2019 Annual Gathering
Experiencing "What Wondrous Love"

BY RICK CARSON
EDITOR

On the theme of “What Wondrous Love,” the United Church of Christ in Florida assembled at the Wyndham Orlando Resort October 10-12 for its 2019 Annual Gathering. It was our larger faith community’s once-a-year opportunity to learn, transform and experience our covenant.

Prior to the official start of the Gathering, the Local Church University was held on Thursday afternoon. Three one-hour modules were offered.

- “Worshiping with New Creativity” was moderated by Neal Watkins (Minister for Faith Formation) with a panel consisting of Rev. Karen Curtis-Weakley (Hope UCC/Rockledge), Rev. Talia Raymond (United Church of Gainesville) and Rev. Patrick Rogers (UCC/Fort Lauderdale). They addressed such questions as your church’s mindset, your type of worship and the challenges of doing things differently.

- “Having Good and Productive Meetings” was led by Rev. Andy Bachman (United Church of Gainesville), who touched on the key “nitty-gritty” details for effective committee meetings, the importance that they have a spirituality element and that committee members come away with joy in what they are doing.

- “A Spirituality of Generosity” was presented by Rev. Andrew Warner (Generosity Outreach Officer for the national UCC). He shared the results of a national study on generosity in congregations. He discussed the value of talking about generosity throughout the liturgical year, the importance of “thank you’s and sharing stories and testimonials of generosity apart from lecturing about the church budget. “Because of you, our church changes lives...” he said. “Giving is an opportunity to be blessed.”

[A special session of “A Discussion of Pastoral Practice” was presented by Rev. Dr. Casey Baggott (Community Church of Vero Beach) for those clergy seeking credit for professional ethics education credits in the Florida Conference.] The afternoon program concluded with a lively informal social/reception at a popular adjacent Tex-Mex restaurant.

Table worship with Communion — creatively orchestrated by Rev. Jen Daysa and members of Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park — opened the Friday program.

This was followed by the first round of 45 minute workshops. These were:

- “Anti-racism Work in the UCC” (Rev. Velda Love, Minister for Racial Justice for the national UCC)
- “Breakfast Church” (Rev. Jen Daysa, Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park)
- “Just Peacemaking” (Rev. Dr. Sheila Guillaume, Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach)

...continued on page 2
With 146 delegates registered and 63 congregations represented, the first business plenary session followed, then lunch and the second round of workshops in the afternoon:

- “Global Ministries Southeast Asia Initiative” (Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, Minister for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations for the national UCC)
- “Creating a Sustainable and Achievable 3-Year Plan” (Rev. Andy Bachman, United Church of Gainesville)
- “Coalition of Immokalee Workers Update” (Uriel Zelaya-Perez of the CIW)
- “Interfaith Relations” (Rev. Dr. Hal McSwain, First Congregational UCC/Ocala, and Rabbi Harari, Temple Beth Shalom/Ocala)
- “Called as Partners in Christ’s Service: Developing and Nurturing Attitudes of Servanthood as a Matter of Faith, Not Obligation” (Lynn Jones, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

The keynote address was a duo presentation by Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson (First United Church of Tampa) and Rev. Velda Love (Minister for Racial Justice for the national UCC). Calling herself “a drum major for justice for the national UCC,” she emphasized the importance of telling one’s story. Dr. Bernice discussed the transformative, restorative role the church can play in being a “healing space,” creating a church that does not exclude and the importance of telling that story. Bernice provided the gathered with a perspective on terrorism and violence over the centuries, underscoring the significance of our remembering this history.

The afternoon business plenary followed. Moderator Rev. Barton Buchanan (Windermere Union Church) read the report of the Legacy Funds Committee (chair Michael Downs (Naples UCC) unable to be present), and Budget & Finance Chair Ray Peidl (UCC at The Villages) presented a 2019 overview, summarizing that the Conference is “financially healthy overall.” Regional Ministers Rev. Leslie Etheredge and Rev. Dr. Raymond Hargrove read the names and introduced clergy new to the Conference since the last Gathering. Nominating Committee Chair Dyanne Edds (Hope UCC/Rockledge) submitted the report on Board and committee vacancies to be filled. Affinity groups and various ministries were available afterward to share information with interested delegates and visitors.

The day concluded with a banquet followed by a brief program during which the Conference Minister acknowledged various Florida UCC members and churches that had been recognized during Synod in Milwaukee this past summer. In noting the UCC’s early recognition of female clergy, Synod cited “pioneers and innovators” like Floridians Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson and Rev. Eileen Norrington (member, Hope UCC/Rockledge). Representatives from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers thanked the Conference for its long standing support, and Rev. Alan Coe (Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples) shared about the Immokalee Fair Housing initiative.

Saturday began with morning prayer and a rousing message about “changing the unchangeable to make the possible” delivered by Rev. Robert Asinger (Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour). Moderator Rev. Barton followed by sharing a deeply personal reflection about a pastor’s role in guiding congregants from darkness to light, the empowerment of truth-telling and enabling people to discover their voices. “Do you have any idea how transforming the UCC is?” he asked, closing with “Never underestimate the transforming healing power of your local church.”

Votes were taken on two pieces of business. Nominating chair Dyanne Edds submitted the names of new Board nominees (all approved) and Budget & Finance Chair Ray Peidl sought and received approval of the 2020 budget. The Conference Minister read the names of those clergy with standing in the Conference who had passed since the last Gathering. The “State of the Conference” address was delivered by Rev. Vertigan in
Committee vacancies filled:
Nominating committee — Rev. Dr. Sheila Guillaume (Union Congregational Church/West Palm Beach)
Budget and Finance Committee — Enrique Martinez (Spring Hill UCC)
Legacy Funds Development Committee — Rev. Bonnie Lipton (member, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)
Personnel Committee — Jeannie Haemmelmann (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)

A challenge from the floor was issued to the Conference and Florida UCC congregations to support financially the Immokalee Fair Housing Initiative [see pages 6-7 for more information about this].

The Conference Minister opened the Gathering to a Town Hall format during which delegates and visitors had the opportunity to ask him questions and share concerns. Issues raised included Legacy Funds grants, the Young Adult Service program, WISE and the Creation Justice Church initiative.

Meetings like the annual Gathering don’t just happen. They take a whole lot of work and time — you know that. In addition to all the speakers and presenters, here are some of the people who made it such a success and deservedly earned our thanks.

Planning and logistics – Dave Cyril, Beth Shedden, Rev. Karen Curtis-Weakley (Hope UCC/Rockledge), Rev. Aaron Lauer (Coral Gables Congregational UCC) and Rev. Jen Daysa (Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park)

The musicians – Tom Snellgrove, Kevin Jonas and Art Burgess (all from the Community Church of Vero Beach), Tiffany Rivera (Stetson University) and Kevin Harris (Music Minister at Windermere Union Church).

Friday morning Table Worship – Rev. Jen Daysa, Lisa Ware, Debbie Rasmussen and Carolyn Woodard (Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park), Rev. Karen Curtis Weakley (Hope UCC/Rockledge), Regional Conference Ministers Rev. Leslie Etheredge and Rev. Dr. Raymond Hargrove and Minister for Faith Formation Neal Watkins

Officers of the Conference including Moderator Rev. Barton Buchanan (Windermere Union Church), Registrar Lynn Jones (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota) and Parliamentarian Bob Koterman (Cocoa Beach Community Church)

which he commented on the Conference finances, programs and support available to congregations and the Board’s vision going forward [see page 4].

The vespers-style closing worship was led by Rev. Aaron Lauer (Coral Gables Congregational UCC), whose message reflected his recent experience accompanying church youth to Taize, France. His words brought to life the imagery of fire and embers and the imperative to keep the fire burning.

The gathered departed, having been anointed with oil and reminded of the “blessing of what we’ve done and a charge to keep the embers going.”

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Book Resources

What a sacred and powerful time we had at the 2019 Annual Gathering. Thank you to one and all who participated with leadership and presence. The Rev. Dr. Velda Love, as a follow-up to some of the work we did together, has sent along a bibliography for those who wish to continue their exploration without waiting for another opportunity to arise in-conference. I pray you’ll find blessings in these offerings.


For more information contact Rev. Dr. Velda Love at lovev@ucc.org or 216/736-3719.

By Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan from e-Celebrate, October 16
In the fall of 2014, the Florida Conference found itself at a turning point. The Conference was in a time of interim leadership, looking at its common life with fresh eyes, planning for the future and preparing to call new leadership. The planning team for the October Gathering that took place at the First United Church of Christ/Orlando chose as the theme for the event “Standing at the Threshold” and used a wonderful piece of art to illustrate the theme.

That meeting was memorable for me because I had come to town a day or two earlier to prepare for a time of candidating and an eventual vote on whether Conference delegates would extend to me a call to be the next Conference Minister here.

The theme resonated with my own spirit. Both in my professional life and my personal life, God had been readying me for a new thing. My years as Conference Minister in the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, while generally quite satisfying, were also marked by the end of my 30 year marriage and the necessity of addressing the needs of a church-owned camp and conference center with more than a million dollars in deferred maintenance. Both events were emotional, as you can well imagine.

So it was that I found myself standing at the threshold when I took to the lectern at First Church and began answering questions from delegates. That was five years ago, and I’ve been deeply grateful for the conversation that day and the all of conversations that have followed on so many days between then and now. I am enriched by the conversations we’ve begun here this weekend and am anxious that they should continue.

I recall, though, that I googled the theme back then as a way of preparing in my spirit for what God had in store. One of the images that came up in my search became one that I used in my first years here to describe my own journeying in conference ministry. The image that came up was the tarot card called “The Fool,” and I found it quite interesting. It pictures a traveler with little or nothing in their pack, a friend by their side, eyes skyward as they walk blindly into the future with one foot raised and ready to land on who knows what. If that doesn’t describe my life when I moved to Florida, nothing does!

But here we are five years later with a chance to reflect just a little and put things in context in a way that I think matters. Bear with me while I engage my love of numbers and statistics because I think that sometimes we get so caught up in the immediacy of a moment as to miss the view from the balcony, the bigger picture, the greater context in which we are living our days as the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ.

In 2014 the Florida Conference listed 95 member congregations. Today we list 91, for a net loss of four, or 4.3% of our Conference churches. Those four congregations were removed from membership for a variety of reasons. One chose to leave the denomination over theological differences related to Biblical literalism and a perception that the UCC holds to a low Christology. One was removed after a long dispute based on assumptions and years’ old misunderstandings between the local church leadership and the Conference. An amicable solution was difficult to come by. The other two are congregations in Fruitland Park and Winter Haven that ended their ministry in those communities and left legacy gifts to the Conference that will help more vital congregations continue in their ministry for years to come.

I note that in the same period, the United Church of Christ experienced the loss of 180 congregations. That’s three a month denomination-wide, almost one every ten days and should continue to be a cause for concern for all of us. It has been two years since we experienced the closing of a UCC congregation here in Florida so I count us as ahead of the national curve. Still, it is these kinds of losses and closings that lead me to continually focus on the vitality of the local congregation as the key emphasis of Conference life.

I asked our Financial Assistant, Beth Shedden, to offer me a simple evaluation of our financial position here in the Conference. Her e-mail to me included a spreadsheet that I’ll reference shortly along with a simple sentence … “yes, we are better off financially at the end of 2018 then we were in 2014.” To that point, the general reserve that represents our ready cash available as needed, was roughly $335,000 at the end of 2014. Today our general reserve account holds $1,350,000 and places us in a sound financial position, prepared for hard times should they arise.

This is, in large part, due to the generosity of local churches, individual donors and legacy gifts left by congregations who have ensured future ministry here even when their congregation is no longer viable. Please take note that the Conference Board of Directors holds those dollars closely while also exhibiting a willingness to spend appropriately when appropriate challenges and opportunities arise. Our total holdings — including both the general reserve and legacy funds that carry donor designations and can only be spent for very particular purposes — has also grown in the last five years. These funds help fund seminary scholarships, clergy sabbaticals and continuing education, in-
novative ministries proposed by local churches, missions and gatherings that are interfaith in nature, camp scholarships for youth otherwise unable to participate in such special opportunities and a variety of other grants and awards in keeping with the intentions of the original donors. Our total holdings at the end of 2014 were roughly $5,470,000 and at the end of 2018 totaled $7,450,000. Prudent investing, a healthy market, sound spending policies and careful attention to donor designations have helped these funds thrive.

Be mindful that those dollars are not all immediately available to us. We seek to preserve the value of original gifts while making grants and awards available from the growth of those funds over the years. It’s worth noting that when we first began publicizing the availability of these funds we experienced a flurry of requests for funding. That flurry — rather than turning into a steady trend of congregations seeking to do innovative ministry — has largely diminished and I’m bold to ask you today to discern in the life of your church, “What is the new thing God is calling us to do for our neighbor and our neighborhood that might just bring deeper vitality to our congregation?”

