I’ve been juggling calendars recently. Maybe you have, too.

Spring came last week. I notice the greening of trees and freshness in the air that signals the end of our version of winter and the beginning of the countdown to hurricane season. Easter will happen in a day or two. Our Lenten fasts will come to a joyful end as we celebrate the new life we find in that resurrection moment and begin the great 50 days of Easter that leads us up to Pentecost and the tongues of fire that mark the traditional birthday of the church. There’s March madness to keep up with, too, and the onset of the regular season for our favorite baseball teams. Many of our churches are anticipating the end of “the season” and are planning for whatever comes next in this “there’s no such thing as normal” kind of year.

And then there is the pandemic. What calendar are we on with that? Are we waiting for a surge or are we winding down with gratitude for vaccinations? Will we be barbecuing on the Fourth of July or are there variants of the virus just waiting to take a bite out of our huge sense of relief that the worst is perhaps behind us.

Some of our seasons are more difficult to measure by looking at a calendar alone. There’s a full blown season of hate crimes against our neighbors in the Asian-American community. The...continued on page 2

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**Observing Lent in a Time of Pandemic**

As we conclude the season of Lent, how did our churches “do” Lent when COVID-19 made the programming even more challenging? Here are some of the ways our congregations rose to the occasion, with a concluding message from Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan. Watch for the April/May issue when we cover what was offered during Holy Week.

**Bal Harbour — Church by the Sea**

Had virtual Ash Wednesday meditation service at 7pm featuring music, spoken word, scripture

- Celebrated Mardi Gras Sunday on February 21 with music and an after-worship mask making workshop with supplies provided by the church
- Held Zoom macramé workshops in English after worship on March 14 and Spanish on March 21 with supply kits provided
- Offered a pysanky (traditional Polish and Ukraine) decorated egg workshop after worship with kits provided by church
- Scheduled daily Lenten devotion/prayer in English and Spanish
- Offered the Lenten Lunchtime Live Concert series over four Fridays at noon in March on FacebookLive

**Boca Raton — Church on the Hill Congregational UCC**

Ash Wednesday service was at noon in-person outside (and online via Facebook)

- Scheduled Zoom book study on Wednesday evenings using Unattended Sorrow: Recovering from Loss and Reviving the...continued on page 2

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**Look Inside**

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trial in the murder of George Floyd reminds us of the long season of racism that continues to plague our country. Judicial activism in Washington threatens to undercut the New Deal that has provided a social safety net to American citizens for the last 80 years.

Did you see the weight room controversy caused by the NCAA when they provided a full workout studio to players in the men’s basketball tournament while at the same time offering the women a yoga mat and a single rack of free weights? There continues to be systemic inequality between men and women in America, and too often it shows itself as blatant misogyny. And here in Florida there’s a season of unrest across county and neighborhood lines as charges of vaccine favoritism fill the air and the airwaves (I fervently hope you’ll get the shot when it’s your turn).

Ecclesiastes reminds us that “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” I find myself praying for a time of national healing, a time of for mutual care and respect among people, a time for equality across lines of gender and sexuality, a time for deep care for the earth that we are born to steward. I find myself praying “Come, Holy Spirit, Come” and moving into a season of anticipation that God is about to do a new thing — and we all are invited to be part of that new thing to the glory of God in Jesus whose resurrection we’ve barely celebrated before being asked to move on to whatever’s next.

I invite you to offer the same prayer with me while giving thanks, too, that we have the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ in which to practice our faith and become the people we so long to be. Thank you for being the church wherever you live.

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

Heart by Stephen Levine

Boynton Beach — Boynton Beach Congregational UCC
Offered the imposition of ashes and a brief prayer on Ash Wednesday from 9-11:30am in the comfort and safety of one’s vehicle in the driveway of the church

Brandon — Faith Family UCC
“Ashes to Go” service on Ash Wednesday with Communion available for those wishing to partake

Coral Gables — Coral Gables Congregational UCC
Offered trilingual Ash Wednesday evening service in English, German and Spanish in the Sanctuary (and online) at 6:30 on the Lenten theme, “Again & Again: A Lenten Refrain”
- The traditional Mardi Gras Sunday was observed on February 14 outdoors (and online) with music, beads and masks; each participant received a bag filled with Mardi Gras beads and a treat plus items to guide recipients through Lent (including a devotional guide, a home communion set for the first Sunday in Lent and a small bag of ashes for Ash Wednesday)
- Midday Lenten devotions were on Tuesdays at noon for one hour on Zoom using “Emily Dickinson and the Poetry of Lent”
- Book and video “Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner’s Guide to Holy Week” by Amy-Jill Levine for one hour on Sunday mornings via Zoom
- Offered online Lenten vespers in the Celtic tradition on Wednesday evenings at 6:30pm

