Our Churches: Responding to Parkland

A Pastoral Letter in Response to the Parkland Shooting

by Rev. John Vertigan
Conference Minister

Ash Wednesday Evening 2018

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

Psalm 51

We are desperately in need of mercy. We are painfully in need of knowledge of God’s unfailing love. We are a nation in need of forgiveness and the cleansing of our sin.

Today, on a day of repentance, Parkland, Florida, experienced a shooting. A school shooting. A massacre. A national sin. Our hearts break at the news of the twelfth (12!) school shooting of 2018 and the loss of life the scope of which is still unfolding.

Our condolences go out to all involved, but our condolences are not enough. That said, the emptiness we feel in the face of this tragedy can easily cause us to shut down, to isolate ourselves, and to turn from the news in despair. I understand the emptiness because I feel it, too. And so, I pray, “have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love,” and I strive to keep faith with a hurting people, a devastated community, and a nation in need of repentance at our lack of resolve to bring an end to the senseless gun violence that continues to scar the lives of so many young people and their families who start each school day with a hug they hope will be returned later that very same day.

The Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ is a member of the Florida Coalition for the Prevention of Gun Violence and today proves that membership is not enough. ,

...continued on page 2
Activism and advocacy are essential. It’s past time for the Church to act. It’s past time to stand up to the gun lobbies and to advocate for Jesus’ way of peace that just can’t imagine how sisters and brothers or a nation can dwell together in unity while doing nothing to train our common spirit in the ways of justice, while doing nothing to mitigate the availability of weapons that enable such rampant violence, while doing nothing to stand in the public square and shout with a prophet’s heart that our prayers are not adequate and our faith demands more. We cannot pray “How long, O God, how long?” and stand by doing nothing in the face of evil.

Pastors, find your people today and console them. People, find your pastors today and ask them to lead with you in a movement to end violence in our communities. Remember especially the people of Parkland, Florida, whose anguish cries out and whose pain demands justice. Help build communities where this doesn’t happen. Use your own compassion and power to heal this national sin. And, yes, continue to pray.

On Sunday evening, February 18th, a vigil attended by close to 400 was hosted in the Sanctuary of First Congregational Church/Winter Park in honor of the lives lost in Parkland. It was co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters, the Florida Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence, Moms Demand Action Florida and the Council on American-Islamic Relations Florida. Those who spoke were powerful in their remembrance of the lives lost, of our society’s continued propensity toward violence and the call to be a more peaceful world. It was as well a re-articulation on the part of the Florida Coalition on the stance the church voted to adopt at its annual congregational meeting — a call for gun legislation reform that keeps weapons that can inflict the most amount of harm in the least amount of time out of the hands of civilians. Rev. Shawn Garvey offered a song, and then the gathered moved outside for the lighting of candles, the reading of the victims’ names and the ringing of a bell and then some closing words from Rev. Shawn.

An excerpt from a February 23 message from Rev. Dr. Steve Hudder to Christ Congregational UCC/Miami members.

...Another shooting incident happened at Taft Union High School outside Bakersfield, California. One student was shot and is in critical condition. But a 40-year-old teacher named Ryan Heber stood in the classroom face-to-face with his 16-year-old student, who was holding a shotgun. Ryan had no idea whether the student – whose pockets were filled with ammunition – would put the gun down or pull the trigger. Eventually, the teen released the gun, and police took him into custody. The teacher’s father, David Heber, was interviewed after this incident. This is what he said about his son, Ryan. “Because he knows the boy and the boy knows him... I attribute that to why the boy talked to and listened to my son. It’s all about kindness. It’s all about my son being kind and caring about his students.”

“Because he knows the boy and the boy knows him.”

When we don’t know our neighbors, we are not in relationship with them and we are not in covenant with them. When we are not in covenant with one another in our nation, we cannot rationally, compassionately, with common sense, discuss realistic solutions to the great problems which confront us. We need to rebuild our relationships with our neighbors; with our governmental leaders; and they with one another and with us. Because rather than arming everyone with their own weapons, the only real solution that will solve this crisis is contained in the statement of that teacher’s father: “Because he knows the boy and the boy knows him.”

Colleen Coughenour, a member of Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg, created an installation in the Sanctuary to remember those killed by gun violence, including the Parkland shooting.

The installation was up through the season of Lent.

In response to the shooting in Parkland, Naples UCC’s community partner, Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America (Southwest Florida Chapter), had leaders in the church’s Gathering Place after each worship service on February 25 to discuss tangible ways for getting involved in impacting change. On Saturday, March 24, members assembled in the morning in Cambier Park for the March for Our Lives/Naples.

Fort Lauderdale’s faith communities were invited to gather together on Sunday, February 25, at 7pm on the grounds of the UCC/Fort Lauderdale (and Unity Fort Lauderdale) for an Interfaith Prayer
Vigil regarding the tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. The prayer vigil was called “17 Empty Chairs,” with leaders from the local faith communities — including Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and others — leading the attendees in prayer.

On the church campus of Faith United UCC/Tamarac — 10 miles from Parkland — on February 18, a gathering offered prayer and condolences for the families who were experiencing unprecedented grief and loss of heroes of all ages at Marjory Stoneman Douglas. Members of the church along with other parents who have experienced loss through school massacres were present.

Pastor Rev. Sonja Williams and the church’s Health and Wellness Justice Ministry partnered with Hands on Broward to share their hearts with the community.

It was hoped that, in the aftermath of a tragedy like Parkland, sharing hearts through words of hope would illuminate the path for collective healing. Words of encouragement were shared and memorialized; some of the messages, poems and notes may be found on social media at #parklandhearts.

Hearts completed by two of the youngest who attended. Josiah reminds us the spirits of the Parkland 17 will live on.

Show of Solidarity for Our Students event was held March 14 for 17 minutes at Emmanuel UCC/Sebring as a silent show of support for our students, letting them know that their voices rang in honor of each life lost at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

In the March Beacon newsletter of Congregational UCC/ Punta Gorda, Pastor Rev. Mike Ford’s message and that of Moderator Judy Miner were as follows:

From Rev. Mike: “In response to this wave of sensibility that is sweeping across the nation, our very own Leadership Team considered showing support for change as well. Several months ago, I asked them to consider a policy that bans firearms on our campus. Practically speaking, it is a gesture. However, it makes a strong statement that we favor a sensible approach to stopping gun violence. In addition, it was considered to support the students in their declaration that ‘Enough is Enough!’

Last week, after much considerate and thoughtful exchanges, they voted to adopt a gun free zone policy for our church (see Moderator’s Report below)! The vote was not unanimous. The dissenting votes were not an objection to the policy, but a concern about the safety of our church once the public sees the policy enacted. It is a very reasonable concern. It is a risk for faith that the Leadership Team decided to take. I must admit that I was pushing hard for its adoption. I felt strongly that we needed to make a statement that will be heard.”

From Moderator Judy: “In December, your Leadership Team considered the idea of a policy related to firearms on church grounds. We specifically stated the idea as: ‘It is the policy of this church that firearms, of any sort, are not allowed on this entire property, including the parking area, even if the individual has a valid permit to carry. This policy does not apply to law enforcement personnel.’

Action on the matter was tabled at that time. Following the shooting in Parkland, FL, the Leadership Team voted to implement the statement as policy going forward. There was a great deal of thoughtful discussion as we deliberated the matter before the motion was passed. We felt it is important to take a stand as a matter of moral and spiritual principle, particularly when the congregation applauded the idea of giving support to the Stoneman Douglas High School students in Parkland as they work to encourage the government to implement more effective gun laws.”

First Congregational Church/Lake Helen hosted a concert by the DeLand High School chapter of Tri-M® Music Honor Society to benefit the victims of the tragedy at Stoneman Douglas High School. Two of the 17 slain students were members of the band and color guard. Students played piano, flute, trombone and sang and two students presented original compositions.

The church’s Music Director, Ross Cawthon, is faculty advisor to the group. The students from DeLand High hope that their music can help inspire the community to awareness and to have a dialogue. More than $500 was collected in a free-will offering. Half the collection went to a memorial foundation for one of the slain students and the other half went to a survivor student’s scholarship fund. The students were members of the band/color guard.
From Rev. Mike MacMillan in The Open Door, March 2018, the newsletter of Faith UCC/Dunedin

“I’m here because kids are dying from guns, and I’m sick and tired of it,” said one man with tears in his eyes. “I’m here today because I want to show those kids across the street that we love them and support their right to protest the latest school shooting,” said a woman as she stood proudly holding a sign high over her head that read ‘NO MORE GUN VIOLENCE!’ “I’m here because no kids should have to go to school in fear or being shot by an assault weapon,” said another woman waving at cars as they drove by honking in solidarity. “I’m here just because I love kids and my heart is breaking for them in these senseless days,” said a man as he gazed across the street at Dunedin High School, where students had the opportunity to peacefully walk out for 17 minutes – one minute for each of the shooting victims of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School that were killed one month ago.

These were the sentiments of the over 50 people from our church, or friends, or community members that gathered on our front lawn today (Wednesday March 14th) to rally against senseless gun violence that is ravaging our schools, communities and our nation and show support to the students across the street. What a powerful day of actively doing justice, of raising up a powerful witness to the community around us that we are a place that is speaking from our faith to say NO MORE to the senseless killing of students – children and kids – and all victims of gun violence. I want to thank Debbie Dunbar and LizBeth Cone in organizing this rally and ‘show of love’ and thank the many people that were able to come out with your signs and be a presence in the community for non-violence, peace and justice. What a wonderful morning it was here at Faith UCC!

On February 18 following worship, Coral Gables Congregational UCC held a “Conversation Around Gun Violence: What Can We Do” The church hosted a vigil for those lost, sponsored by the Miami-Dade PTA and PTSA.

On Saturday morning, March 10, in the church Sanctuary, interested parties heard from Shannon Watts, the founder of Moms Demand Action, which was created in the aftermath of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown. With chapters in all 50 states, the organization seeks common-sense solutions to decrease the escalating epidemic of gun violence.

There were more than a dozen marches in Florida on Saturday, March 24, and many of our churches participated.

Here’s what we heard as we went to “press,” and the next issue of Celebrate Florida will include other congregations as we hear from them.

A dozen+ members from Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg were part of the estimated 1500 who marched through downtown St. Petersburg, proudly carrying their church banner.
Coral Gables Congregational UCC had two full busloads and more than 70 people travel up to Parkland to stand in solidarity with the students and activists demanding change to our nation’s gun policies.

Some of the dozen or so members of Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/ St. Pete Beach scattered through the crowd marching in downtown St. Pete. A separate march along the mid-Pinellas Gulf beaches attracted 17 folks from PAG.

A contingent from Faith UCC/Dunedin participated in the St. Pete march.
Fifty members from Naples UCC joined a large crowd of some 5,000 in Cambier Park in the heart of downtown Naples for the early morning march.

Rev. Mike Ford (Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda) reports that more than 1,100 people showed up for the March in Charlotte County. He was a marshal for the event and says his church had about 24 members and visiting friends participate.
Board Authorizes Staff Restructure
FROM "CONFERENCE CALL" BY REV. JOHN VERTIGAN
E-CELEBRATE, FEBRUARY 28

At their February meeting, the Florida Conference Board of Directors authorized the restructuring of current staff roles as follows:

The two part-time positions for youth ministry in the Florida Conference will be eliminated effective June 30, 2018. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to Sheila Guillaume and Jeanne Haemmelmann for their leadership these last years and, indeed, I hope you will want to reach out to them as they experience this transition in their own ministerial life. I’ve no doubt that even as these particular positions come to a close, the Spirit is moving in their lives with discernment for what will come next in their service to the in-breaking realm of God. Please join me in thanking them for their ministry among us.

The Board has authorized the hiring of a full-time Minister for Faith Formation in the Florida Conference. [See update on this below] The Minister of Faith Formation will implement the Conference mission and strategic priorities, particularly as these affect intergenerational faith formation. Within this framework, the position is responsible for:

Planning, guiding and supporting the implementation of a comprehensive Conference-wide faith formation ministry program and relating it appropriately to the local, regional and national settings of the United Church of Christ;

Shaping the youth ministries of the Conference to ensure they serve as a significant vehicle for faith formation ministries and align with Conference values and priorities.

More specifically, the Minister for Faith Formation will be available for local church events geared toward disciple-making and deeper connection with our spiritual roots. Too, the Minister for Faith Formation will provide oversight and leadership for at least three youth events per year, participation in regional and national youth events, and retreats for adults from around the Conference on a variety of models and themes.

I expect a staffing announcement in the near future, and a start date for this position is pending.

This position and the ministries that come forth from it are made possible by your gifts to Our Church’s Wider Mission and by timely payment of per capita dues. Please continue to pray for and support the ministries of the Florida Conference as we seek to engage, equip, and empower ministers and congregations in providing a progressive Christian witness in Florida and beyond.

Board Names Neal Watkins as New Minister for Faith Formation
AN ANNOUNCEMENT MADE ON MARCH 5 BY CONFERENCE MINISTER REV. JOHN VERTIGAN

Dear Church and Partners in Ministry,

We announced last week that the Board of Directors of the Florida Conference approved the hiring of a Minister for Faith Formation to work with the youth and adults of the Conference in bringing to life a vision of faithful disciple-making on an intergenerational model.