“And we have grants for that”

That very question becomes the point of focus twice a year when our ministry staff goes on retreat to reflect on current affairs and set goals for the year to come. Those short times away that we share have proven to be both productive and important to the health of our ministry staff team. A couple of days away is an incredible gift for which I give thanks while also encouraging you to invite your own pastor to take a couple of days away... provide them with time, space and funding to refresh their spirit after those inevitably intense times of ministry with persons in their joy, sorrow, trials, grief and multitude of circumstances that tax your pastor’s spirit seven days a week. You’ll benefit in the long term by insisting that your staff helped develop these goals and are, by and large, excited about bringing them to life in our midst. Ours is the finest staff I’ve had the privilege to work with and we can’t celebrate them enough even as we ask so much of them on a daily basis.

I think that’s enough...

I’ll close near where I began ... wondering after five years with you if I’m a happy fool to think that any of this is possible and makes a difference, confident that my path is indeed guided to places unknown and sure-footed enough to believe that when we dare to move forward carrying little for our journey but maintaining a strong faith in God, “goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The Florida Conference is strong and vital today, but here we are again, standing at the threshold looking toward whatever is out there. Informed by the past, vital in the present and hopeful for our witness that will last for years to come, we are in good condition to respond to whatever will come our way. Thank you for being the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Be at peace, and be in touch, won’t you.
**UCC Conference, Congregations Raise Thanksgiving Gift to Fund Immokalee Land Buy**

**BY CONNIE LARKMAN**<br>**UCC NEWS, NOVEMBER 26**

The Florida Conference United Church of Christ and its congregations, with support from UCC Justice and Local Church Ministries, is giving a longtime partner a special gift this Thanksgiving.

The faith groups, through a three-week fundraising campaign, will be providing more than $200,000 to the Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance, Inc., money to complete a land purchase the IFHA will use to provide sustainable housing to farmworker families in Immokalee.

“We want to offer a gift of thanksgiving for the people who make it possible for us to feast,” said Conference Minister the Rev. John Vertigan.

The Florida Conference was spurred into action through a challenge to its Board of Directors. At the Conference’s annual gathering last month, more than 100 UCCers from 51 churches pressed participation in an ecumenical effort supporting Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance’s effort to buy a nine-plus-acre parcel of land in Collier County. The IFHA needed the last chunk of funding — $200,000 — to finalize the sale.

“We needed to raise $200,000 to enable the building of more than 100 affordable housing units,” Vertigan said. “That’s a pretty good investment!”

On October 30, the Florida Conference Board approved an initial $100,000 gift, donated from the Conference’s unrestricted reserves, and challenged UCC bodies to match it. Rev. Traci Blackmon, Associate General Minister of Justice and Witness Ministries, immediately responded with $50,000. Vertigan then invited additional gifts and commitments from the churches, to be made by November 25.

Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach was one of the first responders, reaching out with a pledge of almost $10,000 to help model local church commitment to mission, ministry and justice for farm workers.

“A central part of Pass-a-Grille Beach UCC’s identity is outreach,” said the Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmelmann, church Pastor. “Every year we send youth and adults around the country and world helping those whose lives have been altered by hurricanes, floods or other tragedies. Though it is a horse of a different color, the inability of the Immokalee workers — those who labor to place food on our tables — face their own crisis. This is the inability to afford decent and affordable housing in the area where they work.”

Haemmelmann said PAG, which has supported the farmworkers with school supplies, clothing, backpacks and other materials, presented a challenge to churches of the Florida Conference to raise $100 per member for the IFHA. “Every one of our churches is equal, but not the same. This approach makes the playing field equal. We are giving $9,500.

“Long term, the systemic causes of this tragedy must change, and will require time that today’s workers don’t have. I have heard individuals say for years, ‘Why do our people go to so many places when there are needs in our back yard?’ Well, Immokalee is in our back yard and the assistance they need is not about someday, but today.”

“For over 15 years the Venice UCC has cheered on the farmworkers of Immokalee as they have persisted in their campaign for fair wages and decent and safe working conditions. We have supported them through gifts of clothing, bicycles, money, prayers, and participation in such actions as a protest march at a new Publix supermarket in Sarasota and support of the Wendy’s boycott. This Challenge Grant has given us the opportunity to put our money where our mouths are,” said VUCC member Jane Chittick.

“We sent $6,210 to the Conference in response to the $100,000 Challenge Grant, gifts from individuals, members and friends of VUCC. We are delighted with the response.”

Arlington Congregational Church UCC/Jacksonville has hosted the Coalition of Immokalee Workers during justice calls, when they have made pilgrimages up through Florida in their movement for fair wages for farm workers. Because of those encounters, Pastor Rev. Bruce Havens said, the church’s Mission Core Ministry was “quite ready to positively respond.”

“We are thankful to be able to help such an important need for our brothers and sisters in Immokalee,” Havens said, noting that the church is donating $1,000 from its Mission Fund, “which is a significant amount from a congregation our size [with average worship attendance of around 70].”

**Longtime Partners for Fair Food**

The UCC is a long-time partner of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, supporting their campaign for better wages and working conditions for farm workers. The General Synod joined their boycott of Taco Bell back in 2001, making the UCC the first denomination to stand with them. UCC members marched with farmworkers at General Synod in Tampa in 2011 advocating for retailer participation in the CIW’s Fair Food Program and presented them with a check to complete construction of a community center. In 2016, General Synod rallied in support of the group’s boycott of Wendy’s. At the 2018 General Synod in Milwaukee, the UCC honored the Immokalee Workers with the denomination’s Movement Makers Award.
Over the course of those years, numerous UCC congregations have marched, participated in rallies, sent letters and postcards, held workshops and stepped up in variety of ways to help eradicate what many recognized as modern-day slavery in the tomato industry in a small town in Florida.

“Your heart builds homes”

The IFHA, a not-for-profit organization, was founded on the belief that the people who harvest the food we eat deserve to live and raise their family in safe and affordable homes.

“Having a safe, affordable home is critically important for all of us, and yet the people who harvest our food lack this basic human need for themselves and their children,” said Arol I. Buntzman, the chairman and CEO of the Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance, Inc.

He noted that the housing stock in Immokalee has always been an issue, but when Hurricane Irma came through in 2017 devastating southwest Florida, the town of Immokalee was hit hard.

According to the IFHA, “The storm also exposed the urgent need for safe and affordable housing for these hardworking farm workers and their families. The significant destruction of housing stock has left farmworkers and their families with even more expensive and yet sub-standard, unsafe and overcrowded housing. In many cases, rents tripled and even quadrupled due to unconscionable rent-gouging.”

“This project began as a result of damage to housing in Immokalee after Hurricane Irma in 2017,” said Rev. Alan Coe (Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples), UCC Florida Conference Disaster Coordinator. He went to Immokalee on behalf of the denomination to survey the situation and met Buntzman for coffee.

The UCC, along with other faith organizations, earmarked funds for disaster relief in Immokalee, but those funds were not able to be used for land purchase. Organizations that also helped fund the land buy are Peace River Presbytery, Mision Peniel, We Can’t Have That Foundation, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Buntzman said $6 million in gifts to the IFHA have been earmarked for the construction phase by disaster assistance organizations and a growing list of individuals.

The IFHA CEO noted that the land the alliance had in mind wasn’t on the market, wasn’t even for sale. But he approached the Barron Collier Limited Partnership anyway. The group agreed to sell the IFHA nine-and-a-half acres for $450,000.

“They supported our project and agreed to sell us the land for a third of what it’s worth. People recognize the need for affordable housing in Collier County.”

The land project’s total cost, with environmental impact studies and other due diligence, is $580,000. The building plan, which will be covered by grants, gifts from each member of the IFHA Board and other donations, calls for 128 housing units, made up of two and three bedroom apartments that are hurricane resistant (to wind speeds of 250mph), energy efficient and low maintenance. The project funding is expected to keep rents affordable. Monthly rents of $750 to $900 will cover insurance and maintenance of the homes and common areas. Currently, the IFHA said a family of two adults and two children pays $500 a week for half of a trailer plus utilities.

After the land purchase closes in December, the site development planning and permit work begins. The IFHA hopes to begin constructing roads, adding utilities and doing water and sewer work next summer, with building construction beginning around this time in 2020.

“On behalf of the Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance, Inc., and farmworker families that will be provided sustainable housing in Immokalee, I’d like to express our sincere appreciation to the UCC and its Florida Conference for its support of IFHA and the housing project,” Buntzman said. “The UCC’s fundraising campaign put us over the top, by providing the $200,000 that we needed to complete the land purchase.”

On Monday morning, November 25, the Florida Conference announced that it collected a total of $203,822 for the IFHA land buy.

As Vertigan said, “Empower the spirit of generosity in God’s people with the right project and they will respond with gladness immediately!”

THANK YOU, Florida UCC congregations and members, for your generous outpouring of wondrous love!
Glimpses of the Gathering

Plenty of great meals and snacks

Co-featured presenters Rev. Dr. Powell Jackson and Rev. Love deliver a powerful message

Rev. Andy Bachman (United Church of Gainesville) presents helpful tips at the Local Church University’s module on “Having Good and Productive Meetings”

Our talented musicians

Rev. Andrew Warner from the national church presents at the Local Church University on “A Spirituality of Generosity”

Saturday begins with morning prayers

The Conference Choir makes a “joyful noise” unto the Lord at closing worship
We depart with a wondrous heart.

Rev. Asinger’s creative message has the rapt attention of Rev. Vertigan and Rev. Dr. Hargrove.

Friday evening’s banquet.

One of the settings for Table Worship on Friday morning and one of its lighter moments.

CALENDAR

December 1
Advent begins
World AIDS Day

December 3
UCC #GivingTuesday

December 3-6
RCMs Rev. Leslie Etheredge & Raymond Hargrove, UCC Associate Conference Ministers national gathering, Orlando

December 8
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Christ’s Promise UCC/Auburndale

December 15
CM Rev. John Vertigan, First UCC/Orlando
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Venice UCC

December 21
RCM Rev. Raymond Hargrove, Cocoa Beach Community Church

December 24-27
Conference office closed for holidays
December 25
Christmas

December 29
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Faith UCC/Dunedin

January 5
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, All Faiths UCC/Ridge Manor

January 11
RCM Rev. Raymond Hargrove, Southeast Region Committee on Church & Ministry, UCC/Fort Lauderdale

January 12
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda
RCM Rev. Raymond Hargrove, Coral Isles UCC/Tavernier

January 14
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Western Region Committee on Church & Ministry, First United Church of Tampa

January 18
RCM Rev. Raymond Hargrove, Northeast Region Committee on Church & Ministry, Daytona Beach

January 19
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Pilgrim Congregational UCC/St. Petersburg
RCM Rev. Raymond Hargrove, Community Church of Vero Beach

January 22
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Pinellas Plus clergy group, Clearwater

January 26
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Altamonte Chapel Community UCC/Altamonte Springs

January 31
CM Rev. John Vertigan, Budget & Finance and Legacy Funds Committees, Orlando

February 1
CM Rev. John Vertigan, RCMs Revs. Leslie Etheredge & Raymond Hargrove, Board of Directors, Orlando
RCM Rev. Raymond Hargrove, Church of the Palms/Delray Beach

February 2
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Longwood Hills Congregational Church/Longwood

February 5-7
CM Rev. John Vertigan, UCC Insurance Board Directors, Coral Gables Congregational UCC

February 9
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota

February 16
RCM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach

February 18-20
Ministerial Staff retreat/Orlando

Check uccfla.org for updates and watch for e-Celebrate messages
Unexpected Gifts

Last year my family received this card from a dear and rather cynical friend. Even though the image is silly and the sentiment is funny, it still makes a powerful point about Christmas. It seems our national expectation during Christmas is everyone around the world is experiencing that perfect Hallmark moment and a Norman Rockwell image of Christmas — except for themselves. I love Christmas. I have a wonderful time celebrating with my eccentric family and the friend who sent me the card. To be honest, I am incredibly busy during Christmas, and I do not really enjoy the holiday until after my Christmas Eve service! It is then I can take a deep breath and focus on being with my family and enjoying the holiday without any distractions.

One might think, “This pastor just has a bad attitude.” I promise I do not. I simply spend time with many people who struggle with the holiday. For those who had lost a loved one during the year, the first Christmas is the hardest. Those who live with depression seem to feel ten times more depressed. There are many families whose siblings and parents live far away and they cannot be with them over the holidays. They miss them terribly. There are some families whose daughter or son is serving in the military and stationed overseas. There have been periods in my life when Christmas was very difficult.