Dunedin — Faith UCC
- Provided a resource link to activities, reflections and readings week-to-week during Lent
- Offered a Zoom Mardi Gras Happy Hour following Sunday service on February 14, keeping the traditional congregational celebration going
- Provided a weekly spiritual practices exercise (e.g., breath prayer) via e-blast
- Planned a Lenten study group which met Tuesday evenings for one hour and a spiritual practices session (e.g., lectio divina) on the five Sundays during Lent

Fort Lauderdale — UCC/Fort Lauderdale
Offered Drive through Ashes on Ash Wednesday between 6:30-7:30pm
- Provided link to “Release and Renew: A Spiritual Practice for Lent 2021”
Fort Myers — Fort Myers Congregational UCC
Ash Wednesday service at 7pm via Zoom; ashes mailed to homes or envelopes picked up at church
- Offered Wednesday evening study series, “Who Do you Say I Am? on Zoom when members of the congregation reflect on who Jesus is to them followed by open discussion

Gainesville — United Church of Gainesville
A “virtch” virtual Ash Wednesday service was available beginning at noon (with a children’s worship on Zoom at 5:30) with a drive-by ashes pick-up from 4:30-6:30pm
- Lenten devotional booklet on the theme “Elemental” — composed of writings, reflections and arts submitted by members — was created in hard copy form and as PDF; a reading each day appeared at noon on Facebook
- Contemplative prayers sessions for one hour on Wednesday evenings on Zoom and led by Minister Emerita Rev. Sandy Reimer
- Family pre-dinner Lenten devotional on Sunday evenings at 5pm for 20 minutes on Zoom
- Five minute devotions online led by ministers on Thursdays at noon
- Walking the Labyrinth between 9am-5pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays

Lake Helen – First Congregational UCC
- Made UCC Lent Devotional available to members

Miami — Christ Congregational UCC
Offered worship in the Garden Chapel on Ash Wednesday from 5:30-6pm (service livestreamed on Facebook); those present received ashes with which to make sign of the cross on their forehead with Pastor saying, “Dust you are and to dust you will return”
- Celebrated Mardi Gras Sunday on February 14 in a bring-your-own lunch to enjoy Dixieland music in the Garden Chapel after worship

Naples — Naples UCC
Ash Wednesday virtual worship livestreamed at noon with Lenten theme “Rooted” (preceded by seedling pickup from the Portico that morning)
- Celebrated by tradition the Sunday before Lent with New Orleans Jazz including a rousing rendition of “Just a Closer Walk with Thee”
- Book study, The Grace of Les Misérables by Matt Rawle, on Thursday mornings for 90 minutes led by Associate Pastor Rev. Dr. Deb Kaiser-Cross via Zoom

New Smyrna Beach — UCC/New Smyrna Beach
Ash Wednesday service for the application of ashes and the remembrance of baptisms was at 6pm via Zoom
- Pastor Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy used e-mails and Facebook to provide brief devotions connected to One Year Bible readings

North Port — North Port Community UCC
Ash Wednesday in-person service was at 7pm with ashes provided for self-administration (online viewing via YouTube)
- Offered Wednesday evening one hour study using Embracing the Uncertain: A Lenten Study for Unsteady Times; members offered personal testimony of their faith in God

Orange City — First Congregational Church
- Invited members to reflect during Lent upon the gift of shalom (the Hebrew word for peace)

Orlando — First UCC
Ash Wednesday service was at 6pm
- Offered Lenten Bible study on Wednesday evenings at 6pm for one hour using Embracing the Uncertain: A Lenten Study for Unsteady Times

Pensacola Beach — Pensacola Beach Community UCC
Ash Wednesday service at 7pm
- Planned in-person sessions on the five Thursday evenings in Lent focusing on passages from the “Still Speaking” series

Pinellas Park — Good Samaritan Church
- Offered ashes on February 21, the first Sunday of Lent
- Offered a challenge to members to give up one thing for 40 days, estimate its cost and make a donation in the amount to the church’s Food Pantry
- Offered “Lenten Conversations,” a weekly video devotional on the seven things Jesus said from the cross with additional study resources and suggested questions for personal reflection

Port Charlotte — Pilgrim UCC
Drive Thru Ashes under the covered Portico between 10-11am on Ash Wednesday and a service with ashes in the Sanctuary at 6:30pm
- Offered as a Lenten devotional Promises, Promises by the Still-Speaking Writers Group
- Small group study on Wednesday evenings using Forgiveness: A Lenten Study by Marjorie Thompson
Lent

Rockledge — Hope UCC
• Offered Lenten study via Zoom on Wednesday evenings using Brian McLaren’s *Seeking Aliveness: Faith* guide and video

Sanibel — Sanibel Congregational UCC
Ash Wednesday service was broadcast at 7pm on YouTube; ashes for self-imposition were mailed to members ahead of the day
• Celebrated Mardi Gras Sunday on February 14 with an outdoor blended service at 9am