Today, I am pleased to announce the hiring of Mr. Neal Watkins as the Minister for Faith Formation in the Florida Conference. Neal brings a depth of experience and passion and vision to his new role and will begin working with us on April 16, 2018, from his home office in Vero Beach, Florida. Neal is currently licensed for ministry and will complete his path to ordination while using his substantial gifts for ministry to:

• Plan, guide and support the implementation of a comprehensive Conference-wide faith formation ministry program and relate it appropriately to the local, regional and national settings of the United Church of Christ;

• Shape the youth ministries of the Conference to ensure they serve as a significant vehicle for faith formation ministries and align with Conference values and priorities.

More specifically, Neal will be available for local church events geared toward disciple-making and deeper connection with our spiritual roots. Neal will provide oversight and leadership for at least three youth events per year, participation in regional and national youth events and retreats for adults from around the Conference on a variety of models and themes.

Neal Watkins and his wife, Pam, live in Vero Beach with their children Casey (5) and Caleb (3). Neal grew up as an active member of Coral Gables Congregational UCC/Miami and would later move to the Tampa Bay area, where he attended the University of South Florida to pursue a major in religious studies while working as a member of Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole and as the Faith Events Coordinator for the Florida Conference.

For the last ten years, Neal has enjoyed working for the Community Church of Vero Beach as Youth Minister, and later the Ministry Associate for Youth and Families. While working at CCOVB, Neal has also nearly completed his Masters of Divinity as an online scholar at Chicago Theological Seminary, where he has successfully defended his thesis entitled, “Millennial Ecclesiology: Merging and Reconciling the Church’s Latest Great Divide.”

In his free time, Neal enjoys playing fetch with his dog (Tillich), doing logic puzzles, and eating French fries with his exercise buddies.

We look forward to welcoming Neal to our ministry team and give thanks to the faith communities from which he has come for their nurture of his journey and for their preparing him for this new calling from the Spirit.
Rev. Doug Borko, former Conference Minister, has returned to Florida and has been named to the Board of Directors as the Conference Treasurer. He’s updated us on what he’s been doing since he resigned as CM back in 2005.

Welcome back, Doug – and wife Rev. Sharon Rogers, the former Pastor of First UCC/Hollywood.

“When I left the Conference I served at the Pension Boards until I retired in 2013. While at Pension Boards I served as the Director of Ministerial Assistance for the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance, one of the corporations forming the Pension Boards.

The work involved managing the annual Christmas Fund Appeal for the UCC and then managing the distribution of those funds, along with Endowment Funds, to support the clergy and lay leadership of the UCC at times of need.

During my tenure the Next Generation Leadership Program was conceived and implemented. Also, I did the early work on the Credo Program, which was implemented after I retired and its purpose is to support mid-career clergy.

Since retiring I have been working on my bucket list. Most of my time is currently devoted to amateur radio, and I am in my third term as President of the Spring Hill Amateur Radio Club.

Sharon and I are living in Weeki Wachee with our Calico cat, Shelby.”

Rev. Borko Named Conference Treasurer

Young Adult Service Internships Offered

This fall, Coral Gables Congregational UCC, in collaboration with the national setting of the UCC, will launch an exciting new opportunity for young adult service and community building.

The Young Adult Service Community – Miami is a year-long program that will match young adults ages 21-35 with paid service and justice internships in the city, as well as ministry in the local congregation. Participants will live in conscientious community together in an ecumenical house with interns from other service programs. The program also features an emphasis on vocational discernment, spiritual growth and experiencing life in a diverse city.

The program has two openings for the fall of 2018. If you or someone you know is interested in applying, please visit the YASC website for more information, or click here to start your application today.

Scholarships Available for UCC Clergywomen Retreat

The UCC’s Antoinette Brown Society will host a UCC Clergywomen Leadership Retreat May 1-3 at the Carefree Resort and Conference Center in Carefree, Arizona. The keynote presenters are the 2017 Antoinette Brown Awardees, the Rev. Day McCallister and the Rev. Loey Powell. This event is open to all authorized clergywomen in the United Church of Christ; registration information can be found here.

Registration is $250 a person, and that includes four meals on site as well as the housing for two nights, starting on May 1. Participants will be responsible for their own travel to the site (the resort is about 40 minutes from the Phoenix airport), three meals and any extra nights at the venue.

The Florida Conference is pleased to announce 10 full registration scholarships, on a first-come, first-served basis, to clergywomen with active standing in the Conference. Each scholarship is worth $250 and will cover costs as noted above. These scholarships are being subsidized by The Wilson Fund of the Florida Conference, and I encourage you to seek local church support for your attendance at this event. For more information, be in touch with me at jvertigan@uccfla.org.

This is just one way in which Legacy Funds in the Florida Conference seek to lift up excellence in ministry by authorized ministers in a variety of settings. Visit our website at uccfla.org to learn more about how we can partner with you to offer a progressive witness to seekers in Florida.

Adapted from Rev. John Vertigan’s “Conference Call” in the January 31 e-Celebrate
**What the Heck is Per Capita/Initial Offering?**

*by Sammie Hartwell, Moderator*

*UCC/New Smyrna Beach*

Per capita/initial offering. Some of you think it’s the cost to pay for the envelopes. We are part of a larger place out there, which is lovingly called “The Florida Conference”...which is also part of a bigger place called “The National Offices of the United Church of Christ.”

The easiest way for me to explain how the Conference works FOR us: this is how we found Pastor Diane! Without their help we would be reading classified ads...when is the last time you were looking in the help wanted section and saw the heading of PASTOR NEEDED? Our Regional Minister, Raymond Hargrove, has attended several events here including different anniversaries and celebrations, guiding us through difficult or uncharted territories and sometimes just to worship with us.

Our denominational motto “That They All May Be One” is one that we cannot help but rejoice in. How can we not support those who support us? How can we not feel joy and the presence of God when every Sunday we say, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are always welcome here.”

There may come a day when we urgently need the Conference to help US and give us guidance. Personally, I just wouldn’t feel right to just take from them without supporting them. What our dues cover, while not glamorous or exciting, include: the Conference’s office space, liability insurance, travel, office space for the Regional Ministers, expenses for the Board of Directors and help for the Retired Ministers Health Insurance, just to name a few. If you belong to this church and do not include this offering specifically, we take it from the general donations to the church. The Church Council, Finance Committee and you as the congregation voted to pay the Florida Conference $14.50 per person. I sincerely hope, if you are able, to contribute to this and help defray our expense.

*From The United Voice, the newsletter of the UCC/New Smyrna Beach, March 2018*

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*From The United Voice, the newsletter of the UCC/New Smyrna Beach, March 2018*
I am excited to be attending Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, DC, this coming month. Imagine it: a social justice event lodged in our nation’s capital where we’ll come face to face with legislative staff to share our concerns about “A World Uprooted” from the perspective of our Christian Faith.

The focus scripture that will guide our learning times, worship and on-the-Hill advocacy comes from Deuteronomy 10:17-20 and is followed here by a descriptive clip from the EAD website:

“For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Ecumenical Advocacy Days 2018 will focus on the uprooted-ness of our world. We will analyze current policy and envision ways to more fully and justly respond to the global and local needs of displaced communities. Through prayer, worship, advocacy training, and networking, we will seek policy changes that advance hope and overcome the devastating impacts of conflict, climate change and corruption on God’s people.

We’ve learned much about displaced communities here in Florida in witness to the disaster that was Hurricane Maria, the disaster that followed in the inadequate response to rebuilding Puerto Rico and the mass migration of hundreds of thousands of our island neighbors into Florida neighborhoods. I have a concern for our local response to that displacement, too, though I am short on answers at this juncture. A Florida UCC response will be one of the topics of conversation at our May Board of Directors meeting. Your thoughts are welcomed. Be in touch.

In the meantime, join me in being guided by the Gospel lesson that will lead hundreds of people from across the faith spectrum to Washington this April in praise of God and in search of a just world for all. From Matthew 25:

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

You can learn more about Ecumenical Advocacy Days at https://advocacydays.org/2018-a-world-uprooted and perhaps your reading will culminate in God’s call on your life, a call to be part of the new thing God has promised in this season of resurrection and new life.

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

A Story Worth Telling

Ed Pritchett (First Congregational Church/Orange City), a member of the Florida Conference Legacy Committee, reports that the committee has 11 different Legacy funds available from which awards and grants can be made. These funds are intended to be used for various purposes, and some have specific donor designations. To date this year approximately $5,000 has been awarded or granted, and these funds have been used to provide scholarships, workshops and college tuition. The total grant/award funding potential is close to $400,000 this year.

Information about these funds and applications are available on the Conference website or can be obtained by contacting the Conference office. A complete guide to the funds will soon be added to the website.

“Keeping Faith: Sisters of Story” was held on the afternoon of Sunday, December 3, at First Congregational Church/Lake Worth thanks to the sponsorship of the church, the Florida Conference of the UCC and the Lake Worth Interfaith Network. The Florida Conference awarded $1,000 for co-sponsorship as did each of the other two co-sponsors. Three exceptional storytellers shared stories from their own faiths – Christian, Muslim and Jewish – to counter the current rhetoric and transcend differences through their shared belief in the power of connection, compassion and unity. Rohina Malik, Susan Stone and Kim Schultz were the storytellers.

First Congregational Pastor Rev. Jason Fairbanks reports that over 100 attended the free event, including representatives from all three faith traditions. In thanking the Florida Conference for the grant, he says “The sacredness, openness and authenticity of the time together was felt” by all in attendance. “We are grateful,” he adds “for helping make this important event a reality.”
“I Love to Tell the Story…. ”
– Let’s Tell Them!

“I’ll tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.”

Katherine Hankey, 1866

The following letter about the Three Great Loves initiative — love of children, neighbors and the environment — is being sent to all our Florida congregations. This issue of Celebrate Florida — like all editions — is chock-full of 3 Great Loves stories, some brief and others more detailed. So if your congregation has a story here that needs to be shared and heard, please don’t be modest! Contact Jean and Lynn about it with any additional information as necessary.

“We all have a story. We are all a part of God’s story. What’s your story?” ~ The Rev. Dave Sigmund

“Our expression of God’s love is and will be our living testimony.” ~ Nichole M. Collins

3 Great Loves is a denomination-wide story-telling initiative. Over the span of the next two years, the wider UCC Church will collect and lift up the stories of our local churches and affiliates as we demonstrate our Love of Neighbor, Love of Children and Love of Creation. They want to hear about the knitting clubs, the food pantries, the community meals, protests, letter-writing campaigns and anything else our church or organization may be doing to create a just world for all. Nothing is too small. The work that is already being done is significant and greatly needed. The hope is that with this initiative we will tell the story of how we are impacting and transforming the world as covenantal partners united in common purpose, vision and mission.

There are many ways your congregation demonstrates each of these 3 Great Loves. We want to highlight these stories within the Florida Conference of the UCC and across the nation. Whether your story involves one or many, by telling our stories we will help inspire others to engage in spreading God’s love throughout our world.

We invite you to share your story with us; please contact either of us, your Florida Conference 3GL Coordinators. Let’s shine some light on the good work we are doing in our neighborhoods and around the world.

A gift will be given to the first 10 stories we receive…We would like to collect them by May 2. Looking forward to hearing from you….Photos are welcome!

With gratitude,
Rev. Dr. Jean Simpson
JSimpsonUCC@gmail.com

Lynn Jones

Hope UCC/Rockledge has done something each year for Devereux School, which has one of its main campuses only two miles from the church. This is a fun project for them, and especially for the children of the church.

The congregation held a potluck on Sunday, February 11, to complete the church’s Valentine project for students at the Devereux School. For several weeks prior, church members and friends brought bags of individually wrapped candies to church. Then, following the potluck, the participants walked around tables laden with piles of different candy choices to fill 127 Valentine bags for the Devereux children. Some congregants who could not walk to fill bags helped by handing out the bags or tying completed ones. Adults supervised the children under 10 years of age who wanted to help fill bags. Since nine Devereux children were diabetic, they filled nine additional bags with sugar-free powdered juice boxes at the suggestion of the Devereux administration. All bags were delivered in time for Valentine’s Day and distributed on their main campus and also to transition homes run by Devereux.

Devereux is a national, non-profit organization that is one of the largest and most advanced healthcare organizations in the country. The local campus houses children in grades 2-12 and is one of the few behavioral healthcare institutions providing sophisticated treatment for youth from around the country who have experienced emotional, physical and sexual trauma. They recently added victims of sex trafficking and also have programs for autistic children.
Reflections on Haiti

Rarely does a group of clergy get to spend three days together with such joyful and meaningful purpose. Such was the case, however, when 10 Florida Conference clergy had the opportunity to visit Haiti and work with the Be Like Brit organization (https://www.belikebrit.org/). Please Google to find out more of their poignant story. We were prepared to see abject poverty and we did. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Though this weighed heavily upon our hearts and will call us back to do more, what we were not prepared for — and so pleasantly surprised over — was the joyful, grateful and genuine response from everyone we met.

Be Like Brit orphanage houses 66 beautiful, delightful and very energetic children ages 5 to 16. Our accommodations were quite adequate though some would call it minimal. There were bunk beds in a dorm-like setting, no hot water and no hair dryers allowed. There was awesome homemade bread at every meal and hysterical Creole lessons! The 10 of us got to know each other very well! Immediately upon arrival, we were welcomed with gleeful hugs that would warm any heart. We were instantly hooked!