One way I learned to deal with the holidays was to reframe my expectations. I remembered how the story that inspired our holiday was one that took place when the nights were the longest and the winter weather made everything dormant. Yet, there was an anticipation for new life. Mary and Joseph traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register. In Luke’s story many wonderful things happened that strange evening to celebrate the new life born in that dark season. This story inspired me to expect something wonderful when everything inside of me felt dormant.

In 2007 my mother died in May, and I was divorced in August. After the Windermere Union Church’s Christmas Eve service, I went home to a very empty house. Earlier in December, I decided to open myself to be surprised — accept and enjoy whatever that mystical night was to offer me. I had no expectations. If it was going to be a night alone then, I would create an evening enjoying my solitude and become thankful for what I had.

Fortunately my Office Manager, Debbie, inquired about my plans. I shared with her I was not doing anything for Christmas. She invited me to join her family for Christmas Eve at her mom’s house in Poinciana. For me, that was about a 45 minute drive. I told her I would consider it. After the Christmas Eve service, I was tired. I was sad. I was tempted to make an excuse and not go to Debbie’s family Christmas Eve. However, I remembered my intention for the season and I made myself go.

Debbie’s Puerto Rican Christmas tradition was her whole family gathered together late Christmas Eve when everyone opened their gifts at midnight. I, like Mary and Joseph, had to travel a long way to experience that magical night. When I arrived around 11pm, they welcomed me like I was family. They had the traditional Puerto Rican food with roasted pork, sweet and green plantains, Coquito and many other delights. They fixed me a plate of food and everyone visited with me. I was thrilled I had accepted the invitation. When midnight arrived, all the children and adults gathered together around the Christmas tree and they started their gift exchange. The room was full of energy and joy!

As I watched in delight and was taking it all in, my name came up. “Barton, this one is for you.” I was shocked! Not only did they invite me to their family event but they bought me a gift, too! It was all I could to do to stay composed.

As the evening was coming to a close, I became aware of something I had almost missed. English was not the first language of anyone in the house except for me. I knew Debbie and her family spoke Spanish at home. I asked Debbie, “When your family gets together, do you all usually speak English with each other.” She smiled and said, “No, we spoke English for you. We did not want you to feel left out.”
Report of the Budget and Finance Committee

RAY PEIDL (UCC AT THE VILLAGES)  
BUDGET AND FINANCE CHAIR

With Christmas at our doorstep and the October 2019 Florida Conference Annual Gathering in our rear-view mirror, here is the last article for 2019 regarding the Budget and Finance (B&F) Committee’s activities for 2019. “What Wondrous Love” was the theme for this year’s Annual Gathering, and that theme was evident in the B&F report given at the Gathering and subsequent financial reports since!

The B&F report and proposed 2020 Budget for the Florida Conference were presented by me as chair of the Committee. In that report I first expressed appreciation for the work of its members Rev. Ken Frey (Union Congregational Church/Tavares), Rev. Booth Iburg (Eternal Hope UCC/Fort Walton Beach), Jeff Ruoff (UCC/Fort Lauderdale) and Mickey Wich (First Congregational Church/Port St. Lucie) as well as the ex-officio members — Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan, Conference Treasurer Rev. Dr. Doug Borko (Cocoa Beach Community Church), Conference Moderator Rev. Barton Buchanan (Windermere Union Church) and Legacy Funds Chair Michael Downs (Naples UCC). It is the continued input and support that these members expressed during the year that allowed the committee to be fully functional.

A financial overview was then presented to the Gathering by reviewing three basic components of the Conference’s current financial well-being. It was first exclaimed that the Conference is overall in a healthy financial condition. This is primarily due to the legacy funds that were established as gifts and grants by past members and subsequent Legacy Committee stewardship of those funds over the many years of the Conference’s existence. Secondly, it was described that it is the year-to-year operating budgets that require closer scrutiny and management for the Conference to remain in a continuing healthy condition. It has been the Per Capita dues and OCWM (Our Church’s Wider Mission) contributions by member congregations that have been steadily declining over the years to the point that the proposed 2020 Operating Budget has 32% of that budget being funded by the Budget Stabilization Fund. Third, it is the Budget Stabilization Fund established by the Conference Board of Directors where Legacy Funds investment income is used to support the declining funds for the yearly Operating Budget.

The Budget & Finance Committee’s goals for 2019 were then discussed.

The first goal was to stabilize Conference expenses but not at the expense of the Conference staff. As of the most recent August “Budget Performance” report available for this meeting, overall Conference expenses were down by 10% compared to last year’s August reports.

The second goal of the Budget & Finance Committee was to stimulate Per Capita and OCWM income via Conference staff direct communication with member congregations. The Conference staff took this challenge to heart, and as the August financial report indicated the combined Per Capita and OCWM income was off by only 6%.

The third goal was the continued work of the Legacy Funds Committee’s management of the monies that they are responsible for with investment growth as its goal. The Budget and Finance Committee’s assessment as of the August financial report is that expenses are stabilizing and income deficits are being reduced as the year moves forward.

The Conference proposed budget for 2020 was then presented to the Gathering’s delegates and visitors. The budget consisted of total expenses of $918,921, which was 0.6% less than the current 2019 budget. The income to balance this budget expense will come from the traditional sources such as Per Capita and OCWM and augmented by the Budget Stabilization Fund (which was previously discussed within this report). The 2020 Budget was unanimously passed by the Gathering’s delegates during the business portion of the Annual Gathering.

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Since the Annual Gathering, a more recent ten-month (October) financial report has been issued. Continued stability of the operating budget’s performance continues to become more evident.

The expenses for the first ten months of Conference operation were $750,594.40. This was within the year-to-date budgeted expense guidelines of $796,663.80 — or $46,069.40 less than budgeted for within the ten months reported for 2019. Congregational support (Per Capita and OCWM) by member congregations were both -12%. The income aspect of the operating budget historically improves as we approach the end of the year. These improved performance results are directly due to Conference staff efforts of addressing both these operating expense and income categories.

So as the Conference continues on its financial journey in 2020, we anticipate continued expense containment as well as improved income advances. The Budget & Finance Committee extends its deep appreciation of all those who help to produce these improving numbers and most importantly extends gratefulness for God’s grace in guiding us through this year.

On behalf of the Florida Conference UCC and the Board of Directors, I want to salute and celebrate Ray Peidl.

Ray served the Florida Conference faithfully as the Chairperson on the Budget and Finance Committee. He was always diligent and thorough when creating and implementing the Conference budget. He loved the Florida Conference and made the budgeting process fun and transparent.

Ray is returning north to be closer to his family and friends, and we all wish Ray peace and happiness as he starts a new adventure in Maine.

Rev. Barton Buchanan  
Moderator, Florida Conference UCC
Beginning October 10, Pastor Rev. Dave Bucye of Fort Myers Congregational UCC was in recovery mode from a hip replacement and reports that the healing has gone well and he returned to worship on October 27.

On Laity Sunday (October 20), Chance Martinez-Colon, a Member in Discernment, preached at Spring Hill UCC.

In September, Jim Andrews (Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg) completed the process for commissioning and ordination with the Federation of Christian Ministries (FCM). FCM is a progressive organization which ordains chaplains and others involved in public ministry.

Cottage meetings in members’ homes with gatherings of between 8-12 members began in late October at Christ Congregational Church/Miami. Each was led by a Transition Team facilitator as they began sharing thoughts on the future of the church.

The United Church of Gainesville continues the process for advertising for a Settled Minister. Church members have received an All Church Survey to help create a profile of the church and craft a three-year plan based on members’ wishes for what UCG should concentrate on during this period.

United Church of Marco Island Pastor Rev. Mark Williams, Emily, Nolan and Marie welcomed into their family Anna Grace Williams, born at 2:10am on October 29 at 8 lbs. 6 ozs.

A Month of Celebration in Fort Lauderdale

The 65th anniversary celebration of UCC/ Fort Lauderdale took place during October – “30 Days of Gratefulness” — culminating in a special worship service on October 27 with special guest speaker Rev. Elizabeth Dilley (pictured with Rev. Patrick Rogers).

She is leader of MESA — the national UCC’s Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization team.

New Conference Staff Member

Please join us in welcoming the newest member of your Florida Conference staff, Dana Ney. He started in his role as part-time administrative assistant on Monday, November 4, and he will be the main person answering the phones at The Florida Church House. Dana also will be assisting Florida churches and authorized ministers in the search and call process, and he will be the primary Conference liaison to our Committee on Church and Ministry.

Dana is an Ohio native and a member of First UCC/Orlando, where he has served as trustee and deacon. Before joining the Florida Conference, he worked for Darden for more than 30 years, retiring in 2017.

These days, he loves to travel with his husband, Ossie, and gardening for pollinators using Florida native plants. He and Ossie are new backyard beekeepers and members of Orange Blossom Beekeepers — and they enjoy cooking, too.
World Peace Sunday at Good Sam

by Debbie Rasmussin
Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park

On Sunday, September 22, Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park observed World Peace Sunday. Past observances of this event evolved around six to eight stations where people were able to move from station to station at their own pace. This year, it was a different format: we had five stations allowing for a more in-depth view, discussion, and a hands-on activity.

The five stations were:

Station 1 – Care for Our Earth which focused on the importance of caring for the environment with the help of The Lorax by Dr. Seuss. Activities included planting seed cards.

Station 2 – End Violence which focused on the impact of violence on our world and some ways that we can make it safer. An activity at this station was writing and/or painting on a rock that can be (and has been used) as a weapon – symbolizing turning a weapon into something nice.

Station 3 – Welcome a Stranger focused on eliminating/minimizing how we judge people based on how they look before we get to know them. Activities included looking at pictures of people and determining who they were supposed to be.

Station 4 – Feed the Hungry focused on Malawi, Africa, and the impact of the food crisis on its people. Activities at the station included sampling a traditional Malawi food and making Pack-a-Snack bags for the Head Start community.

Station 5 – Self Care focused on inner peace and gave some insight on ways to deal with stressors in our lives. Activities included walking the labyrinth, meditation, and intercessory prayer.

Spiritual Formation would like to thank Rich Feigel, Lisa Ware, Judy Friend, Sarah Butz, Chris Osberg, Shelby Lamb, Pastor Rev. Jen Daysa and Bev Kelly for helping out with the stations.

From The Messenger, the newsletter of Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park, October 2019

Prayer Walks

by Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson
Pastor, First United Church of Tampa

A year ago First United Church of Tampa moved to a completely different part of the city. We decided that prayer walks through our new community would be a good way to begin to know our neighbors and to pray for and with those who live and work near our church.

In the spring we did three walks and two this fall. We passed out flyers for our Easter egg hunt and community picnic and our Fall Festival and Trunk or Treat. We had between three and ten walking each time.

It’s been a good opportunity for those who don’t live in that community to get to know it. Out of our walks grew the idea for doing Pack-a-Sack with the school two blocks away and also for the spring picnic. And... walking and praying was a blessing to us.

God’s rainbow leads to a treasure at... Faith UCC/Dunedin
Halloween and Fall Festivals... At Our Churches

Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach celebrated its Fall Festival following the second service on October 27. There were decorations, fun games and a treat trail.

October 26 was the date of the first Fall Festival held by First UCC/Orlando. Members of the community as well as members of the congregation enjoyed craft sales, games for all ages, food and more. Several vendors offered handcrafted jewelry and handmade items. A bake sale provided delicious home-baked cakes, pies and cookies. The Orlando Gay Chorus also performed several musical numbers for the crowd.

The parking lot at the United Church in Tallahassee was trunk-or-treat central in the neighborhood on Halloween evening. Members were invited to donate candy even if they weren’t present with a “dressed” car trunk.

Sunday School children at Fort Myers Congregational UCC collected for UNICEF over several weeks in October ahead of Halloween. Loose change, dollar bills and checks all were welcomed.

The Trunk or Treat at Spring Hill UCC was a huge success with amazingly decorated trunks and hundreds from the community participating in the fun.
Families from miles around descended upon North Port Community UCC for weeks leading up to Halloween to select the perfect pumpkins from its 4th Annual Pumpkin Patch. Its profit was $2,400 and change. It couldn’t have happened without all the volunteers who unloaded truckloads of pumpkins and staffed the Patch.

And there also were thanks to go around to those who donated to its Pumpkins for Preschoolers program that provided pumpkins and gourds to about 120 children at three local preschools and some 75 more to a couple elementary schools. And each child in Sunday School, like Mia Rose, received a pumpkin on Sunday, October 27.

Kim Kessler (Faith Family UCC/Brandon) and her grandson AJ took all the toys collected from church members to St. Joseph’s Children’s Hospital in Tampa in time for Halloween – an annual tradition for Kim in memory of her other grandson Logan, who passed away on October 28, 2014.

