Is it really January 20th? It seems like we should be well beyond that date for all that has happened in the last month or two. Liturgically speaking, we’re not yet a month past Christmas and, yet, we’re deep into planning for Lent. We’ve had the coming of the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus, the calling of disciples and we’re just a few weeks from the wonders of the transfiguration and turning our heads and hearts toward Jerusalem.

As a nation, we are turning our heads and hearts, too. Regardless of your politics, today dawns a new day as we change national leadership and begin anew in our great experiment in democracy. But just two weeks ago, on the same day we were celebrating the Magi bringing their gifts, a mob attempted to overthrow the government. It’s hard to even write that much less think that, much less believe that. My first trip to the nation’s capital was in 1966, and my best recollections are of how that trip instilled in my young heart a love of country, an appreciation for the values we aspire to, a marveling at the overwhelming sense that we are a people connected by common ideals, dreams and longings. (I was too young, then, to have awakened to the sin of racism, the corruption of politics, the injustices of the economy and so much more.)

My life in the church is a gift my parents gave me. In the church I’ve unlearned all that made me innocent while also learning the grace of redemption, renewal and second chances. I still love my country; I’m UCC National Prayer Vigil Calls People Together after Riots at Capitol

By Connie Larkman
UCC News, January 7

Prayers for calm, for democracy, for the soul of the nation were lifted up Wednesday evening across the United Church of Christ after a defiant mob of pro-Trump terrorists stormed the U.S. Capitol. Rioters breached the floor of the Senate and House of Representatives on January 6, and stopped the counting of electoral votes to certify Joe Biden as the next president.

Congregations, Conferences and national ministries held a number of vigils to give people an opportunity to collectively grieve the insurrection aimed at the blocking the transfer of power.

The Rev. Traci Blackmon, Associate General Minister, welcomed more than 1,000 participants to a Zoom service at 7:30ET, just hours after Washington D.C. was locked down — “something,” she said, “we thought we would never see as the United States of America. … People all over the world were exposed what happens when racism and hatred go unchecked.”

She opened with a song learned from her great grandmother, sing-
still proud of who we say we want to be, I just do it as a much more well-informed person of faith who knows how Caesar falls short of the here-and-not-quite-yet Kindom of God.

This January 20 will be seen by many as one in which we pivot from the failings – corruption – of one president to a future yet unknown though longed for by millions. Can what has been broken be repaired? Can the parentheticals of my childhood be cast in the full light of day such that God’s light might be a healing balm to a troubled land? Will we continue the long and unfinished journey of addressing not just our historic racism but our historic attitude of white supremacy? Will we recall the scriptural mandate of jubilee and work to bring economic equality to those who have been left out, set aside, deemed unworthy, considered “other” in a nation that suffers from division and disunity?

Our second chance (again!) starts today. The local churches of the Florida Conference are called upon to be a source of hope in a broken world, to raise up disciples of the Most High God, and to send those disciples into the public square to preach and practice a new Way. That’s where the liturgy calls us. That’s where the events of the day call us. That’s where God calls out to those who have promised in their own baptism to resist the powers of the day while working for justice for all people.

Today, as new leaders take their seats in the houses of power, we rise up anew in our commitment as the United Church of Christ in Florida to being a people of faith in a world that needs what we have to offer. We prepare to turn our heads and hearts toward Jerusalem, yes, but also toward the sacrifices called for in these days in order to proclaim the love of God in a new day. May it be so.

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

From e-Celebrate, January 20

UCC President and General Minister Rev. John Dorhauer’s Call to Prayer

I have spent the last hour watching as our capital endures a coup attempt at the hands of an armed pro-Trump mob. They were empowered by the words of our own president who invited them to take action. They have now swarmed the Capitol and breached its safety barriers. I watched as the Vice President was escorted out of the Senate chamber by his secret service guards. I watched as new leaders take their seats in the houses of power, we rise up anew in our commitment as the United Church of Christ in Florida to being a people of faith in a world that needs what we have to offer.

Let us pray for the elected representatives and their staff who are going to spend a number of harrowing hours waiting and watching.

Let us pray for the officers of the law who will risk their lives in an effort to defend our democracy.

God help us all.

Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with me.
We, the called and elected leaders of the United Church of Christ, heirs of a tradition rich with saints who have gone before us and whose courage in the struggle for justice and peace informs our own words and actions, rise in one voice, with clarity and unity to condemn the insurrection that took place at the United States Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Upon hearing the news of his pending birth, Jesus’ mother proclaimed: “God will scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts.” We remember too these words from our blessed Savior Jesus, “I have come to bring good news to the poor, to bring release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.”

In the spirit of our ancestors, recognizing their intent and standing on their shoulders as people who acted in courage and faith, we join in one voice to name the evil we witnessed, and to condemn the words of our president and the actions of his insurrectionists and white supremacist terrorists. The president’s words incited the attack on the United States Capitol. Therefore, we call upon members of his administration and the Congress to remove him from office, thereby holding him accountable for his treasonous actions and ensuring that he never hold the office of President of the United States again.

We bear witness to and name as racist the deplorable difference between security plans implemented during Black Lives Matter protests and the security plans ordered and implemented on Jan. 6, ahead of a rally by armed domestic terrorists and call out that difference as an embodiment of white supremacy. That difference allowed the act of terrorism to happen.

We hold accountable our elected leaders, who have been complicit by their support of the actions of the president, as well as the lingering silence in the wake of his actions. We condemn their unwillingness to uphold the Constitution of the United States and their fueling of the flames that erupted at the U.S. Capitol and on the streets of Washington, D.C.

We name the pain and the collective trauma that all Americans felt when we were forced to witness the terror inflicted by armed insurrectionists. The mob broke through windows and forced our elected representatives to hide under their desks, place gas masks on their faces, lie under the rows of seats in the House and Senate Chambers. The mob surrounded U.S. Capitol security guards, who were outnumbered and overwhelmed, and made them fear for their lives. They marched through the Capitol buildings carrying Confederate flags. They placed pipe bombs and Molotov cocktails on the grounds of the Capitol. They ransacked the offices of our elected representatives and vandalized the grounds and the building. They removed the American flag that flies over the U.S. Capitol and replaced it with a Trump flag. They desecrated the Halls of Congress and our nation’s democracy.

To the extent possible, every person involved in this armed attack on our Capitol must be identified, arrested and placed on trial for crimes committed.

Our love affair with white skin in America, a love affair that seeps into every pore of America’s skin – including our houses of worship – culminated in another indefensible act of raw terror and violence. Some rioters and insurrectionists – many of whom would proclaim Jesus as their Lord and Savior – were carrying Bibles or holding “Jesus Saves” signs.” We want to be clear: there is nothing Christlike in any of this. Christians have for too long tolerated racism and racists as a part of our collective story.

Today as we condemn the perpetrators of this violence on the grounds of our Capitol, we further condemn the lie that whiteness is a virtue. The love of whiteness is an evil that must be rooted out from our shared and common narrative, and until it is, white supremacists like our current president and his devoted followers will continue to behave like they have a God-given right to acts of violence and insurrection.

We condemn the inaction and complicity of the church, which continues to miss the mark of its high calling by using the Bible and the gospel narratives to support injustice. The time has come, indeed, is long overdue, for the church to denounce ideologies of whiteness, and to name white supremacy as idolatrous. Now is the time for the church, in all denominational contexts, to release support of white power and white privilege and to embrace fully the call to follow Jesus.

Our faith calls us to acts of love, kindness and compassion. Our faith reminds us that the power of God aligns with the poor and the abandoned, the weak and the hungry, the oppressed and the marginalized. We call on all people of faith and goodwill to use what we saw on January 6, 2021, as a call to justice and a reminder of what happens when evil goes unchallenged.

Our faithful response to this most recent act of white terrorism and insurrection will be to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, free the oppressed, welcome the stranger, love the
neighbor, and fill the whole world with the love of our blessed redeemer, Jesus. And, as we continue to do so, we will walk in the courage to denounce and dismantle theologies and systems of oppression and hatred, replacing them with theologies of freedom, peace, justice and love.

We invite all members of the United Church of Christ to a period of sober reflection and fervent prayer. We further urge brave conversation and a willingness to break down the barriers between us and within our communities. May we as Church offer a clear witness of the bold love, honest confession, and simple humility required of us all in this moment. In the words of the prophet Micah, let us go forth to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.”

Faithfully,
The Elected Officers of the United Church of Christ

The Rev. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President
The Rev. Traci Blackmon, Associate General Minister
The Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, Associate General Minister
The Council of Conference Ministers

Our Churches Respond

As the terrorist attack upon the U.S. Capitol on January 6 was concluding, our Florida congregations responded, some in the hours and days right after as well as during worship on January 10. Clergy and lay leaders took to social media and in e-blasts to members to express their concern and provide links to helpful information sites, among them UCC/New Smyrna Beach, First Congregational UCC/Winter Park, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach, United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine and Faith Family UCC/Brandon.

On that Sunday morning following the insurrection, there were reflective statements in prayer concerns and in sermon messages. When Rev. Andy Bachman (United Church of Gainesville) welcomed viewers to the online service, the first words out of his mouth were, “Are you okay?” and in his sermon he admitted he had been “enraged” by the January 6 events before he shared how he was dealing with his feelings. Rev. Patrick Rogers (UCC/Fort Lauderdale), in his sermon, quoted excerpts from the e-blast Rev. Dr. Dawson Taylor (Naples UCC) had sent to his church members [see excerpts following]. Rev. Jack Copas (Boynton Beach Congregational UCC) and the church Moderator took to sending a message to their Member of Congress in support of the President’s impeachment [see below]. Many churches e-blasted their members with links to statements and planned events by the national UCC.

Excerpt from E-message by
Rev. Shawn Garvey (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park), January 6

“...As we continue to watch these events occur in our nation, I would offer that we remember the words from John’s gospel that we only just celebrated a few short days ago: that the Light shines into the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. What we are witnessing today is a darkness in our midst, and we must be those who continue to be vessels of the Light that keeps days such as these at bay.

We can understand anger and frustration, and we can be agents of listening and compromise in the face of differing opinions. What we cannot be is a people who allow our lesser angels to overcome us and sow discord and chaos. We are called to be peacemakers and offer one another our prayers; even those with who we are at odds. Today, perhaps more than any day in recent memory, we would do well to embody that more than we ever have....”

[Rev. Shawn and Rev. Dr. Sherie Lindamood led a vigil on the evening of January 8 on Zoom, “Prayers For Healing, Prayers For Peace.” As part of the transitional activities that happened in the capital, the church’s chimes rang at 5:30pm Tuesday, January 19, in honor of those whose lives have been lost and affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as lights were lit in Washington D.C. and bells were rung from houses of worship around the country.]

Excerpt of Draft Letter to the Editor
by Rev. Justo Gonzalez II (Spring Hill UCC)

Rev. Justo Gonzalez II circulated among the members of Spring Hill UCC the draft of a letter to the editor he planned to send to the Tampa Bay Times for its Hernando County edition. Along with input from several parishioners, the letter was in response to the events of January 6. Members were invited to add their name to the Pastor’s. Included in the draft was the following text:

We, the people and pastor of Spring Hill United Church of Christ, denounce White Supremacy, Radical Extremist and those firmly rooted in hate and violence. We reject all manifestations of their radical hateful views and beliefs.

