Editor’s Prerogative

Welcome to this issue of Celebrate Florida.

Thank you for keeping in touch with what is happening in the Florida Conference of the UCC through this edition as it supplements what has been shared in recent e-blasts of e-Celebrate. We decided to keep to our regular schedule of sharing with you the good news of the United Church of Christ in Florida despite – or perhaps because of – the situation in which we all find ourselves.

This is not a business-as-usual issue; its content is a bit different but it does include news about what you were doing prior to mid-March. We think it is good to remind ourselves of all this good news and that, yes, it will be resuming.

We began in February preparing news of all that you were doing and had planned, and we continued doing so until early March when “things began to change.” So as you page through this issue you will read much of this, which we’ve kept to share because it represents who we were and are as a people of faith: being church. You were doing a lot and it deserves recognition.

As things began to change dramatically, we shifted gears. Our focus became what we as individual congregations were and are doing and planning as we continue to be the church. You can read some of these stories in this issue.

Please excuse any errors we have made as we’ve compiled the news for this edition under not-so-normal conditions. Some of what you planned didn’t happen – but it is informative to know the creative ministries and outreach that was in the works. And understand that some of the news included may note things and events into the future which will not be happening or will be re-scheduled.

If your church has not been sharing information with us, please do so we can include news about you in the next issue. In the meantime, stay safe and keep the faith.

Blessings,

Rick

Editor

Messages From Our Conference Leadership

Dear Church,

To suggest we are living in a strange time is to understate the obvious. To extend thanks to the authorized ministers in the Conference is entirely inadequate. Local church ministers and chaplains are helping us navigate the unknown with faithfulness, creativity, perseverance and deep resilience in the face of a situation that changes daily. Thank you.

Too, I would be remiss in not extending deep thanks to Conference staff who are adjusting to the needs that present themselves in an ongoing basis. Dave and Beth in the office are still available even as we are physically distanced. Profiles are still being sent out, e-mails are being answered and resources are being provided. Please remember Dana Ney in our office, who is on furlough during this time of diminished capacity on-site. Finally, to Raymond and Leslie and Neal, a word of gratitude as they continue their front line ministry in the Conference while I am largely taken up with administrative duties. I marvel at their abilities.

The Council of Conference Ministers, the national gathering of people in my role, has created a “situation room” from which we hope will emanate deep thinking on the complex questions that arise for our local settings, conferences and the national setting. I know this is a very difficult time, and I thank each and every person in the Florida Conference for doing the best you can in a tough situation. May our better angels continue to prevail. Easter will happen; praise will be given across distances and we’ll get through this Covid-19 crisis together. God bless you in your journey.

You’ll never walk alone.

Rev. John Vertigan
Conference Minister

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I find myself from time to time in these days reflecting upon the Israelites as they travelled through the wilderness on their journey from the known to the unknown. The wilderness was usually a place of danger, uncertainty and stresses of various sorts. There was usually no way of knowing what lay ahead. They faced some difficult questions as they lived into their “new normal” – how long would they be in this wilderness, what would each new day bring, what would life be like on the other side of this experience? Whenever the people became frightened, tired, frustrated or “stressed out” they would harken back to thoughts of the way life had been. Even when they seemed to quickly lose sight of God’s presence and provision right there in the midst chaos and confusion, God provided everything that they needed to make it through (but not always everything that they wanted).

I am grateful for and encouraged by the faithful and creative ways in which our clergy and congregations are responding to the challenges that we share on the journey through this particular “wilderness.” Every day I read or talk with people who share thought-provoking questions, innovative responses, words of hope and encouragement. I believe that one of the gifts with which we shall emerge from this “wilderness” experience will be new ways of doing and being the Church. Israel, on their journey through the wilderness, had the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night as a visible reminder of God’s presence among them. May we, too, remember that even in the midst of these days God is with us….

What a truly weird time we are living in, unprecedented by anything we have ever known in our lifetimes. I have found in my new routine that it is paramount to recognize the “silver linings” and to note and appreciate them. They are out there!

For a bona fide church geek like me, being able to see five services in one day (or more if I’m so inclined) is a dream come true. Instead of being a part of one church service per Sunday, I’m being able to watch many services from past and present churches as well as those from churches of the Western Region that I serve in Florida. It helps me appreciate the yeoman’s work that our pastors are doing and, in an odd kind of way, even in this virtual reality I feel our relationship is being strengthened. Silver lining.

Churches and congregants that have been hesitant to move into the technological age are being forced into it AND they’re really doing an incredible job. They’re reaching more people and finding new ways to communicate. Silver lining.

People are actually using their phones again for audible conversations. Hearing a voice on the other end of the line has never been so welcoming. People are checking in with each other, expressing their care and concern for one another and expressions of kindness abound. They are being the church for one another. Silver lining.

I could go on and on: my hands haven’t been washed as many times in my lifetime as they have been in the past two weeks; my house has never been so clean; my garden has never had so few weeds; I take much longer walks and I say much longer prayers. Silver lining.

Maybe we can look upon this time as a way to hit the “restart” button on our lives. Perhaps with a bit of extra time on our hands, we may take on a new spiritual discipline or experience a bit of much needed sabbath. It is still the Lenten season and Easter is still coming. Technically, it comes April 12. Realistically, I hope it comes in the form of a huge celebration when we can be together again with our church families. Won’t we appreciate it even more? Silver lining.
Discovering the Gold

Yeas ago when my mother-in-law experienced worship at the Windermere Union Church for the first time, her observation was, “Wow, your congregation really does like each other!” In reality we do! I minister to an incredible congregation who is always serving and supporting each other. As I was video recording my sermon for our first virtual worship service on March 22, I was struck by a harsh reality. “Here is the church, here is the steeple, Oh, my God, I am preaching to no people!” Preaching to an empty sanctuary was a very strange experience. I also felt so deeply the absence of all those lovely people who attend worship each week. I miss them and we miss each other.

However, not holding person-to-person worship is the healthiest and most responsible thing for us to do. I recalled our official Board meeting March 2 when we discussed healthy strategies for serving Communion on the first Sunday in April. Well, as it happens, will not be holding person-to-person worship on the first Sunday in April and it appears will not be celebrating Easter together as well.

Rather than panic we planned: we will celebrate worship via video. It is not ideal, but it is something. On Communion Sundays we are going to encourage families and individuals to have the Communion bread and wine at their tables. As I institute the elements on video, they can serve Communion to each other or individually. Below are some more of the Windermere Union Church’s plans for continuing to be a church community during self-quarantine.

• We are recording the weekly music, children’s message and sermons in English and Spanish on Thursdays
• Our Tech Team will do post-production of the video to create a virtual worship service; the virtual worship service will be posted on our YouTube account
• On Sunday morning our Office Manager will send the YouTube worship link to our congregation through an e-mail blast at our normal worship hour
• We are asking our church members to send our Office Manager their celebrations and concerns; our Office Manager will then send the prayer requests and celebrations to our parish via e-mail, and this way we stay informed about each other
• Our staff and Stephen Ministers will make consistent contact to our membership and friends through phone calls, texts, e-mails and cards
• Our official Board meetings will be held through Skype and e-mails

“Where is the gold in this experience?”

• We are sending our congregation weekly updates about our church
• Our Finance Team is mailing our congregation instructions on how to make their contributions online or simply mail them to our church office
• When it is healthy for us to gather together again, we are going to have a Return of the Prodigal Son celebration!

I read a book years ago that was very meaningful. The title was The Alchemist: A Magical Fable About Following Your Dream by Paulo Coelho. My biggest take-away from the book was how to use spiritual alchemy to change harsh life experiences into gold. Since reading that book when I find myself in a hard situation, I ask myself, “Where is the gold in this experience?”

As I ask myself that question now, this is what I have discovered thus far. My gold is the fact I miss the people I teach and serve. They are a gathering of the most beautiful humans I have ever known. I celebrate my excellent leaders. They love our church and work well together making sure we have the healthiest church possible. I love my staff, who are using their imagination and skills to continue to minister to our faith community. I celebrate our Stephen Ministers, who went through 50 hours of training on how to minister to our church members. They are contacting our membership weekly while assessing their needs and reporting back to me and our leadership. I am experiencing the gift of extra time. I have time to read, reflect, write, journal, meditate, create art and rest.

There is one more nugget of gold that my soul is strengthened by: I know from past life experience I have within me all the resources I need to deal with anything life gives me.

1 John 4:4 — Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

When I start to get stressed and anxious, I remember this powerful reality. We are not alone even if we are quarantined. We have our faith, our church and our love for each other to deal with this harsh reality we find ourselves in. I would love to read your stories of how your faith communities are dealing with the coronavirus along with spiritual gold you have discovered for yourselves.

Peace and health to you all...
As leaders in our beloved United Church of Christ, we write to speak a word of tender care to our congregations, our clergy and our members.

We are sensitive to the grief and loss that many of you are experiencing. Most of us have never seen anything like this. The pandemic has interrupted our lives. Some have suffered the premature death of loved ones, while others live through and with severe pain and suffering. People are losing their jobs. Many of us have been placed under orders not to leave our homes and to shelter in place. In most of our communities, orders have been given to limit gathering in public spaces. This has been hard for all of us.

As leaders, we also bear witness to acts of profound kindness and creative ingenuity that remind us of the better angels within us. We are watching a Church prove itself to be incredibly adaptable as orders to stay at home have not ended our collective need even in times like these to give our thanks to God. Churches who not only have never gathered in a digital community, but who never thought they would need or want to, are doing just that – and experiencing something very profound and very meaningful. We have heard stories of whole families, spread across the country, being able to gather together for the same worship service via digital broadcast. That is such a meaningful gift the church has to offer in a season such as this.

We grieve deeply with you the losses that we are all living with; but we also celebrate a body of Christ that can adapt quickly to meet the emerging need. It is our hope and prayer that what we are learning about ourselves – about our capacity for grace, for hope, for change, for love beyond our walls – will enrich us long after this pandemic ends.

We strongly encourage churches to suspend your traditional ways of gathering to worship. Gathering to worship in this moment places our loved ones at risk. On the website of the denomination you can find resources to help you create new ways to worship as a sequestered community. Our Conferences are regularly offering networking opportunities so that you can share creative ideas and practical learnings.

Remember that we are a Christmas people and that Jesus is incarnated in every act of love and kindness we extend to one another.

Remember that we are an Easter people, and we know that God can reach us beyond all the barriers the world can create.

Remember that we are a Pentecost people who know that the Holy Spirit can revive us and who will be our strength in times of great distress.

We can do this. We are the Church, the body of the risen Christ. As leaders called to serve you, we pledge to you that we will continue to draw on every resource available to us that will help you through this season.