Sarasota — First Congregational UCC
Ash Wednesday service outdoors at noon and livestreamed on Zoom at 7pm
• Scheduled a “word of the week” upon which to focus and center a reflection
• “Artful Prayer” on Zoom on February 11 to share a prayer practice that can be done every day using only paper and any writing utensils
• “Explore Nonviolent Communication” on Thursday afternoons for 90 minutes to learn a new language and ways to connect (using book by Marshall Rosenberg)
• Suggested adopting an ethical meal pledge to commit to a more plant-based diet for 40 days
• Suggested selecting seven pieces of music or hymns – one for each week of Lent – listening and leaning into each piece every day of that week noting emotions elicited

Sarasota — St. Andrew UCC
Ash Wednesday service was at noon
• Lenten preaching series focused on the church’s present and future in light of the early chapters of the book of the prophet Jeremiah
• Offered a Lenten devotional using *Go to Jerusalem* by Pastor Rev. Mary Alice Mulligan

Sebring — Emmanuel UCC
Ash Wednesday service was in-person at 7pm

Spring Hill — Spring Hill UCC
Had pre-recorded Ash Wednesday service available on YouTube

St. Augustine — United Church UCC-DoC
• Lenten series “Stations of Christ Connections” via YouTube link with reflections and meditations centered on artwork of Ulrich Javier Lemus and MC Richard
• Scheduled two-hour period for drop-in spiritual care on Wednesdays for meditations, reflections and time for conversation and prayer

St. Pete Beach — Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC
Offered Ash Wednesday service at 7pm in the Sanctuary for liturgical contemplation, guided prayer and ashes
• Sunset services on the beach on Sunday evenings at 6pm began on February 21
• Online Lectio Divina sessions offered via YouTube
• Psalms, song, poetry and statements of faith shared by members of the Iona Community were led by Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmelmann at 6, 7 and 8pm on Mondays and Fridays during Lent

St. Petersburg — Lakewood UCC
Ash Wednesday service was fireside on church grounds at 7pm

St. Petersburg — Pilgrim Congregational Church
Ash Wednesday service with imposition of ashes on at noon

Tallahassee — United Church in Tallahassee
• Offered a drive-through “Ashes to Go” (providing a small plastic container of ashes mixed with a drop of mineral oil) on Ash Wednesday afternoon and evening
• Suggested members use link to “The Way to Shalom: A Lenten Journey to Peace and Wholeness” for further reflection
The Lenten Journey Begins

by Rev. John Vertigan

A five-page liturgy for Ash Wednesday caught my eye when I noticed that fully three pages of it are a prayer of confession. Indeed, most of the worship for the day involves confession, an unburdening of both inner and outer brokenness the kinds of which lead us down wrong paths for the sake of something other than righteousness.

Wouldn’t it feel good to be freed from self-blame and shaming over the perceived shortcomings of your life? Wouldn’t it feel good to empty the cup of self-centeredness to make room for reaching out to neglected neighbors and those in need? Wouldn’t it feel good to be on the road to freedom from prejudice and malice toward people who are different from you? Wouldn’t it feel good to claim your place among those seeking to restore the creation rather than participating in the kind of indulgence that is destroying the earth? A reflective time of confession is a great place to begin that personal transformation that bears witness to God’s proclamation and promise that “Behold! I am making all things new.”

And yet, confession seems out of place with many in the church these days.

In 1986 I drove to a rural paper milling town in Northern Maine for my first-ever solo preaching assignment. In my nervousness, I skipped over the prayer of confession and jumped right to the passing of the peace. Walking the aisle, a man pulled me close and whispered (he thought) in my ear, “You forget the confession.” His comment was overheard, and another gentleman chimed in sotto voce, “It’s OK; we haven’t done anything wrong anyhow.” I’m rather certain his comment was born of kindness rather than self-assurance, and we continued in worship together in forgiven community. Thank you, God, for the grace of covering my mistakes with your goodness.

Scriptures remind us that “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) As such, we might choose to view the liturgy of confession as a promised time of restoration to wholeness. In our modern day emphasis on the individual, though, it is often seen as a demand to admit we are less than perfect, less than we are expected to be, less than what the world requires of us. So we hide.

And, still, the Lenten Journey begins.

I’ll spend some time journaling my confession, taking note of what I pray will be set aside in me so that I can more faithfully walk this walk to which we are called in baptism. And maybe I’ll even come out of hiding to celebrate neighbor, meet the needy, unlearn my prejudice, simplify my little space in this earth, and cast aside the various major and minor cups of shame that have marked my life ‘till now. With any luck, I’ll encounter you on the way, and together we can sing to the Lord a new song that begins with “Behold! In Christ, a promise kept.”