St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota held its annual Halloween potluck and party on Monday, October 28, with delicious food, fun gifts for everyone and a costume contest.

First United Church of Tampa had to reschedule its Fall Festival and Trunk or Treat fun from Saturday, October 26, to Saturday, November 2, due to predicted thunderstorms. But there was no fear that the kids would be tired of collecting candy.

Riverside UCC/Jacksonville held its annual Fall Bazaar fundraiser over two weekends – October 26-27 and November 2-3.
An Invitation to You …

BY REV. LESLIE ETHEREIDGE
WESTERN REGIONAL MINISTER
FLORIDA CONFERENCE

Do you have a bucket list? I hope you do and that you are methodically and happily checking off things on it slowly (or quickly) but surely. Up until two years ago, I had never been on a mission trip out of this country. That was on my bucket list, and it was beautifully accomplished in 2018 when I went to Haiti to serve as a “Britsonian” through the Be Like Brit organization. It was such a great experience that I went back again in 2019 for another joyful and meaningful experience. Now, I am blessed to be going in 2020, and I’d love for YOU to join me. I will be leading the trip of Florida UCCers to Haiti February 2-8.

There is something in this trip for everyone.

1. Great food (priorities, you know?)
2. Community service (we build a small house for a homeless family; no skill needed, and everyone can be useful)
3. Potential to interact with 66 great kids (they sing, dance, play and worship with an energy and love for God that is beautiful to see)
4. Opportunity to experience the beautiful country and people of Haiti (visit the market, the clinic, the mountains, the schools, the beach and even the voodoo temple!)

Your $1,600 bargain-priced trip pays for all your food, lodgings, the opportunities above AND the house we build, along with food and supplies for the family for a month!

If God is calling you to something wonderfully different or if doing profound good for others is on your bucket list, please give me the chance to talk to you about Haiti. It is a glorious adventure to be sure.

We still have a couple of spots left. Join UCCers from all over Florida for an experience you will never forget. Feel free to contact me for all the details! letheredge@uccfla.org 205/515-8741.

*From e-Celebrate, October 3*

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

- Rev. Dr. John Danner (Sanibel Congregational UCC): [www.pewinkleponderings.blogspot.com](http://www.pewinkleponderings.blogspot.com)
- Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota): [www.gracetraces.blogspot.com](http://www.gracetraces.blogspot.com)
- New Sacred – A United Church of Christ blog [www.newsacred.org](http://www.newsacred.org)
Mission: Restoring Hope

BY REV. DR. GUILLERMO MARQUEZ-STERNING
PASS-A-GRILLE BEACH COMMUNITY UCC/ST. PETERS BEACH

She stood alone in the living room of her disheveled and hurricane-damaged home, looking at us with tear-filled eyes. She stood, not straight or proud, but in a posture that suggested defeat. Her facial expression was that of disbelief as we walked in, volunteers ready to restore the roof over her head. Julie, a single and unemployed mother of a teenage boy suffering from epilepsy, quietly stated she did not believe we would come. She thought we would be like the others -- people who toured the disaster but never returned to help rebuild. “No,” I said. “We’re not disaster tourists.”

Hurricane Maria exited the island of Puerto Rico a couple of miles from Julie’s home. Two years later we, a group of 29 mainlanders, went with a plan to restore homes and lives. We came back to our home and church after a week of labor exhausted, inspired and different -- the kind of different that is difficult to measure but easy to observe.

Two blocks from Julie, in the same poverty-stricken and hurricane-damaged neighborhood, was Richard, a young man in his twenties. In many ways, Richard is blemished by the ravages of poverty: poorly educated, gang-related, marked by an overabundance of tattoos and stripped of hope. He told me how FEMA inspectors, who came to evaluate his living conditions, looked at his criminal record and walked away. Richard was convinced that his past, and his tattoos, were immediate disqualifiers in the requests for assistance.

When Richard saw us, volunteers committed to making his home livable, he innocently asked, “So, how much money do you all get for doing this?” I told him we were all volunteers. He asked for a clarification, unsure of what I meant. I stated that this was our way of giving thanks to God for the abundant blessings in our lives. He nodded, but the disbelief was evident. It became evident he hadn’t experienced true Christian love: giving without expecting in return.

The local church we partnered with mirrored the poverty of the surrounding region. Their thrift store suffered from neglect, created by volunteers who were overwhelmed. We labored with them to make their “store” shopper- and volunteer-friendly. Little did we know we also made it Spirit-friendly. It was the Spirit of God’s love that transformed that space and our hearts.

The presence of “sister” churches and the work of mission trips like ours is priceless, because we do more than repair damaged homes. We restore hope.

The details of what we did and how it was done would take several pages. Instead, I offer the following: if your church is interested in a mission trip to Puerto Rico, contact me (revdrgms@gmail.com). I’ll gladly share everything we learned. It is my hope that you, our sister churches, travel to Puerto Rico and spread the redemptive power of love and hope.

Why Celebrate Florida?

“I enjoy reading it and am glad to send it to our community. I hope there are folks who are reading it as a result. It’s fun to see ourselves in there, but more importantly it’s helpful to see what else is going on around the Conference.”

From the Office Manager at one of our churches

“Connecting your congregation with the insight into our denomination is such a powerful stewardship tool. It’s formulating in my spirit now. This is a powerful ministry…”

From a UCC Pastor

You asked, you shall receive! A link to Celebrate Florida will be added to ALL our newsletters, weekly church updates, e-mail blasts and will also be added to our website!

From the Office Administrator in one of our congregations

We sincerely appreciate the growing number of our congregations which do provide links to Celebrate Florida to members of their churches – through your newsletters, e-blasts and monthly newsletters.
Port Orange UCC Choir Performs at Carnegie Hall

The Port Orange UCC Choir, under the direction of Dr. Thomas Naus, was invited to participate in the world premiere performance of Joseph Martin’s “Christmas Evergreens” in Carnegie Hall in New York City on Sunday, November 17. The choir joined with other choristers to form the Distinguished Concert Singers International, a choir of distinction. This performance by 250 singers and orchestra was conducted by composer Joseph Martin.

Dr. Jonathan Griffith, Artistic Director and Principal Conductor for Distinguished Concerts International New York stated: “The Port Orange United Church of Christ Choir received this invitation because of the quality and high level of musicianship demonstrated by the singers as well as the exceptional quality of their audition recording. It is quite an honor to be invited to perform in New York. These wonderful musicians not only represent a high level of music and education but they also become ambassadors for the entire community.”

The choir spent four days in New York City in preparation for their concert. Approximately 10 hours were spent in rehearsals, with free time to enjoy the history and culture of the city. But as Dr. Griffith said, “the performance is the primary purpose for their visit to the city.”

Joseph Martin, a native of North Carolina, earned degrees in piano performance from Furman University and the University of Texas. As a pianist, he has performed throughout the United States and Mexico and has made four recordings. As a choral composer, he has over 1,200 pieces, including nearly 40 choral cantatas, currently in print. He is Director of Sacred Publications for Shawnee Press and devotes time to playing in churches and for conferences of church musicians.

Spring Hill UCC was creative in combining a free pasta luncheon on Saturday afternoon, October 26, with a hymn sing-along.

The Harvest Moon Family Sock Hop on Friday evening, October 11, at the United Church in Tallahassee featured a night of dancing (in your socks), snacks and board games. Admission: a pair of new socks to donate to Grace Mission.

A free art lecture series is being offered at First Congregational Church/Orange City with an emphasis on Christian imagery. The four presentations (first in November and the final one in June) are by Pastor Rev. David Wescott, whose undergraduate majors were in philosophy and art history and who also taught a course in theological aesthetics at Andover Newton Theological School. The four presentations are: November 7, Images of the Crucifixion by Michelangelo; January 16, Madonna and Child: Duccio to Raphael; March 19, Spiritual Imagery: Gauguin and Van Gogh; June 18, The Gospel According to Rembrandt.

First United Church of Tampa held a big fundraiser art show and auction on Friday evening, November 8, at the Portico in Tampa, featuring art for sale, music and refreshments.

Synchrony Arts Production put on “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” at a dinner theater presentation at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park on Saturday evening, October 26.

Lively Arts at the United Church of Gainesville presented an afternoon muscal at “Chamber Music, However Known” on Sunday, November 10, in the UCG Sanctuary. It was a selection of something old, something new, something borrowed and something unusual. A free will offering benefited Food4Kids.

The award-winning Ben Prestage was in concert at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg on Friday evening, November 15, employing his interesting approach to instrumentation with a selection of Tennessee and American blues/roots music. Also, mountain
dulcimer lessons were offered at the church on two occasions in November.

Elvis impersonator Keith Coleman was the attraction at a free concert on Saturday evening, October 26, at Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole. For 13 years in a row he has been voted the best Elvis show in the state.

On September 14 UCC/New Smyrna Beach hosted its first Zumba-thon event. The music was pumped up and Community Hall was jumping for two hours with 74 people joining in the party — like a big non-stop dance party with great music incorporating different moves from salsa, reggae, merengue, cumbia, mambo, samba, cha-cha and flamenco. The event was developed and organized by two of the church’s own Zumba enthusiasts, Liz Incardone and Karen Watson, who felt that a Zumba party was a natural fit as a church fundraiser. Through their connections, they reached out to eight local certified Zumba instructors who graciously donated their talent and time. The event raised $1,000 for church ministries, which include Colors of Hunger (a new community feeding program), Surf’s Edge (a UCC/NSB ministry supporting community at-risk youth) and the Gifts of Love Food Pantry.

Faith Family UCC/Brandon held a fundraiser for one of its congregants, music performer Kindell (on guitar in photo) and his wife, who are trying to raise funds for an IVF procedure to have a baby.

The North Port High School Jazz Band performed after a pork roast dinner prepared by the North Port Community UCC, which was held as a fundraiser for the high school’s marching band’s trip to Rome, Italy, on New Year’s Day. The event was open to the public and 100% of the proceeds went to the students’ trip.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC began hosting contra dances for the Miami community on the second Sunday evenings of the month beginning this past September (preceded by a potluck). Contra dance is an American folk dance that began in colonial times in New England. Instruction is provided so everyone can party like a pilgrim!

The church hosted the Coral Gables Music Club on Tuesday, October 15, in its opening concert presentation of the 2019-2020 season with concert pianist Daniel Luzko performing Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition.”

The annual Sing-a-Long special Reformation edition of beer and hymns was held on Sunday afternoon, October 27, at Duffy’s Party Room in Miami.

The Intergenerational Church & Family Faith Formation Ministries at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park offered a couple of Movie Night recently — “Hoot” in October and “Pets 2” in November.

The Sunday Cinema movie night and potluck at Fort Myers Congregational UCC in October was “Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.” November’s feature was “Doubt,” in which a Catholic school principal questions a priest’s ambiguous relationship with a troubled young student.

The Christian movie event at North Port Community UCC on December 7 was “I Can Only Imagine.”

The film premiere of “Guardians of Our Troubled Waters” took place at Coral Gables Congregational UCC on Thursday evening, November 7. It is of the untold stories of the early heroes who stood up for southern rivers and streams before it became fashionable — people like Marjory Stoneman Douglas. The screening was followed by a Q&A session with the film’s director.
Yes, meals are one of the fuels that keep our churches going. Whether they are potlucks, cook-offs, pancake breakfasts, teas, progressive dinners or Lenten suppers, we church people love our food and our fellowship!

And we also know the importance of sharing food with those who often go without. Here are some examples of members of our Florida churches “breaking bread” together as well as extending the gift of food to others.

Sunday, October 13, was Dessert Sunday at Spring Hill UCC, where members were invited to bring their favorite ethnic or family desserts for all to share after worship. December 6-7 will be the annual Christmas Bazaar and Cookie Walk, which features dozens upon dozens of all sorts of homemade Unique Christmas Cookies.

For the second year in a row, the congregation of Sanibel Congregational UCC and the Rotary Club of Sanibel-Captiva joined efforts in a “Meals of Hope” event to pack over 25,000 meals for local families and individuals facing food insecurity. Members gathered at the Community House the morning of November 9, working together in teams to assemble the ingredients for packets of macaroni and cheese that serve six people. Together they fulfilled “Meals of Hope” vision: “To inspire and empower communities to come together to end hunger.” Meals of Hope is currently the only food packing organization where meals stay within the United States. The meals packed at last year’s event went to those recovering from Hurricane Irma. This year’s packets are intended for pantries in the Sanibel-Fort Myers areas.

Cinco de Mayo is as good an excuse as any for Faith Family UCC/Brandon to have great spread of food, lots of fun and raise money for the church and a non-profit.