In the midst of the poverty there are many good things going on in Haiti. There are clinics and schools sponsored by many denominations and countries. Be Like Brit is an oasis of good, sitting upon a hill surrounded by stunning mountain and ocean views. The time at Brit’s home was awesome. We sang, danced and worshiped with those precious children with reckless and wondrous abandon. The joy-filled atmosphere of that place gave rise to a sense of perspective in each of us as we experienced the Holy Spirit surrounding us in the form of these beautiful children.

Be Like Brit has brought a little order into the chaos of this poor and disaster-ridden country. Not only is this non-adoptive orphanage educating future, productive citizens of Haiti, they are very active in the community. Their purified water is shared with their neighbors, and each mission group of people (affectionately called Britsinarians) builds a 12x12 house. We were privileged to build BLB’s 101st house for a widowed mother of eight (four of whom lived with extended family) who heretofore had lived under a tarp with four of her children. We hammered, painted, built a bed and hauled supplies in to this precious family. With each blue tin roof house that is completed, a month’s worth of food is given, along with a small grill, a bed with sheets, cleaning supplies and a pregnant goat... her name was Gladys. The typical stoic nature of the Haitian people was nowhere in sight the morning of the house blessing. The unbelievably grateful mother dressed her children in their finest clothes, exuding both pride and humility, stood on the porch of her new home as the thankful tears flowed. Her 12-year-old son — the man of the house — after trying to express what this meant to his mom, wept openly. We stood together in the spirit of the one true God, brothers and sisters all, so very blessed, so humbled and so grateful.

There are no adequate words that will convey the level of transformation that we all experienced. We would invite you to share in this joy with us. You or your church could look into sponsoring a child at BLB, taking a mission trip to Haiti or funding the building of a house. Feel free to contact Chloe Rits (chloe@belikebrit.org) for answers to any questions. Any of us would love to share more of our experience with you or your congregation.

Many thanks to the Florida Conference for helping to sponsor this beautiful trip of a lifetime (though some of us have already planned our next trip!!). We are forever grateful!

Deb-Kaiser Cross (Naples UCC)
Mike MacMillan (Faith UCC/Dunedin)
David Kaiser-Cross (Naples UCC)
Jeanne Haemmelmann (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)
Harvey Lockhart (First Church of North Miami Congregational)
Attila Szemesi (Northport Community UCC)
Keith Scott (Miami Lakes Congregational Church)
Bob Melhorn (Altamonte Chapel Community UCC/Altamonte Springs)
Booth Iburg (Eternal Hope UCC/Valparaiso)
Leslie Etheredge

L-R front: Frankie (driver, guide and Creole teacher), Leslie, Keith, Booth, David, Deb, Chloe (organizer of mission trips and constant companion with the group), Jeanne
L-R back: Attila, Mike, Bob, Harvey
A Reflection from Rev. Booth Iburg (Pastor, Eternal Hope UCC/Valparaiso) in message to her church members: I hope you noticed I did not send a message last week. I was in Haiti on a pastor’s mission trip. I arrived home on Friday night and honestly I am still processing the trip. As I discussed in church on Sunday, Be Like Brit works within the culture of the people and it was amazing how quickly we immersed ourselves into the culture with love and no judgment. When I first saw Port au Prince, though, I thought it was horrible, but then I was helped to put all into their perspective. On our trip there was an infant critical care nurse, also pastor, who went to Haiti immediately after the earthquake in 2010. She could see the progress in spite of so much damage still visible; thousands remain homeless. I am happy that I could be a part of building a home for five deserving homeless people. I believe God smiled.

Workshop to Focus on Church Future That Embraces Creativity

Come join us May 2, from 10am-3pm, for “Sacred Habits,” a free workshop with Rev. Chad Abbott at the Florida Church House (9300 University Boulevard, Orlando, Fl. 32817).

Rev. Chad will speak on topics raised in his latest book, Sacred Habits: The Rise of the Creative Clergy. At a time when the church in the United States is struggling to make sense of its place in the public square, a space of inquiry is needed that intersects the work of religion scholars and local church pastors. What will the future of the church look like, and is there hope for transformation? His book and the workshop focus on an emerging future for the church, one that embraces creativity and experimentation in the pastorate in the midst of a context of rapid decline.

Rev. Chad is Conference Minister for the UCC in Indiana and Kentucky. Having served congregations in both the United Methodist and UCC traditions, he is a pastor at heart and the author of two books. He is passionate about local churches, pastors and spirituality, a trained labyrinth facilitator, spiritual director and storyteller.

This workshop, which includes lunch, is being underwritten by the Wilson Fund, a fund of the Florida Conference. However, registration is required by April 18. This workshop satisfies one unit of the Professional Ethics training requirements for authorized ministers in the Florida Conference. Register today!
By Sandy Lynch
Missions Chair, UCC at The Villages

The UCC at The Villages conducted its annual Suitcase Drive in February. Since 2010, over 700 new or gently used suitcases and totes have been collected by the Missions team and given to families at Haven of Lake and Sumter counties and Shepherd’s LightHouse in Belleview.

Haven serves women and children seeking shelter from domestic violence and Shepherd’s LightHouse assists young women with children in a crisis situation — many times women come to Shepherd’s LightHouse carrying their possessions in a garbage bag. Started by church member Bea Hester, she has continued this mission with the help of other UCC volunteers. As a flight attendant, Bea had helped abused women by donating suitcases to women’s shelters, and she continued this ministry after moving to The Villages and becoming a member of the church.

Can You Fit Your Life in a Suitcase If You Don’t Have One?

by Sandy Lynch
Missions Chair, UCC at The Villages

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Reaching Out to Homeless Youth

In January 2017 the Social Justice Team at Spring Hill UCC, in coordination with PFLAG Hernando, held a kick-off fundraiser with a goal to raise $1,000 to provide 100 “Blessing Bags” filled with personal hygiene and non-perishable food items (each valued at $10) for the homeless youth in Hernando County.

Because of generous donations, they exceeded their goal by collecting supplies and funds that allowed them to distribute over 252 Blessing Bags to the homeless youth of Hernando County in the first five months alone.

After a late start this school year, due to Hurricane Irma, they have had 15 schools request 174 bags, and they are happy to say that all their needs were fulfilled just in time for the Christmas/New Year break.

With support from church members and the community, SHUCC was able to distribute a total of 326 Blessing Bags during the 2017 calendar year — its first year with this program. Other organizations have joined these efforts to show homeless youth that they are loved.

They learned a great deal during this first year of the program.

• They no longer prepare girl and boys bags. Instead, they put personal care items in the bags and let the students choose what bag color they would like.

• Feminine hygiene and shaving products are kept separate from the other products and distributed by the school as needed.

• Although not a product most would think to provide, feminine hygiene products are in high demand and needed in elementary, middle and high school.

• They no longer supply mouthwash that has alcohol in it because alcohol consumption is a concern.

The items they seem to always need are: deodorant, antibacterial wipes, body wash and feminine hygiene products.

At last count there are 530 youth in the county. On behalf of church members, the Social Justice Team will continue to identify homeless and other youth in need in Hernando County and provide them with these important personal care items.

A Very Special Camp for Very Special Kids

The UCC/St. Augustine is offering a Camp of Compassionate Unity this summer, specifically designed for deaf and hard of hearing children ages 5-15 and their families with the goal of providing spiritual nourishment, personal enrichment and community wholeness. And something this special has its own new comma logo created just for this project!

Supported by a grant from Neighbors in Need, the camp will run from June 4-August 3 (excluding the week of July 2-6) on weekdays from 7:30am-4:30pm.

The camp will offer: counselors proficient in ASL, lunch, snacks, a camp t-shirt, field trips and weekly special guests. The cost is $150 per week (a second child is $90).

The curriculum is based on UCC resource “Faith Practices.”

Week 1: Conversations with God or your Higher Power and making it a habit (How do we do this?)

Week 2: Giving and receiving hospitality — how to be a good neighbor (Welcome to our place)

Week 3: Discovering gifts — I have talent! (Who are we? And what are we good at?)

Week 4: Compassion training (Caring for the people around us)

Week 5 Experience beauty (It’s a beautiful world!)

Week 6: Playing and living joyfully (Let’s have some fun!)

Week 7: Working for justice – social responsibility (We’re in this together)

Week 8: Blessing and letting go (It’s been nice getting to know you)

A Very Special Camp for Very Special Kids
A

s part of its Lenten programming, Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole offered a series about faith and healing led by Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. Martin Lewis. On three Thursday evenings in March, lectures and Q&A sessions were held in the church Sanctuary.

Dr. Martin’s unique experience in medicine and ministry offers insight as he shared his knowledge and passion for healing and wholeness for all God’s people. He has been involved in teaching and medical research — particularly the healing process, the immune system and cancer — and has served in church ministries, missions and pastoral care for over 55 years. As a Clinical Professor of Pathology at USF, he has served as Professor of Pathology at several prestigious medical schools in the U.S. and Canada.

The sessions centered on scientific and theological bases for healing body, mind and spirit and our role as individuals in the health and healing process. The first session was “Introduction to Faith That Heals,” considering concepts of our self-healing body and its response to disease and injury illustrated through the years; contributing were several other medical professionals. Session two was “Mechanisms of the Self-healing Body,” which looked at the links between the endocrine, nervous and immune systems working together with emotions and behaviors; the positive/negative effects of stress reveal the connection between our body and mind. The final session was “Historical Application of Systems’ Evolution,” which focused on the body/mind/spirit process and the role of faith as it mediates through our systems. At the close of this final session those who wished could participate in a brief healing ceremony.

The three-part series was open to the community.

Clergy in a growing number of our Florida congregations have created blogs, which are discussion or information sites on the web offering posts on various topics.

Rev. Dr. John Danner (Sanibel Congregational UCC): www.periwinkleponderings.blogspot.com/


Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota): www.gracetraces.blogspot.com/

Rev. Shawn Garvey (First Congregational Church/Winter Park): www.fccwp.org/blog/


United Church of Gainesville: (www.ucgainesville.org/sample-page-2/)

Rev. Jim Coyl (Pensacola Beach Community UCC): (www.jamescoyl.com)

Rev. Dr. Steven Hudder (Christ Congregational Church/ Miami): www.christcongregationalucc.org/blog/

New Sacred – A United Church of Christ blog www.newsacred.org/
The Volusia Symphony performed at First Congregational Church/Orange City on the afternoon of Sunday, April 15, with classic and film favorites. It was the Gospel According to the Beatles at Coral Gables Congregational UCC during worship on April 15. The music was performed by local professional musicians under the direction of the church’s very own producer/composer/performer of multiple platinum records and Grammy award-winner Clay Ostwald, keyboardist and songwriter for the Miami Sound Machine. Church-goers were invited to put on their Sargent Pepper Nehru jackets and go-go boots for a service of soul-stirring, thought-provoking, joy-inducing music. On Sunday evening, March 4, the Miami Gay Men’s Chorus performed in the church Sanctuary with its “Love is Love” concert. Love comes in all forms — whether it’s the love of a mother, friend or lover, it’s a universal feeling no one can truly live without.

It was the seventh annual Salute to Black History Month at Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami on Sunday, February 25 with honored guests at worship Drs. Nelson Adams, Rudy Moise, Todra Anderson-Rhodes and Ann Ashley-Gilbert. Music was provided by Dr. Edward “Dr. G” Robinson. A jazz brunch followed. Dancing shoes were optional.

UCC/Fort Lauderdale held a dinner buffet and entertainment showcase fundraiser for the Pet Project on Saturday, February 17, presenting Miss Fritz Ann and a “Night of a Thousand Stars.”

On Friday evening, February 16, Four Pianos held a concert at Naples UCC billed as “a magical evening filled with intricate, beautiful, spirited, and uplifting music and clever anecdotes.” The Voices of Naples celebrated its fifteenth anniversary of giving scholarships to talented high school seniors from Collier and Lee Counties with its annual “Singing for Scholarships” concert on Sunday afternoon, February 25. Four of their scholarship winners performed with the chorus and soloed on their favorite Broadway musical numbers. On April 3 it was the Still Kickers, a popular bluegrass band that entertains regularly around Southwest Florida.

The recent music offerings at the United Church of Marco Island were marked by diversity. World-renowned bell ringer Christine Anderson entertained those attending worship on January 28 with a special bell choir concert involving other church musicians following in the afternoon and was open to the community. The Naples Philharmonic performed on Friday evening, February 9. It was a Jazz Worship Service on February 25 as the church choir and men’s quartet, guest pianist John Harman and Marco Island Strummers and umbrella ladies teamed up for an upbeat, toe-tapping morning. Then the Purdue Varsity Glee Club performed on Tuesday evening, March 13.

Recent musical offerings at the Community Church of Vero Beach included the Treasure Coast Handbell Concert and “Ravel on the Rachs” duo piano/organ concert in February and concert pianist Andrew Staupe in March.

Dr. Doreen Rao, currently serving as the Interim Conductor of the Master Chorale of Tampa Bay, was the Artist in Residence at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota on March 3-4 where she led a Choral Master class and rehearsal of Faure’s Requiem on Saturday and in worship on Sunday. The untold hours of practice and the faithfulness of the 50+ member choir — along with Minister of Music Greg Chestnut — made for an incredibly moving service.