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

From “Conference Call,” e-Celebrate, February 17
Surviving the New Normal

Recently I was on a video chat with some friends, and we began talking about many of the issues that have been a part of our lives the past couple of years. The topics were vast and soon we realized a bit painful: the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other people of African descent; the COVID-19 pandemic with scores of people who have died here in the US and around the world; the number of hate crimes against people of color; the issues of climate change and its effect on the environment; the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol; LGBTQIA+ rights; ending violence against women and many, many more.

In our discussion, we realized that the list was very, very long. But we all agreed: this is the NEW NORMAL — but it did not have to be if each of us committed to do our part to change some things in this new world order.

As I thought about how I could play a role in helping myself and others survive this New Normal, of course my attention turned towards the Church and specifically the United Church of Christ in Florida and my role as Moderator.

For instance, it is heartening to see the churches of the Florida UCC making a difference through ministry in our communities. We see it in the stories shared in Celebrate Florida, e-Celebrate and elsewhere about our churches’ activities in the Florida Conference — including feeding the unfortunate in a global pandemic, ministering to those who are affected by discrimination and violence and looking at ways to improve the environment around us — by bringing God’s love and word to as many as possible.

I ask that you help me by continuing to ask yourselves and your congregation, “Can we do more?” to affect positive change through our ministries. I believe that we can bring hope to the hopeless, touch the very hearts (even through our video screens) of those who have lost faith and transform the life our communities.

As we move forward together, I look forward to hearing from you and how you will help yourself and others survive and thrive in this New Normal.

Odds & Ends from the Conference Church House

Lutz is currently accepting new directees. He offers a no-fee first session. Rev. Lutz is a UCC minister with 47 years of experience in local church, hospice and AIDS ministry. He is a graduate of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation individual guidance program. For more information or to schedule a session, you can contact Rev. Brad at brad.lutz49@gmail.com.

From e-Celebrate, February 3

Submissions Welcome

Try out our Connections section in the bi-weekly e-Celebrate. Connections gives you the chance (yes, you need to take the initiative) to write a sentence or two about the kind of issue you want to address and reach out to persons of a like mind who will then have the opportunity to network with you for better ministry. This is hardly hi-tech and hardly complicated. Think of it as personal ads for mission advancement.

Let light shine out of darkness.

Send your Connections to Dave Cyril at dcyril@uccfla.org and we’ll include them in an upcoming issue. After that, it’s up to you to create your network and bring it to life. If you do, you’re free to contact regional staff, and we’ll do our best to resource you for active ministry where you live.

From e-Celebrate, February 3

Nurturing Our Covenant

Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan was pleased to meet in early March with Rev. Edward Rivera Santiago from Iglesia Evangelica Unida de Puerto Rico (IEUPR). Edward was in Orlando visiting families who have moved to the area in recent years for a variety of reasons, including Hurricane Maria and other natural disasters that have so damaged our island neighbors’ homes and infrastructure. They met at a bakery in Orlando (COVID-
safe except for the moment they took this photo) and talked about the needs of his church members who are now settling here for the long term. We hope to partner with the IEUPR in offering support for their ministry with their members within the boundaries of our Conference. This is good news for the many Spanish-speaking people living locally who are looking for a more progressive presence than is offered by many Spanish-speaking churches in the area. Rev. John’s hope is for a cooperative partnership that benefits the ministry and mission desires of both the IEUPR and the United Church of Christ.

Adapted from e-Celebrate, March 17

Are You Violating Copyright Laws In Your Worship Services?

Our churches often call us with questions about their hymnals and copyright laws. For instance, is it OK to publish the lyrics to hymns during live streamed worship services? United Church of Christ General Counsel Heather Kimmel answers several of these commonly asked questions in this brief FAQ document. From e-Celebrate, February 17

How Congregational Financial Support to the Conference is Used

In an e-blast in February, the treasurer at Pensacola Beach Community UCC shared with church members what the church had paid to the Florida Conference for its Per Capita dues and itemized what their contribution goes to pay and specific ways in which their church has benefited in the past. In a recent e-blast to members of Christ Congregational UCC/Miami, Per Capita dues were explained and it was noted that the church had utilized a number of specific Conference services in recent years.

2020 Conference Annual Report

If you missed receiving a link to A Year in the Life of the United Church of Christ in Florida, the Conference annual report for 2020 that was provided in an early March e-blast, here is the link https://www.uccfla.org/files/docs/2020.pdf

Date Change for Annual Gathering of the Florida Conference

A change in circumstances has necessitated a change in the date for our 2021 Annual Gathering. With apologies for any inconvenience and with hope for the lack thereof, the dates for the Annual Gathering, which we hope will take place at The Community Church of Vero Beach, are October 14-16. Stay tuned for additional details soon.

From e-Celebrate, March 3

Please note that staff travel continues on-hold due to COVID-19.