We choose to embrace the beauty of all of God’s creation. You are beautiful. You always have been. We will always stand on the side of love. Love Wins. Love Always Wins. Hate cannot overshadow the Light and Love of God. We are shining the Light of Love on those who perpetrate violence and hate on others...

We will not stand on the sidelines and remain silent. Quiet isn’t our style. Truth telling is what we embrace. Jesus is who we serve. Besides, there are already way too many congregations that have their heads in the sand or who tacitly support these radical fringe elements of society.
Excerpt from Message by
REV. DR. DAWSON TAYLOR (NAPLES UCC) IN "GOING THE DISTANCE," JANUARY 7

“...before you stop reading or send an e-mail about how I should stick with religion and stay out of politics, let us be clear that what happened in our nation yesterday is a spiritual issue. What happened yesterday is about fear and division. What happened yesterday is about our seeming inability to deal with our differences in respectful and civil ways. What happened yesterday is about when people who do not get their way refuse to accept the sting and pain of defeat that happens to all of us. What happened on Capitol Hill yesterday represents a spiritual deficit as if God keeps a score of wins and losses. And to top it off, there were people carrying crosses and ‘Jesus Saves’ banners while attempting to defile and disrupt democracy.

That is why churches like ours are so important. Churches like ours are the last places I know where people who have differing opinions, ideas, backgrounds, and theologies can gather and respectfully discuss those differences with the sincere desire to understand. We worship together and learn together. We laugh together and break bread together. We baptize our young together and bury our old together. We work hard to ensure that the lonely are not alone and the afraid are not scared. We seek to lift one another up and carry each other’s burdens.

As the chaos ensued yesterday, a friend text messaged me and said: ‘I don’t know what to do. Pray?’ I responded, ‘It’s the only thing I know to do.’...”

[On January 20 the church’s Clergy Roundtable considered “The World is About to Turn: Mending a Nation’s Broken Faith,” which was livestreamed and on FacebookLive.]

Excerpt from “The Threat of Christian Nationalism,” an E-message
BY REV. DR. KEITH HAEMMELMANN
(PASS-A-GRILLE BEACH COMMUNITY UCC/ST. PETE BEACH), JANUARY 16

“It has taken some time for me to sort out the events of January 6 before writing anything in response. The events of that day literally took my breath away. Since then, I have regrouped and listened to the responses of others enough to share some observations and concerns...

If we can agree there was a specific message to be sent by the acts of January 6, then we must also take note of the symbols under which their violence transpired, including the Christian flag. I watched one rioter bludgeon a Capitol Police officer with an American flag and I thought, ‘People sacrificed their lives for the ideals that flag represents, and beside it, a Christian flag. Hard to believe what Jesus would have to do with shouting, ‘Hang Pence!’ Jesus died, not in support of such acts, but because of them. Jesus looked at his opposition with love, forgiving them even as their actions were the cause of his death. Jesus insisted his followers forgive 70x7, not club them 70x7. And when, even one person claims to act on Jesus’ behalf in this manner, everyone claiming that name is thrown under the bus as well. Then we wonder why churches are declining and the salvific message embodied in Christ is seen as one more hypocrisy, a load of hogwash.

You may not agree with these observations, thinking that a church or its minister shouldn’t be meddling in such things, but these things are not partisan or political unless we choose to see them in that vein. How we act on our beliefs is a human issue, not a political one. Our faith is not something to politicize but apply to our life and world. It is where heavenly values intersect human existence. It has nothing to do with party identity but everything to do with Christian identity. It’s why children are taught to not cheat, lie, or steal. It’s what puts integrity behind saluting the flag and kneeling before the cross. It’s about servanthood, not power; lifting up, never tearing down....”

[There was a short time of prayer and meditation at noon on Thursday, January 14, on the labyrinth of the church for the healing of our nation and society. It was led by Dr. Keith with music provided by Dale Williams (choir director/organist). On Wednesday morning, January 20, there was a short time of prayer and meditation on the labyrinth for the inauguration.

In response to the violence that threatened democracy on January 6, Associate Minister REV. DR. GUILLERMO MARQUEZ-STERLING is leading a prayer for peace opportunity, “From the Debris of Chaos: 46 Hours of Prayer.” From January 20-Easter, daily slides of visual and written art as well as Biblical verses will be shared to inspire participants in moments of contemplative prayer.]

“America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.”

Abraham Lincoln
“Gracious One, we are heartsick over the events that have unfolded this past week.

We pray for peace in our nation, for harmony amid our divisions, for respect in the midst of such disregard of truth, and for courageous and honorable leaders who are willing to stand boldly and with integrity on the right side of history.

May we find our voices and live principled love in your presence and for your purpose. Amen.”

“...Our congregation has many members who have put their very lives on the line out of love of country. And even more folks who have engaged in the public sphere as elected officials, volunteers, board members, even employees of organizations that seek to bring out the best in America. Over and over, you have shown your love for the United States of America (even as our Canadian members have shown love for their country!) So, I imagine yesterday was a painful day for you, as have been other days this year. We have not been at our best as a nation.

It is time for us to stop, and together, together as Americans, take an honest look at ourselves. It is time to acknowledge our flaws and weaknesses even as we honor our strengths. And as people of faith, it is past time for us to call on God, asking for wisdom and courage as we honestly assess who we are and as we move into the future.

I have seen posts on social media that declared (in the midst of yesterday’s mayhem in Washington) ‘This is not my country.’ But like how we are behaving or not, it is our country. It is my country. And while I was appalled yesterday on many, many levels, I haven’t stopped loving it. Which means I will continue to work for the day when we fully live up to our ideals, and become the nation where liberty and justice are known by all. Where no one goes hungry. Where everyone has shelter. Where medical care, and quality education are available for all. Where people are treated equitably...”

Faith Family UCC/Brandon had a National Unity Prayer Vigil via Zoom on Wednesday, January 20, at 7pm.

A copy of the service was provided ahead of time to church members.

Let us not forget

December 7, 1941
September 11, 2001
January 6, 2021

The national setting of the UCC welcomed more than a thousand people to a virtual worship service of hope and renewal Tuesday afternoon, January 19, broadcast on Zoom and on YouTube.

ISAIAH 9:2

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined
Message from the Conference Moderator

BY SUMNER HUTCHESON III
CHURCH OF THE OPEN DOOR CONGREGATIONAL UCC/Miami

It’s 2021

I would like to start this new year by thanking many in the Florida Conference for your thoughts and prayers as I assume this new role as Moderator. With the Lord’s help, I will provide the best leadership as we navigate through what I believe will be a challenging and exciting year with many opportunities.

A friend shared with me a few weeks ago his thoughts about this new year of 2021. While he thought this would be a better year than 2020, his enthusiasm was tempered with a little caution as he said “Just because we flip the page on the calendar doesn’t mean everything will change.” Well, I have always been a person who sees the glass as half full. Though the first two weeks of 2021 have been difficult as we see the remnants of racial unrest, COVID-19, the economic pandemic and the recent insurrection, I truly believe this year has promise.

So how can we all make a difference in 2021? I believe the churches in the Florida Conference/United Church of Christ must remember “our faith calls us to acts of love, kindness and compassion. Our faith reminds us that the power of God aligns with the poor and the abandoned, the weak and the hungry, the oppressed and the marginalized,” as stated recently by the UCC.

Let’s each one of us pledge to make this a GREAT 2021.

Data Hub Now Open for Churches to Enter Yearbook Reports for 2020

Yep, it’s that time again … time for all United Church of Christ churches to gather up their numbers and information and submit their reports for the 2021 UCC Yearbook!

The UCC Data Hub has opened for local churches to begin submitting their 2020 reports. The Data Hub will close and churches will no longer be able to enter their reports after midnight on Wednesday, March 3. That’s a month from now. So don’t delay. Please file your reports as soon as possible.

As has been the case for the last several years, all church data must be submitted online, directly into the UCC Data Hub. But fear not, although there have been minor mostly cosmetic changes to the Data Hub over the years, the process for entering your information is almost exactly the same as last year. So if you entered your reports in the Data Hub last year, filing your reports this year should be a snap. And, of course, we’re here to help if needed. Just give the Conference office a ring during office hours (9am-4 pm weekdays) at 407/835-7501 or e-mail Dave Cyril at dcyril@uccfla.org.

We know you’re busy, especially at the start of a new year. But filing your reports really is important. “Why,” you ask. Well, you’ll find just a few good reasons here.

Ready to get started? (If not, you may want to save this reminder somewhere where you will be able to find it easily, or you can always find it in our website under News > e-Celebrate > scroll down to UCC in Florida e-Celebrate for January 9, 2021.)

To log in to the UCC Data Hub, go to http://datahub.ucc.org/. For your “User Name”, use the Florida Conference number (12) followed by your church number, including leading zeroes before the church number for a total of five to six digits. So, using New Hope United Church of Christ in DeLand (Church 108 in the Florida Conference) as an example, their User Name would be 120108. Using Faith United Church of Christ in Dunedin (Church 60 in the Florida Conference) as another example, their User Name would be 120060.

Once again this year, there is a short, supplemental survey the national setting would like you to complete. If you submit your annual reports and complete the survey, your church will be entered into a drawing for one of 40 prizes.

If you find the old paper forms useful for gathering up all your information before entering it into the Data Hub, you will find updated blank forms, as well as the supplemental survey questions, at the bottom of the Church Yearbook Instructions document here.

Once again, if you need help getting your Yearbook reports submitted, we’re here for you. Please feel free to call or e-mail Dave at 407/835-7501 or dcyril@uccfla.org with any questions or challenges you may encounter. And if, for any reason, you are unsure or uncomfortable entering the data online yourself, just call to set up a time with us to either walk you through the process or have us take your information over the phone and enter it for you.

Adapted from e-Celebrate, January 6
Please note that staff travel continues on-hold due to COVID-19.

**February 3**
RM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Community of Practice coordinator workshop

**February 4-5**
CM Rev. John Vertigan, Insurance Board Directors meeting

**February 6**
RM Rev. Raymond Hargrove, Southeast Church & Ministry

**February 8**
RM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Western Region Committee on Church & Ministry

**February 17**
ASH WEDNESDAY

**March 4-6**
CM Rev. John Vertigan, national UCC Board meeting

**March 13**
CM Rev. John Vertigan, RMs Revs. Leslie Etheredge and Raymond Hargrove, Committee on Church & Ministry meeting

**March 28**
PALM SUNDAY

**April 4**
EASTER

All meetings via ZOOM; staff travel remain on hold Staff has ongoing virtual appointments/meetings with church staff and leaders

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**In Memory**

Rev. Dr. Harold Brockus passed away on November 18, having pastored Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park (a Presbyterian and UCC union congregation) for 33 years. Rev. Harold believed God’s calling for him and those he inspired was through putting his faith into action bringing equal opportunities to all God’s children and supporting “justice for all.” After arriving in Pinellas County in 1970 he quickly created an interracial youth group and adult peacekeepers to walk the halls of a high school when race riots occurred after integrated busing. The church was offered as an official “Safe Space” to activist groups throughout the 1970s and ’80s. He chaired the local AIDS organization and helped organize a PFLAG (Parents and Friends & Family of Lesbians and Gays) chapter. Since his retirement in 2002 he served on the Board of Directors of Bethel Farm Workers and as president of the local chapter of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. A virtual memorial service was held on December 5. A video in which Dr. Harold shared about his beginnings in ministry through his tenure at Good Sam was made available on Zoom in January and February.