Organist Edward Krynicki and pianist Elaine Reinhardt presented a concert of duets in the Sanctuary of Church of the Palms/Delray Beach on Sunday afternoon, March 11. The program consisted of original music written for organ and piano duet along with several transcriptions of familiar pieces. The concert was free and open to the public.
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, under the artistic direction of pianist and church’s music director Dr. Adolfo Vidal, has been presenting four concerts per year. The Concert Series started more than four years ago and has been a successful way to engage the community of Miami Lakes with a series of concerts from chamber music to solo classical and jazz events with top-notch artists. The next performance will be on June 2, presenting the Miami Chamber “Pops” Players with a chamber orchestra performing classic pop tunes (check the website for more info http://miamilakesucc.org/)

Jeff Wells (Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg) and Florida Conference Regional Minister Rev. Leslie Etheredge perform in the local One City Chorus, which occasionally rehearses at the church.

February’s Jazz Jam at Altamonte Chapel Community UCC/Altamonte Springs was Kid Dutch and his New Orleans Music paying tribute to Mardi Gras.

The UCC/New Smyrna Beach choir performed at the Black Heritage Festival during the February 11 Gospel Music segment of the three-day event at Pettis Park in New Smyrna Beach.

Pensacola Beach Community Church hosted “A Musical Salute to Our Veterans” by Operation Song, a songwriters showcase in cooperation with the Pensacola Beach Songwriters Festival and UWF’s Kappa Sigma’s Military Heroes 5K on Friday evening, March 30.

Tin Pan Alley Productions is bringing several entertainment events to Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole. March 31 was singer Mario Rocco, April 28 will be John Timpanelli with an evening of music, comedy and impressions and May 26 Petrina, a British-born fun-loving singer.

The Drama Ministry of North Port Community UCC held its debut in February. Presenting its first production “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,” director Jack Rabito and stage manager Maureen Moran brought together mostly unseasoned actors to a packed Sanctuary of viewers. Telling the story of good conquering evil was both uplifting and enjoyable. Thanks go to Pastor Rev. Attila Szemesi and Jack for this vision, neatly two years in the making. Through the church’s audio visual and artistic coordinator, Mike Bourque, the drama created a life of its own.

The Sunday Nighters Minnesota Shuffle potluck on Sunday, February 18, at Fort Myers Congregational UCC included a Valentine’s program performed by the Jubilee Quartet, an a cappella “barbershop”-style gospel quartet (of whom two members, Marti Pierce and Janet Kuhns, are church members).

As part of its Tuesdays at Twilight program, for Valentine’s Day, Naples UCC offered “An Intimate Evening of Loves Songs” on February 13 featuring church section leaders and Opera Naples resident artists.

Congregational UCC/Bradenton presented a Valentine’s concert Sunday, February 18, featuring Elona Krasavtseva and Nina Wegmann in an afternoon of Russian and European romantic music. A suggested $12 donation helped support the church’s student scholarship fund.

Following dinner at the church on Valentine’s eve, Venice UCC’s own Mark McKinley presented his show of danceable favorites as guests enjoyed a musical walk down memory lane.

The intergenerational movie night for March at First Congregational Church/Winter Park was “The Princess Bride” complete with free water and lemonade (or you could bring your own beverage) with a $1 snack bar with free popcorn refills.

In recognition of Black History Month in February, the UCC/New Smyrna Beach showed “Hidden Figures” on February 11.

Film & a Latte at Christ Congregational UCC/Miami for February was the Oscar-nominated melodrama “A Fantastic Woman” about a transgender singer.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC had a showing on March 4 of “When I Saw You,” Palestine’s submission to the 2012 Academy Awards.
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.

Food, Glorious Food

How about a cross-cultural interfaith cooking class? That was offered by Coral Gables Congregational UCC on February 24 at Pastor Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner’s home. It was done in collaboration with the church’s Turkish Muslim friends where they discovered about cooking with different ingredients and techniques and shared conversation across cultural lines — all while creating dishes representative of multicultural Miami. There was a $30 fee to participate with proceeds going to a charity that feeds hungry children. On Sunday evening, March 11, church members served dinner at the Chapman Partnership Homeless Shelter in Miami.

The Chancel Choir of UCC/Fort Lauderdale presented a “Just Desserts & Show” on Saturday evening, February 24, that offered an assortment of delectable desserts and flavored coffees plus a show. Proceeds benefited the choir’s retreat fund.

Hope UCC/Rockledge kicked off January with a “Hope and Happenings” potluck – a hamburger/hotdog cookout with tasty side dishes. Guests brought their own plates, utensils, napkins and such in an effort to reduce the carbon footprint by reducing the use of paper products and Styrofoam.

As part of its fiftieth anniversary celebration, United Church of Marco Island families enjoyed a free Key West-style picnic on Saturday, February 10. It included a delicious catered lunch, live music, a fabulous fundraiser to benefit the church’s capital campaign and games for all ages. Attire was “fun island wear.”

Following a United Church of Gainesville tradition, church members could participate in the Oxfam Fast for World Hunger, which began after lunch on Wednesday, February 7, with the fast broken on Thursday evening in the church hall. Participants brought their own bowls, plates, cups and utensils along with soup, salad, bread, juice or fruit. A monetary donation was requested with the proceeds going to specifically support micro-loan projects around the world.

To show its appreciation for its northern members, Pensacola Beach Community UCC threw its Snowbird Appreciation Potluck on Sunday, February 4 – and the snowbirds didn’t have to bring anything except their appetites.

While a large group from Naples UCC was participating in the March for Our Lives in downtown Naples on Saturday morning, March 24, another 40 church members from the Board of Mission and Outreach were bagging four tons of potatoes at a local food bank. Says Pastor Rev. Dr. Dawson Taylor, “While the timing was serendipitous (or Holy Spirit driven), I am really proud that Naples UCC was marching for justice and feeding hungry people at the same time.”

Fort Myers Congregational UCC cooks and serves meals for the homeless at Abundant Grace Fellowship Church on the second and last Wednesdays of the month. And the homemade brownies and cornbread are really special!

The January Mission project at Port Orange UCC to support Holy Joe’s Café — a coffee house ministry for UCC chaplains and troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kuwait — has raised over $330.

On February 25 over 300 people packed UCC at The Villages to hear the popular Billie Thatcher and The Villages Swing band. In addition to swing classics like “Night Train,” they paid tribute to Chicago with “Does Anyone Know What Time It Is” and “Twenty-five or six to four.” The concert raised $3,783 and 400 pounds of food to benefit Seeds of Hope and the Wildwood Soup Kitchen as part of a series of seven concerts hosted by churches in The Villages area.

February 25 – Venice UCC, Good Samaritan Church/Pinelas Park, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community Church/St. Pete Beach (photo)

March 4 – First Congregational UCC/Sarasota and St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota
Opportunities

Non-violence and Protecting the Environment

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota will welcome Father John Dear on Friday evening, April 20, to speak on how the non-violence practice relates to the environment. The American Catholic priest (former member of the Society of Jesus), Christian pacifist, author and lecturer has been arrested over 75 times in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience – protesting against war, injustice and nuclear weapons. Nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize, he is author of a new book, They Will Inherit the Earth: Peace & Nonviolence in a Time of Climate Change.

2018 Ecumenical Advocacy Days

A World Uprooted: Responding to Migrants, Refugees and Displaced People

WHEN
April 20, 2018 at 6pm

WHERE
Doubletree by Hilton, Crystal City – Washington, D.C.

CONTACT Rev Michael Neuroth neurothm@ucc.org

There is still time to register for the 2018 Ecumenical Advocacy Days. This weekend-long conference, which is sponsored by our Justice and Witness Ministries and Global Ministries, offers faithful advocates an opportunity to worship and learn together, all while honing their advocacy and organizing skills.

The weekend’s theme, “A World Uprooted: Responding to Migrants, Refugees and Displaced People” is especially timely as our nation’s leaders continue to debate the fate of our nation’s immigrant and refugee policies. Register now!

Patsy McDowell, President Florida UCC Women
Member, Church of the Open Door Congregational/Miami

Hello, Florida UCC Women,

I hope that those of you who attended your Regional Meetings found them to be enjoyable, informative and educational and that they gave you a look into what the Annual Conference will be like. We are excited about this year’s conference and are looking forward to spending the weekend of May 4-6 with you at Chateau Elan in Sebring. Registration is available online as well as by traditional methods. Please visit our website (www.uccwomen.org) for more information.

At this year’s meeting you will have the opportunity to elect your new President, 1st Vice President, 2nd Vice President and some of the Regional Representatives. If you are willing to become more involved and serve in an official capacity, please do not hesitate to contact Bunny Gruntler, Bert Perry or me.

Don’t forget to get your “Reading for Renewal” report into Terri Crawford by April 18. Remember: a qualified reader is anyone who has read five books from the regular list and at least one book from the Mission Study list. This year’s Mission Study was the Florida Seminole Indians.

Registration for 2018 Florida UCC Women Annual Conference

All women are invited to attend the 91st Florida UCC Women’s Conference May 4-6 at Chateau Elan Hotel and Conference Center in Sebring. Join women from throughout the state to explore this year’s theme, “Planting Seeds.” Service project donations will be collected for the foundation.

[Read more about Be Like Brit elsewhere in this issue on page 12]
Opportunities

Upcoming free webinars!

The following webinars are scheduled for the coming weeks. These webinars are free and open to all. Webinars are scheduled to begin at 2pm Eastern. To register for one of these webinars, click on this link and click on “Insurance Board Webinars”: https://www.insuranceboard.org/online-learning/

Wednesday, April 11:
Risk Management for Camps
(The Insurance Board)

Wednesday, May 9:
Ladder Safety
(The Hartford)

Wednesday, May 23:
Sex Offenders in Your Congregation:
Recommendations and Best Practices (Heather Kimmel)

Wednesday, August 8:
Unique Risks Preventing Sexual Abuse in the School Environment (Praesidium)

Every Season is Slips and Falls Season!
Contrary to popular belief slips and falls occur all year in every climate!

The haven of your church is probably the last place you would think of as a dangerous environment. Yet, our church homes are full of potential hazards for our congregants. These hazards come in a variety of forms, including, steps and stairwells, slippery parking lots or walkways, sidewalks in disrepair, or simply transitioning from one surface to another, such as from a marble floor to carpeting. Group these obstacles with the physical ailments many of our elderly church members experience, such as failing eyesight, balance issues, and physical frailty, and you have a recipe for disaster. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, falls are the leading cause of fatal injury and the most common cause of non-fatal trauma related hospital admissions among older adults.

The good news is that slips, trips, and falls are largely preventable through inspections and preventive maintenance. Regular walk-throughs should be conducted of the church premises to make sure property is kept in good condition.

Starting on the exterior of the building, follow the path your church members travel each week. Begin with the parking lot and walkways to the church and look for uneven payment and potholes. If you notice an area that requires attention and the necessary repairs cannot be done immediately, the area should be secured. Drainage grates should be clear, as a blocked grate may cause standing water. Additionally, any debris such as tree limbs, leaves, trash, etc. should be cleared.

In inclement weather, snow and ice should be promptly removed, and salt or sand should be applied. Snow and ice removal should be documented in a log. Certain jurisdictions consider the public sidewalks to be the responsibility of property owners. If this is the case in your area, be sure to include these in your regular inspection/maintenance programs.

Your review of the external areas of the property should be completed in the evening as well. Reduced visibility increases the opportunity for falls. Multiple lighting sources should be considered, as well as reflective strips on walkways and stairs.

As you proceed to the entryway of the church, be sure to inspect steps and ramps. These should be in good condition with securely fastened handrails. Handrails should be round so they are easy to grip and should run the length of the steps or ramp. Highlighting the leading step edges with yellow paint is a good practice, in order to make them more visible. Handicapped entrances and exits should be clearly marked with appropriate signs. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may not apply to churches, state and local laws may apply. The ADA has specifications on ramps, and it would be a best practice to follow to make sure that they are safe.

Non-slip mats should be used on the outside and inside of the entryway. This allows for debris and snow to scraped off shoes and boots prior to entering the building. The interior secure, non-slip mats should be of adequate size so that visitors take at least three steps on them. If the non-protected floor beyond the mats is wet or soiled, larger mats should be used.

The aisles in the sanctuary should be clear of clutter, and easy to navigate. Any tripping hazards, such as electrical cords or cables, should either be removed from floor areas or taped down. Carpets should be in good repair and free from frays or tears. The transition from a hard flooring surface to carpeting should be inspected, as this may be a tripping hazard.

Interior steps and stairwells should have stair treads and be well lit, especially at the top and bottom of the steps.

Should an incident occur:
- If the person is injured, render first aid or call EMS if needed.
- Get pictures of the damaged area.
- Claims negotiations revolve around whether the defect was significant or obvious.
- Prepare an incident report to keep on file. Get details from those who may have seen what happened.
- Protect the area, if necessary, so that no other injuries occur.
- Contact your Insurance Board agent.
Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg Supports Family Promise

BY MARK DeVORE AND SHARON DUNAWAY-ALT
MEMBERS, TRINITY UCC/ST. PETERSBURG

2017 was the third year Family Promise of Pinellas County (FPPC) was in existence. It also marked the third year trained volunteers from Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg partnered with Palm Lake Christian Church as a support church. Throughout the year, Trinity volunteers spent four weeks helping to fill the 65 volunteer slots needed per week to take care of the guest families. Trinity is one of 11 support congregations in the area which assists the 14 host congregations. Host organizations actually house the families overnight. Support organizations provide financial support and also direct participation by cooking or staying overnight with the families.

New in 2017, Palm Lake Christian hosted the families for the week between Christmas and New Year’s, a week that has been difficult to get enough volunteers. A call for help went out to all of the host and support congregations to fill the volunteer positions. Trinity UCC volunteers Mark and Jan Boyson and Eleanor Rouse answered that call by supplying dinner for two of the seven nights. And many others in the church have played a role with Family Promise.