The “over 60” Rock On group at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC held an Oktoberfest celebration on Thursday evening, October 24, with live music and entertainment (dirndls and lederhosen were optional).

Volunteers from Coral Gables Congregational UCC prepared and served dinner at Chapman Partnership’s homeless shelter in downtown Miami on Saturday, October 13.

It was “time to package” on Sunday, October 20, at First Congregational Church/Winter Park, as volunteers assembled ingredients for red lentil jambalaya to supply Feeding Children Everywhere.

North Port Community UCC will enjoy an international potluck on Thursday, December 5, to share pictures and stories from the recent church trip to Israel and Egypt.

Boca Christians Eating Out (BCEO) at the Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton meets every Friday evening for dinner and conversation at a different location.

As part of its commitment as a Blue Zones Project church, members at Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples followed up on their successful summer potluck “moai” with one on Thursday, November 7. There was a “plant slant” to it with potluck vegetarian fare to share (along with the recipes). Though not everything was meatless, the emphasis was less meat in a dish.
What are we doing for #GivingTuesday?

Your donation to our #GivingTuesday campaign will be used to erase crushing medical debt for people living below the poverty level who are facing insolvency, and for whom medical debt is 5% or more of annual income.

Did you know?

- Medical debt contributes to more than 60% of all bankruptcies
- 43 million Americans owe about $75 billion in past-due medical debt
- 75% of all individuals in medical bankruptcy had health insurance coverage

Medical debt is an economic justice issue, which causes people to cut back on non-medical necessities, cuts people off from needed medical services, and sinks people into a health-poverty trap.

**With your donations, we will erase medical debt for thousands of families across the country.**

The United Church of Christ will work in partnership with conferences and congregations to abolish medical debt for those living at or below the poverty level in the communities served by our churches.

This #GivingTuesday, we have set a goal of raising $50,000 with your help.

$50,000 will erase some $5 million dollars in medical debt. The United Church of Christ works with **RIP Medical Debt**, a New York-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that identifies and purchases medical debt for pennies on the dollar then abolishes unpaid and unpayable medical debt as a benefit to recipients and society.

Please Make Your Gift Today

[Make a Gift]

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At the final Sunday of the celebratory and powerful month of October at **Faith UCC/Dunedin**, they joined together for a true feast as they celebrated Oktoberfest for the fifth year. The weather was hot, as were the brats, beans and other goodies, but the beer and root beer — not to mention the new Gathering Space — were nice and cool!

**Rev. Booth Iburg** and several others from **Eternal Hope UCC/Fort Walton Beach** have been pitching in to serve Wednesday lunches at Helping Hands, which operates out of Catholic Charities.

During a recent week in October, the food pantry at **First UCC/Orlando** served 83 families representing 282 people.

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A Thanksgiving dinner was served on November 28 at The monthly Fellowship Dinner at the church for November 24 – turkey provided and sides and desserts welcomed.

Beaumont UCC/Brownsville

For those at Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami without a place to go for Thanksgiving dinner, one was offered in Pilgrim House that afternoon thanks to the organizing efforts of Lauren and Philippe deLavalette. It was a Thanksgiving luncheon at First United Church of Tampa after worship on November 24. A Thanksgiving dinner was served on November 28 at Christ’s Promise UCC/Auburndale.

The turkey day dinner hosted by Milt and Pat Denker at First UCC/Orlando took place on Saturday, November 16 – along with a BIG RED BUS blood drive.

Members of all ages at Coral Gables Congregational UCC volunteered on Thanksgiving Day morning to make and package 250 luncheon meals – from food donated by members – that were delivered by Branches Meal Delivery. A related effort that same morning was bagging upwards of 300 lunches for the homeless in downtown Miami in partnership with a Methodist church.

Each year, Boca Helping Hands asks community groups to put together boxes of food for Thanksgiving dinners. Included in each box are such things as a turkey (provided by Boca Helping Hands), canned veggies, pie crusts, sweet potatoes and more. The Mission and Community Outreach Team at the Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton decided to participate in this local drive for those less fortunate in their community again this year. A room at the church was filled with boxes indicating what foods were needed in each, and the items were collected up to November 10. Monetary donations were also accepted.

As has been done in the past, November’s dry good Thanksgiving food donations at Port Orange UCC were given to Spruce Creek Elementary School along with 20 $20 gift cards for turkeys. The monthly Fellowship Dinner at the church for November was a Thanksgiving feast on Thursday the 21st – the turkey was provided and guests brought sides and desserts.

The Come Alive women’s group and Spirit Keepers men’s group at First Congregational Church/Winter Park joined together to create baskets for those in need. Suggested items for the required laundry basket (decorated optional) included holiday plates and napkins, a $10-$25 grocery gift card (for a turkey and pie), baking/roasting pan plus the usual Thanksgiving dinner foods. Basket Brigade participants gathered on Thursday evening, November 21, for pizza and salad and “basket building” for families of five. On Saturday morning, November 23, the baskets were delivered to families around Central Florida.

Senior and local first responders were the special invited guests at the Thanksgiving Appreciation Meal on Thursday noon, November 7, at Pensacola Beach Community UCC and co-hosted with the local Catholic Church.

Volunteers from the United Church of Gainesville helped served a Thanksgiving meal to the girls and staff at a Girls Place, a licensed child care facility, on Wednesday, November 27.

The Outreach Committee at Christ Congregational Church/ Miami collected donations for Thanksgiving to help seven families of the Guardian ad Litem children with whom members of the church work. The church celebrated with a Thanksgiving potluck on Sunday, November 24, after worship.

Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach has been a supporting partner of CASA (Community Action Stops Abuse) by preparing monthly meals for their residents. This year the church again prepared a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for CASA residents on Thursday, November 21.

Riverside UCC/Jacksonville participated in the greater J’ville interfaith Thanksgiving Gratitude service on Thursday, November 21, at a Methodist church. Attendees were encouraged to donate canned and dry goods for the Lutheran Food Bank.

Spring Hill UCC offered a Thanksgiving Day dinner at the church on November 28 with donations provided by church members. Thanksgiving baskets were delivered to 16 needy families with children at a local elementary school.

Thanksgiving for participants in the Ruth Ministry at the UCC/Fort Lauderdale enjoyed their holiday meal on Thursday, November 21, thanks in part to the 10 donated turkeys from Smarty Pants Bar.

Making Thanksgiving possible in the Bahamas, members at Plymouth Congregational Church/ Miami loaded hurricane relief supplies on a truck headed for Opa Locka Airport. Next stop was Christ the King Church in Freeport, where these supplies were part of the church’s Thanksgiving feast and celebration. Thanks to Miami Executive Aviation and their CEO, Fabio Vasquez, Plymouth member donations and Plymouth staff for this effort!

Members of UCC/New Smyrna Beach helped prepare and serve Thanksgiving dinner at Colors of Hunger on Monday, November 25. They were encouraged to then sit beside a stranger and share in the celebration.
One of the ongoing conundrums facing many churches is what to do – or not to do – about name tags: ‘To name tag or not name tag – that is the question.’ Here is one Pastor’s take on the subject, addressing whether to have a congregation “where everybody knows your name.”

Pastor’s Page
by Rev. Tom Lacey
Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton

Let’s say you visit a church. You go in and nobody has a name tag on. Every person you see or who comes up to you has their name on them for you to see and know. They also make the effort to put your name on you so others will get to learn your name. Perhaps you don’t even notice that day that everyone has a name tag. You just feel the church is a nice church where people seem to be available or friendly.

The next Sunday you visit another church. You go in and everybody has a name tag on. Not a single person has his or her name somewhere where you can see it. They also don’t spend the time to give you a name tag. It doesn’t seem to matter to them. The impression you get, without even knowing it really, is the church while nice just doesn’t seem as open to you.

Maybe you can’t even put your finger on it, but if you had to choose between the two churches you decide you want to go back to the one where you got the feeling that they want to know your name and the people want you to know their name.

Solar Power 101:
A Webinar for Faith Communities

Does your faith community have soul-ar power? For faith communities, solar power can mean putting panels on a roof, but it can also mean much more. The pursuit of solar power can also be a way to serve the community and advocate for a more just society.

In this area, Solar United Neighbors has done groundbreaking work that has been replicated all over the country. Anya Schoolman is their founder and executive director. For her accomplishments, she was honored by the White House in 2014 as a Champion of Change.

In this webinar, she will cover three critical areas for faith communities interested in solar power: practical tips for going solar, solar coops as a way to lower costs for faith communities and neighborhood residents and how faith communities can advocate for energy democracy and equity.

The webinar will be on December 5, but register even if you can’t make it in order to receive a link to the video recording afterwards. Sign-up now!

From e-Celebrate, October 30

Opportunity

UCC History, Theology and Polity Course

A UCC history, theology and polity course that meets the requirements as set forth by the UCC Polity Teacher’s Network will be offered online in January and February. Rev. David Gaewski, Conference Minister of the New York Conference/UCC, will be the instructor. Classes will begin at 9:30am and end at 3:30pm EST on the following dates: January 4, 18 and 25 and February 1. The platform utilized will be Zoom Video Conferencing (zoom.us), and tuition will be $495. For more information contact Rev. Gaewski at davidgaewski@uccny.org.

This polity course is sponsored by the Oneida Association of the New York Conference. Payments should be sent no later than December 20 to UCC Polity Course, Attn: David Gaewski, P.O. Box 551, Dewitt, NY 13214. Make checks payable to David Gaewski. A syllabus is available upon request. The course will be cancelled if at least seven students are not registered by December 20. Students who cancel enrollment will receive reimbursements up until January 2. Please note that space is limited and several recent courses reached maximum capacity. Registration is now open.

From e-Celebrate, October 30
Members of St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota and Mary Mother of Jesus Inclusive Catholic Community gathered on September 29 for a luncheon and participated in SURE’s listening process (Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity). During their Sacred Conversations, they discussed and lifted up important justice issues facing residents of Sarasota County.

On November 4 the church was represented at SURE’s Community Problems Assembly and helped add criminal justice issues that need to be addressed in Sarasota city and county.

In the summer of 2016 we asked if it was Time for Conversations on Race, Religion, Violence, Tolerance, Justice, Inequality. We have asked you to share with our Florida churches how you as a church family have, are now, or are planning to have such conversations.

As you read through these brief descriptions, do you note any which sound like programs or opportunities you would like to consider for your own congregation? If so, please feel free to contact our Conference Minister, Regional Ministers or the Pastors and staff of those churches to learn about people, curricula, materials and other resources that could be available to you. We will continue to share as we learn more from you. Here are a few more happenings. Please continue to participate in this conversation by contacting us at celebrateflorida@uccfla.org.

On Sunday afternoon, October 27, the church, in conjunction with the FIU Jaffer Center for Muslim World Studies, had a screening of the documentary “Same God.” A local Muslim group provided food prior to the showing.

The church continued its involvement with PACT (People Acting in Community Together) as members met on Monday, October 28, to discuss justice in the areas of affordable housing, immigration and gun violence.

Victims and/or survivors of sexual abuse were invited to a #metoo gathering at the church on Monday evening, November 18. It was a safe space where participants could choose to share stories or sit in silent solidarity.

As part of the 2019 Bread for the World’s “Offering of Letters” campaign, members of Faith UCC/Dunedin wrote 80 letters to their Members of Congress in October to encourage them to craft budgets and legislate with hungry people, especially children, in mind.

The church’s Interfaith Dialogues group’s collaboration with the Dunedin Quaker community continued in November when a Clerk of the local Religious Society of Friends spoke during a Sunday worship about the Quaker faith and its practices.
Nearly 350 members from the HOPE (Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality) Justice Ministry Network representing 23 congregations came together on October 28.

This included 22 from First United Church of Tampa who had met in weeks prior to the convention in small group meetings.

The assembly decided to actively monitor the Hillsborough County Board’s commitment of $10 million annually for affordable housing to make sure that the lowest income families are given priority. HOPE will also continue to press to ensure that all Tampa Police Department officers are trained in crisis intervention training and that there will be a Clubhouse to support people with mental health needs in their quest to return to work.

They will also continue to gather stories of racial profiling and mental health and addiction problems.

On Sunday, November 3, Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg station a postcard writing table before and after worship so members could acknowledge their gratitude for the permanent closing of the Homestead Migrant Youth Detention Facility and ask that for-profit detention centers all be closed and not re-opened.

By mid-November, 20 members had written postcards asking their elected Congressional representatives not to re-open the detention facility and to monitor that these children receive the care and education required by law for any children.