APRIL 2
RM Rev. Raymond Hargrove, Northeast Region subcommittee

APRIL 7
RM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Southern Region UCC Women’s planning meeting

APRIL 10
RM Rev. Raymond Hargrove, Northeast Region Committee on Church & Ministry

APRIL 14
CM Rev. John Vertigan, Insurance Board annual members meeting

APRIL 23-24
CM Rev. John Vertigan, Global Ministries board meeting

MAY 6
CM Rev. John Vertigan, Palm Beach/Treasure Coast clergy group, Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach

MAY 8
CM Rev. John Vertigan, Conference Board of Directors

MAY 11
RM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Western Region Committee on Church & Ministry

MAY 16-21
RM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Festival of Homiletics

MAY 24-25
CM Rev. John Vertigan, Council of UCC Conference Ministers

JUNE/JULY
RM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Sabbatical

Consider Donating to the Conference

There are several ways to give, and your generosity will be greatly appreciated. Please click below to go to our website and make your selection:

- 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
Joseph DiDonato, Pastor, UCC at The Villages, service begins on May 1

Rev. Robert L. Loffer, retired founding Pastor at Emmanuel UCC/Sebring, passed away at age 72 on Tuesday, February 9, at his home in Iowa. Memorial services took place February 13 at Trinity UCC/Marengo, IA.

Rev. Robert Sargent, a retired UCC Pastor and member of Faith UCC/Dunedin, passed away on January 31. He was ordained in the UCC in 1955 and served churches in NH, ME, CT and NY. While retired in Florida he continued to do some interim pastoral work.

Rev. Keith Mills, leader of the Northern Plains Conference of the UCC, died suddenly on February 1. He is pictured (second from right) with partners in Conference ministry, including Florida CM Rev. John Vertigan. We join Rev. John in mourning the loss of a friend and colleague.

We extend condolences for both Rev. Mike MacMillan (Faith UCC/Dunedin) on the early February passing of his father, Bob, and Rev. Deb Kunkel (Sanibel Congregational UCC) upon the death of her mother.

Chance Martinez-Colon, a member of Spring Hill UCC, is serving as a seminary intern/field education student at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park from February through August. A student seeking his MDiv in UCC Studies at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, he is a medical social worker at Morton Plant Hospital where he supervises a team of 55. Chance serves on the Florida Conference Personnel Committee and has provided pulpit supply at local congregations.

Rev. Lisa LeSueur (second right) was ordained into the Christian Ministry and installed as Minister of Congregational and Staff Care at Coral Gables Congregational UCC on January 31. In her part-time role she will continue to bring support to CGCUCC’s business office, middle school youth program and WISE ministry, which includes leadership in a weekly Zoom support group.

Please mail us your church newsletter or add us to your e-mail list to receive it. We'd love to share your good news with our other churches.

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

Share The Good News

A Richness of Opportunities

Your Invitation to be Informed — Inspired — Transformed

July 11-18 General Synod 2021 p19
August 2-6 Mediation Skills Training p9
October 14-16 Florida Conference Annual Gathering p7
Anti-Racism Ministry pp17-18
Back Bay Mission Trips/2022 p12
Emergency Clean-up Buckets p31-32
Making Room for Doing Good

Project 180’s Annual Lecture Series took place at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota over three days in March, April and May. Project 180 is a local Sarasota nonprofit organization that is housed in office space on the campus of the church.

Project 180 seeks to reduce recidivism by providing: workforce education and financial literacy classes for inmates; an annual reentry lecture series for the public; information and referrals for formerly incarcerated individuals seeking housing, programs and employment; and a comprehensive, whole-life residential program for men in recovery.

In partnership with The Boxser Diversity Initiative, Project 180 presented its eighth season of the nation’s only annual lecture series dedicated to prisoner reentry topics. The series provides meaningful public education about prisoner reentry issues and features nationally recognized scholars, industry experts, community leaders, and those impacted by incarceration and reentry. The three-part lecture series took place on Zoom with opportunities for guests to engage with Project 180 residents in breakout rooms. Learn more about Project 180 at www.project180reentry.org/lecture-series/

Pass-a-Grille Beach UCC Wins Preliminary Injunction Against City of St. Pete Beach

In late January, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach obtained a preliminary injunction against the City of St. Pete Beach in a suit the church had filed in August after the City barred the church from allowing the general public to park in its lot. The City had also sought to restrict the church’s youth group from evangelizing, praying and seeking donations from those who parked in their lot for free.

“This preliminary injunction validates our legal position from the start: the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) protects the Church’s right to use its parking lot in accordance with its religious mission to show biblically-based hospitality,” said Daniel Dalton, a religious property and land use attorney with national law firm Dalton & Tomich, which is representing the church.

The City is objecting to how the church was using its parking lot and began issuing citations. In 2020, the City fined the Church $1,000 for allowing general public parking in its lot, and the Church faced a $500 fine every time it allowed an individual that was not there for “legitimate church purposes” to park in the lot. Another attorney representing the church has said the Court found that the Church’s beliefs were sincerely held and that the Church is substantially likely to prevail on the merits of its RLUIPA claim.