Rev. Dr. Fred Fourie recently passed away. He was ordained in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands and the Dutch Reformed Church in his native South Africa where he served one of the nation’s largest churches and conducted a radio ministry. When he moved to the United States he pastored churches in New York and New Jersey. Since the 1990s he served several UCC churches in Florida including First UCC/Orlando, First Congregational UCC/Winter Park and Cocoa Beach Community Church from 2001-2014. Our condolences to his wife Tienka and their family.

Elizabeth Vertigan of Syracuse, NY, mother of our Conference Minister, passed away Tuesday, December 8. We hold Rev. John and his family in our prayers.

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Rev. Dr. Jerry Jones, Rev. Donna Ives, Chance Martinez (Member in Discernment) and Enrique Martinez for covering worship services before the arrival of the new Designated Pastor, Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzalez II.
Recent Learning Opportunities

The Conference recently offered learning opportunities. This included a Just Peace webinar on Wednesday, January 27, and a “Burnout & Self-Care” workshop on Thursday, January 28, and Saturday, January 30.

The United Church of Christ Just Peace Steering Committee invited Just Peace Churches (and those exploring becoming a Just Peace Church) to explore the important justice work ahead of us in 2021. Topics included: Where do we go from here? How do we engage? What should be our Just Peace priorities in 2021 as individuals, congregations, Associations, Conferences and the national setting? What might we expect from a Biden Administration, and how does that influence our work?

The two “Burnout and Self-Care” workshops took place via Zoom video conference. Florida Conference clergy who attended earned one unit of professional ethics (boundary) training credit. The clergy workshop was on January 28 and the one for lay leaders happened on January 30.

Get the Weekly Lectionary Devotional & “Videos That’ll Preach”

It is our sincere hope that you will enjoy the lectionary reflections provided by the members of the Florida Conference Writer’s Collective and the “Videos That’ll Preach” that accompany them.

More importantly, we hope that you will find them useful in preparing for worship, Sunday School, Bible Study or personally diving into the week’s lectionary gospel lesson.

The members of the FCWC seek to serve us in three ways: to serve not as a “finish” but as a “primer” for those engaging the lectionary, to offer Biblical and personal insights into the text and to offer a challenge/nudge/word of encouragement to our pastors and leaders that acknowledges our many Floridian contexts.

To subscribe to these e-mails, please click here.

Considering Donating to the Conference

Consider donating to the Florida Conference of the UCC. There are several ways to give, and your generosity will be greatly appreciated. Click below.

- Donate as a Friend to support the current operating expenses of the Florida Conference
- Make an enduring gift to the Church Redevelopment Fund to revitalize and renew programs and innovative projects in our local churches
- Make a Legacy Gift of cash, securities, or property to provide perpetual support of a Florida Conference Mission you embrace.

( ___ ) I wish to discuss this gift in more detail with Florida Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan

Share The Good News

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

Please send your electronic newsletters, Facebook posts and e-blasts to rickcarson1@gmail.com

A Richness of Opportunities

First 3 Tuesdays in February  Wisdom Conversations 2021: Ministry and Dementia  p23
February 5  Author Brian McLaren at Fort Myers Congregational UCC  p23
February 4  ONA webinar series begins  p26
February 27 ONA 1-Day Virtual Conference  p26

Lenten Resources from the Pilgrim Press  p9
Weekly Lectionary Devotionals and "Videos That'll Preach"  p9
COVID-19 information from the Insurance Board  p23
Anti-Racism Ministry  p16
Our churches continue to adapt, expand, tweak, reverse course, innovate — and pray a lot — as they adjust to being church in the age of the novel coronavirus. In recent months, more congregations have experimented with limited in-Sanctuary worship as well as outside worship on the lawn, patio, labyrinth or courtyard and observing COVID-19 CDC safety guidelines.

Online worship continues and is becoming more sophisticated as churches improve upon technology and platforms used. Many of our churches have had staff dealing with COVID-19 symptoms and conditions and we pray for their well-being and recovery.

**To Open or to Not Open – That is the Question**

More churches are beginning to experiment with in-person worship — always with restrictions in place and gathering sometimes in the Sanctuary, sometimes outside. This includes St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota [pictured], Sanibel Congregational UCC, Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg, Christ Congregational UCC/Miami, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota, Spring Hill UCC, North Port Community UCC.

More church activities can be found in the Time for Conversations, Food, Music & Arts and other featured sections in this issue.

Skim through what follows and learn some of what we have heard from our congregations as they adjust, adapt and — yes — thrive as being “church” during COVID-19.

At the conclusion is “Adapting to the New Normal: Two Churches” where you can read reflections from leaders in two congregations about their churches’ adaptations to the pandemic.

**Orange City – First Congregational Church**
*Thanks to Sam Bass, everyone can stay connected to the Zoom worship services.*

**North Port — North Port Community UCC**
*Tuesday Bible study is outside under the oak trees. Participants bring their own lawn chairs and bag lunches. Masks are required.*

**St. Petersburg — Lakewood UCC**
*The Care Team made a Christmas drive by to the Westminster Suncoast senior living facility on Sunday, December 13 with their “sleigh” (a.k.a. car) filled with poinsettias for the LUCC residents.*
Brandon — Faith Family UCC
The Sanctuary gets ready for livestreaming. The church has decided to have a drive-in worship service on the first Sunday of the month beginning February 7; a donated FM transmitter will enable congregants to sit in their cars and tune in via the FM radio dial.

Miami
Christ Congregational UCC
Moderator (and videographer) Lorrie LeGrand and daughter Isabella as her helper/apprentice film in a Chapel worship service.

Rockledge — Hope UCC
The church had an outdoor movie night the Friday before Halloween as a fun family night out...socially distancing with masks.

Pinellas Park — Good Samaritan Church
The church offers a wide variety of Pop Up events weekly.
Adapting to the New Normal: Two Churches

Naples UCC

We have come to a junction in the road where we must lead in a new way in order to manage the work of our congregation within a pandemic that is changing daily. While this may not be a permanent context, it requires maximum innovative responsiveness for the months and perhaps years ahead. We need to transform our ability to shift from face-to-face methods for meeting our congregation’s spiritual, educational and social needs to a virtual technology that we hope will become as excellent as reopening our face-to-face worship under the restrictive measures of physical distancing, face coverings and personal hygiene.

Given these demands, plus our need to reach out to younger generations and new communities, we believe a virtual format is crucial. At the same time, to achieve the quality and variety of broadcasts we believe will be necessary to continue to enrich the lives of our congregation, we will need to invest in new technology and staffing. We envision moving from merely “broadcasting” Sunday services and other events to “producing” them. What this means is that rather than just having one or two cameras that capture what our Sunday service was before COVID, we need to re-envision our Sunday broadcasts to make them engaging from a viewer’s perspective. This means adding camera angles, zooming in and out on choir members and the clergy, and providing a “video dynamic” to the service.

We have a vision of the technology and staffing we will need to make all of this happen and we hope to have something in place before the end of the year. Stay tuned – both figuratively and literally – to see us become a true virtual church before your very eyes!


Faith UCC/Dunedin

As I reflect back on this year one more time before shifting my full gaze to the future, I just want to say how proud I am of how this church responded and is coming through this terrible time of pandemic. We are blessed with an excellent Leadership Team, one that sprang quickly into action when it became apparent that meeting together was becoming dangerous. I remember our last LT meeting in the Gathering Space, pouring over statistics, guidance from infectious disease experts and just gathering all of the news on this virus that we could. Always throughout our discussion on next steps for us as a church, it was the health and safety of each person in the church that was guiding us to arrive at the decision to suspend all activities, including worship.

Many churches stayed open for weeks, or even a month of two after we made the decision to suspend services and activities, endangering members of their congregations. But for this team and this church, the decision was clear. We are a church that trusts science and whose theology is not beholden to pews and walls. God is in and all around us, so while being together is what we love and would miss, we knew that it was the right decision to just rest for awhile. And when I look back on that decision, I am proud of how it came about with such care and concern. If we believe we are called to love our neighbor, then doing our best to not risk our neighbor’s health and wellbeing was the guiding principle. And though it was emotionally hard sitting in that empty church alone in the coming weeks, I knew we made the right decision. And I am so thankful for such a wise, deliberative and caring Leadership Team!...

Rev. Mike MacMillan, “From the Pastor,” The Open Door weekly e-Newsletter, January 8.
The women’s group at Christ Congregational UCC/Miami solicited monetary donations to provide Christmas gifts to children in the Guardian ad Litem program.

Sisters on Sojourn at Coral Gables Congregational UCC celebrated Christmas a bit differently this season. They were together virtually on Zoom on Saturday afternoon, December 19, displaying their most favorite holiday garb while supporting one another with laughter and fun.

Women at the United Church of Gainesville had Christmas lunch via Zoom on Friday, December 18. They were encouraged to share stories or readings reflective of the season.

The Women Engage! at Naples UCC continue to meet on the third Monday of the month, now using Zoom. The group focuses on deepening engagement with the world, each other and their faith through topical discussions. For January it was “Human Trafficking: Realities and Responses” and for February it will be “Mental Health and Addiction in Collier County: A Community Response.”

Lenten Resources from the Pilgrim Press

www.thepilgrimpres.com/collections/all

- Essential Lent: Holy Moments and Sacred Experiences for Your Whole Congregation
- Promises, Promises: 2021 Lent Devotional
- Hear the Shouts: Hosanna! Crucify! Alleluia! (story coloring book)
- The Jesus Diaries: Who Jesus is to Me
Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach sponsored a free community band outdoor concert on the church campus on Saturday afternoon, December 19. It was a mask-required, socially-distanced free event (donations accepted).

Musicians at the United Church of Gainesville gathered (socially distanced) on the church Courtyard on Saturday morning, December 12, to record the music for the All Church Band Christmas Sing-a-Long that was played as part of the worship service on December 20.

Members and friends of Coral Gables Congregational UCC enjoyed Advent vespers in the church Courtyard on Wednesday evenings through December 23. Each week an instrumentalist provided the music with JC Oviedo performing violin music at one gathering. (R) On Sunday afternoon, December 13, the church’s Community Arts Program performed a concert, “In the Virtual Holiday Mood!” that could be accessed for free on any of four different platforms. Featured were Creative Strings, the Miami Jazz Institute PREP Band and ALL-STAR Jazz Ensemble.

A Zoom carol sing was organized for members of Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg, which took place on Saturday afternoon, December 12.

The annual Christmas Music Sunday at Naples UCC was performed during worship on December 13. Each of the three ministers offered personal reflections between musical pieces featuring instrumentalists from the Naples Philharmonic and across the country in addition to the debut of a virtual choir video. Director of Music Becky Weese-Rumpf created a choral anthem for Christmas Eve services – with a 22-member virtual choir. Choir members recorded their parts solo and a cappella onto videos at home. The children’s choir also “performed” for the family service in similar fashion with violinist Glenn Basham, having recorded “Angels We Have Heard on High” at their homes. How all this orchestration came about was shared in an article in the Naples Daily News on December 21.