In the love of our blessed Redeemer, we remain as always your humble servants and your beloved covenant partners.

Faithfully,
The Council of Conference Ministers
The Officers of the United Church of Christ
The Rev. Dr. John C. Doshauer
The Rev. Traci Blackmon
The Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson

So maybe we should imagine together?

If I can serve as a network point or ministry partner, in terms of connecting you to new technologies or ways of ministry via social distancing, it would be my pleasure to continue the work of equipping and empowering the ministry of your church for such a time as this. Each moment of hope and every chance at community opens an opportunity to understand what WE are capable of and, of course, most excitingly what God is capable of, too.

I am reminded of John Robinson, who reminded our ancestors of faith on the Mayflower, that God “has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word.”

So as we search, stumble, serve and lead in these times, let us do so knowing that we are not alone. And we are indeed stronger. Together.

I look forward to speaking with you soon.

From the National Office of the United Church of Christ
A Pastoral Letter in a Time of Pandemic
March 26, 2020

There is a meme that I saw on my social media feed that has some guy from “Star Trek” (I am not against “Star Trek,” though I don’t know anybody’s name) saying “Darn it, Jim, I’m a pastor not a videographer!” Perhaps you, too, are feeling overwhelmed or flustered at feeling like current circumstances are “not what I signed up for!”

This is true. For all of us. Yet another thing to add to the list that mama never taught me and certainly was never covered in seminary.

And yet God is not bound by time, nor by context and certainly not by my oft-limited imagination.

BY NEAL WATKINS
MINISTER FOR FAITH FORMATION
As the seriousness of the corona-19 virus became increasingly apparent in early March, the clergy and leadership in each of our individual Florida congregations have been convening to discern how best to proceed in providing guidance and comfort to their church family. Our churches have been in contact with their congregants through social media, e-mail, phone and personal visits to provide guidance during these challenging times. Support has been extended by our Florida Conference staff and from the national UCC offices.

Thank you for keeping in touch with what is happening in the Florida Conference of the UCC through this edition of Celebrate Florida as it supplements what has been shared in recent e-blasts of e-Celebrate. This is not a business-as-usual issue; its content is a bit different but it does include news about what you were doing prior to mid-March. We think it is good to remind ourselves of all this good news and that, yes, it will be resuming.

Church life as we’ve come to know it has been upended. “Being church” now means experiencing it apart from the building we call “home” Sunday mornings and many weekdays and doing even more of “being church” out in the neighborhood and community. Church offices may be closed or minimally and haphazardly staffed. Pastors can most often be found working from home and staying in contact via phone and social media. Clergy -- trying to remember if they missed that class in pandemics in seminary – are becoming fast learners in devising out-of-the-box and creative ways of shepherding their flocks.

Our churches have been reaching out to their members with helpful facts about the virus and links to sources providing reliable information. Many are providing links to various faith groups that offer spiritual sustenance. And, yes, few have failed to remind their members that their congregations still have bills to be paid and are encouraging continued financial support.

Here is some of what we have learned as of late March when we “went to press” about Sunday worship services, other church activities and creative ways of staying connected. Please keep in mind that so much continues to evolve and will be changing as the situation warrants, and we regret any errors in what is being shared. If we report an event taking place that didn’t, we apologize -- but just think how great it would have been had it happened! If your church does not appear in this overview, it is because you’ve not added Celebrate Florida to your e-blast mailing list; you can do so by including CelebrateFlorida@uccfla.org.

Our Easter season traditions will not be the same this year. Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday will be different, but the reason they are and will be celebrated have not changed. Watch for the next issue to see how we “did” Easter!

Easter blessings,

Rick Carson
Editor
Covid-19

Congregations Respond

Altamonte Springs - Altamonte Chapel Community UCC

As of March 17 its office was closed and all church activities through April 6 were canceled; on March 31 the decision was made to extend the closure and cancel all church activities through April 30.

Auburndale - Christ’s Promise UCC

Effective March 15 all church activities were suspended but services were to be streamed on its Facebook page.

Boca Raton - Church on the Hill Congregational UCC

With public church services suspended after March 15, a worship message and musical selections were offered on Facebook Live Sunday mornings and continued to be posted on Facebook.

Brandon - Faith Family UCC

In-church services on March 15 and going forward were canceled; services were streamed live on a private page on Facebook, available for re-play on Facebook and the church website.

Face-to-face services have been canceled through April 26 with plans to resume on May 3.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC

Worship (except for Sunday School) was held on March 15 but public services thereafter were canceled going forward; online worship began March 22.

Frequent YouTube video messages were created; videos of members singing “I am the Church, You are the Church” were collected to be shared online.

Morning prayer and song are posted on their Facebook page Monday-Saturday beginning at 9am; Sunday morning adult study is online; there is a walking group Wednesday evenings from 6-7:15pm; a support group meets Tuesdays at 7pm via Zoom.

A “compassion fund” was established to collect contributions for those in the church family in need.

Bags of food were handed out from 9am-2pm from Tuesday, March 31-Friday, April 3.

Dunedin - Faith UCC

As of March 12, all church activities were canceled to at least March 29 pending developments; services began livestreaming on a private Facebook page.

Members were advised that the Pastor’s Discretion fund was available for those in need to help cover basic items, especially food and medicine; bins were made available in the Gathering space to collect basic items.

A new private Facebook page was created for members to stay in touch as well as a Microsoft Teams meeting page for anyone who wanted to join to connect there and run groups, chat and just offer support and care.

Periodic messages were e-blasted and Pastor Rev. Mike MacMillan has a new podcast page, “Spiritual Reflections for Trying Times.”

Fort Lauderdale UCC

Public worship was held on March 15 (recorded and made available on the church website); beginning March 22 the service was pre-recorded and available to view on the church website.

Weekly Christian ed classes continued electronically.

The church’s Ruth Ministry that serves those in need spiritually and with food on Thursdays went basic to the basics to prepare “to-go” bag lunches of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, apples and a bottle of water.

Fort Myers Congregational UCC

The church held an abbreviated worship service on March 15, followed by a period of discernment and prayer about what the next few weeks may hold; on March 16 it was decided to cancel all church activities for the following two weeks; live streaming worship services on YouTube began March 22.

Lee County did go ahead and use the church as a voting site for the March 17 primary election and disinfected and cleaned the entire building the next day.

Members were invited to send stories and photos of things that bring them joy (“silver linings”) to share in e-blasts.

Pastor Rev. Dave Bucey shared an article he read about a pastor in Newfoundland who, in the midst of the quarantine, asked his members to e-mail him photos of themselves so he might have a visual to pray for; Rev. Dave now has photos showing his Sanctuary adorned with photos of his prayer recipients in the places they usually sit.

Eternal Hope UCC/Fort Walton Beach

The mall in which the church meets closed so they recorded an abbreviated service for March 22 to be posted on their website;
live broadcasting via Facebook began March 29 with posting on Facebook the following day

Pastor Rev. Booth Iburg and a couple church members helped prepare weekly grab-and-go dinners in Pensacola

**Gainesville - United Church of Gainesville**

On March 8 the church held a seminar led by two doctors on “best practices” addressing the virus

On March 12 the decision was made to suspend in-person gathering for all campus activity; beginning March 15 a pre-recorded worship service was made available on YouTube

A helpline was established available 12 hours a day from 9am-9pm and staffed by a UCG member

UCG assisted with a variety of needs such as assistance with grocery deliveries, pastoral care referrals, help with technology or just someone with whom to talk

Ways to connect include virtual Friday lunch groups via Zoom and LiveChat with the ministers on Sunday;

each week on Tuesday afternoon beginning March 24 they released E-vents e-mails containing links to connection opportunities ranging from meditation and Bible study to coffee talks, children’s activities and much more

**Jacksonville - Riverside UCC**

With a small congregation, the church met March 15 and March 22; services were held via Facebook Live beginning March 29

**Miami - Christ Congregational Church**

The church began a streamed service on its Facebook page beginning March 22 (with later posting on its webpage) and the bulletin is provided online ahead of time

A weekly e-newsletter is circulated

**Naples - Mayflower Congregational**

On premises worship has been suspended along with all church activities and in-person meetings; plans are to start April 5 with a pre-recorded video of a shortened worship service to be e-mailed to members with placement on its website and Facebook page

When regular worship is resumed the first service will be an Easter resurrection service whatever the date on the calendar

**Naples UCC**

The church continues to offer streaming worship and podcasts; it scheduled to resume in-person worship on May 17; the church office is scheduled to be closed until May 11

“Going the Distance” is an e-blasted weekday devotional

Midweek Lenten meditation were offered on Wednesdays, online only via Livestream or Facebook Live; the all-church Lenten Book Study was livestreamed Wednesdays as well

The Bargain Box Thrift Shop was closed and anticipates reopening May 11; Precious Cargo Academy was scheduled to remain closed until Monday, April 6

The church released a $10,000 grant to the Harry Chapin Food Bank, which is being matched by a foundation

Rose Schmigle and Jim Johnson were married on Friday, March 20 by Rev. Dr. Dawson Taylor in the Gathering Place

**New Smyrna Beach UCC**

There were no Sunday services March 15; Zoom services began March 22 and Communion was served beginning March 29

Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy e-blasted daily devotional based on readings from the *One Year Bible*

The church shared an e-mail from a member who is a nurse, providing care tips; the church provided an updated phone list of members for the convenience of staying in touch

Colors of Hunger continued to provide bagged meals for those who are in need but there was no inside dining

All were invited to a Zoom concert by Shawn Proctor on Friday evening, March 27

**North Port Community UCC**

The church closed on March 18 and plans to be closed until at least April 1. There were no meetings, activities or public worship services; services were provided beginning on March 22 through Facebook with the Order of Worship for each service provided ahead of time

Pastor Rev. Attila Szemesi began posting daily messages on Facebook beginning March 17 with Wednesday Lenten studies on Facebook; a Tuesday morning virtual Zoom Bible study is set to begin March 31

**Orange City - First Congregational Church**

All church activities were canceled up to April 1

**Orlando - First UCC**

There was in-church worship on March 15 but the in-church service for March 22 was canceled and the service on March 29 was pre-recorded and posted on Facebook and the church website as will be future services; Bible study (has less than 10 participants) continued until the end of March when it ceased

As of the end of March the food pantry and Thrift Shop were closed

**Pensacola Beach – Pensacola Beach Community UCC**

All church-sponsored on-campus gatherings were suspended as of March 15 until May

Worship and prayer messages began on March 15 via podcasts on the church website, a Zoom coffee hour is scheduled for April 5

Compassionate Care meals continued to be delivered to the church on Mondays for the carrier to pick up