With the preliminary injunction in place, the Church can immediately allow the public to use its parking lot and can continue sharing religious messages and soliciting free-will charitable donations from those who park in its lot.

[Editor’s note: Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. Keith Haemmelmann reports that since the preliminary injunction the City Council has met twice in executive session to discuss the Church’s request for settlement. More about the case may be found in the October/November (p19) and December/January (p16) issues of this newsletter (https://www.ucfla.org/celebrateflorida).]

Center Will Offer Conflict Resolution Training for Churches

Lombard Mennonite Peace Center’s (LMPC) summer session of Mediation Skills Training Institute for Churches will be conducted in-person in the Chicago area August 2-6, 2021. The exact site has yet to be determined, but it will be within driving distance of O’Hare Airport.

Should circumstances force LMPC to revert to an online-only presentation, registrants will have the option to attend remotely, apply full credit towards a future LMPC event or receive a full refund. A final decision will be made by the end of May. Online registration is now open at https://lmpeacecenter.org/ticketspice/.

The training event was described by a previous attendee as “the Golden Globe winner of conflict resolution programs.” Acquire 32 contact hours of instruction, enjoy Christian fellowship, and learn skills that will help transform destructive conflict into an opportunity for growth and renewal.

Additional sessions in May, June, October and November will be offered remotely or as hybrid events. For more information call the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center at 630/627-0507, e-mail Admin@LMPeaceCenter.org, or visit https://lmpeacecenter.org/.
Our congregations continue to tweak and adapt their worship, programs and outreach as the pandemic stubbornly hangs on. An increasing number of churches are opening up, some even a little bit as many continue with a combination of limited in-person worship and some version of live streaming or recorded services -- while enduring glitches and switching to new platforms as congregants stave off becoming Zoombies.

Here’s just some of what we have heard. The snippets are followed by reflections from Rev. Tom Lacey (Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton) and Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner (Coral Gables Congregational UCC) sharing what they have learned about their congregations over the past 12 months.

Bal Harbour — Church by the Sea
A weekly Wednesday night event at the church is a service with prayerful meditation and music. There’s a Wednesday morning session for knitting – and spiritual discussion.

Brandon — Faith Family UCC
The congregation had Drive-in Church on Sunday, February 7, and has decided to have these on the first and third Sunday of every month. The service is broadcast to cars on FM radio. Bringing lawn chairs and social distancing with a face mask is an option as is viewing from home via Facebook LiveStream.

Coral Gables — Coral Gables Congregational UCC
The church has learned during this time of online worship and gatherings that the congregation is worldwide, with a strong community of expats. Following worship on February 28, they held their first gathering of the worldwide web of Gables UCC expats with 17 families represented from places such as France, England, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, North and South Carolina, Pennsylvania, New York, Indiana and around the state of Florida.

Lake Helen — First Congregational UCC
The church continues without a settled Pastor and enjoys a Supply Minister through Lent and Holy Week while worshipping virtually. Several questionnaires have been sent to members regarding in-person worship, which is not favored by a majority. Events on the porch and weekly Scripture and prayer via Zoom help keep everyone connected.

Miami — Christ Congregational UCC
Picnicking was in order in the Garden Chapel at the church after worship on Transfiguration Sunday.

Naples — Naples UCC
The church has decided to no longer use Livestream.com and instead worship can be found on its homepage; worship and classes are now streamed on its YouTube channel.

North Port — North Port Community UCC
As an alternative to its postponed annual grief seminar, the church offered a service in which members could participate in person or online by watching on YouTube. Participants were invited to send a photo of a loved one, including the person’s full name, date of birth and date of passing and text of up to 10 sentences to be shared during the service. A candle was lit in the loved one’s memory. The church also has virtual prayer gatherings on Thursday mornings for 45 minutes.

Pinellas Park — Good Samaritan Church
Member Jane Gaylord recently turned 90, and her celebration was made extra special by a birthday parade.
Rockledge — Hope UCC

An appreciative congregation successfully applied to the Conference for a $2,500 grant to help defray the cost of its extensive new audio/visual equipment purchased in the fall. The equipment was necessary in anticipation of returning to in-person worship services and still wanting to be able to produce a quality virtual service for those preferring to worship via Zoom or live-streamed on Facebook.

Sarasota — First Congregational UCC

A new opportunity at the church is “Breathe,” within the Oasis Ministry for Reflection and Renewal. It formerly was the Grief Group but has been expanded to include all those who find themselves wandering in the unfolding unknownness of today. It gathers every other week on Zoom at 1 pm. Sessions have titles such as “Learning to Fall,” “Learning to Walk in the Darkness,” “Ouch...When Life Hurts” and “Telling Your Story.” Another opportunity was “Balanced Body & Mind Blueprint,” a class on nutrition, exercise and mindfulness. Held on Tuesday afternoons in March on Zoom, it was led by Meghan Jones, a certified Integrative Nutrition Health Coach and personal trainer.