There was Christmas caroling at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota with the choir on Zoom at noon on Sunday, December 27.
The United Church of Gainesville has an active and diverse music and arts community. There is the Ukelele Club of Gainesville that is on-going year-round, playing for the congregation as well as the wider community. The UCG Drum Circle meets in the church Courtyard twice a month. Last Tuesday Storytelling meets once a month to consider stories for presentation and discussion. An online writing group is designed for participants to write new work and share with group members during weekly sessions.

Church leaders at the UCC/New Smyrna Beach collected information from congregation members regarding music preferences for worship. There were so many interesting recommendations including some that they were pleasantly surprised by — chants and organ interludes, for example. The results received more than fulfilled what was hoped for. Every effort was promised to learn from and utilize the suggestions going forward. Here are a few of the more popular requests received: “Here I Am Lord,” “How Great Thou Art,” “I’ll Fly Away,” “On Eagles Wings,” “The Prayer” and “Amazing Grace.”

A harp solo concert featuring Giuseppina Ciara was filmed in the Reed Chapel at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota for the Italian Institute of culture in Istanbul. Click here to watch.

Gospel singer Maryl Epps was the special music guest at UCC/Fort Lauderdale on January 3.

A virtual event was enjoyed by many with thanks to the National UCC.

EPIPHANY MUSIC
WITH MUSICIAN LEA MORRIS
JANUARY 14, 2021 | 3:30 PM ET

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


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

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

New Sacred — A United Church of Christ blog www.newsacred.org/

Rev. Dr. Anna Verlee Copeland (Community Church of Vero Beach) https://ccovb.org/rev-dr-anna-verlee-copelands-blog/

Rev. George Miller (Emmanuel UCC/Sebring) https://pas-toralsole.blogspot.com/

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

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

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


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

A Brady vigil against gun violence was held via Zoom on Friday evening, December 11, and was promoted by First Congregational UCC/Sarasota.

The Peace and Justice team at the church presented the new county school superintendent with a copy of the book, *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*, written by three nationally respected lecturers and scholars on the subject of culturally responsive teaching toward making students of color more successful.

Members of First United Church of Tampa participated in a Florida statewide collaborate Zoom educational opportunity on reducing unnecessary and excessive adult arrests in the state.

“Exposing the Myths around Excessive Adult Arrests in Florida was held on December 8.

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The Racial Justice Book Group at the United Church of Gainesville is exploring books that deal with issues related to racial justice — a variety of fiction, nonfiction, contemporary and classics. It meets once a month for 90 minutes in the evening on the fourth Wednesday of the month in the UCG Zoom Room. Upcoming reads are: *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, *Sing, Unburied Sing* by Jesmyn Ward, *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead, *The Soul of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois and *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver.

Another event was a panel discussion of the film “Just Mercy,” which took place on Sunday afternoon, January 10. Participants were encouraged to watch the film on their own and then join a panel of experts for discussion on UCG YouTube. The panel consisted of a community organizer, public defender and county sheriff-elect with the assistant county manager as moderator.
First Congregational UCC/Winter Park held a Conversations on Race via Zoom on Wednesday evening, January 6.

The annual Interfaith Shared Scholar Lecture at Sanibel Congregational UCC for 2021 took place virtually, livestreamed on Zoom on Sunday afternoon, January 31.

The event featured Dr. Susannah Heschel, who examined how her late father, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a colleague of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., might respond to the current issues surrounding systemic racism in the United States.

Dr. Heschel is chair of the Jewish Studies program at Dartmouth College, the author of several books on German Jewish history and has published over 100 scholarly articles.

The program was made possible by an interfaith coalition of congregations in Sanibel and Captiva, including Bat Yam — Temple of the Islands, Captiva Chapel by the Sea, the Christian Science Church of Sanibel, Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church along with SCUCC with additional funding provided by the June Rosner Foundation.

At First Congregational UCC/Sarasota the Sacred Conversations on Race occur each Wednesday at 3pm on Zoom. The church has sent to the county school board a resource book, *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*, and is hopeful it will be given as suggested to the person who is to be appointed to oversee cultural equity in the schools.


It began on Saturday morning, January 9, and will continue through March 13. Each chapter in the book ends with exercises and questions designed to stretch and transform an understanding of who we are and who we can be. The study is facilitated by LUCC member Rev. Mardie Chapman.

Pastor Rev. Kim Wells was a panelist for “A Frank Conversation about Racism” sponsored by Faith in Florida.

The Missions and Outreach Committee at St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota has formed an Anti-Racism subcommittee under the leadership of Roger Hooversman and Rev. Mary Alice Mulligan.

It plans to explore personal feelings of racism and White privilege, and eventually reach out to church members and the surrounding community to take a deeper look at racial injustice in society.

A Racial Justice Ministry has been unanimously approved by the Church Council at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach. Moved by the worldwide efforts to end institutional racism, while standing on the teachings of Jesus and the rich prophetic tradition of our Christian faith, the pastors and leadership of the church affirm the following:

- God calls us to love our neighbor and to reach out to those in need. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” John 13:34
- God calls us to treat all people with dignity and respect, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender or political beliefs. “The second is this ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:31
- God calls us to listen to those who struggle for equality. “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his neighbor in need, yet closes their heart against the neighbor, how does God’s law abide in that person?” John 3:17

Therefore, with the hope and promise of our Still Speaking God, we commit the resources of the church to create and support a new Racial Justice Ministry that will educate our church community about racism and its ills, while seeking to improve race relations in our community and beyond.


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Pastor Rev. Kim Wells was a panelist for “A Frank Conversation about Racism” sponsored by Faith in Florida.
Remembering Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Building Back Hope: A Service of Release & Renewal” was a webinar offered by the national UCC on Tuesday, January 19. At the close of Martin Luther King Day celebrations and on the cusp of the 47th Inauguration, it was an opportunity to worship together bearing witness to this past year and pouring hope into the future. Hope — the confident expectation that all God intends will come to pass. The sermon was delivered by Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, Senior Pastor of Trinity UCC/Chicago.

The worship at Faith UCC/Dunedin on January 17 was a “Celebration of Rev. Dr. Martin King, Jr.”

Worship at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota Included the reading of portions of a sermon by Rev. Dr. King and an original poem by Priscilla Crumel with singing by Felix McElroy. Earlier on Thursday, January 14 there was a service on FacebookLive led by Pastor Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby and Minister of Music Greg Chestnut to pay tribute to Dr. King with music and his words.

The Annual MLK Service of Remembrance and Recommitment at Coral Gables Congregational UCC included a reflection on the church’s Statement of Commitment to the Work of Anti-Racism.

In her e-blast message to church members on January 15, Rev. Booth Iburg (Eternal Hope UCC/Fort Walton Beach) reported: “This Monday is the holiday for MLK. With all that is going on with our country, I decided to forego the lectionary Scriptures for Sunday and will speak about Dr. King, his vision and where we are right now. As a person who grew up in the ‘50s and ‘60s, I remember the horror and pain, and the ugliness of white supremacy.

At Christ Congregational UCC/Miami there was a recognition and celebration of the prophetic life of Dr. King as he answered God’s call to justice work. God calls people to speak and to act is a very strong thread in Scripture, and the promise is that God is with us in this work — renewing, supporting and strengthening. Our challenge as individuals and as a church is to listen for God’s call and answer as best we can.

Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach announced during worship on January 17 a new Racial Justice Ministry at the church. The newly-formed ministry encouraged church members to attend the virtual 35th annual MLK Leadership Awards Breakfast on January 18 sponsored by the St. Petersburg Metropolitan Section of the National Council of Negro Women.

Worship on January 17 at UCC/Fort Lauderdale included a tribute to Dr. King.

Music Director Hilton Jones at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg created five music videos as lead ups to Martin Luther King Day (https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUn2RmCFhW2uAVvwKQ1gJnzNmZK5).

Anti-Racism Ministry

On the second and fourth Thursday afternoons at Good Samaritan Church/ Pinellas Park beginning in January, a “Racists Anonymous” Zoom gathering was initiated.

It invited members to join who might be resisting internal racism and who wanted to work on addressing it.

The thinking is that by doing one’s own internal work leads to greater awareness and commitment to the larger, systemic-justice work.
Expressions of Joy and Pain from the COVID Experience

At the beginning of the time of isolation due to COVID-19, Pastor Rev. Jen Daysa at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park suggested that members create something together for a remembrance of this time of separations. They had two art projects, one of which is still ongoing. The first was the quilt pictured and the second is the painting of peace stones for the Peace Garden.

Many church members contributed to both. Then a call went out for anyone who had done a quilt panel to turn them in at the church so a new altar cloth quilt could be put together. A Pop-Up Zoom event was scheduled showing different ways to create a small panel. Then the panels started pouring in and many of them were original pieces of art by members and friends. Some were pieces of printed fabric that spoke about the pandemic. Some people asked for help from Carolyn Woodard who was willing to take ideas and portray them, get them printed on fabric commercially and make them a part of the project.

Sarah Butz took on the role of overall designer and seamstress extraordinaire and spent many hours choosing how the panels would fit together best, choosing the colors of material to use for borders and exactly how it would all piece together to express a message.

Since all members were not able to be at church now, a copy of it was shared in the church newsletter. When the time comes to see the altar cloth in person, each individual can be viewed more closely and read. In the years ahead, members will remember the times they couldn’t find toilet paper, or when church offices were closed, or when we were afraid to go out — and these images will continue to remind them.
On December 5 the UCC at The Villages held a drive-in food drive to supply the food pantry and soup kitchen in Wildwood. In four hours, 3,037 pounds of food were collected from church members and from the surrounding area, filling a truck and a trailer. Seeds of Hope, a group of churches in the Wildwood area, had planned a dozen concerts in 2020 to raise money for the local food pantry, and to collect food at Sunday services. COVID has kept churches closed and cancelled concerts so a food “drive” is one alternative that has worked very well!

North Port Community UCC has held food drives for the Salvation Army on November 30 and January 11.

On December 19 members of Spring Hill UCC were able to provide all the making for Christmas meals to 33 families (106 individuals) in need of such assistance. Students at Spring Hill Elementary School have donated food from their canned food drive to the church’s Loaves & Fishes pantry. The church regularly donates to the “food for Thought” program that provides healthy snack items for the kids at the school.

Sanibel Congregational UCC in conjunction with Temple Bat Yam had a no-contact drop-off food drive on December 3 and again on January 7. The generosity benefits clients of F.I.S.H. of Sanibel/Captiva and the Gladiolus Food Pantry.

Faith UCC/Dunedin made a $750 donation to Dunedin Cares with the bulk of the donation coming from contributions for Faith UCC face masks. The anonymous mask donor helped make Thanksgiving a bit brighter for neighbors in need. The church has reminded its members that many of its neighbors with food insecurity often have to surrender or abandon their cats and dogs for lack of money for pet food. Next time you’re in the grocery store, you may want to grab a couple cans of dog or cat food and help keep families fed and whole through their tough times.