**Pinellas Park - Good Samaritan Church**

All services and activities on the church campus were suspended through April 15 with a decision to be made on April 1 regarding an Easter service

Pastor Rev. Jen Daysa was on Sabbatical in Europe with her family and returned mid-March and self-quarantined

Beginning March 29 the church began online opportunities for worship (virtual breakfast church on March 29), prayer and connection; virtual beloved community groups were available Tuesday mornings and Thursday evenings beginning in late March

The food pantry was available for drive-up pick-up

**Port Orange UCC**

The church decided as of March 19 to not meet for at least the next two Sundays; on March 24 it announced all church services and meetings would be suspended to April 5 and perhaps beyond
Sanibel Congregational UCC

Church service on March 15 was canceled (the planned sermon by Rev. Dr. John Danner was posted on the church website) and on March 18 all church-sponsored activities through March 31 were canceled (including Sunday morning worship), and on March 30 that date was extended to April 30

Live-streaming of worship began March 22; a Maundy Thursday live-streamed evening service was scheduled for April 9

As of March 30 the church office was closed and all office-based staff worked from home; church phones were monitored hourly Monday-Friday between 9am-3pm

The church enlisted volunteers to pick up groceries from two cooperative grocery stores for those unable to do so for themselves

Sarasota - First Congregational UCC

Livestreaming of worship via Facebook began March 15 with a posting on the church website later on those Sundays

Rev. Wes Dr. Bixby posted several prayers during the week on Facebook; mid-week messages continue to be e-blasted, Zoom was utilized for Tuesday night and Wednesday morning Bible study and Wednesday afternoon opportunities for members to connect with one another and a Facebook Live prayer service was available on Thursday afternoons

Sarasota - St. Andrew UCC

Worship was held in the Sanctuary on March 15 with a virtual online experience beginning March 22

A discussion group for the book *When Demons Float* by Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlewaite met via conference call beginning March 26

Spring Hill UCC

As of March 18 all church activities were suspended until at least March 31; a live service was offered beginning on Facebook on March 22

Rev. Robin DeAngelis sent out a weekly scripture, prayer and devotional for members’ reflection; she posted a live message on Facebook on March 19, updating on the church’s response and informing that she would be in phone contact to check in with all members

Members were invited to take selfies in their home or yard to be sent with short greetings to the church for sharing in church e-blasts

The church encouraged food donations to the food pantry open at the Society of St. Vincent DePaul

St. Augustine - United Church UCC-DOC

Church members worshipped by accessing an interactive worship guide in PDF format that provided text and music links to YouTube and Facebook

The church offered an online book discussion with the author of *Dear White Christians*; continued Lenten spiritual practice of Visio Divine (Divine Seeing) through e-mail and music via Facebook link

Church newsletter was e-mailed weekly while in-church is suspended

St. Pete Beach - Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC

The church began livestreaming a Sunday worship message on March 15

Daily e-mails generally included these: devotion and prayer; member-to-member connections; health and wellness tips; youth connections; parent and family ideas; something to generate a smile

The men’s prayer group continues to meet via the Internet, Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmelmann hosted two virtual “Beer, Bible & Keith” gatherings

In the absence of March Madness, members were invited to send to the church selfies wearing something showing their favorite teams and they were shared online; also being shared are stories of how members are using this time to be the church for family, friends and community

Members are encouraged to volunteer through the church to deliver meals to shut-ins

St. Petersburg - Lakewood UCC

The final service in the Sanctuary until further notice was on March 15

On Fridays the church posts on its website devotional readings and a weekly “Corona Sabbath” devotional video reflection from Pastor Rev. Kim Wells and accompanied with music that members could access at their convenience over the weekend

On Sundays, Rev. Kim is at the church from 10:30-11:30am; the peace candle is lit and prayers offered with an opportunity to stop by to pray or meditate (the labyrinth was also available)

Labyrinth walks on Wednesday mornings through Lent continued as social distancing is not an issue

The congregation recommends that everyone in the church family pause at 9am each day, light a candle if possible (or put on the light on a cell phone) and offer a prayer that is provided and by so doing together in spirit helping everyone to feel connected and bonded as a congregation

Tallahassee - United Church in Tallahassee

On March 16 the decision was made to shut down the church facility for the following two weeks, including all committee meetings, meditation groups, spiritual formation classes, activities, events, and inclusive of worship on March 22 and 29

The first virtual service was shared on March 29 with a weekly shortened service appearing on the UCT website and social media; additional video messages were sent out via the church
website and Facebook page as well as other electronic media links.

To help the church stay informed and connected, committees (including a new spiritual formation class) were encouraged to meet through Zoom, Skype or phone conferencing.

**Tampa - First United Church of Tampa**

Worship was held on March 15 but there was no Fellowship hour; live-streaming began on March 22 and with viewing via Facebook.

**Windermere – Windermere Union Church**

First virtual worship service was on March 22 with the Tech Team doing post-production of the Sunday service in English and Spanish on Thursdays and posting it on YouTube through an e-mail blast Sunday morning at the usual worship time.

Church members are being asked to send to the church office celebrations and concerns, which will be shared with other church news in weekly e-mails.

Staff and Stephen Ministers remain in contact with members and friends through phone calls, texts, e-mails and cards.

Official Board meetings are being held through Skype and e-mails.

**Winter Park - First Congregational Church**

The church began a streaming service on March 15 (more than 300 signed in to watch), on March 29 they switched to a pre-recorded video format.

As of March 13, all programming at the church was suspended for the coming weeks; utilizing Webex, some groups continued to meet virtually, including classes led by Rev. Shawn Garvey and Rev. Dr. Sherie Lindamood; Zoom was the platform for Wednesday night Lenten class, Sunday morning Bible study and the book club.

Rev. Shawn continued e-blasting his personal daily Lenten meditations.

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**Getting in the Spirit(s)**

Many of our congregations have off-campus gatherings to explore our faith, spirituality and concerns-of-the-day in a less “religious” venue. Programs at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach, Coral Gables Congregational UCC and Faith UCC/Dunedin come to mind. Here’s another example — although during this pandemic such gatherings would need to be virtual.

**Spirits and Spirituality**

by Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner  
Co-Pastor, Faith UCC/Bradenton

Our congregation has an every-other-week program at a local restaurant/pub called “Spirits and Spirituality.” It is a simple program where we ask just four questions of increasing depth and significance. The first one is usually light like, “What is your first childhood memory?” The last question is usually much harder to answer — questions like, “What is the most difficult challenge you ever faced?” or “What happens to us when we die?” usually provide lots of interesting discussion.

The rules, based on a program called “Pub Theology,” are simple: no politics, no interrupting, no advice and share the time. The goal of the program is not to find “the answer” to a question but allow people to hear each other’s responses in a supportive environment.

This program has attracted many spouses of church members who do not come to church but are very willing to go to the pub, drink some beer or wine and talk about life. Other benefits include members getting to know one another in a much smaller setting where they have come to know and care about each other. We have been surprised at how deep some of the conversations have been and how popular the program is with folks. We usually do three sessions a year — fall, winter and summer.
I n 2013, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach recognized the need for a specialized ministry for its senior members. Florida attracts seniors from all over the country—some seeking a full-time retirement home and others enjoying mild winter weather as seasonal snowbirds. PAG’s church attendance soars during the months of November to April. Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmelmann, PAG’s Senior Minister, saw the need to provide special services to those older adults and began its Health and Aging Ministry.

Our initial goals were few: 1) provide information and assistance to members and their families as they navigated the options for nursing home placement, assisted living communities or home health care; 2) provide a minimum of three educational workshops annually that addressed specific needs related to health and aging; 3) establish a resource library of books and informational material related to health and aging.

I was hired as a part-time Associate for Health and Aging and began the process of learning about resources for seniors. I contacted nursing homes and assisted living communities in the immediate geographic area, and they were very happy to provide tours and information about their facilities. Some of the communities had an employee dedicated to church relations and were very interested in seeking a close relationship with the church.

The maze of home health care and companion services was explored and, again, relationships were established with trusted partners. When a church member struggled with the decision to move into a facility or hire in-home caregivers, we had the knowledge and relationships to help with those decisions.

A resource library was established that included books related to aging, memory care and caregiving. Also included are many other resource books and information about area retirement communities and healthcare facilities.

Have Suitcase, Can Travel!

BY SANDY LYNCH
CHAIR, MISSIONS AT UCC AT THE VILLAGES

W omen and children arrive at shelters, the victims of eviction or abuse. They arrive with few possessions, stay a few weeks and move on. Thanks to Bea Hester, who has led this ministry for 11 years, they are able to leave with their possessions in suitcases and not garbage bags. The last two weeks in February, UCC at The Villages conducted a suitcase drive, advertising in the local paper and with other churches for suitcases, totes and toiletries.

On February 28, 20+ members of our church arrived at 9am to deal with more than 600 suitcases and totes which needed to be inspected (some rejected), cleaned and transported to The Haven women’s shelter in Leesburg and Shepherd’s Lighthouse shelter at Belleview. Three volunteers spent four hours sorting through 2,000 toiletry items; soap, shampoo, toothpaste (and slippers). The toiletries were divided among the two women’s shelters and the men’s House of Hope, a substance abuse treatment center in Wildwood.
My Sabbath

Editor’s note: This “New Dimensions” message was prepared on March 12. Rev. John has since appended it with a note that all his planning for sabbatical is contingent on our national response to the Covid-19 pandemic and can easily be placed on hold to serve the needs of the Conference.

I’m thinking backward today to October of 2014. It seems so long ago; however, it was events in that timeframe that bring me to this moment in my professional life and this moment in our common life in the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ. I’m in year six of my service as your Conference Minister, and the Board of Directors has graciously offered me sabbatical leave to renew, rest and refresh in order to return to ministry prepared for whatever will come next in this world full of questions, change and wonder. I am grateful for the gift and recognize it as the privilege it is. I hope to use the time well.

I will be away from Conference ministry from June 1, through August 31, 2020. In my proposal to the Board last year, I suggested the following as key aspects of my time away:

First, I offered a description of my Sabbath. I will have been in ministry 31 years at the commencement of this sabbatical. I feel called to a time of reflection and reminiscing. I plan to travel, at times with my adult child, to the places where I heard and nurtured God’s call on my life, to the places she was born and lived in times before memory (for her!), to the communities where I served and grew and learned in ministry. This will be a special pilgrimage as I review where I have been professionally and how God might be calling me for the next part of my career. It will also be a great road trip! I hope to create a word and photo essay that might serve me well in years to come when memories might fade and stories get forgotten.