Also in 2017 Trinity’s outreach committee made a financial commitment to support Family Promise on a monthly basis. In addition, a one-time donation of $1,000 was made which helped Family Promise purchase a new 15-passenger van they desperately needed to transport the families.

Family Promise is a national organization founded in 1988 in New Jersey that uses community resources to address immediate needs. The core program addresses the challenge of family homelessness by using existing resources. The approach is to keep families together, identify their strengths and partner with the community for solutions that greatly lower the risk of families returning to homelessness.

Locally, Family Promise is currently present in St. Petersburg and Sarasota. Finally, after years in the making, Family Promise of Pinellas County was able to host homeless families in April of 2015. As of January 2018, 24 families, with 58 children, have “graduated.” Graduation means those once homeless families have moved into sustainable housing, worked out child care and have found gainful employment. Currently 90% of the graduates remain in sustainable housing. Notice the photo of hands — these are the hand prints of families that have graduated.

Trinity UCC/St. Petersburg looks forward to a long-term relationship with Family Promise. Visit the websites for Family Promise at www.familypromise.org and for Family Promise of Pinellas County at www.fpinnelas.org. Look for Family Promise in your area!
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 Minister, Regional Ministers 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 celebrateflorida@uccfla.org.

**UCC/Fort Lauderdale** hosted the second annual One World Family Interfaith Prayer Gathering on Sunday afternoon, March 25. The event’s theme was “Love and Inclusiveness” and was a collaboration of 24 diverse South Florida faith communities coming together with one purpose, one mind and one heart.

Prayer and music was presented in numerous languages and dances of various faith traditions.

**The United Church of Gainesville** has been holding a series of discussions on the sanctuary church movement in their area. The goal is to educate church members on the process the church’s Task Force on the issue has been using, what insights have been gained and what possible role UCG might have in the community. As part of Black History Month in February, the church organized several events: February 4 and 11 - Sacred Conversations on Race; February 18 - Movie Night – “Selma”; February 25 - debriefing the month and making connections.

**Members of Coral Gables Congregational UCC** who are part of PACT (People Acting for Community Together – a 35 congregation coalition) met after worship on Sunday, February 4 to have a conversation on affordable housing, gun violence and immigration in preparation for the church’s involvement in the Nehemiah Action:

A Community Gathering for Justice met on March 19.

**Three Pinellas County UCC churches – Pilgrim Congregational, Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole and Church of the Isles/Indian Rocks Beach** are continuing their covenantal conversations involving their clarity of mission, purpose and calling. On the March 11, 18 and 25 Sundays, church members gathered in the afternoon at COTI for a “congregational exploration” of their gifts of the spirit and other treasures.
First Congregational UCC/Sarasota and St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota continue their involvement in the Nehemiah Action Assembly as part of SURE (Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity) with participation in the meeting on Monday, March 19.

On the agenda was: affordable housing, civil citation (for common infractions) and restorative strategies for the public schools. Organizers are certain that a big show of support from interfaith organizations impresses the city and county officials who gauge seriousness by the numbers who show up.

The Faith Formation Team at Church of the Palms UCC/Delray Beach held a series of five Wednesday evening “Sacred Conversations on Race” from February 21-March 21 to dialogue about healing divisions in our society and understanding overt and subtle racism, both personal and systemic.

Participants examined ways in which these divisions pervade our language, attitudes and culture.

They used Biblical reflection as well as the game, “Breaking It Down: Towards E Pluribus Unum,” a game developed by the National Race Amity Center to help promote cross-racial and cross-cultural harmony.

A safe space was created to invoke honest discussion, inspire reflection and engage participants in looking at some hard issues in a non-judging atmosphere.

Ash Wednesday began the season of Lent. It is a traditional practice of Lent to “give something up” in order to practice the discipline of self-denial. The idea was to spend more time in prayer, or to have those cravings direct your thoughts more to God. In recent years it has been suggested the practice should be shifted to a form of “taking something on” in order to do something more positive and less negative.

So this is my commitment for Lent. I offer it as a suggestion for you to consider as well. I am going to write a letter a day to one or more of my representatives informing them of my expectation, my desire and my demand that they take legislative action to restrict access to high-powered assault-type weapons in a meaningful way. I will inform them in each letter that I will be watching their actions, not their words, in the coming months and that this issue will become the primary issue on which I will be deciding my vote for future elections, until meaningful legislative action is enacted. (You can certainly word your letters in whatever way is meaningful for you, but I encourage you to make a similar commitment and begin letting the politicians hear from you regularly so they begin to know how important this issue is to “We the People...”)

I am inviting you to give up some of your time each day to take this action. I am inviting you to make it a prayer-of-action as part of your spiritual discipline for Lent. I am inviting you to allow it to be a continual moment of reflection on how we all need to repent of our acceptance of violence in many forms and of our need to change our lives and our hearts to become more loving, more forgiving, more compassionate, as was Jesus.

To help you begin this discipline here is how to contact your Government Leaders.

- To contact Senator Bill Nelson: www.billnelson.senate.gov/contact-bill
- To contact Senator Marco Rubio: www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/contact
- To find and contact your Congressional Representative go to www.house.gov/representatives, then enter your zip code in the box in the upper right hand corner of the screen and it will identify your representative. From there you should be able to access their website with an e-mail form to use.
- To contact Governor Rick Scott: www.flgov.com/contact-gov-scott/email-the-governor
- To find your Senator and Representative for the Florida Legislature go to: www.leg.state.fl.us and you will be able to search for them. You may only find an office address and a telephone number but you can call and get their e-mail address to use or register a concern over the telephone.
Being Church

Mommy Reads Prison Ministry

At its December visit to the Florida Women’s Reception Center prison, members of the Mommy Reads outreach at the United Church of Gainesville had the opportunity to interview previous participants in the program. One said that when she talks to her child, he gleefully tells her “Mommy, I’ve got your voice in my pocket.” Another said that “It gives my child peace on a daily basis when he hears my voice before he goes to bed.” Yet another said “It was the greatest gift you could ever give a child.”

During the past year Mommy Reads was able to send books and recordings to 462 children, an all-time high. They were rained out due to Hurricane Irma in September but then doubled up in December to make up the difference. Since program’s inception in 2012, the project has sent out 2,368 books and recordings to 62 of 67 Florida counties, 35 states and Puerto Rico and to four foreign countries. Their 33 active volunteers thank the congregation for its continued support that makes this prison ministry possible.

The Faces of Christmas at Lowell Women’s Prison

BY KAREN JOHNSON
MEMBER, UNITED CHURCH OF GAINESVILLE

On December 15, Becky Johnson, Barbara Beynon and I participated in the annual Christmas gift celebration at Lowell. We joined about a dozen other volunteers from various programs in a long receiving line where we handed out five donated gifts—a pocket New Testament, a composition book, a 2018 calendar, a bag of candy and nuts, and a toothbrush—to each incarcerated woman who filed by, probably 800 or so over the course of four hours. I’ve been volunteering at Lowell for more than five years, but to look into that many faces of incarcerated women in that concentrated time is something that I am still struggling to process.

They were all dressed alike, but each woman was otherwise unique. There was every skin and hair color imaginable. They were tall and short, old and young, thin and round-bodied. Most walked, some had canes, some were in wheelchairs.

Prison practice dictates that every woman there is to be called only by her last name, but we UCGers, in our little private act of defiance, made a point of shaking each woman’s hand and wishing her a Merry Christmas using her first name. Everyone deserves to hear someone say her given name aloud during the holidays.

The first several hundred women through the line were from the “receiving” dorms where every woman who enters the FL prison system spends at least 6-8 weeks for orientation to prison life. In their faces, interspersed among those with firm handshakes and confident greetings, I saw the hollowness of abuse, the toothless ravages of drug addiction, the disbelief that this was really happening and the fear and loneliness of spending a first holiday away from family.

Never before have I witnessed adults becoming so excited about being able to choose the color of their toothbrushes.

Later the longer term “general population” came through the line. In these faces I saw many who had made some level of peace with their lot and were doing their best on a sunny, December day. In others I saw the faraway looks of mental illness. For those women who live in poverty with no outside support our simple gifts were treasures. Never before have I witnessed adults becoming so excited about being able to choose the color of their toothbrushes. Most of the composition books we distributed were black, but since there were a variety of donors, perhaps 10-15% were vivid colors and prints. We were instructed to give the women whatever book was on the top of the pile as they filed by. In another poignant moment, our inmate helpers quietly collected the colored composition books and set them aside until “Bravo” dorm came through. Bravo houses the women with long-term and life sentences; our helpers thought these women needed the bright and colorful composition books more than anyone else. The bags of nuts and candy included several unshelled walnuts. The women said they would open them by putting them in a clean sock and then cracking them with the combination lock from their foot lockers. Things we take for granted require great resourcefulness in prison.

There are many political and legislative battles to be fought in order to reduce the unconscionable rates of incarceration in this country. More than anything a visit to the prison reminds us that these women are our neighbors, sisters, mothers, wives, nieces and friends. Just for today, I hope that simply remembering that is enough.

Miss Seeing News About Your Church?

Maybe we aren’t receiving your newsletter (hard copy or online version.) Whatever the reason, let’s fix it!

For your online newsletter, add us to your mailing list: CelebrateFlorida@uccfla.org or snail mail your hard copy version to: Celebrate Florida, Florida Conference UCC, 9300 University Blvd., Orlando, FL 32817.

And always know that you can send us info whenever the spirit moves you and we’ll find a place for it in the next issue (send it to CelebrateFlorida@uccfla.org).
Thinking Genders Biblically

“A Weekend with Rev. Dr. Laurel Koepf Taylor” was offered at Coral Gables Congregational UCC from Friday, March 16-Sunday, March 18, with a series of lectures on “Genders in Biblical family structures with particular attention to the family structures of the Biblical world shape in the UCC. She researches the ways in which theological seminary and an ordained minister at Eden Theological Seminary and an ordained minister at the family structures of the biblical world shape in the UCC. She researches the ways in which the Bible categorizes bodies, what this meant in the world that produced the Bible and how such knowledge can intersect with our own expanding understanding of gender. Saturday’s session was “Working It Out: Gendered Division of Labor.” While it can be easy to assume that the “traditional” gendered division of labor is universal across cultures, the Bible presents a far more nuanced picture.

From agriculture and childbirth to religious and political leadership, she explored the cultural expectations of the ancient world and the ways in which God interrupts that order within the biblical text. The Sunday presentation was “Beyond Binaries: Gendering God,” which looked at how when using expansive language for God, we sometimes run up against the question, “but what does the Bible say?” The session delved deeply into this question including the use of metaphor, the difficulty of translation and how the complexity of gender in the Bible can feed our understanding of the divine.

The opening lecture was titled “Biblical Bodies: What’s a Eunuch?,” examining the complex ways in which the Bible categorizes bodies, what this meant in the world that produced the Bible and how such knowledge can intersect with our own expanding understanding of gender. Saturday’s session was “Working It Out: Gendered Division of Labor.” While it can be easy to assume that the “traditional” gendered division of labor is universal across cultures, the Bible presents a far more nuanced picture.

...
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.

We’ve singled out a few of these with the following bright ideas symbol that you might want to let shine in your own church.

On Sunday, April 15, the American Red Cross Big Red Bus will be on the campus of Faith Family UCC/Brandon so church members and neighbors may donate blood.

The Epiphany Healing Services at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach in January proved so popular that it is being continued, held mornings the first Wednesday of the month to pray for healing in bodies, lives, family, community and world. Each service has an option laying-on of hands healing prayer. As it is located only steps from the Gulf beach, the church celebrated with sunset services each late afternoon on Wednesdays from February 21-March 21. They were brief inspirational services of gratitude, with enjoyment of the splendor of sunsets following.

Coffee lovers lined up at the UCC/St. Augustine on Sunday, March 17, to hear from Charity Gikunju of Grower’s Alliance Café and Gift Shop. Charity — who brought her coffee truck — taught the gathered about the rich opportunities of fairly-traded products.

St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota offered “A Day of JOY Retreat” on the church campus on Saturday, March 24. The day-long “pathways to joy” included yoga (mat or chair), discovering one’s chakra energy centers, meditation, journaling and a gourmet lunch.

A free lecture — “How Will the New Tax Law Affect You?” — was offered at SouthShore UCC/Sun City Center on Wednesday afternoon, February 28. Speakers included a Certified Financial Planner and a Certified Public Accountant.

Beginning in February, Interim Pastor Rev. Bob Roberts at First UCC/Orlando began a very unusual series of sermons. Over the months he has been at the church, he has referenced that he is writing a book, the working title of which is Love beyond...
Measure — Joy Beyond Words. It is a memoir in which he tries to explain why, after 84 years of living, he believes more firmly in God and the gospel than he ever had and why he believes so firmly that the life of faith is the best life to live. On February 11 he began reading the manuscript of his book as the morning sermon. It is log-loaded with stories he thinks his parishioners will find interesting and uplifting. And he says he knows it will be useful to him as he tries to edit and discover ways to improve the manuscript — openly asking his audience to critique. He started with chapter one, “Why Write?”

Several churches had “Souper Bowls” on Super Bowl Sunday. This included: Coral Gables Congregational UCC (Patriots fans were instructed to bring bean soup and Eagle’s fans were to bring vegetable soup); Hope UCC/Rockledge (they collected 119 cans of fruit, 12 cans of soup, 21 boxes of cereal and $260, which went to the Brevard Sharing Center); Eternal Hope UCC/Valparaiso (delivered food to Sharing and Caring); Church of the Palms/Deerly Beach (collected foods went to CROS Ministries).

