked with the governance and operational oversight of Conference endowment funds. This work is accomplished by four subcommittees: Investments, Property, Grants and Development. During 2020, the Legacy Funds Committee met quarterly as a Committee of the Whole and has recommended changes to the Conference Bylaws Review Committee that it formalize this more efficient meeting structure.

The **Investment Subcommittee** operates in accordance with the Conference Investment and Spending Policy dated October 2014. All investments comply with socially responsible guidelines. There are nine discreet subaccounts. At 2020 year end, the asset allocation was 63.92% equity and 36.08% fixed income and cash. The investment style has a slight value orientation. Raymond James is the Investment Manager providing monthly financial outlook updates, performance reports and back office support to Conference staff and the Committee.

The combined fund balance at 12-31-20 was $7,867,531.58 with a return of 6.26% or $458,321.27 net of fees. Since inception on 6-19-17, the Fund has returned 6.76% or $1,633,696.07. The budget stabilization fund balance at 12-31-20 was $381,029.12 for this short duration fixed income fund; $180,000 was withdrawn during 2020 to stabilize the Conference budget.

During the year, the **Grants Subcommittee** awarded $72,430 to Conference local churches as follows: education, $9,485; justice, $2,500; interfaith, $3,900; technology improvements, $56,545. It is important to note that nearly 1/3 of Conference local churches improved their technology to enhance worship and programming due in part to assistance from the technology grants. Check out the Conference website for guidelines, criteria and applications specific to each grant or loan category.

The **Property Subcommittee** manages real property that has been gifted to the Conference and where possible assists Conference local churches with property acquisition and disposition matters. COVID-19 related restrictions on property usage minimized activities in this area of Conference support.

The **Development Subcommittee** supports the Conference in annual appeal activities and other development and fundraising efforts. In 2020, the Conference annual raised $12,500, a 27% increase over 2019. Education efforts on the tax benefits of donations from required minimum distributions were much appreciated.

Generations of faithful giving, bequests and stewardship supports the funding of various missional programs both now and as we lean into a future filled with hope.
The 2020 annual Gathering of the Florida Conference was held “virtually” over several days, beginning on Wednesday evening, October 7, with an introduction to Zoom for those who needed a tutorial. A virtual social hour was shared on Thursday afternoon as a time for catching up with friends across the Conference followed by an informational hearing in the evening on the 2021 Conference budget. An educational hearing and question period on the proposed anti-racism resolution was held on Friday evening, October 9.

The opening Worship on Saturday, October 10, was led by Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan. Minister of Faith Formation Neal Watkins provided a voting tutorial instructing Gathering participants on how to vote using the online Zoom platform. The business session was called to order by Conference Moderator Rev. Barton Buchanan (Windermere Union Church). The quorum call reported by Conference Registrar Lynn Jones (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota) announced that there were 131 ministers, retired ministers, delegates and Board members (and 38 visitors and guests) registered with 60 churches represented — a quorum.

Greetings were heard via video from the General Minister and President of the UCC, Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer. Regional Conference Ministers Rev. Dr. Raymond Hargrove and Rev. Leslie Etheredge introduced nine clergy new to the Conference.

The Nominating Committee report was presented by Chair Dyanne Edds (Hope UCC/Rockledge) and was unanimously approved: Sumner Hutcheson III (Church of the Open Door Congregational/Miami) was elected the incoming Moderator and Lynn Jones (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota) was elected Assistant Moderator.

Mike Downs (Naples UCC), Committee Chair of Legacy Funds, presented its report. He noted that $48,000 in grants have been given to local churches this year for technology upgrades/improvements and further stated that the Florida Conference is among the top UCC Conferences in the country to provide local support through our endowment.

A worship break featured a video from Rev. Traci Blackmon, the UCC’s Associate General Minister of Justice & Local Church Ministries, with an appeal to support “Neighbors in Need.”

The Conference Minister led the presentation of 2020 financials and the 2021 budget. Rev. John thanked the Budget and Finance Committee for its help preparing the proposed 2021 budget and expressed his gratitude for the OCWM and Per Capita giving from the local churches throughout this year.

He stressed that the 2021 budget is slightly less than 2020 given the anticipated decrease in expenses for travel, meetings, etc. The major assumption in preparing the budget was that pre-pandemic activities would not return until at least mid-year 2021.

In addition, he shared that “Other Income” sources are still required to balance the budget each year. The budget of $900,479 was approved, 99% approving with 1% abstention.

The “Establishing an Anti-Racism Ministry” resolution was presented with discussion led by Rev. Donna Cooney (United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine); the resolution was approved unanimously.

There were outgoing remarks from the Moderator, and Rev. John shared some closing comments around the theme of “Where do we see the Light?”