Second, I described a time of growth and learning. I am planning for a time of self-study using the book 40-Day Journey with Parker Palmer. The introduction reads:

“Imagine spending forty days with a great spiritual guide who has both the wisdom and the experience to help you along the path of your own spiritual journey. Imagine being able to listen to and question spiritual guides from the past and the present. Imagine being, as it were, mentored by women and men who have made their own spiritual journey and have recorded the landmarks, detours, bumps in the road, potholes, and wayside rests that they encountered along the way – all to help others who must make their own journey.”

The Journey includes 40 days of reflection using meditation, biblical texts, journaling, prayer, and Parker’s own depth of wisdom and personality to engage the mind and spirit.

This Sabbath study leave will rest under an umbrella of intention related to my own spiritual, emotional and physical well-being. My 60th birthday will be upon me in 2020; I’m nurturing a young – but hopefully life-long -- relationship with one I’ve come to love, and it is time to make a solid plan and take concrete actions to assure that the best is yet to come.

I am grateful to the Conference Board and the people of the Florida Conference for this opportunity of a professional pause. I recognize it as just that … a temporary focus on other things with the hope of deeper journeying yet to come. Plans are underway for leadership coverage during my absence. My e-mail will be turned off beginning June 1, but the Conference office and our faithful staff will continue to serve your needs uninterrupted in what we pray will be a quiet summer season. May you find rest in it as I hope to, as well.

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

Rev. John Vertigan
Conference Minister

Share The Good News

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

Please send your electronic newsletters, Facebook posts and e-blasts to celbrateflorida@uccfla.org.
2019 Florida Conference Annual Report Available

The Florida Conference United Church of Christ annual report is available on our website. To read about what we were up to in 2019 please click here!

Canvas Labyrinths Available

With our local churches in a season of reflection as individuals and communities seek deeper meaning for their life, I hope it will be a fruitful season for one and all and that many will affirm the possibility for renewal that arises when we stop for a time to gain perspective.

The Florida Conference owns six canvas labyrinths that are deployed across our vast geography. These tools for your spiritual walk are housed in local churches, where they can be borrowed for use in your setting when you want to invite people to slow down, to be still, to wait. The labyrinths are 20'x20' and are intended for indoor use in a space you will provide, and you are responsible for its pickup, return and care while in your possession.

Labyrinths are stored at: Union Congregational Church/West Palm Beach; St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota; United Church of Gainesville; the Conference office in Orlando; Pensacola Beach Community UCC; and the office of Neal Watkins in Vero Beach (and to travel with him as he programs our life together).

We are hopeful these will find broad application in the spiritual life of your community. For more information you can reach out to me at jvertigan@uccfla.org, and we’ll work together to meet the needs of your local setting.

Adapted from “Conference Call,” e-Celebrate, February 19

The Villages Church Has Kiosk for Sale

The dark brown, wood-look stand-alone kiosk is four-sided. Each side has a counter top and fabric-covered bulletin board. The unit has locking casters, making it easy to move and stable once it is in place and locked.

The kiosk is great for media areas of your church, conferences, events, classrooms, etc. The price is only $100, and buyer must pick up at the church location: UCC at The Villages, 12514 County Road 101, Oxford, FL 34484. If interested, please contact the church office at 352/748-9199.

From e-Celebrate, March 18

Lots of Phishing Going On

Numerous churches are reporting that ministers’ e-mail accounts have been hacked and pleas are being made of recipients to send gift cards and the like. If you receive such a suspicious e-mail, you should not respond to it, report it as spam and block the e-mail address.

Submissions Welcome

Try out our Connections section in the bi-weekly e-Celebrate. Connections gives you the chance (yes, you need to take the initiative) to write a sentence or two about the kind of issue you want to address and reach out to persons of a like mind who will then have the opportunity to network with you for better ministry. This is hardly hi-tech and hardly complicated — think of it as personal ads for mission advancement. Send your Connections to Dave Cyril at dcvril@uccfla.org and we’ll include them in an upcoming issue. After that, it’s up to you to create your network and bring it to life. If you do, you’re free to contact regional staff, and we’ll do our best to resource you for active ministry where you live.

Sanibel Church Seeks Input

Sanibel Congregational UCC is considering changing its fiscal year to more readily reflect its program year, meaning its fiscal year may be changing from January 1-December 31 to July 1-June 30. If your church has made a similar change in its fiscal year, please contact Rev. Dr. John Danner at john@sanibelucc.org to share your experience with that transition.

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.

Here are a few of them you may wish to check out. If you know of others, contact Celebrate Florida (celebrateflorida@uccfla.org) and we’ll include them in future issues.

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

Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmelmann (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach): www.pagchurch.org/news/pastors-

blog/index.html

Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota): www.gracetrails.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)

New Sacred – A United Church of Christ blog www.newsacred.org/
Why Give

REV. JOHN VERTIGAN
CONFERENCE MINISTER

Through the end of January 2020, the Florida Conference has already made close to $11,000 in grants to local churches, seminary students and local church pastors pursuing continuing education. We are so fortunate in our ability to do this!

Here’s the thing...most of those grant dollars have zero impact on our operating budget. On the one hand, that’s good news. We’re able to provide a multitude of experiences to people across the life of the Conference without spending operating funds. On the other hand, none of those dollars helps us meet our budget on an annual basis either. And that’s what we need to think about for a moment today. Consider this your invitation to think about generosity.

Per Capita dues and voluntary giving to Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM) are the basis of our annual spending plan that pays for staff, programming and the work of the standing committees of the Florida Conference. We reduced our facility cost significantly when we moved in 2016 from downtown Orlando to University Boulevard. This has been a real blessing to us, and we enjoy having a quality space in which to work and meet. I asked a group of people recently whether they thought we should follow what is becoming a bit of a trend and sell our facility in favor of establishing a “virtual office” setup that could at least serve our workspace needs. The reply was a resounding “no,” along with feedback that the University Boulevard site brings added value to our common life.

Someone asked recently, “Why should we give dollars to the Florida Conference?” And the answer came back clearly from another volunteer: “We give dollars to the Florida Conference because we are part of something bigger than ourselves, and what we do together matters.”

I love that answer, and I invite you to consider it. With your generosity, we fund the staffing model of the Florida Conference. The staff provides leadership, counsel, programming and support to the ministry of local settings and authorized ministers. While administering the life of the Conference organization, grants are made that engage, empower and equip ministries and learning experiences that might otherwise not be possible.

It’s a rich and diverse palette we are privileged to work with, and we seldom look at it from far enough away to see how it all works. And work, it does!

But it all starts with Per Capita dues, Our Church’s Wider Mission, a shared covenant and your generosity. So let this be our encouragement, that “we are part of something bigger than ourselves, and what we do together matters.”

It’s time to balance the budget. Please encourage generosity in your place of worship, and if you’d like to help balance our budget today, click here or on the red «Donate» button in the upper right corner of our website to support Florida Conference ministries directly.

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

From “Conference Call,” e-Celebrate, February 5

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UCC National Youth Event – CANCELLED

Due to travel and logistical concerns, the National Youth Event of the United Church of Christ, scheduled for July on the campus of Purdue University, has been cancelled. Volunteers, staff and leaders are working from around the denomination to implement several opportunities for virtual gathering. These details will be published soon.

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Florida Conference Summer Youth Mission Trip (June 13–19)

As of now, plans for our summer mission trip to Montgomery, Alabama, remain in place. Please contact Nwatkins@uccfla.org for details or specific answers to questions.
Ash Wednesday took place in our churches in different ways, and many congregations planned interesting and creative ways to experience the season of Lent. Though most of the churches were not able to complete their offerings as designed, some were able to be shared through social media.

Many of our congregations observed Ash Wednesday through services on Wednesday, February 26, with the imposition of ashes often available as part of the ceremony. There was evening worship: in the historic chapel at Altamonte Chapel Community UCC/Altamonte Springs, Sanibel Congregational UCC, Faith Family UCC/Brandon (with a soup-and-bread meal), North Port Community UCC, UCC/Fort Lauderdale, Pensacola Beach Community UCC, Port Orange UCC, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota (also a noon service), United Church in Tallahassee, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach (a soup supper beforehand), Congregational UCC/Winter Park, Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton, Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples, First United Church of Tampa (preceded by a soup-and-salad meal), First UCC/Orlando and Faith UCC/Dunedin (a soup supper preceded).

At Fort Myers Congregational UCC, Pastor Rev. Dave Bucey imposed ashes on 78 people off the parking area in front of the church during the early afternoon. An evening service following a group meal attracted almost 80 persons and Rev. Wesley Snedeker served 40 clients on AVOW Hospice.

The children-friendly evening service at Coral Gables Congregational UCC was trilingual with worship in English, German and Spanish and was preceded by a light soup supper. Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg planned for an outdoor service around a fire next to a nearby lake but inclement weather forced its relocation inside in front of a large screen displaying a crackling fire.

At Eternal Hope UCC/Fort Walton Beach Rev. Booth Iburg offered ashes for those wishing to be so blessed and then went to Catholic Charities where the homeless were being fed and offered ashes there.

There was a traditional noon service at Naples UCC in addition to a family night service, which began with dinner followed by a brief child-friendly worship service and Lenten craft activities.

Services and labyrinth walks at the United Church of Gainesville were offered at both noon and 6pm. Simultaneously at 6pm a separate children and family service was offered with a smaller labyrinth available.

The service at St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota was ecumenical and included the Mary Mother of Jesus Inclusive Catholic Community, which worships in St. Andrew’s space.

At Fort Lauderdale the Lenten season theme was “The Five Ws of Lent: ‘Who, What, When, Where, Why’.”

A book and Bible study at First United Church of Tampa used Entering the Passion of Jesus by Amy-Jill Levine.

Sanibel Congregational UCC got off to an early start with Mardi Gras Sunday on February 23 with a performance by the Island Jazz.

The Lenten theme at
The United Church of Gainesville was “Fermentation.” Blank canvases hung on the walls of the Sanctuary for members to take home and add whatever to it (though not filling up all the space). They were instructed the bring the canvases back the following week before the service, hang it where it had been and someone else would take it home and add to it, continuing the “artistic conversation.” During Lent the 11:15 service began with 15 minutes for quiet meditation and reflection, Taize chants and the option to walk the smaller labyrinth. Wednesday evenings offered a small group quiet hour to reflect on and renew spiritual journey using simple practices of awareness. A Lenten booklet was compiled from readings and visual art submitted by church members.

The Lenten dinner and discussion series at Fort Myers Congregational UCC focused on the topic, “Who Welcomes the Stranger?” exploring what is known from the Bible, law and experience. Meals were provided by retired Gold Medal chef Jeffrey Trullinger. Beginning on March 1, worshippers were given a small hand-sewn cloth bag to be used to collect coins (30 pieces of silver) to allow participants inside the mind of Judas as he contemplated his misgivings about Jesus. They were to be brought back on Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and placed on the Chancel as a means of admission of our own betrayal of Jesus.