On Wednesday mornings from the end of February through mid-March, Naples UCC offered its “2018 Aging Well Series,” utilizing the expertise of specialists in geriatrics, Alzheimers, gastroenterology and senior housing.

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota held its Health Fair on Sunday, March 18, from 9am-1pm with local community health-care representatives offering information about assisted living, health insurance, diet concerns, disease prevention and much more. Many free screenings were offered, such as blood pressure, vision and hearing tests along with skin cancer screenings.

Examples of Great Loves

Children: UCC/St. Augustine (p. 14)
Neighbors: First Congregational Church/Lake Worth (p. 10)
Environment: Mayflower Congregational Church/Naples & Naples UCC (p. 29)

For more about Three Great Loves, go to page 11

The end-of-the-year Advent giving through the various outreach ministries at the United Church of Gainesville included:

- Over $3,000 given away to individuals, families and organizations recommended by church members through UCG’s mini-grant program
- Over 200 gifts supplied to the Angel Gift Market at Rawlings Elementary, with the leftover gifts distributed between the Behavioral Reward Shop at Rawlings and the Lake Butler Children’s Hospital
- $717 in proceeds from the Angel Gift Market given to the administrators of Rawlings Elementary to be used as they see fit
- 160 socks filled with goodies and good supplies distributed by the church’s youth groups at its Grace Marketplace supper service
- $900 given to the Community Weatherization Coalition
- $3,000 given to the Florida Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls
- 2,947 lbs of food given through its Food First monthly offerings to the Gainesville Community Ministries

Faith UCC/Dunedin is involved in a hands-on ministry experience with HEP (Homeless Emergency Project) in Clearwater, which provides shelter, programs and services for those experiencing homelessness. Church members will help serve lunch and dinner meals at the facility and share in conversation with the clients.

Enough members of Altamonte Chapel Community UCC/Altamonte Springs donated $20 toward purchasing a pair of sneaker for a child in need to raise $860, with the check presented by Hanna and Toni.

Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole is offering an “easy fundraiser.” For every purchase someone makes at iGive.com citing the church, the church will receive a percentage donation. There are over 1,000 mainstream department stores, catalogue vendors, home/garden services, travel providers, airlines, car rentals and hotels from which to choose (donation amounts vary per business). There is no fee required to sign up, plus the site is secure and safe.

Faith Family UCC/Brandon has partnered with Market America (aka shop.com) to raise money for the church while members shop online. A “how to shop” online PowerPoint presentation showed members how to have ready access using the shop.com and shop buddy apps.

Using this not only raises money for Faith Family but also gives participants a “piggy bank” in which to personally earn cash back on purchases.

As part of its efforts in support of community outreach, Spring Hill UCC offers a SCRIP program whereby members and friends can purchase gift cards. When one places an order for gift cards, the church purchases them from the Great Lakes Gift Center at a discount.

This means the purchaser receives the full face value of the card while SHUCC receives a small percentage, which goes to support the congregation’s community outreach.
The ever-popular Trivia Night took place Friday evening, March 9, at Pensacola Beach Community UCC where tables of eight competed against one another to discover who knows their Trivia best.

Mayflower UCC/Naples' first Safe Driving class was so popular that it hosted a second AARP Safe Driving Class on Tuesday, March 13. This makes participants eligible for a 15% discount on automobile insurance, and this applies to car insurance in all states (in New York State one needs to check with one’s insurance company, but in all other 49 states it is an automatic credit).

More than two dozen members of Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park participated in a Micah 6:8 retreat on Saturday, February 17. It was divided into three sections with workshops: “Walk Humbly with God” (“Sharing the Good News” and “Public Prayers”); “Love Mercy” (compassionate listening); and “Do Justice” (FAST – Faith & Action for Strength Together organization in Pinellas County).

Several of our churches recently have been involved in Habitat for Humanity projects. To celebrate the United Church of Marco Island's fiftieth anniversary, the congregation conducted a joint fundraiser to benefit the church’s capital fund and Habitat, with a goal of raising $150,000. On Saturday, February 17, Pastor Rev. Mark Williams dedicated four homes funded by the church in 2017 in the Legacy Lakes neighborhood. On Saturday, February 10, members from Naples UCC worked on a Habitat home in Golden Gate Estates. A week later a team from Coral Gables Congregational UCC invested sweat equity in Perrine/South Miami Heights. Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami had a “Blitz Build” day on February 24. Members from Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach performed light carpentry, painting and landscaping at a Habitat site on Saturday, March 24.

Rev. Dr. Bob Sichta (Congregational UCC/Bradenton) is fired up that 2018 is the International Year of the Woman, March 8 was International Woman’s Day and that Sunday, March 11 was International Women’s Sunday but “we have work to do.” He asks, “Did you know no major newspaper published the obituaries of Ida B. Wells or Sylvia Plath? When we cannot remember the greatest among us, let alone acknowledge them after they are gone, it says discomfitting things about how we understand our faith. We have work to do.” So he encouraged members of his church to read about those two lives and those of 13 other remarkable women at “Overlooked” Click Here He encouraged his parishioners to be in church on March 11 to hear his sermon, titled “Timeless.”

Faith UCC/Dunedin will be one of a dozen plus faith groups and other organizations participating in the United Faiths Walk of Peace on Sunday afternoon, April 29. This will be a two-mile walk through Dunedin with various stops along the way at which a variety of faith leaders will share reflections on peace.

Several members of First United Church of Tampa protested when Luis Blanco — a 20 year resident of Plant City, father of six and sole breadwinner for his family — was detained when he checked in with immigration authorities and was sent to a Miami detention center to be deported. The church took up a collection to help pay the family’s utility bill and another church stepped forward to pay rent for a couple of months.

The Community Church of Vero Beach has begun checking itself out through a series of small group meetings to consider how members view CCOVB’s purpose as a church and how this vision will shape its future. Its Vision 2020 Planning Team has been exploring this concept as it looks ahead to the church’s 100 year anniversary in 2024.

If you like pancakes, you can count on Holiday UCC to keep you smiling. They held their popular monthly pancake breakfasts in January, February and March and the last one of the season will be Saturday, April 7.

Stephen Ministries is playing an important part in the lives of many of our churches. Church members are trained to be able to provide one-to-one Christ-centered care to people who are experiencing a difficult time in life – whether grief, divorce, illness, financial struggles. First Congregational Church/Winter Park is one. Seven members at Spring Hill UCC completed their training in February. On January 21, the 31-year Stephen Ministry at Venice UCC was celebrated during worship.

Naples UCC has been enrolled as a Stephen Ministry congregation since 1988, with Stephen Leaders having trained 150 lay Ministers who have ministered to over 1,200 hurting individuals with over 36,000 hours of care. If you are interested in starting this program at your church, consider contacting staff at one of these congregations.

The Gift and Thrift Store at Port Orange UCC has gotten off to a great start with sales of some $4,500 during January and February. The bad news? They’re low on inventory!

A Seder was hosted at Pilgrim Congregational Church/St. Petersburg by Supply Minster Rev. Larry Shutsko in conjunction with a Messianic Jewish group on Saturday, March 31.

North Port Community UCC is holding its first annual “Faith Builder” church retreat from Thursday, May 3-Saturday, May 5, at DaySpring Conference Center in Parrish. Pastor Rev. Attila Szemesi and Ty Morgan, counselor/spiritual director at the Cornerstone of Hope, will facilitate sessions aimed to help build participants’ faith and renew their spirituality. The United Church of Gainesville has its All-Church Retreat on April 13-15 at Warren Willis Camp near Fruitland Park. It will be a weekend of fun, relaxation and fellowship with the theme “Listen, Tell, Share.”
“A Weekend with the Very Rev. Tracey Lind” was the program on February 17-18 at Coral Gables Congregational UCC.

Rev. Tracey, most recently the Dean of Trinity Cathedral in Cleveland, shared her experiences living with frontotemporal degeneration (a disease that results in progressive damage of the temporal and/or frontal lobes of the brain), which results in a gradual progressive decline in language, mobility, behavior and short-term memory.

Her presentations over the weekend were “Living with Dementia” and “Through the Looking Glass: Dementia from the Inside Out”; she also preached on Sunday.

Registration is now open for National Open and Affirming Gathering, June 27-30, at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, TX! Join us for this annual family reunion of our growing movement of LGBTQ-affirming communities in the United Church of Christ. Help us welcome ONA church #1500, and renew our commitment to become a church where everyone is welcome, wanted and needed, and no one left behind!

This year’s theme is “Living Our Covenant Beyond Boundaries.” We live in a time of great danger and great opportunity. The Trump Administration is threatening the basic rights for which the LGBTQ community and our allies fought for years. Violence against transgender Americans is on the rise. Research shows that anti-LGBTQ feelings, which had been declining steadily for two decades, are creeping upward again. And ONA congregations are challenged not only to defend their LGBTQ neighbors, but all whose lives and human dignity are under attack.

If there was ever a year when National ONA Gathering was needed, this is it!

Our keynoter is the Rev. Justo González II, a leader in the UCC’s Sanctuary Movement, who will challenge us to renew and expand our ONA covenants. Stay tuned more about the program in the coming weeks.

More information and registration are at www.openandaffirming.org/ona-gathering. If you have any questions, please contact us at ona@openandaffirming.org.

LGBTQ

Covenant in Action – Our Churches Working Together

“Water Is Life” is the theme chosen by the Naples UCC, Mayflower UCC/Naples and a Lutheran Church to celebrate Earth Day on April 22. In preparation, the groups have presented a series of informational programs focusing on three threats to their own water in Naples. These free workshops were open to the community.

• “Ground Water Is Life: The Impact of Hydraulic Fracking” was the first threat to be explored with a workshop held on January 8 at the NUCC. A follow-up workshop on fracking was held on February 20 at Naples UCC.

• “Drinking Water Is Life: The Impact of Contamination on Our Drinking Water” was presented in partnership with the Blue Zones Project of SW Florida on February 15 at Emmanuel Lutheran Church.

• “Ocean Water Is Life: The Impact of a Changing Climate” was presented in collaboration with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection on March 15 at Mayflower UCC.

• “Earth Day—Water Is Life” will be a free Earth Day concert at Cambier Park on Saturday, April 22, at 5pm at the band shell in downtown Naples. The concert will feature a variety of genres, styles and performers and information tables staffed by leading SW Florida conservation organizations and a kids’ art showcase celebrating our earth and the theme “Water Is Life.”

Pam Davis of Blessed Life Creations has taken the old worn pulpit at Pensacola Beach Community UCC and refurbished it to go with the church’s current “beach inspired” look, generously donating her time and supplies. She has also beautifully handcrafted its Communion table, entry table and coastal donation box. The old pulpit had been hiding away in a closet and unused until now, and her work has enabled the congregation to bring back some of its past history — and a new coastal look all at the same time. After all, the church IS on the beach!

Altamonte Chapel Community UCC/Altamonte Springs is thanking all who have given so generously to its “Building Faith” capital campaign, with over $120,000 in pledges and donations so far. With the bridal suite and adjoining restroom undergoing renovation, they are very excited to be upgrading the space for all their future brides.
**BOOKS WE’RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER...**

*This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* by Naomi Klein, *Here Comes the Sun* by Nicole Dennis-Benn, *Dance of the Jakaranda* by Petersburg Kimani and *Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II* by Lisa Munday (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

*Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* by Lisa See and *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead* by Brené Brown (Naples UCC)

*Fates and Traitors* by Jennifer Chiaverini and *A Seminole Legend: The Life of Betty Mae Tiger Jumper* by Betty Mae Tiger Jumper and Patsy West (Hope UCC/Rockledge)


*Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* by Walter Wink, *Salt Houses* by Hala Alyan, *The Pecan Man* by Cassie Dandridge Selleck and *The Ninth Hour* by Alice McDermott (First Congregational Church/Winter Park)

*You Are Loved: Embracing God’s Love for You* by Sally Clarkson and Angela Perritt and *Britt-Marie Was Here* by Fredrick Backman (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)

*Forever Island* by Patrick D. Smith and *Don’t Tell Me You’re Afraid* by Giuseppe Catozzella (Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples)


And Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner was honored to have been asked to interview Maria Shriver at Books and Books as part of a presentation of her new book, *I’ve Been Thinking... Reflections, Prayers and Meditations for a Meaningful Life*.

**DISCUSSIONS/SEMINARS/PRESENTATIONS WE’RE HAVING...**


“Exploring Prayer” (CrossRoads Community UCC/Melbourne)

“Back Roads of the Bible” (Altamonte Chapel Community UCC/Altamonte Springs)

Seminar on grieving (Holiday UCC)

“Depression: How to Recognize It In You Or In Someone Else” and “Women’s Rights and Religious Freedoms As Relates to the Women of Saudi Arabia” and “Travel Potpourri: Lions, Tigers and Homo Sapiens” (United Church of Marco Island)

“Taxes, Trusts, Estates and Life Planning Documents” (Faith Family UCC/Brandon)

“Refugees in America” (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)


“The Challenge of Paul” (Hope UCC/Rockledge)

“Words Matter: A Spiritual Formation Series” (Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park)

“A Theology of Sexuality” and “God, Guns and the Good Old USA” (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

“Stating Our Faith: The UCC’s Statement of Faith in a Diverse World” and “What do you Want in Life and in Your Career?” (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

“Ocean Water Is Life: The Impact of a Changing Climate” (Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples)

“Music Thanatology” (Christ Congregational UCC/Miami)

“Introduction to Immokalee” (Venice UCC)

“Prayer, Prose and Poetry” and “Elder Law and Planning Advocacy” (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)
Marco Island at 50

The United Church of Marco Island’s 50th anniversary celebration culminated on Sunday, March 18, with awesome worship that included a guest bagpiper and a dynamic soloist. Then followed an announcement about the 50th fundraiser-giving thermometer that has overflown with member generosity, greetings from Regional Conference Minister Rev. Leslie Etheridge.