During the month of October the church pantry at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park was open on 13 days and served 1,371 adults and children with 481 bags of food items. The pantry has served 7,307 individuals in 2020 through October. These numbers represent a dramatic increase due to the pandemic. The church receives many donations through its website. These donations along with the grant the pantry received from the Presbytery of Tampa Bay and monetary donations from community members have sustained them as they have needed to make large purchases from retail stores to keep up with demand. Over 100 bags with Thanksgiving-themed foods that included either a small ham, turkey or whole chicken were distributed on the Monday and Tuesday of Thanksgiving week with a line of cars on Monday extending down the street and around the corner. Members at the church could participate in a “reverse” Advent calendar food drive, setting aside a specific noted food item each day of Advent for eventual donation to the church’s food pantry.

The Thanksgiving pie sale at the UCC/New Smyrna Beach generated $1,700 (after expenses) for the church, thanks to chefs Donnie Coleman and John Buchanan turning out 114 of the homemade delicacies. The Christmas pie sale – apple, peach, pumpkin, chocolate, lemon or coconut at $12 each and pecan for $15 – raised $1,143.

Naples UCC had a Christmas Dinner Drive-Thru with pick-up on December 16 at the church Portico. Each take-out meal included turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans with bacon and pumpkin pie for $20. The catering was provided by Delicious by Design, a mission of St. Matthew’s House which works to change lives in a spiritual environment providing housing for the homeless, food for the needy and comfort for the addicted and suffering.

Two companion books of recipes from the early supper club at the United Church of Gainesville, called Body and Soul Dining, has been published and are available on Amazon.

Tom Sinclair, the editor, found the folder of the recipes in his late wife Carol’s files. Since food has always been an interest of Tricia Gregory, she helped develop Body and Soul Dining, one of UCC’s first small groups. The committee, that includes Pat Atkins and Carol Sinclair, poured through magazines finding recipes that might work and tweaked them to fit. When Tom found Carol’s file of these recipes, he worked hard to put things together and searched for missing pieces. They are both helpful books and a lovely tribute to Carol. On January 3 the church provided a drive-by opportunity at the church Courtyard to receive donations of non-perishable food items for the Gainesville Community Ministry.

Rev. Booth Iburg, Pastor at Eternal Hope UCC/Fort Walton Beach, coordinates the Lee Street Feeding Ministry in Pensacola, which threw a pre-Christmas event. She feels blessed that the ministry has been adopted by a church, which donated toiletries. The Golden Elite Track Club sponsored back-to-basics events for the homeless, food for the needy and comfort for the addicted and suffering. She and her board have been able to give away books to the children at the event. Next time you’re in the grocery store, you may want to grab a couple cans of dog or cat food and help keep families fed and whole through their tough times.

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SUV full of donations — socks, gloves, hats, scarves, blankets, snacks, shirts, etc. — with plenty to give out also for the diners in the Fort Walton feeding ministry.

Parishioners at Christ Congregational UCC/Miami came through with generous support of the Guardian ad Litem program with food gift card donations at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

First United Church of Tampa participated in the sixth Annual CommUnity Picnic (virtual this year on Zoom or viewable on Facebook) on Sunday afternoon, January 3. This interfaith event was an opportunity to come together in unity to start the new year with community friends.

Through the Shepherd’s Ministries at Emmanuel UCC/St. Petersburg, the church has worked with other local churches to provide meals and food distribution to the homeless in the community, packed and distributed over 1,600 pre-packs of food to help support home-challenged families and pitched in to support Big Brothers/Big Sisters and the Boys and Girls Club to meet food needs for dozens of families in the past three months.

Because the Spirit Keepers Men Who Cook group at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park were unable to do their annual event this year cooking for the church, they met in late January in a park pavilion for a bag lunch/box lunch/picnic basket gathering to just hang out in fellowship.

The parking lot at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota has become a mobile distribution site for the All Faiths Food Bank on the fourth Monday of every month.

Members from Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach brought a truck load of food to the pantry at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park on December 21 with the promise that it won’t be the last.

The annual MLK Hunger Vigil at Coral Gables Congregational UCC was in high gear on Saturday, January 16, as Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner once again retreated to the top of the church tower early in the day. Rev. Laurie reports: “16,601 pounds — this is the incredible, amazing, wonderful, generous number of the pounds of food raised during the annual Hunger Vigil. What a showing of generosity, caring, and support by members and friends of this congregation. So many hungry folks in our community will benefit by the extraordinary poundage raised through food and money. When I went up into the tower at 9am, we already had 7,000 pounds out of the 10,000 pounds to be raised. I have to admit, that gave me great confidence that we would meet our goal and that I would be out of the tower by around 6pm. By 10am we had reached our goal! Since I had already walked up all those steep steps and it was my 13th year in the tower, we decided to go for a lucky 13,000 pounds of food. By 11:30am we had reached that goal! Since by then I had settled into life in the tower, we decided to keep going until around 2pm and see what else we could raise. By the time I came down at 2pm, we had hit 15,500 pounds! Yet food and money kept coming in, and by Sunday evening we were at 16,601 POUNDS!” The haul was shared with the Miami Rescue Mission and MUJER (located in Homestead and working with Latino families) with much of the donations remaining with the church’s food pantry.

Covenant in Action

Christ Congregational UCC/Miami collected an abundance of quality proteins, breakfast foods, soups, beans, fruits and vegetables, pastas, desserts and other items ahead of Christmas to share with its sister UCC church, Church of the Open Door Congregational/Miami.
Many members of Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park received a knock on their doors and found a special package and a smiling face. The Good Sam elders took stewardship packages to distribute them across a four-county area. Some carried signs, some just wore a big Good Sam smile, but all showed their love for the church and felt the love coming back from those who support Good Sam in so many ways.

During January First Congregational UCC/Orange City collected hygiene and baby care kits for the UCC disaster program, which included items such as cloth diapers and diaper pins, hand towels and bar soap. During February the project is blanketed for Church World Service.

At its annual meeting in January, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota ratified the adoption of the Creation Justice Covenant the church wrote earlier in the year based on input from church members and groups. Consistent with one of the UCC’s 3 Great Loves – Love of Creation – this covenant earns the church a UCC Creation Justice Ministry designation. As part of its ongoing commitment to the environment, the Green Team at the church hosted two speakers on Zoom on January 14 who discussed how programs at the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program and New College’s Environmental Studies impact sustainability in the region. The Green Team has also shared resources for reading, watching, doing and discussing during the climate crisis.

Naples UCC will have a Zoom book study on February 9 of Cathedral on Fire by Brooks Berndt. The book takes the position that the climate crisis requires us to act as if our cathedrals and churches are on fire as God’s creation is a grand cathedral. The message focuses on practical actions for individuals and churches. On February 18 a Zoom class heard “Recycling: What You Need to Know.”

The Shepherd’s Ministries at Emmanuel UCC/Sebring pitched in to support Big Brothers/Big Sisters and the Boys and Girls Club to meet food needs for dozens of families in the past three months.

At the United Church in Tallahassee, interested members could participate in a study of people of faith and climate solutions that was sponsored by the church’s Climate Change Task Force on Wednesday evenings between January 13-February 17. Discussion topics included: sources of global warming, climate change and environmental degradation and their likely course in upcoming years, with and without effective counter-measures; promising strategies to reverse course or at least to mitigate these threats and avoid disaster; policy targets to promote change here in Florida and our religious vocation of creation care.

At Sanibel Congregational UCC on Saturday, January 23, Jean Chandler gave a Zoom PowerPoint presentation on “Getting Cleaner and Greener: How to Minimize Exposure to Toxic Chemicals and Heavy Metals.” It included practical suggestions on finding or making safe personal care and cleaning products, reducing the use of plastics, foods to avoid or eat organically grown and foods that help in detoxifying, and ways to make one’s water and indoors cleaner.

It was the Fourth Annual Electronic Recycling DropOff in back of the church on Saturday afternoon, January 30. Masked volunteers took items from cars as they drove through. What was collected included all electronics (except for televisions, printers and copiers) in small cardboard boxes, separating ones that work from ones that don’t. All personal data was stripped on-site from working computers before they were donated to Komputers for Kids. Working phones were stripped of personal data. Other items collected ranged from all kinds of electric wire, flat panel monitors and lithium batteries to automotive batteries, cell and standard phones, gaming devices, circuit boards and electric motors of all kinds as well as video equipment, electrical switches, circuit breakers and panels.

Please send your 3 Great Loves story to Lynn and Sheila.
Brian McLaren Joins Fort Myers Church Guest Speaker Series

Sixty-five million adults in the U.S. have dropped out of active religious attendance and about 2.7 million more are leaving every year. Today, old assumptions are being challenged in nearly every area of human life, not just religion and spirituality. But by living constructively with doubt, Brian McLaren says, we can leave behind unnecessary baggage and intensify our commitment to what matters most.

“Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith,” he explains. “It is an element of faith.” Brian’s new book, *Faith After Doubt*, is for the millions of people around the world who feel that their faith is falling apart.

Using his own story and the stories of a diverse group of struggling believers, McLaren, a former pastor now on the faculty at the Center for Action and Contemplation, explains how questions and doubt are not the enemy of faith but rather a portal to a more mature and fruitful kind of faith.

On February 5 at 7:30pm Brian joins Fort Myers Congregational UCC’s GROW Guest Speaker Series for a conversation on his new book and about journeying into a newer, richer life of faith. [Click here to join.](#)

Wisdom Conversations 2021: Ministry and Dementia

The Ruth Frost Parker Center for Abundant Aging is an initiative of United Church Homes focused on engagement, education and advocacy. For the past four years, the center has held an event around Epiphany called the annual Wisdom Conversations for clergy and those in ministry with older adults. Given the pandemic, this year the event will take place on the first three Tuesdays of February from 3-5 pm ET via Zoom. The topic is Ministry and Dementia.

The presenters this year are Rev. John and Dr. Susan McFadden, both of whom work with the Fox Valley Memory Project. Rev. McFadden has been volunteering in two memory care communities since his retirement after 34 years serving UCC congregations. He collaborated with Susan in 2011 on *Aging Together: Dementia, Friendship, and Flourishing Communities*. Dr. McFadden is professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Wisconsin/Oshkosh. Her latest book, *Dementia-Friendly Communities: Why We Need Them and How We Can Create Them*, is a part of her work to create a “dementia-friendly community” in northeast Wisconsin.

The $15 registration fee covers all three sessions in the series. The registration deadline is January 31 but check for late registration possibilities. [Click here for more information and to register.](#)

Insurance Board Offered Webcast on Church COVID-19 Considerations

This webcast was on Friday afternoon, January 29, and addressed issues churches face as employers during COVID-19 and provided best practice policies and procedures for managing employees and volunteers.

Many states require that employers, including churches, have specific COVID-19 policies and procedures in place to protect their employees.

If you missed the webcast, it will be posted on the Board’s Online Learning Page at [www.insuranceboard.org/online-learning/](http://www.insuranceboard.org/online-learning/).
In “Across Florida” our intent is to share with you what is happening at our 90+ churches throughout the state. It is obvious from these entries that there is an exciting vibrancy evident within our congregations.