The Lenten book study at Faith Family UCC/Brandon was The Book of Joy by Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama held Wednesday evenings after a soup and bread supper.

A special healing service was offered at the United Church in Tallahassee on Sunday, March 8.

“Grace” was the Lenten theme at Naples UCC, which included an all-church book study using If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person by Philip Gulley (the Winter Distinguished Speaker at Naples UCC) and James Mulholland. There were mid-week meditations with music and opportunities for guided labyrinth walks.

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota continued its Lenten tradition of special weekday programs on Thursday mornings. Planned were gatherings with music meditation, faith stories, drumming and art, labyrinth exploration and a field trip.

Faith UCC/Dunedin enjoyed its annual celebration of Mardi Gras with food and good cheer (alcoholic and non-) on Sunday, February 23.

Wednesday evenings members at Plymouth Congregational Church/ Miami gathered for a simple meal and a time to learn the story of Jesus and share stories of how his life has shaped ours.

Rev. Shawn Garvey (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park), inspired by Give Up Worry for Lent! by Gary Zimak, shared a daily devotion via e-blast, each one focusing on a particular passage of scripture, a reflection, response and prayer. Wednesday night discussions were planned.

North Port Community UCC had simple suppers and study on Wednesdays.

It was “Holy Vessels; A Lenten Worship Series of Hope” at First Congregational Church/Lake Worth.

Sunset beach services across the street from the church were on the calendar at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach on Sunday evenings at 6pm. Sunday morning bulletin messages contained tips for earth-friendly behavior and habits in an effort to reduce single-use plastics. The Lenten schedule offered a diverse array of events that included simple soup supper meals on Wednesdays with inspirational messages and two classes on faith development (“Faith, Freedom and the End of Democracy” and a study of Reading the Bible Again for the First Time by Marcus Borg).

Labyrinth walks on Wednesday mornings at 9am were part of the Lenten journey to Easter at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg. Handouts were available for those not able to participate at that time.

The Community Church of Vero Beach observed the season with its Lenten Organ and Poetry Series that involved Thursday concerts of the spoken word and organ and piano music, calling upon talent from around the state and country.

Evening Lenten prayer services were offered on Wednesdays at Spring Hill UCC. The first on March 4 was a Peace Concert featuring Todd Glacy with sacred song, gong meditation and readings. The church also shared ideas for Lenten practices such as: what 10 questions one might ask one’s self like “What spiritual discipline do I need to improve upon or want to try?” and “What are some things in my life that I tell myself I need but I don’t?”; book recommendations; rituals, fasts and meditations to consider.

They proved they know how to party and celebrate the joy of their faith at Coral Gables Congregational UCC with their Mardi Gras worship and celebration on Sunday, February 23. Lots of jambalaya, a ‘Nawlins-style strutting parade and music. Church members were invited to fast one day a week during the season with weekly devotionals provided. There was an opportunity to “fast for justice” by participating in an act of justice or service. Sunday themes during Lent were “‘Lent-ing’ Go...” – of blame, certainty, privilege, the past and the need to be enough.
At the Community Church of Vero Beach the second annual art show celebrating the creativity and artistic talents of CCOVB members was held from Saturday, February 22, to Sunday, March 1. The Vero Beach Choral Society’s Spring Concert was held in the Sanctuary on Sunday afternoon, March 15, and was “A Musical Menagerie” exploring music celebrating animals with works by Britten, Barber, Copeland and Whitacre. Earlier that morning the Rana Quartet from the Cleveland Institute of Music performed as part of the Special Artists in Worship series.

The Gulf Shore Opera presented “Passionate Puccini” in the Sanctuary of Sanibel Congregational UCC on Saturday evening, February 8. The next day was the church’s annual “Bluegrass Sunday” featuring the Myakka River Bluegrass Bands at the two worship services. It was “Gospel Sunday” on February 16 with the Gospel Choir from the Jerusalem Church of God in Christ from Fort Myers in recognition of Black History Month.

The Naples Harp Ensemble Concert performed at Naples UCC on Sunday, February 16, followed by a concert featuring Daniela Shitereva and BJ Miller on Tuesday, February 18. It was the Naples Harp Festival 2020 featuring the Kellyn Celtic Arts Irish Dance with Ms. Jaime and Ashley the piper on Wednesday, February 19. The Artis-Naples Youth Jazz Orchestra was featured on Sunday, March 1, it was Happy 300th Birthday to Bach’s Chaconne on Saturday, March 7, and Brandon Goldberg on piano on Sunday, March 8.

The Epiphany Theatre presented “The Celebrity Songbook” featuring Jere Ring at UCC/Fort Lauderdale on Saturday evening, March 14. It was an entertaining evening of stories of well-known celebrities and their favorite songs told from personal experiences from entertainer and protégé of Liberace. The evening was a benefit for The Why Chronicles HIV education program.

Coral Cables Congregational UCC has been filled with the sound of music. Thursday evening, February 20, was the Coral Cables Music Club’s scholarship students’ recital gala. The Alhambra Orchestra shared “A Chord-ial Evening” of chamber music from baroque to modern on Sunday evening, March 8, in a free concert. On Saturday, March 14, it was the Miami Gay Men’s Chorus presenting “Speakeasy: The Music of the – Very Gay – ’20s.”

A great evening was had by all Sunday evening, March 1, at Faith UCC/Dunedin with the St. Pete Saxophone Quartet concert entertaining some 80 folks who were toe-tapping and dancing to the sounds.

The UCC at The Villages hosted its yearly Seeds of Hope concert on February 9. From a humble $300 beginning, this year pre-event ticket sales brought in $2,459. With attendance over 160, Billie Thatcher and the Skipper were the featured attraction. Billie opened with “I Don’t Get Around Much Anymore” and sang a mix of songs and reminiscences before inviting the audience to sing along songs by Carol King (remember “Tapestry”?). The Skipper had a few songs of his own and duets with Billie. Over 350 pounds of food were collected and $80 of quilt raffle tickets were sold. A total of $4,103 went to support the Wildwood Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen. This concert was one of eight held by various churches to support this...
all-volunteer organization; 60,000 pounds of food and $75,000 were raised last year.

It was a grand night for singing at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach on Saturday afternoon, February 29, with the music of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Five singers performed selections from some of musical theater’s favorite shows with proceeds going to church mission projects.

The Bach Festival Society of Winter Park recently presented a special service at First Congregational Church/Winter Park, which was a “one-of-a-kind experience.” It was “a timeless service [begun] in 1727 by the Moravian denomination, and as the tradition goes, a bun and coffee will be served and shared as an act of fellowship...It uses older and traditional music in worship. Brass music, congregational singing and choral music continue to be very important in Moravian congregations.”

Reflections on Communion
by Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby
First Congregational UCC/Sarasota

Astonishment and healing. Those were the words that stirred in my heart and soul on January 5, 2020, as our church prepared to come to the Communion table. Communion is a holy ritual where we take ordinary, everyday elements of bread and juice to proclaim these are tactile and tangible ways of encountering/experiencing God’s grace.

It is astonishing and amazing that something so familiar can evoke the presence of God. So often when we talk about God it can feel too wordy or theoretical. Communion is earthy, practical and personal. These everyday elements come from the earth. What we do at Communion is a holy action of taking, eating, and tasting God’s goodness. Communion is a sermon that should stir our hearts and sing to our souls.

The table is also one of healing. We are remembering one of the most difficult nights of Christ’s life. We can bring to the table our troubles and turmoil. We can bring the restlessness in our souls that won’t be easily resolved. We all stand in the need of prayer. Yet, often, we don’t talk or think about all that we are bringing with us.

I know in this New Year, I need healing in the face of grief and wondering how I can best be helpful in this world. I need healing to stop trying to do it all. I need healing from the anger and frustration that is frequently stirred up in the world we inhabit. Astonishment and healing can happen in other ways and in addition to communion.

I invited you to keep track of places you feel astonished and amazed in 2020 as an important doorway into the holy in these days. I was delighted a few Sundays ago when I went to Celery Fields to walk/wander around. I found healing on January 19 as we sang, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” and heard Bettye Smith’s beautiful reflection on Dr. King. Please remember that the third Sunday of every month, we are committed to a Healing Service. This is a chance for you to have your prayers heard and have someone witness to the mat you carry with you into worship. It is an embodiment of the words of “Won’t You Let me be Your Servant,” that “I will weep when you are weeping. When you laugh, I’ll laugh with you. I will share your joy and sorrow ‘til we’ve seen this journey through.”

For me, rituals like Communion and healing services help to celebrate the Christmas truth of God’s incarnation. God is more than a concept or intellectual idea. God is an encounter. God is a relationship. God as love is found when I notice God’s presence in you. It is my prayer that in the months to come we might have more opportunities to reflect on healing rituals and moments when we can enter the mystery of God’s presence.

From the February issue of The Newsletter of First Congregational UCC/Sarasota
I n the summer of 2016 we asked if it was Time for Conversations on Race, Religion, Violence, Tolerance, Justice, Inequality. We have asked you to share with our Florida churches how you as a church family have, are now, or are planning to have such conversations.

As you read through these brief descriptions, do you note any which sound like programs or opportunities you would like to consider for your own congregation? If so, please feel free to contact our Conference 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.

Church members of Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda attended the local Martin Luther King breakfast where they heard retired educator Eunice Wiley narrate a video presentation of two of Dr. King’s lesser known speeches that still hold a strong message for today, including “A Time to Break Silence.” Students from Punta Gorda schools read their winning essays about how Dr. King influences their lives today.

The United Church in Tallahassee had a special worship service on February 23, which included gospel music and inspirational readings. Best church lady hats were encouraged!

Sunday School students at Faith UCC/Dunedin were asked what the UCC believes and were shown the list of “UCC firsts” as the list seemed to mesh well with the Black History Month lesson plan. The list was long and the discussion was rich with precious insights. They colored the Black History Month page while it was read and explained, and they read the MLK “I Have a Dream” speech. It was very quiet.

Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami had planned to celebrate its Ninth Annual Salute to Black History on Sunday, March 15, with Florida Memorial University’s honoree for the year. Due to the health crisis, the service had to be canceled along with a jazz brunch and entertainment to be provided by Brenda Alford.

On Saturday afternoon, February 22, at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota, Dr. Adam Clark, an Associate Professor of Theology at Xavier University, spoke on “James Cone and the Crisis of American Christianity,” and followed that the next day at worship with a sermon titled, “Being a Transformed Nonconformist.” Dr. Clark is committed to the idea that theological education in the twenty-first century must function as a counter-story, one that equips students to read against the grain of the dominant culture and inspires them to live into the Ignatian dictum of going forth “to set the world on fire.”