Sarasota — St. Andrew UCC

Thursdays at noon members of the congregation are invited to bring their lunch and join Rev. Mary Alice Mulligan in the Memorial Garden outside the church office building for a time of catching up with others from the congregation – masked and safely distanced.

Sebring — Emmanuel UCC

The Narrative Lectionary Bible Study on Tuesdays that had been on Zoom resumed in-person in mid-March.

Tallahassee — United Church in Tallahassee

The “sermon” at the church on February 28 (organized by two lay members, Andy and Quentin) was a line-by-line reading of Psalm 23 – but with a twist. In between each line there was a pause, at which time members of the congregation could showcase their expressions of joy/reactions to the passage for up to two minutes. Almost anything could be shared: poetry, a bit of philosophy, a musical number, dancing, painting, crocheting – whatever. Video submissions were submitted ahead of that Sunday on Google Drive.

Tampa — First United Church of Tampa

The Zoom Poetry Hour at the church on Wednesday evening, February 10, was a discussion of Amanda Gorman’s Inaugural poem, “The Hill We Climb.” Participants were invited to share their favorite line(s), another poem by her or another youth’s poem.

Amazing What a Year Can Do

BY REV. TOM LACEY
CHURCH ON THE HILL CONGREGATIONAL UCC/Boca Raton

Our last Sunday together in church was a year ago, March 15. COVID-19 became COVID-20 and now COVID-21, you might say. We just had our Ash Wednesday service at noon today, and Marit had the camera standing in its place so it could video the service and broadcast it. Before COVID and this last year, that camera would have upset people. It would have been in the way, a sight hazard, an obstacle, and a nuisance. More than one person would have told me how the tripod and camera standing in the fifth row on the north side was intrusive. Today, nothing. It was expected, as much a part of our church as just about anything else. Amazing what a year can do, and not do.

For all our resilience, it is tough to see how the church has progressed during this time. I mean this with obvious honesty and humility, but with also significant resolution to the facts as they have fallen and as we have played them. We’re not a church that is alright with bringing people back in on a regular basis with a significant indoor participation. For your safety, we will pay a price and we already have. Several folks have left to go to a church that has in person, indoor services. We don’t meet face-to-face for meetings, and the fact is Zoom meetings aren’t all that close to the real thing.

Nobody wants this to continue. Anybody can see how a church that is seeing each other via screens and on the second Sunday of the month when a couple of dozen gather together, will have a hard time sustaining itself, let alone growing. It feels like we are all sitting on the sidelines, waiting for the game to begin again so we can get back in. I wish the whistle would blow.

There is one aspect of church life I didn’t know about but learned in this past year: devotion, commitment, deep-seated care, heartfelt support. If we have lost several folks, that can be expected. But what can’t be expected is the number of people who emotionally and financially support their church even when they aren’t receiving as they did in the past. This aspect of people’s big heartedness and devotion to their church, to an organization they believe in, to a faith that means something to them and they don’t want to have jeopardized when so much around them is at risk -- this I didn’t know was in you, was among us. How could anyone know? This crisis has revealed the real character, the integrity at the heart of your faith. It has been inspiring to watch and experience. I am grateful to you. We are still the Church on the Hill together. A bit battered, but not broken; uprooted some, but holding strong; concerned for ourselves, but still caring for others. Let us continue to commit ourselves to one another, our ministry, our church, to hope, to perseverance, to health, to friendship, to Christ Jesus.

From the “Pastor’s Page.” in the March Vantage (a publication of Church on The Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton)
Continuing to be the “Church”
by Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner
Coral Gables Congregational UCC

Grace, peace, and a blessed anniversary as we come to a full year of being closed to public worship! Who would have ever imagined? And I’m sure like me, many of you are doubtful that it is a “blessed” anniversary as so much sadness, pain, challenges, and difficulties have ensued over these past months.

Yet, I think there have been some blessings that have emerged, especially in our life together as a church. We have certainly learned a few things about what the church is and what it is not.

Among those things, I daresay we have learned that the church is not the building! Ironically, I have spent the last 40-some years trying to get people into the church building and have spent the last year trying to keep them out. I think we have all learned the hard way what we already knew deep in our hearts: the church is not a building, it’s people!

We have learned that the scattered church has even greater potential than the gathered church. We have opened up the possibility for a movement that no building can hold, which is a world-wide congregation of those who are invested in the witness, mission, and values of our particular church, and then choose to worship, study, and share in fellowship with us. (Online or over Zoom of course!)