This energy is making a decisive difference in the lives of congregational members and the communities in which they are located while also touching the lives of strangers in far away places.

Through this sharing, you can learn about innovative ideas, creative outreach and stimulating ministry, some of which might be adaptable within your own congregation.

See something that catches your eye or brings a smile to your face? If an idea sounds good and you’d like more information about what they’re doing, contact that church.

Faith Family UCC/Brandon received $160 in cash, some food/necessity items, two 31 day bus passes and a roll of quarters for laundry to help a family in need, which was overcome with gratitude to the point of tears.

On January 3 the United Church of Gainesville provided a drive-by opportunity at the church Courtyard to receive donations of cold weather items like blankets, jackets and hoodies for the Grace Marketplace.

Members and friends of First Congregational UCC/Orange City donated stuffed animals for the annual Teddy Bear Sunday. The menagerie was delivered to the local fire station where firefighters assigned there will give them to youngsters they meet on their emergency calls.

Naples UCC has announced those agencies and groups receiving its grants for 2020, with thanks to its Bargain Box thrift shop, which makes these grants possible with 100% of proceeds going to help those in need. Because of the pandemic, the church’s Board of Mission and Outreach’s criteria was to maximize its impact by making larger grants to Mission Partners providing services it deemed most essential. After conducting an assessment of community needs, BOMO determined to focus on assisting with family resiliency and investing largely in the Immokalee area where the pandemic has had a particularly negative impact. A total of $125,000 has been awarded; of that amount, 85% went to local agencies providing COVID-19 relief services in Immokalee and 10% went to helping with COVID-19 relief with the church’s global mission partner, People for Guatemala. Other recipients were: Legal Aid Services of Collier County, Redlands Christian Migrant Association, Chicago Theological Seminary and Planned Parenthood of Southwest and Central Florida.

The Mary Martha Team at First UCC/Orlando donated 115 handmade lap robes to the Lake Nona Community Living Center, which provides a home-like environment to eligible veterans who require nursing home-level care.

From Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson in her January 1 e-blast to First United Church of Tampa members: “I saw an article this week about a group of prisoners doing ‘hard time’ in CA but who raised more than $30,000 from their less than a $1 a day prison jobs to send a promising young man, whose parents had both lost their jobs and their health, to his private high school. Wow. If they could find hope in one young man, so can we. If they could find a way to help others, so can we. If they can find a way to hope, so can we.”

The Basket Brigade at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park saw cars drive up and drop off over 100 “work of art” baskets and gift cards in time for Thanksgiving delivery to those in need of holiday cheer.

In conjunction with the Florida and Hernando County Departments of Health, Spring Hill UCC is providing the opportunity to sign up with the church office to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Those eligible must be 65 years or older, or have a preexisting condition or live with someone if they are over 65 or have a preexisting condition.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC members came together to make 2,000 hygiene kits for the shower ministry at First United Methodist Church.

Dedication opportunities are provided at Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton for those who would like to honor someone special or create a lasting memorial in a loved
one’s name. Options include pew dedication (1/4 for $55, ½ for $110 or one entire pew for $220) with the donor’s name added to the appreciation plaque on the west Sanctuary wall or a hymnal dedication with a book plate specially created for $15.

During two nights in early December where temperatures in Fort Lauderdale were down to around 40 degrees, UCC/Fort Lauderdale partnered with Broward County to be an overflow shelter for those who needed a place to stay. Elliott Hall was prepared after the cots had been put in place. The Ruth Ministry continues providing food and clothing for its guests.

Playing Trivia has become a popular way to stay connected during the pandemic. On Sunday evening, December 20, members of Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach were able to gather via Zoom for a game of Christmas trivia. Those at First United Church of Tampa Zoomed together for a test of skills on Saturday, January 30. Teams at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park engaged in a holiday game of Trivia during November.

The Faith Stitchers at Faith UCC/Dunedin have been making stockings that enabled the church to deliver 100 beautiful stockings to Dunedin Cares Food Pantry for them to stuff with all sorts of goodies and give out to families in need. Thanks to the ongoing generosity of members, the congregation was also able to give a $500 donation to help them shop to buy things to fill those stockings.

On January 19 at 5:15pm members of First Congregational UCC/Sarasota gathered around the labyrinth in a short service where prayers were offered and bells rung in loving memory of the over 380,000 Americans who have died due to the coronavirus. Coral Gables Congregational UCC rang its church bell at 5:30.

A six-person volunteer team from the Shepherd’s Ministries at Emmanuel UCC/Sebring took a carload of personal care items and clothing and spent a week assisting at Back May Mission in Biloxi, MS. The ministry has also lent support to a family that delivered premature triplets and engaged in multiple campaigns to raise awareness and donations in honor of Breast Care Awareness and Men’s Health Awareness months.

Church websites may have assumed an even more important role during the pandemic in helping parishioners stay connected and attracting church “shoppers.” Updating them always seems a challenge, and St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota has met that challenge with a new one (sarasotaucc.org). It has been in the works for several months, begun by the then-Office Administrator and resumed by Robert Hooverman, the webmaster. The new platform is Squarespace. As he explains, “The goal was to reintroduce our church in a fresh uncluttered way that from its first page says to visitors, ‘We are a welcoming and affirming community and there is a place for you here’.”

The Beauty of Anonymity

The financial secretary at St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota was thrilled to announce an anonymous gift from one of its members of $200,000 in pre-pledging for four years. This magnanimous gift will allow the church to bolster its pledging while membership is built up once the pandemic is brought under control. The message on the church sign expresses the sentiment of the church.

An anonymous donation from a member of the United Church of Gainesville has covered the entire expense of building a Habitat for Humanity home in Alachua County. There was one catch: the house was to be built in the name of the church. Under normal circumstances, this would mean UCGers would be invited to volunteer in the building of the house or to sponsor lunches for the work crews. However, due to the pandemic volunteering has been temporarily suspended but prayers and good wishes to the new home recipients are being welcomed.
End of Year and New Year Events

Church members at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg gathered around a fire on December 31 evening to say goodbye to 2020 and welcome 2021. There were opportunities to walk the labyrinth and readings and reflections to share. After some discussion about 2020 and personal experiences and reflections, they walked the labyrinth. After the walk each person was given a pinecone, reminded that they open and sow their seeds when there has been a forest fire. It takes drastic conditions to draw forth new life, so they talked about the new life that they want to see coming out of the challenging circumstances faced in 2020. Having expressed hopes and dreams for 2021, they tossed their pinecones into the fire and watched them burst and crackle. And then there were marshmallows to roast.

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota had a virtual Zoom New Year’s Eve prayer service which Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby led off asking the question, “What’s the weather report for your soul today?” The service included an artful prayer exercise. There was laughter, sharing, reflecting, music and blessing each other for the days ahead.

UCC/Fort Lauderdale had a “Burning Bowl” ceremony during worship on January 3 to help participants “release the things that no longer serve you.” On Wednesday evening, December 30, Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmelmann (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach) led a Zoom gathering of quiet time and meditation to give thanks for the year past and the year ahead.

Congregational UCC/Sarasota held a service on New Year’s Eve, continuing a tradition it had begun the previous year to spiritually prepare for a new year.

On Sunday, January 3, in the Garden Chapel worship at Christ Congregational UCC/Miami, parishioners were given the opportunity to take a star on which was written a word. They were invited to trust the Star Word that selects them, thinking about what significance it might have for your life. It might hang on the refrigerator or a bulletin board, be used as a Bible marker or put it in a place where it would occasionally be seen. Then as the year goes by, perhaps the meaning of the word will change, perhaps reflecting upon it by journaling. The premise is this: the magi followed the star to find baby Jesus, bringing their gifts. We are also seeking Jesus, trusting God can/does use many signs (or stars) to guide us closer to the Divine presence.

ONA Webinar Series Starts February 4

Whether your church is just beginning its journey towards an Open and Affirming covenant, or you’ve been ONA for many years, you’ll find a webinar that meets your needs! Our popular webinar series has helped congregations plan for an ONA journey that builds consensus and reduces the risk of conflict, and existing ONA churches have learned how to breathe new life into their ONA commitment. Our services are priced to fit almost any budget, and there are deep discounts when you buy a season pass.

LEARN MORE

Open and Affirming Experience: A 1-Day Virtual Conference

In partnership with the Michigan ONA Coalition and the Michigan Conference, we’re offering a day-long Zoom event with worship and informative workshops for ONA and not-yet ONA churches on Saturday, February 27, 10am-5pm EST. Congregations from any Conference are invited! We’ll offer two tracks: one for not-yet ONA churches, the other for existing ONA churches.

You’ll learn more about:
• planning a Bible-based ONA process that will reduce the risk of conflict and inspire your church with new passion and energy
• exploring new ways to be an effective ally for your LGBTQ+ neighbor

Leaders will include Kimi Floyd Reisch, the Coalition's ONA Program Minister, and Andy Lang, our executive director. More details about the program in the next issue of RIPPLES. LEARN MORE
BOOKS WE’RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER... via Zoom, or other livestreaming

**Across Florida**

A new video camera system has been installed at St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota that is providing livestreaming for a more professional worship service not only for members but for an on-line outreach ministry for those who may be looking for a church community to call home. Initial broadcasting is on Facebook with later expansion to other sites such as YouTube. Meanwhile outside Norma Lee Rhines donated a number of lovely bromeliads to enhance the church’s campus. She and Lois Lewis continue to show up, devoting their time and planting beautiful plants.

The Adopt-a-Road crew of Barb Boley, Sandy Parker, Marty Hodgkins, Ron and Trish Phillips picked up trash around the perimeter of the Spring Hill UCC grounds as well as along the nearby roadway. One generous nearby resident “insisted” on buying lunch for the workers and, through a bit of good-natured bartering, $20 was donated to the food pantry instead!

Finally — after a year and a half of planning — the renovations of the Fellowship Hall at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg are underway to prepare for the adult day care program sponsored by the city’s Neighborly Services. So far a railing has been installed to the back entrance of the hall and three accessible restrooms are being installed. Everyone is excited to see movement toward the goal of offering needed services to the seniors in the area. The tentative opening day for the adult day care center is February 15.

Cleaning up the Courtyard at the United Church of Gainesville in early December.

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Cleaning up the Courtyard at the United Church of Gainesville in early December.

**BOOKS WE’RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER... via Zoom, or other livestreaming**

**Everything is Spiritual** by Rob Bell (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

**The Power of Bad: How the Negativity Effect Rules Us and How We Can Rule It** by John Tierney and Roy Baumeister, *The Wonder of Birds: What They Tell Us about Ourselves, the World and a Better Future* by Jim Robbins, *This Tender Land* by William Kent Krueger and *Anxious People* by Frederik Backman (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

**The Night Watchman** by Louise Erdich, 2084 by John Lennox, *The World is About to Turn: Mending a Nation’s Broken Faith* by Rick Rouse and Paul Ingram, *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummings and *Wisdom from the Woods: Navigating Life’s Unexpected Challenges* by Virginia Gilmore and Duane Trammell (Naples UCC)

**The Prophetic Imagination** by Walter Brueggemann (St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota)

**The Vanishing Half** by Brit Bennett (Christ Congregational UCC/Miami)

**Lincoln in the Pard**o by George Saunders (First United Church of Tampa)

**The Yellow House** by Sarah Broom (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park)

**Reading the Bible Badly: How American Christians Misunderstand and Misuse their Scriptures** by Karl Allen Kuhn (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)
Donations of clothing from Christ Congregational UCC/Miami join others on its way to Guatemala.