To this end, he is intentional about pedagogical practices that raise critical consciousness by going beneath surface meanings, unmasking conventional wisdoms and reimagining the good.
In a demonstration around racial justice at Faith Family UCC/Brandon in mid-February, members sorted M&Ms. They sorted the colored candies from one cup into other cups. But one comes from the privilege of a good family, good income and good school with a metal spoon with larger peanut M&Ms to sort.

Another comes from a single white mother and fair schools and fair income; she has regular M&Ms and a plastic fork as the tool to use in sorting the candies. The other comes from a black, single parent, a poor neighborhood and overcrowded school and is given a small, bitty tweezer and very small candies to sort.

All have a full cup of candies. Some are given more than others in the way of a tool, yet have the same goal that is the same — separate the colored candies.

Not really justice for all. Not really the same opportunity for all.

Some 52 members from Fort Myers Congregational UCC were present at the LIFE Nehemiah Action assembly on Monday, March 9, in a crowd of almost 600 people from diverse faith communities.

Included in the action items were voucher care for infants and one year olds on the waiting list to be served in Lee County and how juvenile civil citations and arrests are recorded.

On February 23 the potluck featured the documentary film “Scarred Lands and Wounded Lives,” which focuses on the broad ecological and human ramifications of everything from technological development and natural resource exhaustion to weapons testing and modern warfare.

Members from St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota and First Congregational UCC/Sarasota attended the SURE (Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity) rally on Monday evening, February 16, held at First Cong to learn about the progress being made on affordable housing, out-of-school suspensions and the criminal justice system.

Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg had a postcard writing event after worship on Sunday, March 8.

They wrote to their elected Congressional representatives urging each of the three to co-sponsor and then vote for the Refugee Protection Act to ensure fair, humane and legal treatment of all who approach our borders.
The Witness Wednesday Group at Faith UCC/Dunedin has been out and about in front of the church, lifting voices on faith-based issues that are near and dear to them. They report the number of honks and thumbs up has been increasing by the week! All are welcome any Wednesday from 10-11am. They have the signs—the necessary ingredient is people to wave them!

In honor of March being Women’s History Month, the Sunday worship on March 8 featured an all-women led service with the theme of “Herstory.” Scripture, hymns, prayers and anthems were all women-focused and inspired by women. The service concluded with the congregation holding their arms in an equal sign, which is the International Women’s Day theme of #EachforEqual, while singing the benediction, “Let There Be Peace on Earth.”

The United Church in Tallahassee hosted a training session on Friday afternoon, February 21, which was a certificate program that focused on the many public policy issues facing the 2020 Florida Legislature in the area of anti-trafficking public policies and laws, including past legislative efforts and current needs. Experts were there to explain Florida law, needs and gaps and the workings of the Legislature.

Faith UCC/Dunedin, in its growing ecumenical partnership with the Clearwater Friends Meeting, hosted a needed and difficult forum focused on raising awareness of human trafficking. Over 100 people from Faith UCC, the Friends Meeting and plenty of folks from the wider community came together for lunch and to learn more about what they can do to help end the scourge that is human trafficking. They heard from four panelists who are currently working to end trafficking and raise awareness about it, teaching people what to do when they suspect someone is being held in a trafficking situation.

First Congregational UCC/Winter Park hosted an after-worship event on Sunday, March 8, that featured Andrea Clemens Vaughan, an educator on sexual abuse. She has participated in both local and national radio, television and news programs and is the author of the award-winning book, Invisible Target: Breaking the Cycle of Educator Sexual Abuse. She hosts the podcast, “Andrea Speaks Out,” which shines a light on healing from and prevention of sexual abuse. She has dedicated her life to sharing her story with others so that schools can provide the safe environment that children deserve. Her hope is that with education and prevention, every child will live in a world safe from abuse.
Food, Glorious Food

St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota participated in the Venice CROP Hunger Walk on Sunday, February 23. Members and friends raised approximately $1,840 on behalf of Team St. Andrew UCC to help end hunger—one step at a time. For St. Patrick’s Day the congregation celebrated with a potluck party on Monday, March 9.

Altamonte Chapel Community UCC/Altamonte Springs served lunch on February 9 and March 8 at the Orlando Rescue Mission. The church is also collecting donations of canned meats for a local food drive.

Communion Sundays at Port Orange UCC are designated as “Fill the Food Basket” Sunday. In January more than 15 bags of food were collected to benefit Halifax Urban Ministries.

Sanibel Congregational UCC participated in the “Feed My Starving Children” meal packing event on Saturday, February 1. The community-wide event was held at the church with a goal of organizing 940 volunteers to measure, scoop ingredients, seal bags and prepare boxes for shipping as well as raise $44,500 to produce 202,000 meals for people across the globe.

On Thursday, January 30, Coral Gables Congregational Church’s Rev. Megan Smith was invited to pray with American Airlines Sky Chef employees at Miami International Airport who cook and prepare the food every time people fly on American Airlines. They were fasting for a week to educate us all on their low wages and unaffordable health care. Pastor Megan said, “It was humbling to pray with people that prepare my food when I fly, while they themselves were fasting for justice.”

Members of UCC/New Smyrna Beach enjoyed a Valentine’s dinner on Sunday, February 9, with music and wine.

The Men’s Ministry at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach held the “Dave Cramer Memorial Pancake Breakfast” on Saturday morning, February 22, enjoying an all-you-can-eat meal and honoring the memory of a beloved church member.

Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples joined the national Souper Bowl of Caring for the hungry, selling homemade soups and bread on Sunday, February 2, with proceeds and donations going St. Matthew’s House, an agency that provides housing for the homeless, food for the needy and comfort for the addicted and suffering. Then on Saturday, February 8, a chocolate sale was held just in time for Valentine’s Day.

The United Church in Gainesville continues with its Supper Club gatherings in which 8-10 members join in a member’s home to share a meal and fellowship.

Members at the United Church in Tallahassee helped prepare, cook and serve food at the Kearney Center on March 15. The Center provides comprehensive emergency services to individuals experiencing or on-the-verge of experiencing homelessness within the Big Bend (8-county) region.

The Education Ministry Team at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg recently collected funds to fill 25 Snack Sacks and 25 Activity Sacks for homeless children who attend a local elementary school. Almost $1,000 was donated for this project. The sacks were given to the children on Friday, March 13, the beginning of spring break. This is the fifth project the church has undertaken on behalf of this school.

Faith Family UCC/Brandon collected soup at its Souper Bowl gathering.
Disaster — But the Same Feelings

In the moments of early morning as I wake, all seems calm. These are the moments between sleep and wakefulness that are calm. As my brain kicks in, I remember this is not a normal time. The calm of sleep is pushed aside to find out what has happened overnight with the threat of Covid-19 or coronavirus as it is being called. The serenity of the moment is gone, replaced with differing levels of anxiety each morning. I hesitate to reach for a screen of one form or another to find out the “breaking news,” but I give in. I need to be informed. Are there new cautions and closings put in place? How many people have now contracted the virus in the state? Are there any infected people near where I live?

The feelings I have behind these thoughts are the same ones I felt when Hurricane Irma was approaching. Where will it make landfall? How strong is it? Should I evacuate? Hurricanes are different than what we are facing now, but a lot of the feelings, thoughts, stress and anxiety are the same. Our lives are changing without us having a say about it. We are at the mercy of something unseen. At least with a hurricane we can see it well ahead of time on weather forecasts. This disaster hides and jumps out of nowhere.

This disaster, while different in form, results in many of the same things we should do when a hurricane is approaching: listen to the experts (the reliable, reputable newscasts) and other media outlets and your local authorities and health officials. Adjust your style as directed by all those entities depending on your individual situation.

The nation right now is in panic mode. I went into a Publix store yesterday (3-18-20) in the middle of the day and almost every shopping cart was in use and many of the shelves were empty. It reminded me of other nations that routinely do not have an over-abundance of food available in stores. The anxiety in the store was very evident with customers and staff as they tried to do their jobs amidst the panic.

What can we do about this unseen disaster? Pray. Pray for a calm spirit. Pray as often as you need it. Remember the wonderful slogan “Keep calm and carry on” developed by the British government in preparation for World War II. Carry on with our lives as best we are able with so much uncertainty surrounding us. Know that we will weather the storm of this virus and there will be a new normal.

Rely on our faith and favorite scripture passages that have brought us to a place of calm and centered us over the years. Each one of us has ways to manage stress in our lives. Do what works for you. Be practical and use common sense in your thinking and actions. (Do I really need to go to the grocery store?)

With this disaster we have been asked not to go out unless it is necessary and keep our distance when we do. Sheltering in place is what some of us do during a hurricane. We have practice with that and now are able to shelter in place without a loss of power. It may be a time to tackle one of those long put-off projects.

Altering the words from Mark 9:24, “Lord I believe, help me with my anxiety!”

My hope is that by the time this is published and read this will be old news!

Maria Recovery Continues in Puerto Rico Post Quakes

Earthquake aftershocks in Puerto Rico’s south and southwest have not impeded Hurricane Maria long-term recovery work in Puerto Rico’s north and northeast of UCC Disaster Ministries in partnership with the Iglesia Evangélica Unida de Puerto Rico (IEUPR).

“We are still working since we focused our reconstruction in the east, for now. Time will tell when we will be able to go back to working in the south,” said Lydia Rosaly, IEUPR Social Action and Response Coordinator.

“This new emergency doesn’t affect the area of our current work of reconstruction from Hurricane Maria. Most of the aftershocks are not felt in the eastern part of the island.”

UCC work teams from the mainland continue to travel to Puerto Rico to restore hurricane-damaged roofs. “No one canceled and folks are still stepping up to help out - earthquakes or not,” said Judy Moore, who with her husband Doug coordinates volunteer deployment to Puerto Rico for UCC Disaster Ministries.
“I have had requests to help with the earthquakes,” Moore said, “but because the situation is not yet ready for volunteers, there is nothing to tell folks about helping there. In the north, not south where the quakes hit, we still have plenty of Maria recovery work. We still have openings for work teams in April and May.”

Matching Grants for UCC Congregations for CWS Kits

The UCC Matching Grants for congregations assembling CWS Emergency Cleanup Buckets and other Kits are back by popular demand for 2020!

UCC congregations may apply for up to $250 to supplement their own efforts to assemble these life-giving supplies. Completed kits get warehoused, ready to send back out again on quick notice.

Priority is Emergency Cleanup Buckets, but other kits also are welcome.

In 2019, 67 UCC congregations received grants. Click here for information and to apply.

Congregations that have received UCC Matching Grants in past years may reapply this year and every year for another grant.