There was a presentation by Amy Disseler (daughter of former beloved Pastor Dick Disseler photo below) and a sermon about the “God of our future” entitled “The Gardner” from John 20: 13-20.

A delicious pot luck luncheon with an abundant spread of food and desserts followed the service.

First United of Tampa Adds to Hispanic Ministry

Rev. Esther Robles is continuing her faith ministry as an Associate Minister for the Hispanic Community at First United Church of Tampa. She is an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and through the partnership between the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church has joined First United. In this post she succeeds Rev. Fernando Bernard Davila.

Rev. Blair Stewart — a founder of First Congregational UCC/ Ocala, a social activist and founding clergy member of Interfaith Emergency Services – died February 14 following a motorcycle mishap on U.S. 27 west of I-75. He was riding a three-wheeled motorcycle when it overturned after he failed to brake in time; when he swerved to avoid colliding with cars stopped at a traffic signal he struck a curb. He is survived by his wife of 48 years, Carol, a son and two daughters.

Said his wife, “Blair’s whole life was about helping people.” After living in Miami, he and his family moved to Ocala when he decided to open a church in a growing area. By 1984 he had established First Congregational using another church’s chapel and started with zero members.

By 1985 the church’s current Fellowship Hall was opened as the Sanctuary and used until around 2000 when the current Sanctuary was completed. After he retired in 2005 the Hall was renamed the Blair Stewart Enrichment Center. He leaves a legacy of some 50 years of ministerial work and social activism as an organizer and counselor.
“Words Matter: A Spiritual Formation Series” was offered for Sunday worship in March at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park at which time church members and friends could share an invitation to confession and assurance of grace written in the words of their own lives.

The idea emerged from Rev. Molly Baskette’s book Standing Naked Before God: The Art of Public Confession (Rev. Molly was the keynote speaker at the Florida Conference annual Gathering in October).

A message from Rev. Dr. Dawson Taylor, from the March Steeplelights newsletter of Naples UCC

I want to share with you about a new worship and community experience that we’re calling Easter Extra! It will take place on Saturday night (March 31) at 5pm. We will begin with an abbreviated, yet meaningful, Easter Family Worship Service with guest artists Rebecca Richardson and Dan Heck leading the music. Following worship, we will have our annual Easter Egg Hunt! And following that, we will have a dinner sponsored by our Membership and Growth Committee.

This worship is born out of several ideas. First, we are not having our 8am Sunday-morning service. We have seen declining attendance over the years, and whenever worship times are shifted, it makes it more difficult. Second, I think the large crowds of Easter scare some people away, especially families with young children. Perhaps something more casual and smaller would be more appealing?

We want to continue being a church that is innovative and willing to try new things. You can ask yourself the question, “What would I be willing to do for my children or grandchildren to be comfortable going to church?” Then you can almost guarantee that is why we are doing some of the things we are. We want to find ways to introduce (or re-introduce) and welcome people to our church.

Also happening at Naples UCC:

On March 1 the Women’s Spirituality Group was lead in exploring “Walking Through Lent: The Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice.”

NUCC had a Lenten book study using Living Grace: Spiritual Growth in the Everyday World by Rev. Martie McMane. Participants met on Wednesday afternoons for six weeks beginning February 14. The church also offered midweek devotions at noon on Wednesdays beginning February 21 in the Sanctuary with Dr. Becky Weese-Rumpf on the organ/piano (other musicians and the choir performed weekly). Meditations were led by clergy staff.

At UCC/New Smyrna Beach Easter will be “Dress For Less.” As they share in their March newsletter:

“Every year hundreds of millions are spent on fancy Easter attire. What if, instead, we put our money to use for a greater cause — feed the orphans, care for the widows and make a positive change in the world? Join in — ditch the fancy garb and FORGET THE FROCK.

To participate you can purchase or wear a current charity T Shirt on Easter Sunday. You may purchase from the link below or from a local charity. Together, we can unite as one to make this happen. The link is www.forgetthefrock.org. This year let us dress for a purpose united in bringing LOVE into the world at Easter!”

Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples began the Lenten season on Ash Wednesday evening and then embarked on a Lenten season Sunday sermon series on the seven deadly sins. Six Sundays and seven sins (they doubled up on one of them). Here’s the list: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth. What fun!
In an effort to assist members find ways in which to grow deeper in their spiritual journeys, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach made available a 40 day Lenten journey entitled, “Holy Habits.” It was a commitment by those wishing to participate for working to create daily habits that expand the horizon of one’s faith as well as grow a fuller sense of what it takes to live a prayerful life — a change of life. Participants could meet on either Wednesday afternoon or evening for group sessions. Five spiritual disciplines were practiced by for centuries by disciples, pilgrims, monks and believers who sought to broaden their love, increase their sense of compassion, nurture their spirit of gratitude and through it all grow closer to God. The challenge for PAG church members was a commitment to:

- Worship — attend at least five worship Sundays during Lent
- Study — attend at least two of the Holy Habits Bible study classes and read articles or books suggested in weekly e-blasts
- Pray — visit the church website or Facebook daily for morning and evening Scripture and prayer suggestions
- Serve — put faith into action by giving of time, talent and sweat by: participating in a workday at the church; an environmental day at Egmont Key state park; working at a Habitat for Humanity site; visiting shut-ins; creating a care package or gift bag; and ushering or greeting during a Sunday service
- Give — a tithe for the month of March

Members of First United Church of Tampa were invited to reflect upon Lent and stewardship, pondering how to move from commitment to accountability and deciding how to place the stewardship of God’s gifts at the center of one’s life. They were encouraged to share these reflections via Pastor Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson’s weekly e-messages.

The Lenten series at the UCC/St. Augustine was “What are you up to?” It was an invitation to consider all that Jesus was “up to” and all that we are called to be “up to” in his name.

In place of an Ash Wednesday service at Eternal Hope UCC/Valparaiso a Bible Study was offered that evening with an opportunity to receive ashes.

CrossRoads Community UCC/Melbourne held a Good Friday Candlelight Vigil at its labyrinth.

Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg’s 50th anniversary theme, “Foundation for the Future,” was the theme for the Lenten season. Church members were encouraged to take on something for Lent like additional volunteer work or an environmental practice. They were encouraged to consider what was given up or given on as a spiritual discipline. A bulletin board at church was made available for posting what was given up so that the church family could inspire everyone to pray for each other and to share stories.

Rev. Kim Wells posted devotions on the church website. Parishioners were encouraged to spend time in silence each day, setting aside time to stop and just be not do and letting whatever thoughts come or go as they will. It was suggested that a set amount of time be dedicated, say 15 minutes a day, to observe the discipline of silence and that it was something that a family could do together.

Member Rev. Emily Bell led a weekly Wednesday evening gathering based on the ancient prayer practice of lectio divina, a contemplative way of praying the Scriptures. The sessions followed up on the themes and scriptures used the previous Sunday in church. The labyrinth was also available for prayer practice on Wednesdays and throughout the Lenten season.

An outdoor Ash Wednesday service was held around a fire next to the lake at a church members’ home. It included communion and the imposition of ashes. On Maundy Thursday a light soup supper was served in Fellowship Hall followed by a service of communion and Tenebrae in the sanctuary. On Good Friday there was a guided labyrinth walk at noon related to the crucifixion of Jesus, and the Sanctuary was open for meditation and prayer from noon until 3pm.

The celebration of Easter will begin with a sunrise service at 7am outdoors on the church grounds followed by breakfast in the Fellowship Hall.

An intergenerational service begins at 10:30 followed by an Easter Egg hunt.
The Mission Team at Spring Hill UCC had its eighth annual book drive as a Lenten devotion this year.

On February 11, there was a table in the Narthex with a book display. Books were available for purchase between $13-$17 (most were purchased through Amazon.com at a discount). Along with the books, there was a basket with envelopes for donations, whether large or small.

Through the donations, the Missions Team will present a hardcover book to approximately 90 children at the end of school in May to encourage their summer reading. For some of these children, it is the first book that they have ever received. These books are meant to be a keepsake. They are quality literature and are on various reading levels.

From the feedback that has been received when the Team has visited the school on other occasions, they still remember the title of the particular book that they received. SHUCC is making a difference in their lives!

Coral Gables Congregational UCC once again had its annual Mardi Gras worship and celebration complete with boas, beads and masks. It was a joyous, spirit-filled worship as they let loose on the Sunday before the more reflective and quieter Lenten season began. There was swinging and swaying and lots of singing, be praying, preaching and, of course, a New Orleans style parade. It was celebrative worship at its best. At the end of the service, they dedicated the new sculpture that had been given to the church by the Knezevich family. Following the dedication, everyone moved into Fellowship Hall for a Cajun-style luncheon (free will donation) with jambalaya, biscuits, slaw and alleluia cake. They marked the beginning of Lent with an Ash Wednesday service — worship, prayer, music and the symbolic act of receiving ashes. This was a child-friendly service and families were encouraged to worship together. It was shared with the brothers and sisters from CG’s German-language ministry and Spanish-language services as well. Good Friday was a trilingual service in Spanish, German and English, joining with clergy and members of Riverside Presbyterian Church. Easter would offer one morning service in Spanish and an afternoon in German.

From Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner: “As Floridians we are so very fortunate to live near (or for some of you on) the beach. It can be a place of reflection, peace and contentment, away from the stresses of the world. Just dig your feet in the sand, hear the waves lapping against the shore and look out upon the endless horizon as you escape into the beauty of God’s creation. Perhaps the beach is one of those places where we can hear God’s voice and experience God’s presence most fully. Maybe that is why Jesus spent a lot of time on the beach or on the shore. He did much of his ministry — and lived — near the Sea of Galilee. In fact, one of the stories is that it was at the water’s edge that he called the first disciples, fishermen, who as the Gospel of Luke tells us were washing their fishing nets near their boats.

During the Lenten season, the Pastoral Team invites you to take a beach journey, both as Floridians and as people of faith, to see what the lessons of the sandy beach can offer us. Each Sunday in Lent, we will pour sand into a large vessel filling it slowly and deliberately as we mark our movement toward the beauty and joy of Easter Sunday. Also each time we worship there will be fishing nets — just like those early disciples were using when Jesus first called them — on which you can tie prayer requests, concerns and joys. These nets will be presented on Easter Sunday as an offering, as Jesus did (John 21:5-6) on the beach.

Come and journey with us and embrace the lessons of the sandy beach as we travel together through this sacred and holy season.”
The Lenten worship theme at the United Church of Gainesville was “The Shadow of the Day,” inviting church members to re-examine the shadow sides of our faith, the paradoxes and hard questions, the long nights of the soul and the perseverance toward life and hope that keeps us moving toward the rebirth of spring and Eastertide. But first, there is the deep shadow time... Church members submitted original written word and visual art for this year’s Lenten devotional. There was a special celebration on Sunday, February 11, with the joy of New Orleans style jazz and the energy of Mardi Gras with the Hogtown Strutters at worship. A labyrinth was in the Sanctuary and available for meditation and for walking February 12-16 with Ash Wednesday services and labyrinth walks on February 14.

Lenten Contemplative Prayer was offered on Wednesday evenings from 6-7pm in the Sanctuary. People were invited to this quiet time each week, in the beauty of the candlelit Sanctuary, to nurture their souls with silence, with reflection and prayer, with Psalms and poetry, all connected to the simple spiritual practices of attention and awareness. Toward the end of the hour, the assembled gathered in small groups to share and listen with one another. This year there were on-going small groups for participants who were able to attend at least three of the five evenings.

The Seminar Committee prepared the theme “The Concept of Evil.” with a wide-ranging study on the ideas of evil from across the ages. The Sunday morning seminars had titles including: “Hitler’s Shadow: Evil Ascendant,” “Owning Your Own Shadow,” “The Intergalactic Battle of Good v. Evil: The Star Wars Saga” and “The Biology of Evil.”

Church of the Palms/Delray Beach used Plenty Good Room: A Lenten Bible Study Based on African American Spirituals for a unique Bible study that combines an in-depth look at Scripture, American history and the music and lyrics of six African American spirituals. The six-session study provided Biblical, social and historical analyses of the spirituals. The church also offered Lenten “Soul Suppers” on Wednesday evenings, which were followed by “Sacred Conversations” on race (see more in “Time for Conversations” elsewhere in this issue).

The Easter Bunny got an early hop at the church by appearing on Saturday morning, March 24. There was face painting, snacks, the egg hunt and prizes and an appearance by special musical attraction Shawn Thomas, contemporary Christian singer/songwriter and frequent guest at Florida UCC churches. After the Easter service there will be a release of 100 butterflies.

The United Church of Marco Island offered a “Journey to the Cross” on Good Friday as an experience for all ages. Meditating on the events of Good Friday can be profound. The challenge for most of us is shutting out the noise and distractions of everyday life long enough to quiet our souls and listen to the Spirit of God. Journey to the Cross was an experiential, hands-on opportunity that allowed participants to experience Jesus’ final hours.