Faith UCC/Dundin’s Anam Cara Women’s Circle started a chapter of Dining for Women in December of 2019. This non-profit organization is a powerful community of women engaged in education and advocacy, and it aligns with Anam Cara’s mission of supporting and empowering women and girls. It comes together every other month to share a meal; during the pandemic it meets through virtual gatherings on Zoom. Members donate what they can, usually what they would have spent dining out. The combined donations support DFW’s monthly grantee and sustained grantee. Recently, Anam’s featured grantee was a project in Haiti that will fund the development and implementation of a Sexual and Reproductive Health Education Program. It specifically targets girls ages 13 to 20 who have not yet been pregnant.

The program will educate young women on prudent decision-making and will help prevent the challenges of young teens delivering and raising children in poverty. Another grant recipient is the Kopila Valley Women’s Center in Nepal, a job skills empowerment program which has graduated 160 women. A civil war left an entire generation without a proper formal education and created thousands of orphaned children.

Members of Sanibel Congregational UCC have been invited by Associate Pastor Rev. Deb Kunkel to join her in writing on behalf of nine cases that Amnesty International has chosen to highlight this year. They range from a young woman in Saudi Arabia arrested for working for women’s rights, to a jailed Algeria journalist, to college students in Turkey arrested for celebrating LBTGI rights. Participants can write on behalf of all nine, pick the ones that resonate or even just one. Once the letters are written, they would be returned to the church so that they can be reported to AI before being mailed out. That way AI can use the number of letters sent as they advocate with authorities, reminding them that people around the world are aware of the situation.

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

via Zoom, or other livestreaming

“A Twentieth Century Prophet: The Life and Work of Abraham Joshua Heschel,” “The Nativity Stories” and “Out Of Harlem: Langston Hughes and Black Nativity” (Sanibel Congregational UCC)


“Mapping YOUR Life: A New Year” (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota)

“Controversies in the Early Church,” “The Message Behind the Advent/Christmas Story” and “Beginnings: A Series on Starting Over” (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)


The Book of Ecclesiastes (Good Samaritan Church/Pinelas Park)

“Embracing the Uncertain: A Lenten Study for Unsteady Times” (North Port Community UCC)

“Reflections on Democracy” and “Squandering the Gifts” (UCC/Fort Lauderdale)

Our Sincere thanks...

to unsplash (www.unsplash.com) and its talented artists and photographers for many of the generic photos and images used in this issue.

We appreciate the generosity of this free service.
Youth Around the State

The Middle School youth at Coral Gables Congregational UCC had their Christmas party on Friday evening, December 4, socially-distanced outside in the Courtyard and high schoolers had theirs on Friday evening, December 11. There were Christmas games, snacks, the lighting of Advent candles and faith reflection.

Christmas shopping was made easier at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach by supporting the WAVE youth group’s Native American workcamp scheduled for June. Gift cards were available for major stores in amounts of $25 and $50.

Middle and high school youth at Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton had a Netflix “watch” party on Friday evening, January 7, viewing the movie version of the Broadway musical “The Prom.” Youth participated from the safety of their own homes.

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The United Church of Gainesville has offered a group for families of elementary and nursery aged children to share ideas and provide support on coping and thriving during the challenges posed by the pandemic. The Children’s Christmas Pageant was a drive-through on Sunday, December 6. Children from pre-K through 5th grade performed as costumed characters, some with speaking parts. Each scene was set up around the church parking lot. Masks and social distancing were in effect.

Children at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park were able to celebrate Advent virtually with the Godly Play Team. They received Advent boxes that included an interactive Advent calendar, moving nativity set along with a variety of other seasonal activities. They met via Zoom on several days during Advent. On January 17 the Pop-Up event on Zoom was “Stories to Make You Laugh,” which was geared toward kids but fun for all.

The Naples UCC Children’s ministry celebrated a virtual Christmas tree blessing via Zoom on December 20, coming together with other families to bless the family tree through sharing, prayers and singing. Children were asked to choose an ornament on the tree to share with others the reason it was chosen. Parents and grandparents were encouraged to share memories of Christmases past.

For the “Parent and Pastor Connection” at Coral Gables Congregational UCC it was “Parent Talk” on Thursday evening, January 7 using Zoom. It was a time for check-in, support, group wisdom and prayer led by Associate Pastor Rev. Megan Smith. She is also leading Sunday School from January 10-February 14 with the theme “No Ordinary Light” as she explores the Light of Christ through Epiphany and ordinary time.

The Toddler Tuesdays at Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour provide a time of fun and faith made especially for toddlers and pre-schoolers with singing songs, hearing a story read and praying together. One recent edition included beginning sign language. The YouTube videos are available to view all day Tuesday and during the week on the church web-site www.churchbythesea.org.
The pandemic made the Christmas season in 2020 a challenge unlike anything that could have been expected and one that summoned a whole lot of creative planning, patience and cooperation. Following is what we’ve learned about how many of our Florida congregations responded to Advent, Blue Christmas, Christmas Eve worship and giving back to the community.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC offered the “Light of the World” Advent video series via Zoom on Sunday mornings. Forty-five minute mid-day devotions were available on Zoom on Tuesdays using Maya Angelou and the Freedom Poetry of Advent. Vespers of “sunset prayers” with candlelight, music and prayers were held on Wednesdays at 6:30pm in the church Courtyard.

An Adult Small Group led by Minister Emerita Rev. Sandy Reimer at the United Church of Gainesville met in the Sanctuary or church Zoom Room for an hour on Wednesday evenings for “Advent Contemplative Prayer.” Thursdays at Noon offered five-minute devotionals from church pastors on YouTubeLive. The third Sunday in Advent featured the 29th Annual Service of Nine Lessons & Carols.

Rev. Dr. Sharon Harris-Ewing and musical guests at Naples UCC were featured at a livestreamed Advent meditation on Wednesday, December 16.

Each Wednesday at 7pm at the UCC/New Smyrna Beach during Advent a 15-minute Zoom reflective period of pausing and pondering was scheduled.

Pastor Rev. Jack Copas at Boynton Beach Congregational UCC reports that the leadership of the congregation proposed finding alternative ways of connecting with one another during Advent. Under the leadership of Moderator Candace Etzler it was decided to bring Advent to the homes of each church family. A poinsettia plant, a liturgy to read and a set of Advent candles to light were delivered to every member’s residence. The feedback was overwhelmingly upbeat. Rev. Jack says this outreach from the church to everyone’s home had profound rippling effects and brought comfort to home-bound people fatigued with pandemic weariness.

On every day of Advent, Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park scheduled short “Advent Conversations” videos with each devoted to a specific topic, like Bethlehem, Wilderness, Elizabeth, Angels and Messengers and Inn Keeper. Church members also were invited to participate in a “reverse” Advent calendar whereby on each day of Advent they could add a specific food item (e.g., box of cereal, canned fruit, dessert mix) for donation to the church’s food pantry.

Congregational UCC/Sarasota offered live online Advent prayer services. A special edition of the online show, “Pastor Chat,” featured the Great Pastor Chat Christmas Quiz with winners receiving an Amazon gift card.

Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmelmann at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach resumed his “Coffee with Keith” series in December with two Wednesday morning Zoom
sessions, “BACKSTAGE: The Message Behind the Advent/Christmas Story.”

Invoking a “Rekindle the Gift” theme for Advent from a verse from 2 Timothy, each week at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg the Corona Sabbath and daily devotions with a posted reading for each day focused on the traditional themes for the candles of the Advent wreath — rekindling Hope, Peace, Joy and Love.

Due to the pandemic, First Congregational UCC/Winter Park could not do its annual “Walk Through Bethlehem,” so it became a “Drive Through” on the evening of December 23. Almost 150 cars made the journey through Bethlehem to hear live music and see animals, King Herod, angels and Wise Men leading to a live nativity scene.

Being Church in the Age of COVID – Sound Familiar?

“...as we approach the end of an Advent like no other in this time of pandemic, we’ve been blessed to be able to gather in-person in our Garden Chapel and through Facebook livestreaming on each of the four Sundays. The weather has been nice, except for the Sunday when a sudden rain shower struck, and we had to run for cover to the Sanctuary! Minor challenges — such as dripping wax from the breeze-fueled, fast-burning purple and pink Advent candles, the failure to locate last-year’s Advent wreath (which was carefully put away for safe-keeping) and avoiding the tripping hazards of microphone cords stretched across the front of the worship space — were overcome with ingenuity. We also dealt in good humor with noisy peacocks and loud jets flying over!”

Interim Pastor Rev. Candy Thomas, Christ Congregational UCC/Miami in a December 23 e-blast to the congregation

The Longest Night Service at Faith UCC/Dundin was held on Monday evening, December 21. Sponsored by Life is Life, it was a short Zoom service that offered a time to share Scripture, poetry and readings — coming together for those struggling with life changes, loneliness, cabin fever and perhaps even depression.

The United Church of Gainesville offered a Blue Christmas Labyrinth Walk beginning on Sunday, December 20, through Wednesday, December 23. There was a sign-up for a 30-minute spot to come and walk the labyrinth in the Sanctuary. A Sunday Seminar entitled “Blue Christmas: How to Find Peace and Joy Despite the Maelstrom of 2020” took place on December 20 and was led by Pastor Rev. Bromleigh McClaneghan. Participants were asked to take a moment to gather a few supplies ahead of time: a candle and match, some colored or shading pencils, a photo of a loved one, a symbol of something that is weighing on your heart and mind and a copy of a finger labyrinth (provided). A Longest Night/Blue Christmas Service was held on Monday evening, December 21, as a YouTube Live service of grief, loss, reflection and quiet hope.

The Blue Worship at UCC/New Smyrna Beach was a quiet worship service that managed to be a gentle gift in over-hyped times but may have been even more soothing during this pandemic Christmas season that has laid waste to so many expectations. It took place on Tuesday evening, December 20, through Wednesday, December 23. There was a sign-up for a 30-minute spot to come and walk the labyrinth in the Sanctuary. A Sunday Seminar entitled “Blue Christmas: How to Find Peace and Joy Despite the Maelstrom of 2020” took place on December 20 and was led by Pastor Rev. Bromleigh McClaneghan. Participants were asked to take a moment to gather a few supplies ahead of time: a candle and match, some colored or shading pencils, a photo of a loved one, a symbol of something that is weighing on your heart and mind and a copy of a finger labyrinth (provided). A Longest Night/Blue Christmas Service was held on Monday evening, December 21, as a YouTube Live service of grief, loss, reflection and quiet hope.

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There was an afternoon Blue Christmas service at St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota on Sunday, December 13. Because the Christmas season is not full of “ho-ho-ho” for many, the service was offered for anyone who was experiencing loss, sadness or general “blues” during the holiday season. The service acknowledged that for some, the holiday season is painful. For those with a fresh loss, or depression, or feelings of isolation, the happiness of others leaves can leave others feeling empty and tired of “putting on a happy face” while others are spreading Christmas cheer. The service took place in the Sanctuary and was available online on the church Facebook page.