For families facing the muck and ruin that a disaster has caused to their homes, CWS Emergency Cleanup Buckets are more than just relief supplies — they are an expression of love and symbol of hope for the future.

Matthew Stevens, CWS Director of Congregational Giving, said, “We can only respond to these situations because of the generosity of the UCC.”

Completed kits may be taken to any one in a national network of CWS warehouses. Many of the depots open their doors on April 1 to start collecting Kits for the upcoming hurricane season, so now is a good time to begin assembling Kits.

Find your nearest depot here: https://cwskits.org/depots; the full list of depots will be posted by April 1.

The ecumenical Church World Service and its participating denominations, including the UCC, collaborate to keep CWS warehouses stocked up with Emergency Cleanup Buckets and other Kits. When disaster occurs, UCC Disaster Ministries and other such entities may request Buckets and/or Kits for use in their response.

Join Us for April Courses

April 15 – May 12 ($99)
- ESC13 An Overview of Homosexuality and the Bible (4-weeks) – Rev. Dr. Danny Spears

April 15 – May 26 ($295)
- L1.1 Making Sense of Theology (6-weeks)
- L2.2 Old Testament Hermeneutics (6-weeks)
- L3.11 Special Occasions Course (6-weeks)

April 15 – June 16 ($295)
- L3.2 Supervised Ministry V: Pastoral Approaches for Those Living with Mental Illness (9-weeks)

April 15 – July 14 ($595)
- 2.6/2.7 UCC History and Polity (12-weeks)

(no assignments week of July 1-7)

Register at www.pathwaysatheological.org

Just published!

UCC Disaster Ministries: Helping Rebuild Homes and Lives in 2019. See how generous contributions from across the United Church of Christ totaling more than $1 million have provided relief and long-term recovery to disaster survivors across the U.S. and around the world. Click here to download the report (PDF).
The United Church of Gainesville’s Lads in Plaid raced to the finish line at the annual Family Promise Bed Race on Saturday, February 29. In 2015, the Bed Race to End Childhood Homelessness was created, a quirky fundraising event that would bring together something fun and meaningful for those participating. The UCG team is currently focusing on laps and naps for next year’s race.

There was a pulpit exchange at Sanibel Congregational UCC on Sunday, February 2, with Rev. Dr. John Danner preaching “The World Upside Down” and Rabbi Stephen Fuch, whose Bat Yam-Temple of the Islands shares space in SCUCC, whose sermon was “The Violent World of the Sport We Love Most.”

Faith Family UCC/Brandon held an all-church retreat with time for sharing and learning about one another, a table liturgy experience and a portable labyrinth (thanks to the Florida Conference!).

Andrew UCC/Sarasota has been at it again, decorating a new batch of teddy bears with ribbons, bows and tags. The bears will be lovingly placed in the pews to find a new home. The purpose of the ministry is to provide comfort to anyone who has suffered a loss, has an illness, is lonely or is a little blue and needs some cheering up.

There was a vow renewal at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach on Sunday, February 16. The ceremony was held on the Pavilion between services.

The Endowment Team at Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda donated $2,000 to Crossroads Hope Academy, a home for foster boys ages 12-18.

A crew from Coral Gables Congregational UCC [pictured] recently participated in a recent Habitat Blitz Build in February. On Saturday, February 29, Naples UCC dedicated eight Habitat for Humanity homes in Immokalee for which the congregation was responsible making happen. Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples and five other churches are partnering with Habitat for Humanity of Collier County and Thrivent Financial on Faith Build. Thrivent has contributed $100,000 to the effort and each church has committed to a minimum of volunteer time and funds. Congregation members began working on the site earlier this year and will have invested a total of 11 work days by mid-April. Mayflower donated $2,600 toward the effort.

Wednesday Night Live continued at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park in February. The once-a-month evening together began with dinner and fellowship followed by a choice of 65-minute classes from which to choose. For that month it was: a “Living the Question” session; a yoga class; a college scholarship segment designed for parents; and a Kids Club with appropriate activities.

From March 10-12, farmworkers from Immokalee, their families and consumer allies flooded the Big Apple for the 3-day “Follow the Money” March through New York City. They took the fight for farmworkers’ fundamental human rights directly to the doorstep of those with the power to ensure that the women and men picking Wendy’s produce can labor with dignity, safety and respect on the job. Fort Myers Congregational UCC helped support the marchers with donations of winter clothing for farm-
workers and their families who headed north for the action.

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota held a health fair on Sunday, March 8, that featured health experts on various topics — like blood pressure, nutrition and self-care — who were available to speak one-on-one in privacy booths with attendees.

UCC/Fort Lauderdale held a services fair for clients of its Ruth’s Ministry outreach on Thursday, February 20, bringing together service providers with those in the community in need of assistance. The event included a portable shower, a portable hair salon and massages plus lunch and prayers.

Sanibel Congregational UCC is continuing to support an intergenerational plarn (plastic yarn) project to weave sleeping mats out of plastic bags to be given to a new hurricane shelter in the Dunbar neighborhood of Fort Myers.

The February mission effort at Port Orange UCC benefited the local Women’s Pregnancy Center. Donations included diapers, wipes, infant clothing, a bassinet, baby swing, Pac-n-Play and an assortment of toys. Also the Program Office Manager for Camp Boggy Creek thanked the church for the 45 beautiful afghans, 43 men’s ties and disposable briefs and wipes contributed by church members. The camp, in Eustis, has programs and opportunities for children with serious illnesses and their families.

Pastor Rev. Tom Lacy (Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton) had vision of hosting a square dance and grill on the church lawn as part of his sermon series, “Country Songs, Christian Steps.” It was held on Sunday, February 9, and was a grand success, with lots of high energy and enthusiasm (thanks to the callers!) and delicious barbequed chicken, burgers and hot dogs.

BOOKS WE’RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER...

The Girl Who Wrote in Silk by Kelli Estis, The Only Woman in the Room by Marie Benedict, The Paris Architect by Charles Belfoure, The Pocket Pema Chödrön by Pema Chodron and Such a Fun Age by Kiley Reid (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park)

The Mind of God: Neuroscience, Faith, and a Search for the Soul by Dr. Jay Lombard. (Faith UCC/Dunedin)

The Book of Joy by the Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu (Faith Family UCC/Brandon)

The Killer of Flower Moon by David Grann (Naples UCC)

Breakfast with Buddha by Roland Merullo and True Inclusion by Rev. Brandon Robertson (Spring Hill UCC)

Evolution of the Word by Marcus Borg and I, Eliza Hamilton by Susan Holloway Scott (Fort Myers Congregational UCC)

What We Talk About When We Talk About God by Rob Bell, Mapping Your Life Curriculum by Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby, We Fed an Island by Jose Andres, Tenth of December by George Saunders, Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens, The History of Bees by Maja Lunde and Night of Miracles by Elizabeth Berg (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

Grant by Ron Chernow, Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson, Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens and Being Mortal by Atul Gawande (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

Long Bright River by Liz Moore (United Church in Tallahassee)

On the Brink of Everything by Parker Palmer (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

Reading the Bible Again for the First Time by Marcus Borg and Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)
Spring Hill UCC had a Rummage Sale and Flea Market on Saturday, March 2, and there were breakfast muffins, bread, brownies, cookies or coffee cake to sell. Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples had its seventh annual garage sale after church on Sunday, February 2. The Almost Spring Bazaar at Sanibel Congregational UCC on Saturday, February 29, offered everything from books and jewelry to furniture, plants and baked goods with proceeds benefiting local missions supporting women and children.

There was another epic yard sale on Saturday, February 8, at the UCC at The Villages. This major fundraiser for the church—which took more than a dozen people five days to organize—generated more than $3,500, with unsold items donated to Marion County Hospice.

The 2020 Attic Treasures sale at Fort Myers Congregational UCC in early February succeeded thanks to the many donations and the more than 50 volunteers who contributed their time, talents and energy. It was a wonderful opportunity for volunteers to once again work side-by-side with long-time friends and also get to know many of the newer folks a lot better. More than $2,400 was raised with a profit over $2,200 after expenses. This money will be used to make contributions to community programs supporting some of their neighbors in need and for special projects around the church.

The success of an event like the early year rummage sale at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park was measured not just by meeting its dollar goal of $9,000+ but by newfound relationships that formed over the eight days it took to organize it—with special thanks to Jackie Miller who coordinated the effort. A shopper mentioned that his church donates leftover jeans and long sleeve shirts to a group of migrant workers in the area. Organizers jumped right on that idea and collected bags of men’s, women’s and children’s clothes that were leftover at the close of the sale, included toys and books for the kids and caravaned these items and more to the migrant workers in Mascotte through the Collectivo Arbol organization.

The recent yard sale at the United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine netted $2,700, with $1,000 earmarked for the church budget and $1,700 for the “Raise the Roof” fund.

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

“How Mediation Can Be a Godly Work” and “How to Cope with Pressures and Trials” (Port Orange UCC)

“The Lonely American in This Digital Age,” “Atonement,” “Forgiveness Sets Us Free,” “Coping With Loss” and mental health first aid/skills-based training course (United Church of Gainesville)


“The Lives and Works of Zora Neale Hurston and William Faulkner” (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

“Lectio Divina” (Fort Myers Congregational UCC)

“The Aging Body: What to Expect” and “Aging and the Brain” (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

“Florida Estate Planning” and “What You Need to Know About Prescription Drugs” (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)

Book of Acts (Christ’s Promise UCC/Auburndale)

“Restorative Justice,” “Antiracism,” “Discovering Who You Are: Beyond Labels and Circumstances” and “Will the Real Role Models Please Stand Up!” (United Church in Tallahassee)

“Enjoying Your Kids: Parenting Today” (Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton)

“Overview of Medicare,” “Jerusalem and the Beginning of Christianity,” “Sacred Sounds in Spiritual Places” (UCC/Fort Lauderdale)

“The Practice of Prayer” (Pensacola Beach Community UCC)

“Triumph/Transformation/Thrive” (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park)

“The Creation Story” and “Study of the Shroud of Turin” (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

“Women of the Cross and Tomb” and “Lectio Divina” (Mayflower UCC/Naples)
Both St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota and First Congregational UCC/Sarasota participated in Sarasota Pride on January 25 to share their Open and Affirming messages with the local community.

A committee studying the Open and Affirming process has begun at Mayflower UCC/Naples.

The Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton celebrated its first anniversary as an Open and Affirming Church during worship on Sunday, January 12. Everyone in attendance was encouraged to share in the anniversary cake after the service.