Future letter writing opportunities are planned to share faith perspectives on immigration, the environment and gun safety with elected officials, and a petition related to ending gun violence has been placed on the writing table.
Peter Butzin, Chair of the Moving Forward Committee at the United Church in Tallahassee, reports that its short-term parking shortage has been solved thanks to committee members Jeremy Block, Rachel McAllister, Ivy Kelley and Bob Smith. Twelve parking spaces have been added, including several diagonal spaces along the east side of the driveway. It is expected that the parking capacity will soon be increased from 63 to 70. The church is developing plans to have volunteers provide parking attendant services to guide visitors and new members. They are encouraging families to attend services in one vehicle, carpool with others and, for especially well-attended services, park on a couple of the nearby streets.

The exterior of First UCC/Orlando boasts a new coat of paint thanks to a generous gift from deceased member Dot Haldeman and to Milt and Pat Denker for overseeing the project. Another large gift has made possible a new floor in Fellowship Hall – with gratitude again to Milt and Pat, all those who helped with prepping and to Amanda Winkleblack for her flooring expertise.

Faith UCC/Dunedin began October by celebrating and dedicating the completion of its new space — Gathering Space, Narthex, ADA bathroom, patio and more. It was a grand day, with many friends coming back to celebrate with them, a wonderful time of hospitality and a ribbon cutting blessing dedicating this sacred space to a future of nurturing spiritual lives for many, many more years to come.

As Port Orange UCC continues celebrating its 40th year anniversary, they feel blessed with members and friends who want to see the church remain viable and active for many more decades into the future. Its Church Matching Funds Program has been a huge success as financial donations now match the initial $5,000 with more continuing to be added to make the church operations fund even stronger. These funds are being used in a very visible way. As the church continues to grow to meet the demands of a changing community and world, they feel tasked with making sure their grounds and facilities are maintained to be both long term and financially sound. The funds being raised are making sure this happens. Trimming and weeding can only go so far here in Florida, so the grounds needed “major” attention. Working with Don’s Tree Services, Inc., a long-time established business in the area (and who donated a portion of their work), they have gone forward with an aggressive removal of trees, palmettos and other ground covers no longer attractive or impossible to maintain. Coming next will be seeding and sodding portions of the cleared areas after which they will consider a special landscaping plan. Plus their paved parking areas need attention and the West property around Veteran’s Chapel needs clearing and improving.

The beautiful new labyrinth at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota was dedicated on October 5. More than 60 people gathered to bless the labyrinth with Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan there to offer his reflections and visions. As part of the blessing led by Pastor Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby (in photo) members of the Seekers (who have worked for two years to make this a reality) — Jim Cross, Michael Cross, Sara Little and Susan Raines (along with Cindy Woodling and Lindsay Huddleson present in Spirit) — walked on the labyrinth using water that had been gathered in 2018 at their Gathering of the Waters service to dedicate this holy space.

The roof work at Fort Myers Congregational UCC is complete and it’s time to pay the piper. The total cost is almost $96,000 with a bit over $43,000 donated/pledged and additional funds being sought.

Click here to visit the National UCC website

Click here to Connect and “Like” our Facebook Page
The repair and restoration of the Corinthian capitals on the church columns at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park is close to completion, thanks to the skilled craftsmen, who are fewer and fewer. Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach, steeple-less since Hurricane Irma swept through in 2017, again has a beacon atop the church. At a steeple-raising ceremony on Sunday, November 24, a crane positioned the spire on top of the roof of the new pavilion, part of the church’s extensive renovation project. Sr. Pastor Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmlemann noted: “The joy and satisfaction of this event was as evident with the construction workers as any church member. Appreciative of their willingness to assist in making this event happen, I thanked each construction worker personally for their time. And one responded in the most gratifying way possible saying, ‘Just doing God’s work! Thank you for letting us join you!’ What a great day it was!”

“God’s Doors” at Lake-wood UCC/St. Petersburg, by church member William Owen II, inspired by similar creations at UCC churches in Westfield, CT, and Albuquerque, NM.

A Richness of Opportunities

Your Invitation to be Informed — Inspired — Transformed

December 3 #GivingTuesday p 21
December 5 Solar Power Webinar p 23
January 4, 18, 25 and February 1 UCC History, Theology and Polity Course p 23
January 26-27 Shared Scholar Program at Sanibel Congregational UCC p 37

February 2-8 Mission trip to Haiti p 16
Books by Florida UCC clergy pp 40-41
3 Great Loves Advent Toolkit p 35
Center for Progressive Renewal Webinar Series p 3
“Go Bags” and Other Random Thoughts

Many of us prepare a “go bag” in early May so if a hurricane heads our way and evacuation is called for we are “ready to go” at a moment’s notice. As the hurricane season ends on November 30, what is in our “go bag” that needs to be used up and replenished this coming May for next hurricane season? Hurricanes are not on our minds now. We are looking forward to the holiday season when we enjoy time with family and friends, giving thanks to God and celebrating the birth of Christ. Hurricanes take a back seat in our daily thoughts this time of year. There is something we do need to keep in mind amidst holiday preparations and planning: wildfires.

Wildfires are the disasters of the winter and spring season in Florida as the rains of summer end and the land dries out. It was three years ago when at one point there were 109 active wildfires in the state of Florida. Where we live there was a wildfire close enough to close down major roads in the area, and the Red Cross opened shelters for those that were evacuated. We were on high alert in our development, so every morning we left for work with our suitcases and important papers. Our “go bags” are different for each type of disaster. Living in Florida, there is no real down time when it comes to disasters. Hurricanes just create the most anxiety and get more press since we anticipate them for so long as they churn through the ocean and we hope they go elsewhere. Didn’t we all watch Dorian with great interest waiting for it to make “the turn”?

Regardless of the track of a hurricane — unless it is out to sea and only affecting shipping lanes — some population center is going to suffer damage from a hurricane. Our hearts go out to all people who suffer from disasters regardless of the type of disaster, where it hits, whether it is a smaller local event like a tornado or one that covers a large area. My hope is that as people of faith we respond when disaster strikes here in this state or elsewhere. As we enjoy the holiday time in safety and comfort, there are many in this state and other areas struggling to recover from past hurricane damage and are in need of help.

We have many options for response to a disaster, but this is where I tow the company line and invite you to respond through the UCC disaster response appeals either with a monetary donation or organizing a trip through the denomination to the Panhandle of Florida or another location. One of the questions I have been asked time and time again is how come the UCC is not doing this or is not responding yet or some variation on the theme. The denomination does what it is able with the funding it receives. So it is on us as members to support the wider church through OCWM (Our Church’s Wider Mission), OGHS (One Great Hour of Sharing), Emergency USA Fund and other opportunities.

During this holiday time as we pause and give thanks to God for blessings received, give thanks to all who work and volunteer in disaster response and emergency preparedness. Thousands of people across the country in government positions, non-governmental agencies, nonprofit and faith-based organizations have answered a call to do the work they do to keep us as safe as humanly possible before, during and after a disaster.

The least we can do is be prepared and have our “go bag” ready for when the need arises.
Does your church have a policy addressing sexual harassment, bullying and abuse?

The #MeToo and #Timesup movements along with the allegations of misconduct in the six Pennsylvania Roman Catholic dioceses have led to the public’s heightened awareness of and sensitivity to sexual harassment, bullying and abuse. Churches and their boards, employees and volunteers need to be prepared to operate in this new environment and ensure they are protecting those at risk for abuse, the interests of the church and themselves. The best place to start is to update or create an abuse prevention policy. This is not an easy task, but it need not be overwhelming.

When updating or drafting your policy, it is important not to be consumed by the procedural details. Focus on the fundamentals. Your abuse prevention policy should address, at a minimum, these nine components:

- **Policy Statement** - declaring the church (and its trustees, officers, directors, employees, representatives, volunteers and agents) is against sexual abuse, harassment, bullying and molestation;
- **Definitions** - Define sexual abuse, harassment, bullying and molestation so that all who read the statement can comprehend the disallowed activities;
- **Screening** - A requirement for regular background checks on all employees, volunteers, and individuals who come in contact with youths and at-risk adults;
- **Training** - require employees, volunteers and anyone who comes in contact with minors or at-risk adults;
  - These should be tailored to the specific role of each employee/volunteer.
  - Armatus has several modules that will be helpful for supervisors, employees and volunteers. Available through our website.
- **Monitoring** - Clear and concise prevention and supervision rules;
- **Reporting Procedures** - A clear and concise reporting system that does not obstruct nor dissuade anonymous reporters;
- **Review Procedures** - A clear and concise review system that allows for objective evaluation of every reported incident;
- **Mandatory Reporter Requirements** - An outline of which employees qualify under the jurisdiction’s mandatory report laws (if any) and the time requirements for reporting;
- **Consequences** - Clear, concise and consistent standards for correction or elimination of undesired conduct should an employee, volunteer, or any other person be found to have acted in violation of the policy.

Insurance Board has several resources to offer when you decide to update or draft your abuse prevention policy. Visit the Safe Conduct Workbench at www.InsuranceBoard.org where you will find a sample policy, as well as information about background checks and training offered through Praesidium in partnership with the Insurance Board.
Emmanuel UCC/Sebring is gearing up for the Back Bay mission trip. Throughout the year they have been collecting personal care items and personal clothing items that are greatly needed in Biloxi. The suitcase is filled with items that will greatly benefit people there.

In honor of Veterans Day, the Missions Team at Spring Hill UCC collected donations and dollars in order to distribute 30 Blessings Bags (10 for women and 20 for men) to homeless veterans. These bags, to be distributed by the Salvation Army, contain items such as toiletries, undershirts, socks, washcloths and towels and other personal items. The bags were blessed during worship on November 3. This was the second year for this event, for which additional donations of $175 went toward the $349 cost of the gift bags. Church members were notified of donations made in October and November to various charities: $175 to OCWM; $100 to Habitat for Humanity; $200 to Back Bay Mission; $100 to the Crescent Community Clinic; $500 to Neighbors in Need; and $500 to the Hospice camp serving bereaved children.

Days for Girls is an international non-profit dedicated to providing quality sustainable feminine hygiene solutions to girls and women worldwide. Faith UCC/Dunedin hosts a “Dunedin Days for Girls” team monthly to create hygiene kits on these work days.

Michele LaBrot and Lee Daugherty at First UCC/Orlando have a weekly ministry to the homeless in Orlando. They have paid for a Post Office box that is used as an address to send the mail, and then once a week they spend time sorting and handing out the mail to the recipients who have no address of their own.

The thrift shop at Port Orange UCC had its biggest money-making day on October 21, bringing in $382 and close to being $8,000 ahead of last year.

North Port Community UCC has a ministry at The Gardens of North Port assisted living community at which it holds monthly services. The church also holds an all-German language worship service on one Saturday of each month at 3pm. December 21, 2019, will mark the fourth year of these services. Pastor Rev. Attila Szemesi officiates (phone 941/426-5580 for particular details).

Donations from members of Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg will be funding a request from the nearby Maximo Elementary School to purchase 20 uniforms needed by children.

The United Church of Gainesville held its seventh annual Church on the Prairie on Sunday, November 17. The one service that day was held at Prairie Creek Lodge on the theme “Happiness is Harvest.” Worship was followed by a potluck picnic and music provided by the Hogtown Pickers.

Mayflower Congregational UCC/Naples held a health fair on Thursday morning, November 14, that featured presentations by a licensed chiropractic therapist, a licensed physical therapist and a representative from Blue Zones about life style changes and healthier options. Plus there were free chair massages!

First Congregational Church/Orange City recently contributed $150 to Duvall Homes in Deland, which provides residential supportive care and services for people with developmental disabilities. A November Mission Board collection was taken to be shared by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the National Farmworkers Ministry.

Being a Florida church means lots of opportunities for organized group golf outings. But don’t forget about all the fish out there. The men’s group at Spring Hill UCC has organized a day out on the Gulf, with everything provided, like tackle and license (but not necessarily any fish). Over at UCC/New Smyrna Beach they may be taking out some of the fun of catching your dinner, but they had a fish fry on Saturday, November 9.

In early October a Sunday morning began very early for some from Coral Gables Congregational UCC who were part of the Out of the Darkness Walk as part of the Gables UCC team. The resources raised through this walk helps advocate for public policies in mental health as well as understanding and preventing suicide.

Ethel Rudy reports about Stitches of Love and Friendship at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota where she and others knit for friends in South Dakota. She recently sent off a box of items that included seven prayer shawls, five boa scarves, four pairs of bed socks, four large hats, four baby hats, 22 children’s hats, 14 pairs of mittens and six sweaters contributed by Chris Millar, Ruth Olson, Ethel and
The United Church in Tallahassee had another successful Artisan Market on Saturday, November 2. There was a handmade quilt auctioned to raise dollars for Hurricane Michael victims in the Panhandle, homemade items and crafts, canned goods, silent auction items, sandwich, homemade soups and more.