They saw, heard, smelled, felt, tasted and reflected as they journeyed on their own way of the cross. This was meant to be a powerful experience that would make one re-think the sacrifice, suffering and victory of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Participants traveled at their own pace anytime between 1-5pm.

There were seven stations representing the seven last sayings of Jesus. Participants picked up a devotional, entered a station and spent as much time as needed. There was adequate room for several persons to participate at one time. They read silently to themselves or read to their children as needed. Once they had spent time in prayer, they were directed to the next station.

As members of Faith Family UCC/Brandon moved ever steadily toward Good Friday, they were invited to consider giving at that service one of the five-minute testimonials that accompany the seven last words of Christ, those words being:

2. “This day you shall be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23: 39-43)
3. “Mother, here is your son; son, here is your mother.” (John 19: 25-27)
4. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15: 33-37)
6. “It is finished.” (John 19: 30)

Those felt called to speak to one of these words from their own life experience were to inform Pastor Rev. Dr. Kathy Rooke.

The Easter Bunny got an early hop at the church by appearing on Saturday morning, March 24. There was face painting, snacks, the egg hunt and prizes and an appearance by special musical attraction Shawn Thomas, contemporary Christian singer/songwriter and frequent guest at Florida UCC churches. After the Easter service there will be a release of 100 butterflies.

Every Thursday from February 15-March 22 a “Lenten Poetry and Organ” series was offered at the Community Church of Vero Beach and on Good Friday it was Verdi’s “Requiem” with four soloists, choir and orchestra.
During Lent Fort Myers Congregational UCC offered a six week series, “Cracking the Shell of Whiteness,” led by Lyn and John Clark Pegg and others. This was an interactive reflection/discussion group for people who are interested in being effective allies with people of color in the work of dismantling racism and undoing white privilege.

Lyn and John are new-comers to FMCUCC, hailing from Duluth, MN. Lyn is a retired psychologist and educator, and John is a retired UCC minister and community organizer. They have had extensive involvement in the anti-racism and civil rights movement for many years.

On Ash Wednesday Fort Myers MCUCC took it to the streets — well, to the parking lot and driveway, at least. From noon until 3pm, Pastor Rev. Dave Bucey performed the age-old rite of Imposition of Ashes to anyone who turned off College Parkway and presented themselves. Signs directed passersby to turn into the church’s driveway and roll down their auto window, if driving, or just walk up the driveway and receive the mark of ashes.

This Lenten season at North Port Community UCC was busy with new happenings. Along with traditional Lenten Simple Soup and Study evenings, the congregation took part in two faith building events.

In February members visited the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, the full day’s tour lifting their faith and renewing them spiritually as they witnessed the words of Jesus in acting and song.

In March they continued with their Family Movie afternoon, viewing “The Ride,” an emotional story produced through the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (this was a free mission to the community). Afterward they enjoyed a meatloaf supper with an Easter Trivia contest.

Venice UCC is once again giving 36 food baskets to congregation members, daycare teachers and families and community members who would be blessed by the gift of food during the holiday season.

Those wishing to donate food could “adopt” items to give like hams, 5lbs of potatoes, various other vegetables, pasta, canned fruits, eggs, cake mix and frosting or make a monetary contribution.

Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole had an Ash Wednesday Service with imposition of ashes.

On Palm Sunday they held their annual Hosannah Palm Parade as church-goers paraded down Park Boulevard and around the church property in remembrance of Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem.

As part of its “Wednesday Night Live” series, First Congregational Church/Winter Park offered a four-week Lenten series, “Come to the Table: Discovering Our Family’s Spiritual Meal.”

Have you ever wondered what Jesus was really doing at that last Passover meal with his disciples in the Upper Room? Do you want to learn more about why we continue to celebrate this spiritual meal as a focal point of our worship?

Would you like to deepen your experience of God’s presence each time we share this meal together? During this four-week series, participants took an experiential and interactive approach to discovering the origins of this spiritual meal, the reasons we continue to celebrate it and ways we may experience it more fully together. They looked at how Jesus prepared this meal for us and our response to him. They considered how we set the table for it including who we invite to share it with us. They explored the ways in which we participate and share this meal with each other. And finally they explored how we go out into the world to feed others with the blessings we’ve received from this table.

For Easter morning, church goers will head “down the street” for a sunrise service at the lake at nearby Rollins College.
From 2000 to 2005 we lived in Seguin, TX, where I pastored a UCC church. The town is east of San Antonio just off Interstate 10 on the banks of the Guadalupe River on the west side of town and Geronimo Creek on the east side. In a restructuring in the national setting of the UCC in 2000, a call went out for Conference Disaster Coordinators. I volunteered for the South Central Conference.

Prior to our arrival, Seguin had its 100 year flood in 1998. Some 700 homes were flooded or washed away; in one section of the town (Glen Cove), 42 homes were washed away. After that storm — which by the way was a local thunderstorm that generated 22 inches of rain — the town made a decision that no homes would be rebuilt in Glen Cove. The folks that owned the homes had to rebuild in another location.

In 2002 during our time there, another flood happened on the Fourth of July. On this occasion, 400 homes were flooded. Since I was serving as the Conference Disaster Coordinator at the time, the UCC Disaster Ministries sent $25,000 to the Long Term Recovery Committee (LTRC) in the town. As rebuild cases were brought to the committee, I was able to say how much of the UCC funds were used on each project.

Seguin has periodic river flooding mostly due to thunderstorms that roll through the area. There was another flood in 2004 where we had 11 inches of rain in about two hours. Schools were let out early, and as I went to pick up our daughter I had to turn around on my normal route because of high water. Remember, “Turn around, don’t drown.” The last flood I recall in the town happened in 2015.

Because of the periodic flooding, the LTRC in Seguin remains active and keeps a small balance in their bank account so when the next flood hits it is easier for the committee to ramp up their work.

The UCC has been involved with long term disaster recovery since it began doing this ministry nationally in 2000. The UCC supports long term recovery efforts in countless disasters both nationally and internationally. In Florida, the UCC currently supports the long term recovery efforts in Volusia County through VIND (the long term recovery organization in Volusia County) initially in response to Hurricane Matthew in 2016 and now Irma last year. In the coming months, there will more Long Term Recovery Committees developed and the UCC and other denominations will be there with funds and volunteers to assist in rebuilding efforts. Assistance often comes in the form of seed grants to LTRCs to help them get up and running and partner with them for the long term.

During 2018 look for more involvement from the UCC both here in Florida, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in long term recovery efforts. To keep up to date on efforts from the denomination please visit www.ucc.org/disaster.

Volunteers from Granville UCC/Granville, IL, returned to the area February 4-10 to continue with disaster recovery efforts to which they contributed a year ago, and once again they are staying at the UCC/St. Augustine. Their visit was reported in an article in the January 26 UCC News (http://www.ucc.org/illinois_church_mission_team_to_florida_for_long_term_disaster_recovery_01262018), which noted the efforts the church had made welcoming the volunteers welcome last year. In addition to continuing to work on drywall repairs from Hurricane Matthew, there is now clean up to do as a result of Hurricane Irma. In accordance with UCC tradition, the Granville volunteers were greeted with a tasty potluck dinner.

Members at Venice UCC had the opportunity on March 27 to learn about hurricane preparedness from the Emergency Management Chief for Sarasota County.
If you’re looking for something unique to do this summer, come join us on a journey of exploration, enlightenment and multiculturalism as we take a pilgrimage to Franklinton Center at Bricks in Whitakers, NC, June 10-14.

Once a slave plantation that was transformed into one of the first accredited schools for African Americans in the South, Franklinton Center at Bricks has a rich and interesting history.

The historic landmark of the United Church of Christ today serves as a conference, retreat and educational facility focusing on justice advocacy and leadership development. It also serves the local community through various projects, including food justice and literacy outreach and programming. You can learn more about the Franklinton Center [here](#) and on YouTube [here](#).

Don’t miss your chance to immerse yourself in an informative, interactive Christian learning experience that just might change the way you see the world. We only have room for 45 youths and 10 chaperones (one adult per youth group please). This Youth Pilgrimage to Franklinton Center at Bricks is first-come, first-served, and registration will close when all available slots are filled. So don’t delay. [Register today!](#)

This event is being subsidized by the Florida Conference’s Wilson Fund. Cost is just $150 per person, which includes bus transportation to and from Franklinton Center at Bricks, lodgings at the Center, all meals and all programs and activities at the Center. You can [download a promotional flyer here](#).

For more information, contact Rev. Dr. Sheila Guillaume at sheilag@uccfla.org.

The youth group at [Port Orange UCC](#) continues to grow as a true community outreach. The format has been changed to include Bible study and discussion as its primary focus with food and fun in the mix. Youth Leader Sher Butler thought the change would result in fewer youth, but the opposite has happened. Earlier this year it had its biggest group so far — 16 teenagers and only four of them attend the church. Sher reports they are thirsty for God and finding their place in the world. With the group growing, the church is seeking two additional adults who would be willing to help out on Tuesday evenings (6-8pm).

The Annual Ash Wednesday Pancake Supper at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota was another of the youth fundraisers to help send church youth to Cedar Kirk Camp and Conference Center in Lithia where camp costs around $550 per youth. But because church summer camp can provide lasting memories and friendships and strengthen faith, the church is committed to sending its youth to camp. For 2019, the congregation is exploring a mission trip for youth and in 2020 sending youth to the UCC’s National Youth Event.

Can’t figure out how to use your computer, smartphone or tablet? If you were anywhere near Naples UCC on Sunday, February 11, you could have had church youth provide you with helpful tech tips on using your devices. Donations for this service went to help fund the youth group’s 2018 Justice Journey to Colorado.

“Work wanted and we’re not afraid to get dirty!”

That’s the message at [Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach](#) as the senior high youth group fundraises for its summer work camp. Messy garages, closets and rooms, pets to walk, yards to mow or rake, painting — you name it and they’ll get it done.

**Florida Conference Youth Ministers**

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At Coral Gables Congregational UCC, the Middle School Youth Service weekend with DOOR Miami took place on Friday, March 2-Sunday, March 4. This was a weekend of service and learning in Miami on retreat with DOOR, an organization that does outreach and education on issues of justice and service in Miami-Dade.

The High School Youth Service weekend with DOOR Miami was similar and was scheduled the following weekend, Friday, March 9-Sunday, March 11.

The cost to participate was $100, and scholarships were available.

High school youth from the United Church of Gainesville embarked on a “mystery trip” (the youth knew nothing about it before or any of the next stops during) to Atlanta January 13-15.

They worshiped with First Congregational Church of Atlanta, met with former U.N. Ambassador (and UCC clergy) Rev. Andrew Young, visited the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, Stone Mountain and enjoyed the Broadway tour of “The Lion King.”
Including Children in Worship on Communion Sundays
BY MARTY HODGKINS, FAITH FORMATION TEAM LEADER
SPRING HILL UCC

This past year, with the encouragement of Pastor Rev. Robin DeAngelis, the Faith Formation Team decided to include children in worship on Communion Sundays.

As our team reflected on the faith development of children, we acknowledged that the family and the congregation are two important settings for the education and spiritual formation of children. The following excerpt from an article titled “Steps to Planning Family Worship,” gives a strong rationale for intentionally including children in worship.

“. . . There are at least three important reasons to involve children in worship. The first reason is theological. When Jesus says, “Let the children come,” our congregation believes that he is saying that children belong in the worshiping community.

The worship service is the heart of our church life and we think, that children need to be included and welcomed so that they learn that they belong.

The second reason is developmental. Recent understandings of child development theory make it clear that children learn from the moment of birth, if not before. They are open to their environment taking in sensory information every moment. We take our infants everywhere, yet some say “children don’t belong in church.” God comes to us at all ages and all stages. With their innocence, children are often more open to the mystery, to the glorious music and the candles in our worship environment. God comes to those who are fidgety, curious, and talkative as well as those who are quiet and serene. Children’s spiritual life grows through experiencing God in worship. The third reason is evangelical. If young families do not feel their children are welcomed and belong in the church environment, they will not stay. Family worship makes the sanctuary an accepting space for children and also takes their involvement to a deeper level. . . .”

Betsy Woodward, Director of Christian Education, Congregational Church of San Mateo/California

Responding to requests at Coral Gables Congregational UCC for a First Communion Program, Associate Pastor Rev. Megan Smith will be teaching a new course called “Touch the Water, Taste the Bread” in seven one-hour sessions Sunday mornings in place of Sunday School between April 8-May 20.

This is a unique and age-appropriate course for children to learn and experience the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. The culmination of this program will be on Pentecost Sunday, May 20, where these children will partake of Holy Communion.

A sleepover was scheduled overnight on Friday, March 9, for 4th and 5th graders. It was a night of fun and fellowship with Just Dance videos, games, a scavenger hunt, arts and crafts, flash-light tag and much more.

The church offers the Our Whole Lives curriculum four times within a child’s life-span at the church when they are in grades K/1, 4/5, Middle School and High School. This UCC series of sexuality education programs, created for six age groups, is written by professional sexuality educators and provides accurate information to be used in the affirming and supportive setting of our churches.

During the year Sunday School children and youth will be supporting Lotus House Homeless Shelter in Overtown. Every month they will be collecting a different item that the women, children or LGBT youth need. For example, baby lotion was the item for February.