The Gathering adjourned at 10:30am.
One of the great hymns of the Church has a line which says, “New occasions teach new duties.” Over the past few years, there has been a growing awareness that churches must change or die, and this means that ministry must change. This awareness has directed much of the work of the Committee on Church and Ministry (COCAM) when looking at the preparation and readiness of candidates for authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ. Some of the skills that are essential for faithful and effective ministry today were not required of ministers in earlier times. Our committee has also been in the process of changing the way we do some things in order to meet the present needs of the church.

One of these changes is an increased use of the Zoom platform both for interviews with candidates who might otherwise have to travel great distances as well as some of our own Committee meetings. This past year, our first meeting occurred just before the current pandemic reached Florida. Our fall meeting was conducted via Zoom.

Your COCAM is responsible both for the authorization and the oversight of ministers. This past year, the Committee took the following actions relative to that responsibility:

† Approved Lisa LeSueur of Coral Gables Congregational UCC church for Ordination
† Approved Rev. John Fairless, an ordained Baptist minister, for Privilege of Call as minister in the UCC
† Reinstated the standing of Rev. Nancy Dahlberg
† Suspended the standing of Rev. William Breylinger and six months later terminated standing

The three Regional sub-committees (Northeast, Southeast and West) met regularly to do the important work of supervising and preparing Members in Discernment and authorizing persons for Lay Ministerial Standing, a status which has replaced Licensed Ministry in the UCC. The Western Region Committee did a stellar job of creating an Application for Member in Discernment Status, a Member in Discernment Formation Plan and an Application for Ministerial Standing, all of which comply with the new UCC Manual on Ministry and which the Conference Committee then adopted for standardized use across the Conference.

Continuing education is a requirement to maintain ministerial standing, and our leadership has sought a more effective way to make this training available, especially in light of current circumstances. As a result, the Conference has contracted for continuing education opportunities which are being offered via Zoom.

We have also worked with the Conference Minister and Board of Directors in suggesting changes in our Conference by-laws to make the Committee size more appropriate and change its name to Committee on Ministry, which makes it consistent with language in the Manual on Ministry.

I close this report with a reminder: like other denominations, we have an aging pool of available clergy and a shortage of younger clergy. On behalf of the Committee, I ask every local church in the Florida Conference to be sensitive to the Spirit’s leading in identifying those young people in their congregation who have a sense of God’s call to authorized ministry, which that congregation is responsible to nurture, encourage and assist in discernment.
Clearly, 2020 was a unique year for all of us, but the churches of the Florida Conference continued to demonstrate their love of children, neighbor and creation in so many ways. Every edition of Celebrate Florida featured stories and photos submitted by our local churches that highlighted the incredible work being done across the state. Some examples of how they were showing that love includes making masks and medical gowns for neighbors in their communities, providing online Sunday School and other programming for children and youth, providing mental health services to those most impacted by the isolation of the pandemic, working with local food banks to stock and distribute much needed food to families, planting trees and taking steps to become “Creation Justice” churches — and so much more.

On a national level, a 3 Great Loves Resource Document was distributed to pastors and churches in the fall that included sermon suggestions, worship resources, stewardship materials, social media tips and coloring pages for children. In addition, an Advent Toolkit was made available in November from the national setting of the UCC that provided a calendar, theme graphics, social media assets and weekly video prayers.

A huge thank you to all our local churches in the Florida Conference for their continued demonstrations of the 3 Great Loves and a special note of gratitude to Rick Carson (editor, Celebrate Florida) for helping to highlight those stories on an ongoing basis. Despite a pandemic and so many other challenges in 2020, the Florida Conference was a shining example of how showing love, in many different ways, can make such a difference to all who are touched by it.

Finally, we would like to share the poem on page 17 written by Rev. Dr. Sheila Guillaume which captures the love found and felt during the time of Advent.
Advent - Peace Poem

In the sacredness of the moment,
We anticipate the silence of the night,
The Holy birth of God’s grace and love
Whose peace will be our guiding light.

Living day by day with uncertainty,
Our nights hold our fears and grief,
As we long for the promised Christ-child,
Whose peace will be our sorrow’s relief.

And with fragile hearts opened wide,
We acknowledge our brokenness,
While remaining encouraged by our faith,
For Immanuel’s peace to be with us.

As the beloved who seek justice,
We hear the rallying cry of the oppressed,
And we respond by mourning together,
With faithful efforts of Peaceful protest.

Trusting the many ways that God speaks,
Seeking to understand all people of God,
And listening to the diversity of creation,
By believing God’s peace is birthed for all.

And with great reverence and humility,
We embrace Christ’s everlasting love,
As peace was made possible for humanity
When Christ came to us from above.
Above: First UCC/Orlando
R: North Port Community UCC
Below: Emmanuel UCC/Sebring

L: Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg
R: UCC at The Villages

R: United Church of Gainesville
Blessings and thanks from the Church House to all our congregations and members for your support during a challenging year.
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.