Seventeen volunteers from Faith Family UCC/Brandon were at the Trinity Cafe in Tampa early Saturday morning, November 23, with clothes for a grateful homeless community and the needy. The church does this outreach quarterly. Trinity Cafe is a free restaurant, serving more than 500+ hot and hearty meals daily.

Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park organized a Good Sam Market fundraiser on November 15-16 to sell gently used items to include household goods, kitchen items, toy and games, yard equipment, seasonal decorations and clean clothing in good condition.

The once-a-month “Wednesday Night Live” series is on again at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park. First there is dinner and then you select an activity. For November 13 it was: made soups, sandwich, home-made items and auctioned to raise dollars for Hurricane Michael victims in the Panhandle, homemade items and crafts, canned goods, silent auction items, sandwich, homemade soups and more.

Across Florida

The United Church of Gainesville held a one hour All Saints Service on Wednesday evening, October 30 — a quiet and reflective time to pause from the busyness of life and consider the lives and impact of their dearly departed. All were invited to bring a photo of loved ones. An opportunity was provided to do a labyrinth walk as well. This was followed on Sunday, November 3, with an invitation to members to bring a photograph of deceased family members and friends to add to the altar during the service. Fellow UCGers who have died this past year were also remembered.

All Saints’ Day was celebrated at Fort Myers Congregational UCC during worship on November 3. The names were read of all who have died since November 1 of last year. A time of commemoration and remembrance, the chimes were tolled for each name as that person’s impact was remembered. Names were submitted of church members, family members, friends, co-workers and neighbors and printed the worship bulletin. At the conclusion of the service “For All the Saints” was sung.

St. Andrew UCC recognized All Saints Day at worship on November 3. Photos of the deceased loved ones (or their names on sheets of paper provided) were celebrated with prayers and thanks for their lives.

Remembrance Sunday at the Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton on November 3 honored and remembered loved ones with a special candle lighting service, inviting those who have lost someone to light a candle during worship.

Port Orange UCC celebrated All Saint’s Sunday by honoring the four members of the congregation who died during the past year.

Eternal Hope UCC/Fort Walton Beach acknowledged All Saint’s Day on November 3 by inviting church members to call out the names of lost loved ones – including pets – as a bell was rung. Photos were encouraged and all were invited to spend some time after worship sharing stories. Rev. Booth Iburg used scripture from Ecclesiastes and the Beatitudes.

Pensacola Beach Community UCC observed the occasion by inviting members and friends to light candles and with a prayer team present to pray with those who seek comfort and healing.

Christ Congregational Church/Miami remembered loved ones who have died during the year.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC celebrated the “communion of saints,” giving thanks for all the faithful – those living and those who have gone before us.

On this day in worship Spring Hill UCC sang “For All the Saints” and “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God.”
Across Florida

Across Florida

On the same weekend that Faith UCC/Dunedin celebrated 60 years as a church, they opened their doors to a powerful exhibit called the Shower of Stoles—a collection of 50 clerical stoles that have been donated by people in the LGBTQ community, as well as friends, families and allies. Each of the stoles represents a powerful witness to the ongoing discrimination prevalent in our denominations and religions. It was considered a joy to see folks come from the community to immerse themselves in the lives and stories for whom these sacred stoles represent. Also, the church has formed a new rainbow group called LGBTQ Journeys. Its purpose is to encourage, enable, inspire and empower its LGBTQ members and friends whether for social, recreational, cultural, intellectual or spiritual reasons.

The congregation dedicated and added their blessings to a stole in honor of Faith UCC’s seminarian, Brian Craig. During the Shower of Stoles exhibit, members of the church filled a blank white stole with 100 signatures and good wishes. This stole is being donated to the Shower of Stoles Project located in Washington, D.C., to be added to their traveling international collection of over 1,400 stoles.

LGBTQ+ Fort Myers Congregational UCC had a booth at the eleventh annual Pride-SWFL on Saturday, October 5.

LGBTQ+ First Congregational UCC/Winter Park was part of Come Out with Pride Orlando on Saturday, October 12.

LGBTQ+ St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota also had a booth and was a first-time participant in Venice Pride on November 2.

Menbers of the United Church of Gainesville walked in the city’s Pride parade on Saturday, October 26, to the theme “Building On Our History – Stonewall 50.” They proudly wore their “Y’all Means All” t-shirts. Pride was celebrated the following day during worship with reflections by Sara and Eden Ivines, Jodi Hall-Rodgers and Rev. Talia Raymond and a musical offering by the church choir. A seminar, “Spiritual Affirmation and Support for LGBTQ+ Couples Before and After Marriage Equality,” was offered between services and the afternoon concluded with a Pride potluck.

A Transgender Day of Remembrance service was held on November 20 at a park in Hudson. Pastor Rev. Robin DeAngelis of Spring Hill UCC was invited to speak.

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Several of our congregations recently had pet blessings including Christ Congregational Church/Miami (which also collected needed items for the local Humane Society).

Across Florida

Sunday, November 24, was a celebration of Thanksgiving at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg. As part of the service, the congregation was invited to bring something that represented what they are thankful for and place it on the altar. Rituals of Thanksgiving are especially significant when times are challenging, and this was an opportunity to uplift one another.

UCC/Fort Lauderdale held an interfaith Thanksgiving service on Thursday evening, November 21.

A Thanksgiving benefit concert was held at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach on Wednesday evening, November 20, with music performed by Vox Nova, a choral ensemble from the Pinellas County Center for the Arts, joined by the church’s Chancel Choir and Ringers. An offering was taken to benefit the victims in the Bahamas of Hurricane Dorian and close to $6,000 was raised.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC joined with two Jewish temples in an interfaith Thanksgiving service at a Presbyterian church on Wednesday evening, November 20.

Thursday, November 21, was the date for the interfaith Thanksgiving service supported by Faith UCC/Dunedin and other local faith communities at the local Presbyterian church. Donated food items were destined for the Dunedin Cares food pantry.

Several of our congregations recently had pet blessings including Christ Congregational Church/Miami (which also collected needed items for the local Humane Society).

First UCC/Orlando

The Venice Pride event on November 2 included a pet parade and pet blessing. St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota Pastor Rev. Paul Werner blessed a number of dogs – and a snake.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC (where all are welcome...including four-legged friends)

The third annual Prayer Shawl Ministry sale at Coral Gables Congregational UCC will take place on Sunday afternoon, December 1, that includes unique and hand-knitted and crocheted items, including these cuties (above).

September 8 was Teddy Bear Sunday at First Congregational Church/Orange City when firefighters from the local fire department came to collect the bears and were given a blessing by Pastor Rev. David Westcott. The bears will be given to children they encounter in stressful situations.

Pastor Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner at Coral Gables Congregational UCC has been conducting a series Sunday mornings which she entitles “Elevator Speech.”

She asks, “Have you ever wanted to share with someone about this, your beloved church, but didn’t know where to begin? Or have you tried to share so much about the great things happening in the church that the other person’s eyes glazed over?”

To help with this challenge, she offers ways to meet it head on with a short, sweet, concise way of talking about the church.

Across Florida
Across Florida

**BOOKS WE’RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER...**

*The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and *The Good People* by Hannah Kent (United Church in Tallahassee)

*Can’t We Talk about Something More Pleasant?: A Memoir* by Roz Chast, *The Garden of Small Beginnings* by Abbi Waxman, *Evolution of the Word* by Marcus Borg and *Christmas at Little Beach Street Baker* by Jenny Colgan (Fort Myers Congregational UCC)

Geographer’s Library by Jon Fasman, *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers* by Maxwell King and *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*: A Therapist, Her Therapist and Our Lives Revealed by Lori Gottlieb (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

*The Last Romantics* by Tara Conklin (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)

*The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers* by Maxwell King and *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (First Congregational Church/Sarasota)

*Time to Stand and Stare: Meditations on a Mountain Path* by Martin Lewis, most recently Pastor of Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole, has just finished his latest book, *Time to Stand and Stare: Meditations on a Mountain Path*. From Amazon.com: “Part meditation, part travelogue, and part literary analysis, [the book] takes readers along on the author’s physical and metaphorical exploration of Wales and the Apostle’s Creed and the Beatitudes. Follow one man’s journey as he questions fundamental writings of his Christian faith. How can modern Christians apply ancient creeds and gospel writings to the finite time with which we live?”

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

“Daycare Center for Homeless Under Construction in DeLand” (First Congregational Church/Orange City)

“The Muslims Among Us” and The Gospel of Luke (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

“Financial Peace: Bible-based Financial Skills,” “Isaiah and Messiah” and “All Church Discussion of ‘Creation’” (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

“Examining the Prosperity Gospel Claims and Identifying What God Calls Those Who Follow Jesus to Do” (Port Orange UCC)

“Gospel According to Matthew” (Church on the Hill Congregational Church/Boca Raton)


“Can’t We Talk about Something More Pleasant?: A Memoir” by Roz Chast, *The Garden of Small Beginnings* by Abbi Waxman, *Evolution of the Word* by Marcus Borg and *Christmas at Little Beach Street Baker* by Jenny Colgan (Fort Myers Congregational UCC)

“Skillfully Speaking: Planning for Our Long Term Care,” “The Prodigal Daughter,” “Are You Sitting Alone?” and “Keeping Peace in the Family During the Holidays” (UCC/Fort Lauderdale)

“Organ and Tissue Donor Programs,” “The Enneagram However Known,” “Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives” and “Food for Thought from a Farmer who Grows It” (United Church of Gainesville)

“Elder Affairs and Fraud Prevention seminar” (North Port Community UCC)

The Pilgrimage Healing Process and “Music in the Church” (Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park)

“Services Provided by Resurrection House for Homeless and At-risk Individuals” (St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota)

“The Power of Walking a Labyrinth” (Fort Myers Congregational UCC)

“Examining the Prosperity Gospel Claims and Identifying What God Calls Those Who Follow Jesus to Do” (Port Orange UCC)

**Follow a worship on November 24 at UCC/New Smyrna Beach, Dusty Miller read from her newest book in the Alice Ott mystery series, *In Danger in the House*. Dusty and her wife attend UCC/NSB when they escape western Massachusetts for warmer climates. She’s now hard at work on a new mystery series set in coastal Florida.**

**Dr. Martin Lewis,** most recently Pastor of Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole, has just finished his latest book, *Time to Stand and Stare: Meditations on a Mountain Path*. From Amazon.com: “Part meditation, part travelogue, and part literary analysis, [the book] takes readers along on the author’s physical and metaphorical exploration of Wales and the Apostle’s Creed and the Beatitudes. Follow one man’s journey as he questions fundamental writings of his Christian faith. How can modern Christians apply ancient creeds and gospel writings to the finite time with which we live?”

**First Congregational Church/Winter Park** held “Book Swap Sunday” on November 17. Members could bring current (ish) fiction and non-fiction books no longer needed and swap them out for a book they hadn’t yet read.
3 Great Loves is a denomination-wide story telling initiative, collecting and lifting up the stories of our local churches and affiliates.

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

Save Our Beaches

A task force at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach scheduled Dr. Lee Irby, an environmental studies professor from nearby Eckerd College, for a presentation on “The History of and Alternatives to Plastics.”

The event, attended by 65 people, was held after worship on Sunday, November 10. A light lunch was served (utilizing earth-friendly wares) and a resources handout was distributed identifying where to find alternatives to plastics.

The group – known as the S.O.B.s for “Save Our Beaches” – will be continuing efforts to educate church members and the community about conservation measures involving our land and water resources.

Previously church members mailed over 200 postcards to Governor Ron DeSantis regarding his position on environmental policies.

The Season of Advent is Here!

Attention clergy and church staff, in case you missed it.

Click below to download the FREE 3 Great Loves Advent Toolkit that includes bulletin inserts, social media graphics, and a sample suggested calendar for you to use for 3 Great Loves during Advent.

Download the Advent Toolkit

We invite you to share how you and your congregation celebrate Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love this Advent Season; use #3greatloves on social media.

To learn more and share your story, please visit 3greatloves.org and also share your stories with our Florida 3 Great Loves ambassadors Rev. Dr. Sheila Guillaume Sheila@unionucc.net or Lynn Jones HonickvL@gmail.com

As you prepare for the birth of the Christ-child, look for signs of JOY this week.

"O people of God, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" - Psalm 85:4

"And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" - Isaiah 35:10

"She shall bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Lo, the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, “God is with us.” Isaiah 7:14

"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." Isaiah 11:6

As you prepare for the birth of the Christ-child, look for signs of PEACE this week.

"Peace, be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."-Psalm 46:10.