The Longest Night service at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota occurred on Monday evening, December 21, through the Zoom platform. The 30 minute service opened space to pray and be together for all the ways this year has forever left a mark upon church members.

Spring Hill UCC held its Blue Christmas service — a time of hope and healing for the holidays — on Monday evening, December 21.

The Zoom Blue Christmas service at First United Church of Tampa took place on Tuesday evening, December 15. For those feeling a little down this year, it was a quiet time to acknowledge and celebrate Christmas, to pray for ourselves, those we love, those we have lost, our nation and our world. There was Scripture, poetry and music and the company of others. Congregational UCC/Sarasota had a Blue Christmas service that was its most well-attended service during Advent, reaching well beyond its own church community.

Christmas Eve worship services of various types took place containing traditional features that included carols, candles and pageants. Some were live and in-person, others pre-recorded.

But the old adage of “the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry” was very evident on December 24. The planned live services at the United Church in Gainesville were canceled due to staff illness and the threat of rain. At Coral Gables Congregational UCC the skies opened up and then poured as the outdoor candlelight service was being set up, but the service went on an hour later as hundreds of worshippers appeared with lawn chairs and in their cars to listen to the radio broadcast. Due to a forecast of inclement weather, the 7pm outdoor service at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach was canceled ahead of time. But only a few miles away at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg all was calm, all was bright as the Christmas Eve service began on the patio until — about midway through — a storm blew in. Bulletins and papers went flying, and the little Christmas tree on the altar crashed to the ground. Then the rain came and by the end of the service, no candles would stay lit so worshippers got out their smart phones to shine their lights. And because of the pandemic, Sanibel Congregational UCC had decided months earlier to cancel its popular annual Lighthouse Beach service.

But Christmas Eve services did go on as planned (more or less) at our churches across the state. Here’s what we learned about the scheduling.

Boca Raton/Church on the Hill Congregational UCC – Outdoor service at 5pm and available on church Facebook page

Brandon/Faith Family UCC – Outdoor service on church lawn at 4:30pm and livestreamed on Facebook

Coral Gables/Congregational UCC – Spanish language at 2pm, German language at 3pm, Family and Children’s 5:30pm and candlelight at 8pm all online; in-person outdoor candlelight at 6:30pm live on Facebook and church website

Dunedin/Faith UCC — Caroling at 6:30pm, candlelight service at 7pm online

Fort Lauderdale/UCC — online available any time after 3pm
The Christmas Season 2020

Fort Walton Beach/Eternal Hope UCC — outdoor in Pensacola

Gainesville/United Church — pre-recorded service available beginning at noon (due to rain threats and illness among staff, three in-person services were canceled)

Lake Helen/First Congregational UCC — pre-recorded in Sanctuary incorporating music and readings from members in their homes; on Facebook and available on the church website

Miami/Christ Congregational UCC — in-person at 4pm and on Facebook

Naples/UCC — livestreamed Family service at 4pm and traditional service of lessons and carols at 6, 8 and 10pm available to watch on demand beginning December 23 at noon

New Smyrna Beach/UCC — 6pm on Zoom

North Port/Community UCC — live services at 4 and 7pm (all German service on Saturday, December 19; service held in Clearwater on Sunday, December 27)

Orlando/First UCC — in-person open house 4-7pm

Pensacola Beach/Community UCC — virtual service available in the morning on YouTube

Pinellas Park/Good Samaritan Church — YouTube family service available beginning at noon and Zoom service at 7pm

Sanibel/Congregational UCC — candlelight outdoor services at 5 and 8pm and virtual online service at 9pm on church website

Sarasota/Congregational UCC — in-person outdoor service also online

Sarasota/First Congregational UCC — outdoor service at 4pm and livestreamed on Facebook and the church website at 7pm

St. Petersburg/Lakewood UCC — live service on Zoom and Facebook at 5pm and in-person outdoor service at 7pm

Sebring/Emmanuel UCC — virtual on FacebookLive (had over 1,700 views)

Sanibel/Congregational UCC — candlelight outdoor services at 5 and 8pm and virtual online service at 9pm on church website

Sarasota/Congregational UCC — in-person outdoor service also online

Sarasota/St. Andrew UCC — in-person and livestreamed at 7pm on Facebook

St. Pete Beach/Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC — streamed online at 7 and 9pm (and again on Christmas morning at 10); Communion offered on Christmas Eve at 4pm

Spring Hill/UCC — in-person at 7pm

Tallahassee/United Church — virtual service at 7pm

Tampa/United Church — Zoom service at 7pm

The Villages/UCC — 3 and 5pm in-person (3pm later available on website)

Winter Park/First Congregational UCC — available on YouTube and church website beginning at 4pm

Sarasota/First Congregational UCC — outdoor service at 4pm and livestreamed on Facebook and the church website at 7pm
Christmas is a time for giving, and our Florida churches did that in a variety of ways. Here are some of those ways. 

Donated toys for the cancer center at St. Joe’s Children’s Hospital came from Faith Family UCC/Brandon, thanks to member Kim Ressler’s annual organizing efforts in memory of her deceased young grandson. Toy donations had been down in 2020 so hospital staff really appreciated the church contribution. In addition, a family with two teenage daughters in need contacted the church ahead of Christmas, and church member donations provided five gift cards to Walmart and Amazon, a turkey and ham and “fixings” and enough funds to have their propane tank refilled.

The annual Angel Tree Outreach Project at Coral Gables Congregational UCC went virtual in support of the women and children at the Lotus House shelter in Overtown. The church committed to unwrapped gifts or gift cards in amounts of 25 gifts for new mothers, 25 for women, 100 gifts for boys and girls aged 5-12 and 50 for children and infants aged 2-4.

UCC/Fort Lauderdale supported the St. Stephen’s AIDS Ministry collecting unwrapped Christmas gifts and monetary contributions for the children at Food for Life (which provides food and nutritional assistance for those living with chronic illnesses in South Florida). Donations from the church and other sources were enough to supply two gifts to 250 children along with enough funds to purchase and pack about 150 toiletry bags for adult clients.

The annual Red Bow Christmas tree at First Congregational UCC/Orange City was devoted to purchasing fast food gift cards for young people in the community who are homeless or have nothing to eat when school is out over the holidays. This year $120 was collected that provided 12 $10 gift cards to needy students.

The Mary Martha Sewing Group at First UCC/Orlando was busy during the pandemic, creating 227 lap robes, which were donated to a local veterans organization for the holidays. The church also had a Lights of Remembrance tree, which was displayed in the front of church grounds. The tree is in honor and memory of loved ones, with family and friends donating $10 per name submitted. The names of those for whom donations are received were listed in each week’s Monday e-blast.

The Christmas Season

2020

Christmas Giving

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The Compassionate Care Ministry at Pensacola Beach Community UCC delivered Angel Tree Christmas gifts to Navy Point Elementary School, located in a low income community that has been hit hard economically by COVID. Seventy four gifts were distributed to 20 families. Also in addition to food items, the church collected new toys for children ages 5-12 associated with Interfaith Ministries.

Thanks to donations from members, Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park was able to provide gifts to the 20 children in the local Head Start program that included a backpack, a jar of bubble blowing liquid, Play-Doh, a toy and two books each. In addition each child received a gift card in the amount of $22.50.

The Giving Tree at Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda was decorated with gift cards for students at Charlotte High School.

December 13 was Hazel’s Hats Sunday at Sanibel Congregational UCC. For each $5 donated, members were able to provide a hand-knitted winter cap for more than 200 children and adults in need in homeless shelters in Lincoln, NE, Boston and New York City as well as to the Lakota Indian Reservation. Some of the money collected stayed in Lee County and provided Christmas gifts and other items for children associated with the Gladiolus Food Pantry, Friends Who Care and the Harlem Heights Charter School in Fort Myers.

The special tradition at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota during the Christmas holiday season is sending donations to organizations that help people in the community who are in need: people who are hungry, people who are strangers to them, those who are homeless, or ill or in need of clothing and other necessities. These are the people described in Matthew 25:35, and the need is especially great this year of the pandemic. The local organizations that benefited from this year’s offering were: All Faiths Food Bank (including their Backpack Program), ALSO Youth, Baby Basics, Children First, Resurrection House, Second Chance/Last Opportunity and SURE. In a variety of ways, each of these organizations plays a vital role in helping sisters and brothers in Sarasota.

In another outreach, the congregation adopted a family through Family Promise — a single Mom and her four boys, ages 3-9, who had just moved into a home after being without a safe place to live for quite some time. Through Family Promise, they were referred to First Congregational and were asked for a list of things they both needed and desired. Within 10 days, every item on the list had been purchased, wrapped, tagged and dropped off at the church. As a result, all the gifts were delivered to the family a week before Christmas by the Director of Family Promise of Sarasota County along with First Congregational UCC program coordinators Lynn Jones and Steve Combs.

Members of St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota generously participated in the Salvation Army Angel Tree gift program. Over 20 Sarasota seniors received Christmas gifts thanks to the congregation. From dish towels to a bicycle to an electric juicer, needs were met and wishes were granted. From all sources in the greater community, gifts for 1,371 children and 383 seniors were forthcoming; as always, bikes were the number one request with over 480 bikes provided.

Congregants at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach made monetary donations that were used to purchase gift cards in the amount of $800 for the Ronald McDonald House that the organization could use to buy food. In addition to monetary donations, healthy individual dinners, tea bags, hot chocolate packets and vegetable oil were also collected. At the 7pm Christmas Eve service a collection was taken for the homeless — blankets, coats, underclothes, socks, canned goods and personal hygiene items.

What began as a request by the Family and Community Liaison at Maximo Elementary School for gifts for 30 homeless children grew and grew and grew. The partnership flourished between
Continuing what was started last year, LGBTQ youth at the Zebra Coalition were included on the Angel Tree, providing $25 gift cards for youth ages 13-24. Zebra Coalition helps with housing for about 40 youth, but the organization also serves many more teens with counseling and other services as COVID-19 has put these youth at greater risk.

During Advent Congregational UCC/Sarasota donated gift cards to help area restaurant workers and contributed a portion of its Christmas Eve offering to the Kid’s Club Child Development and Educational Center of Bradenton – a key mission partner of the congregation. The Kid’s Club was started by CUCC many years ago and is in the process of re-opening after the pandemic. It provides quality affordable day care to families in the Bradenton/Sarasota area.

Emmanuel UCC/Sebring provided monetary and Christmas gifts to a young family in need.

The Veterans of the Cross (also known as the Christmas Fund) is a special mission offering that UCC congregations have been supporting for over 100 years. The offering is administered through the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance, the charitable arm of the Pension Boards. Funds provide direct financial support to those who serve the church and are facing financial difficulties, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Active and retired clergy, lay employees and their surviving spouses may be eligible for the Supplementation of Small Annuities, Supplementation of Health Premiums and Emergency Grants.

Florida churches that participated include: Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park, Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda, Sanibel Congregational UCC, Spring Hill UCC, St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota, Faith UCC/Dunedin and First Congregational UCC/Sarasota.

Thanks to these congregations and others which contributed this most deserving effort.