On Sunday, February 16, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota dedicated its Oasis Center for Renewal and Reflection. Church members were invited to tour the Center and write a prayer of blessing for this new space. The Oasis Center is envisioned to be a place of healing and hope for the whole community—a place for quiet reflection to listen and lean into one’s life. Regarding security on the church campus, new security measures have been instituted for the protection of staff. When someone comes to the church office, the outside doors will be locked and the video doorbell needs to be used to enter. The office manager will ask for the visitor’s name before admitting the person into the office area.

The recent March workday at Faith Family UCC/Brandon saw Aaron and several others reinstall the light pole on the church campus while also clearing several truckloads of brush from the front of the church.

The Operations Team at Port Orange UCC has been working to make the church both attractive and very functional and in so doing has managed to reduce some costs significantly. For example, the costs for electricity may drop as much as 40% with proper management and cooperation of everyone who uses the church, saving almost $5,000/yr. There may be times when the air conditioning may be off during peak demand periods and fans will be the only air movement; more fans are being added. On February 13 a new deep well irrigation pump was installed along with the replacement of all the well pipe at a cost of $5,000, which will result in an outstanding irrigation system that will preserve the lawn and foliage.

Altamonte Chapel Community UCC/Altamonte Springs is seeking funds to repair the steeple of its historic Chapel. All the money raised in the Help Ringing Our Chapel Bell GoFundMe campaign will go toward repairing the steeple and the bell. The steeple was damaged during the 2019 hurricane season and as a consequence of this damage, the church bell is unable to ring and the underlying roof structure is in eminent danger of developing severe leaks that would damage the beautiful interior.

As a small congregation, the cost of the repair exceeds its capabilities; the cost of the repairs are estimated to be over $22,000 after the insurance deductible is met. It is very important that the repairs are made before this year’s hurricane season begins in June.
The women’s retreat at Sanibel Congregational UCC was held on Monday, February 10, at the home of one of its members. This year’s topic was “The Wisdom of Aging” and was facilitated by Associate Pastor Rev. Deb Kunkel. The discussion centered on the second half of life and the opportunity it can provide for a shift in one’s life from “doing” to “being.” The retreat offered the opportunity to consider what that shift might look like and how to gain that wisdom that aging can offer. After lunch the retreat concluded with sharing in Communion.

Women Engage! (WE!), the women’s monthly discussion group at Naples UCC that examines contemporary issues through the eyes of faith, met in February to focus on the topic, “Understanding and Responding to Rising Anti-Semitism.” In March the discussion was “What to Do with Public Symbols of Hatred,” whether they represent racism, anti-Semitism or other painful parts of our history.

The UCC Book Talk Tea group at Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda visited the mosque in Port Charlotte on January 29. The Muslim women provided lunch and cooked dishes from their respective countries. There was a presentation on Islam and a question and answer period, and the Imam gave a tour of the mosque. It was a wonderful day of interfaith fellowship that was appreciated by all involved.

The Anam Cara Women’s Circle at Faith UCC/Dunedin opened the new year with an art class of spirited beginners and experienced painters led by artist and snowbird member Jan Goodwin. The creative workshop combined play and art. A follow-up offering was held on February 8. On March 8 the Circle’s program centered on International Women’s Day, and the applause was immediate after Maya Angelou’s poem, “Phenomenal Women,” was read extemporaneously. Twenty-six women watched the YouTube video, “The History of International Women’s Day”, #IWD #InternationalWomen’sDay, and were moved by the struggles that began on March 8, 1908, and, quite frankly, continue to this day. Following the video, the women enjoyed a meal while sharing their Herstories about their personal S/heroes: grandmothers, mothers and other women whom they have been blessed to know. At the end of the program, they posed with their hands together in an equal (=) sign in unity with the 2020 theme for this year’s celebration, #EachforEqual.

A group of women from Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach joined with another area church for a retreat weekend in February at DaySpring Conference Center in Ellenton.

Florida UCC Women Cancel 2020 Annual Conference

In light of the recent concerns from the CDC regarding social gatherings and Covid-19, the annual 2020 Florida UCC Women’s Conference, which had been scheduled for May 1-3, has been cancelled.

The Florida UCC Women’s Board has decided to err on the side of caution in consideration of the health and well-being of all potential conference attendees.

Thank you for your understanding.
3 Great Loves is a denomination-wide story telling initiative, collecting and lifting up the stories of our local churches and affiliates about how we are living out God’s love and expressing love of neighbor, children and creation — the 3 Great Loves. From knitting clubs making hats for newborns, collecting food for food pantries, starting a recycling program at your church, standing together against social injustice — these are the stories of 3 Great Loves and no story is too insignificant to share!

Rev. Dr. Sheila Guillaume, Eastern Region Ambassador (Sheila@unionucc.net)
Lynn Jones, Western Region Ambassador (Honickyl@gmail.com)

The Intergenerational Church and the Family Faith Formation Ministries at First Congregational Church/Winter Park organized an outreach event on Saturday, March 7, to help Clean the World (cleantheworld.org). The organization started with a tiny warehouse collecting old soap before it is discarded and have now progressed to a worldwide organization where it collects the soap and the tiny half-used bottles of shampoos from hotels and then magically reuse and distribute to those who have no soap! It began with getting soap to countries where it could literally save lives just by people washing their hands and now also provide kits to those in areas devastated by natural disasters.

Members of Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg were encouraged to attend the Environmental Film Festival held at nearby Eckerd College from February 21-29 and then join in a discussion in the church library on March 5.

A “Living The Questions” class began at the Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda in February with this year’s theme being “Creation Justice/Care.” Also the Social Justice Ministry team co-sponsored an informative presentation on “Our Climate Is Changing: New Findings and Old” given by Nobel Laureate Dr. Terry Root that was attended by 150 members and community residents in CUCC’s sanctuary.

Bill Lewis led a reflective outing for interested members of First Congregational UCC/Sarasota on Saturday, February 29, spending most of the morning in a natural area reflecting on attentiveness, gratitude, grace and awe by walks (about 2 miles on dirt trails), times of silent reflection and quotes to nurture one’s soul.

The United Church in Tallahassee is involved with the Tallahassee Green Faith Alliance, which brings people of faith together to grow in community as good stewards of the earth and seek to stand as one for clean air, water and land. The organization focuses on educating themselves and others to grow strong Creation Care/Green Sanctuaries groups in Tallahassee. They meet bi-monthly at different houses of worship to learn about unique sustainability plans and accomplishments.

Retirement at Back Bay Mission

It is never easy to say goodbye, but with a great sense of gratitude the Board of Directors of Back Bay Mission has announce the retirement of Dr. Alice Graham as Executive Director. Her last official day will be December 31, 2020.

Since joining the Mission in 2015, Dr. Graham has led a gallant effort in meeting the needs of the under-served and enhancing the value of the organization in the community. Her passion for serving others is exemplary. We are excited to continue the mission of Strengthening Neighborhoods, Seeking Justice, and Transforming Lives with Dr. Graham through the remainder of 2020.

The Board has begun the process of identifying candidates to advance the Mission in the future. Please join the Board, along with Staff, as we congratulate Dr. Graham on her upcoming retirement.
Those Special Moments in Children’s Ministry

MERRILL NOBLE  
DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN’S MINISTRY, NAPLES UCC

There are moments in Children’s Ministry when a Director steps back and says to themself, “THIS is what it is all about!!” These are goose bump moments. When children, without being prompted, show that the bible stories they have been hearing have seeped into their souls. When their childlike faith takes their teacher by complete surprise and a lesson becomes less about the plan and more about going with the flow and satisfying a child’s curiosity.

Christmas Eve and Sunday morning lessons in January provided some of those goose bump moments. I will never forget the moment on Christmas Eve when I asked a group of my young friends if I could take a picture of them beside the blow-up Nativity scene in the Gathering Place. They eagerly agreed and began to settle themselves around the baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Through the din of the crowd that had gathered for cookies, crafts and fellowship, I heard one of the girls give a directive to the others. “We should all get close to the baby Jesus, kneel and be praying”. Be still my heart.

After several weeks of being apart for holiday vacations with family and friends, my kindergarten – 5th graders gathered back together in Nelson Hall to begin hearing stories about the Magi, Jesus’ baptism and the start of his earthly ministry. Not every Director has the opportunity to teach, week after week. The blessing for me has been to discern what my new friends know, understand and want to learn. Our discussion about the Magi included how old Jesus might have been when the Magi came to visit, where he was living at the time, where the Magi had come from and the family’s escape to Egypt to avoid Herod’s wrath. I soon learned that my friends were eager visual learners.

One kindergarten child sprung from his chair to get one of the New Adventure Bibles standing neatly on the shelf. Others joined him. Soon they were all flipping to the maps in the back of the Bible to locate for themselves, Bethlehem and Egypt. One young reader exclaimed, “I see the Red Sea!” They could hardly contain themselves, retelling stories we had explored this past fall about Moses and how he had freed the people from slavery. I thought to myself, “This is so exciting, they are beginning to see the big picture of our faith!”

There is no teacher more excited about planning her lesson and teaching than Miss Lois! She inspires me! Baptism Sunday brought out her creative best. Determined to help her young preschool friends learn the story of Jesus being baptized by his cousin John, Lois made a visual out of felt. A long blue piece resembled the Jordan River. She cut out and glued figures to resemble the characters and attached a very simple version of the story above each scene. Her little friends even baptized baby dolls of varying ethnicities. Lois generously gave me a piece of blue felt to use for my lesson. How the older children loved acting out the story! John the Baptist used a piece of Kleenex for his beard. Jesus spread out his arms showing his full joy at being God’s Son and the youngest children made sure that the river had waves with their blue streamers.

As 2020 begins, the children are having fun as they learn. A group of mixed ages on Sunday morning has become a cohesive and supportive community. New, young families are coming to taste our programs and worship services. Praise be to God!

From “Children’s Ministry” in the February Steeplelights newsletter of Naples UCC

One recent Sunday School class at Faith UCC/Dunedin saw the kids discuss the role music plays in their faith, another time it was reflections on Black History Month and another was devoted to “Sea of Faith: The Environment and the Earth Family.”

The children of First Congregational UCC/ Winter Park threw a Valentine’s Party on February 9 for those in their church family aged 65+. They enjoyed lunch, dessert and party games and it was a wonderful opportunity for the children in kindergarten-5th grade to bring the generations together.

There was a Kids Art Adventure Class at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach on Saturday morning, February 29. Kids ages three through 5th grade were able to get creative in different artistic media including music, painting, sand sculpting and artistic play.

Parents’ Night Out at the United Church of Gainesville on Friday, February 14, meant babies through kids in 5th grade ate pizza, watched movies, played games and had fun with their friends under the watchful eye of child care staff – while parents enjoyed Valentine’s Day. The cost was $15 for the first child and $10 for each additional child.

Tessa Frost