"What better time than this week to ‘make your hands busy and your heart pure’.” - Psalms 77:12

As you prepare for the birth of the Christ-child, look for signs of PEACE this week.

"Being born of woman, Jesus learned obedience by the things that he suffered." - Hebrews 5:8

"I will put my laws within them, and I will write them on their hearts. Then will I sin no more." - Hebrews 8:10

As you prepare for the birth of the Christ-child, look for signs of PEACE this week.
"The world needs us to be who we are," Rev. Mary Schaller Blaufuss (D.Min.) said to women at the Southern Region Women’s Retreat/Strong Sisters’ Stories. “The world doesn’t always allow us to live up to our potential.” Eighty-eight persons from four conferences in the Southeast Region of the UCC journeyed to Blowing Rock Conference Center in North Carolina October 18-20 as if on a spiritual pilgrimage, seeking new heights in their lives.

Nine short story sessions and three plenary story sessions offered a rich plethora of thoughts, resources and motivational prompts. In a workshop titled “Is This It?” Rev. Tamara Franks offered her stories of strength, listening to God’s voice as one vocation led into another and yet another ... each time wondering if “this is it?” One white-haired woman said in discussion with her neighbor, “I am not done yet. There is still work to do even at my age.”

Mary Blaufuss introduced conference attendees to the word “kairos,” an ancient Greek word meaning “the right, critical or opportune moment.” She spoke of God’s time and “how we can do God’s talk, and walk in the midst of life’s complexities.” She outlined a hopeful message from chaos theory for life that can be random and complex. A metaphor of the butterfly effect, she explained, is an idea that says a small change can make much bigger changes happen -- that one small incident can have a big impact in the future.

Women heard formal greetings and heralded fun filled “moments after dark.” They brought books of hope for two Asheville schools in a related missionary project, and browsed books by three Southern Region authors. The two Asheville schools benefiting from the book project are Emma Elementary School and Johnston Elementary School.

Attendees responded with a generous offering to be divided between the SOC Disaster Relief funds (for recent hurricanes) and the National Farm Worker Ministry. A communion table gathered participants one final time, and Betty Griffin, who coordinated the Retreat, reports that a successful silent auction will support the next SRWR.

Note, also, some final words from Betty: Thank you to everyone who helped and/or participated in the Retreat and contributed to its success. We invite all participants to send pictures they took at the Conference and are willing to share. We will compile them and share with the group. [Send photos to Yolanda Adams (valiea@gmail.com) and Betty at (bbg9@bellsouth.net)].

Twelve women from Florida UCC Women attended the 21st Southern Region Women’s Retreat in Blowing Rock sponsored by the women of the Southern Conference of the UCC. This event is held every other year and rotates between the Florida, South Central, Southeast and Southern conferences. In 2021 it will be held in Florida.

Attendees in photo are:

Front Row: Emma Goodwin (Fort Myers Congregational UCC), Pat Boyer (Cocoa Beach Community Church) Chris Wagner (New Hope UCC/DeLand)

Back Row: Barb Coons (Fort Myers Congregational UCC), Elaine Hill (First Congregational Church/Lake Worth), Kathy Parent (First Congregational Church/Lake Worth), Ginny Somerville (First Congregational Church/Lake Worth), Bert Perry (New Hope UCC/DeLand), Ilsa Dickinson (Union Congregational Church/ West Palm Beach), Dyanne Edds (Hope UCC/Rockledge), Rhea Taie-Tehrani (Miami Lakes Congregational Church) Missing from photo: Brigitte Ermanons (First Congregational Church/Lake Worth)
Around The State

Back in the spring, women at Faith UCC/Dunedin (R) gathered to explore the idea of establishing a women’s group. It was decided to go forward and the name “Anam Cara” was selected, that being the Gaelic term for “soul friend.” Thus the Anam Cara Women’s Circle was born. They held their first “welcome high tea” on Saturday afternoon, November 9, with 28 women in attendance. They sipped sherry, enjoyed sandwiches, scones, lemon curd and clotted cream while listening to music offered by Sandy Wittman with the Wildwood Dulcimer trio.

First UCC Women from First Congregational UCC/Sarasota met on Wednesday, November 13, at Temple Beth Shalom with the Sisterhood of TBS as well as the women from the local mosque for a “Memories Roadshow.” Each guest brought a show-and-tell object that has a special meaning to her, preferably a religious object or a family treasure. Each woman spent a moment telling about her object and that special memory.

2020 Sanibel-Captiva Interfaith Shared Scholar

The Sanibel-Captiva Interfaith Shared Scholar committee welcomes Mary Evelyn Tucker as their 2020 Shared Scholar Presenter. Dr. Tucker is the Senior Lecturer and Research Scholar at Yale University for the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies as well as the Divinity School and Religious Studies. The first event will be the Shared Scholar lecture presented on Sunday, January 26, at 4pm at Sanibel Congregational UCC. Dr. Tucker will focus on the interface between environmental concerns and spirituality. The Shared Scholar Seminar with Dr. Tucker will be held on Monday, January 27, at the same location from 9am-1pm.

In preparation for her visit, Rev. Dr. John Danner will present a two-part study titled “Journey of the Universe: An Introduction to Mary Evelyn Tucker,” on Wednesdays, December 4 and 11 at Sanibel UCC. Identical sessions will be held at 10am and 7pm. Utilizing her book written with Brian Swimme, Journey of the Universe and a film by the same title, the class will offer a stimulating look at her life and work. Copies of the book will be available in advance of the class. All three events are open to the public free of charge; a freewill offering will be taken at the January 26 event.

The Interfaith Shared Scholar programs are an interfaith offering sponsored by Chapel-by-the-Sea/Captiva, Bat Yam-Temple of the Islands, Saint Michael and All Angels, the Christian Science Church/Sanibel and the Sanibel Congregational UCC, as well as the Leo Rosner Foundation. For more information about the introductory study on December 4 and 11, please call 239/472-0497 or check out www.sanibelucc.org.

Center for Progressive Renewal Offers Free Webinar Series

The Center for Progressive Renewal hosts a series of FREE online events aimed at helping the rest of us know what we can do to make a difference. CPR encourages you to publish these events in your church bulletins and invites your members, colleagues and families to join them online. Learn more and register today!
Seventy-two students and leaders from around the Florida Conference gathered at the DaySpring Episcopal Retreat Center in Parrish from November 1-3 for our annual Fall Youth Retreat entitled “Rise and Shine!”

The weekend utilized the story of Samuel and Eli to illustrate the urgency and persistence of the calling placed on their lives. On Saturday afternoon, the students dug into the Beatitudes to illustrate the ways in which we all “shine” in many different and necessary ways. The weekend included group games, skit shows, campfires, prayer walks and — perhaps most importantly — a time of building relationships and retreating from “normal” to pursue a time of relaxation and extraordinary possibilities.

Rise and Shine!

BY NEAL WATKINS
MINISTER FOR FAITH FORMATION

Senior high youth (aka, WAVE) of PAG Church spent a weekend in November “retreating.” It was a weekend designed to retreat from the rest of the world — no cell phones, social media, electronics of any kind allowed — only time spent in real face-to-face conversations and interactions.

We spent Saturday discussing our faith and our beliefs in God, questioning if there is a God and what that looks like and, most importantly, how does one live out their faith in a world that seems to not deem it necessary. Of course there was time for fun and games as well, and we headed to Disney Springs for the nightly Dance-a-Thon. As we concluded the weekend, the youth returned home refreshed and glad to have had time away from the everyday hustle and bustle. I am so thankful for these amazing young people and their questioning spirits!

Fall Retreating...Unplugged

BY JEANNE HAEMMELMANN, ASSOCIATE MINISTER FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS
PASS-A-GRILLE BEACH COMMUNITY UCC/ST. PETER BEACH
Youth at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park held their annual Spookghetti fundraiser after church on October 27. After lunch all were treated to spooky organ music and a special-never-before tour of the organ!

The youth at the Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton have had some special after Sunday worship programs. On November 17 there was instruction on basic soccer skills and on November 24 a continuation of coding skills with Scratch classes.

Families of all youth in grades 6-12 at Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami were invited to gather in Pilgrim House for a pot luck dinner on Sunday evening, October 20. It was an opportunity to share food and build community.

Teens in Action at UCC/New Smyrna Beach have adopted an area of beach from Bethune Park to the National Seashore, having cleaned it twice this past summer getting rid of about 14 bags of trash and over 300 cigarette butts. With staff changes at Faith UCC/Dunedin, the congregation has an opportunity to repurpose an office into a youth space. Church members have been invited to donate one dollar for each year of the church’s 60 year history (or whatever amount) to invest in items for the room – like a theatre-size TV, game system, ping pong table, bean bag chairs and more.

Just in time for Thanksgiving, youth (and their parents) at Coral Gables Congregational UCC sold homemade pumpkin, cherry, apple and pumpkin pecan pies to support their summer mission trip.

It was “Bible Sunday” on October 13 at First Congregational Church/Winter Park as third-graders received a Bible during the 10am service. Afterwards, Parents and kids enjoyed Bible time (and pizza) as they learned more about their new Bible from Pastor Rev. Sean Garvey and Director of Faith Formation Kerry Weisner.

There’s a “new and improved” Children’s Church Corner at Christ Congregational Church/Miami thanks to Anasofia Godley and Isabella LeGrand who cleaned out the old “Lullaby Lounge” to make it a more functional space. On the wish list is a new rug for the room and more toys.

Sanibel Police Officer Nick visited with the students of Sanibel Christian Preschool/Sanibel UCC as part of their Community Helpers unit. Officer Nick shared with the students about the job of a police officer and their uniforms/tools. He patiently answered the students’ questions so they could learn more about the important job the police do to keep our island safe. Then everyone went outside to see his police vehicle and hear the siren.

The German church community at Coral Gables Congregational UCC invited children ages kindergarten through 5th grade and their parents to participate on Friday, November 8, in a very special German tradition called Martinstag (or St. Martin’s Day). This occasion is named after St. Martin, who is said to have shared his heavy cloak with a beggar in need of some warmth. Thus was born the tradition of children carrying lanterns around on the feast of the saint in honor of this noble deed. Children were invited to make their own lanterns to light the way. Then, on Monday, November 11, those interested commemorated the festivities in Fellowship Hall and the Courtyard with a short play, a processional with the lanterns and the singing of traditional German songs.

The Sunday School at Faith UCC/Dunedin recently engaged in broccoli painting. No, it was not painting pictures of broccoli but using broccoli as the paintbrush. It was fun, and the results were beautiful. There were enough sheets for the children to experiment with multiple colors and techniques.
We are proud of the many authors who are clergy or staff — past and present — in our Florida churches and Conference. Their diversified talent covers a wide variety of subjects and interests.

You can support these authors by purchasing their books as Christmas gifts, stocking stuffers or hostess “thank you’s” — or just treat yourself!

Check out these books On Our Bookshelf.

Catching Stars While Walking into Walls: Finding Our Way to God's Heart in the Daily and the Ordinary by Rev. Dr. Kathy Rooke (former Pastor, Faith Family UCC/Brandon)

In the Footsteps of Disease (Friesen Press), The Call of Africa (Legacy Publishing) and Time to Stand and Stare: Meditations on a Mountain Path by Martin Gwent Lewis, M.D. (most recently Pastor of Chapel on the Hill UCC/Seminole)

Growing Older, Thinking Younger: Ministry to Boomers (Pilgrim Press) by Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmelmann (Senior Pastor, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)

Rise of the Spiritual Activist (West Bow Press) and Praying For An Eclipse (trilogy) by Rev. Dr. Guillermo Márquez-Sterling (Associate Pastor, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)
Alzheimer’s: A Beautiful Spirit Celebrated (Richardson Publishing) by Rev. Linn Possell

The Long Winding Journey Home (Outskirts Press) by Revs. Larry and Sandy Reimer (Pastors emeriti, United Church of Gainesville)

A Fine Day for a Killing Spree (Amazon Digital Services, Inc.) by Rev. Ned Michael (Pastor, Edgewater Union Church)

FreeK Week, A Christmas Dozen, Christmas Stories to Warm the Heart (Burt Creations) and The Bookseller’s Daughter by Rev. Steven Burt (a retired UCC pastor who lives part time in The Villages)

Rev. Dr. Jerry Schumm (a retired UCC minister who served both Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami and Coral Gables Congregational UCC) Pass the Paddle: Mississippi Dreamin’ Come Hell or High Water

Rev. Dr. Michael Price (Interim Pastor at Chapel on The Hill UCC/Seminole) Murder on the Disoriented Express: How the Actions of the Laity May Be Killing Their Congregation

Books are available online from sources such as Amazon.com where you can search by title/author or by using your favorite search engine, such as Google, Yahoo, etc.