We have learned that we are resilient, creative, generous, and faithful. When the pandemic began, we had to pivot, and while we were already doing online worship, we needed to up our game and make our worship even more meaningful, accessible, and inspirational because EVERYONE was watching it over a screen.

The staff has also worked hard at creating new-fangled ways of doing Christian nurture, small groups, outreach, social justice, and programming often with the help of technology. We have tried to keep us connected and to continue building up the church during these COVID-19 days.

And how blessed we have been by the generosity of so many of our congregation in the sharing of their time, talent, and treasure. I think I will write a book someday on how folks continued to be the “church” and to care for one another be it through giving to the Compassion Fund, sending cards, helping folks get vaccinated, keeping the food pantry stocked, making check-in calls, and so, so much more!

And, while there are countless more things we have learned, I think we have been reminded that we do love being together, that we love our beautiful, historic building, that this particular church has a sense of humor, and a commitment to making faith fun, full of joy, and always, always hope-filled. And, that when we do finally all get back, there will be such a party!

...We will keep on learning, and keep on changing, and keep on being the church as faithfully as we can!

From “Laurie’s Lines,” weekly e-blast (February 12) of Coral Gables Congregational UCC

Oppportunity

Back Bay Mission’s Mission Trip Calendar is Open

The Mission Trip Calendar for 2022 is now open and ready for bookings! To book, please e-mail volunteercoordinator@thebackbaymission.org with your preferred dates including your first option and a second option. The e-mail requests are fulfilled on a first-come-first-served basis. To see the weeks that are open, you can access the calendar here.

Please note that updates to the calendar will take some time so please be patient.
“Improvisation 101” is the name of the Zoom show planned at the United Church of Gainesville over three Tuesday evenings in April. It’s for people who don’t like playing games, competing or preparing. The only skills needed are the ability to listen, support the other players and – best of all – make stuff up. No thinking is necessary, no experience either.

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota called upon its members to join in an “artful prayer” exercise utilizing drawing skills (or lack thereof). Participants drew a tree that represents their life and the various elements that make it up in the past, present and future on a sheet of paper or card stock. The drawn tree was brought to the Zoom workshop when the prayer exercise proceeded.

Theological Studies series at Sanibel Congregational UCC in February featured a two-part course on the life and work of Flannery O’Connor. One of the most imaginative writers of the 20th century, her work was informed both by her Southern upbringing and Roman Catholic background. Two of her short stories – “Everything That Rises Must Converge” and “A Good Man is Hard to Find” – were in particular explored. The course was taught via Zoom by Rev. Dr. John Danner and Dr. Thomas Coley, Emeritus Professor of English at The Ohio State University and the author of many books and articles. On March 7 Pastor John was featured in Bat Yam Temple of the Islands’ annual musical fundraiser (virtual) “A Cantor, a Pastor and a Bluegrass Band” that also included Cantor Murray Simon and Nefesh Mountain.

Naples UCC offered an afternoon of piano music – classics to ragtime – in a virtual concert by Lindsay Garriston on Sunday afternoon, March 21.

The Zoom poetry hour at the First United Church of Tampa in February was a discussion of Amanda Gorman’s Inaugural poem, “The Hill We Climb.” Participants were invited to share their favorite line(s) and another poem by her or by a youth.

As part of the Midday Lenten Devotions at Coral Gables Congregational UCC, an hour on Tuesday afternoons through March 30 were devoted to poems of Emily Dickinson and related Scripture passages. On St. Patrick’s Day there was a very special evening vespers with a service based on the words of the Saint and the music of Ireland and the Celtic tradition played on bagpipes.

The women singing Taize prayers during the Lenten season at First Congregational UCC/Lake Helen are Dorothy Cresswell and Dusty Miller. Snowbirds from western Massachusetts, they reside in Edgewater when here in Florida. Dorothy is the creator and producer of “The Curious Giraffe Show: Musical Conversations with Kids.” Dusty is a retired psychotherapist, author of Women Who Hurt Themselves and the Alice Ott mystery series. The duo has previously performed at UCC/New Smyrna Beach.

On Saturday afternoon, March 6, North Port Community UCC showed “Overcomer,” a new Christian movie (offered in lieu of its postponed annual retreat). CDC guidelines were followed.
Beginning Again in Boynton Beach

Boynton Beach Congregational UCC was “homeless” from February 28, 2020 to January 22, 2021, due to Certificate of Occupancy issues with the City of Boynton Beach. There were so many things that had to be fixed and corrected and worked on that it seemed the struggle for a CO would never end. But their long wait did. Pastor Rev. Jack Copas reports that on Friday, January 22, the City issued a much-coveted approval to use the space the church had been renting as a place of assembly. After having the floors professionally cleaned and the pews drilled down into the floor, they are now ready to worship.

Rev. Jack wrote his members:

“Do you believe that THIS church is needed to help make the world a better place to live? Do you believe that the Church should stand for all that is good and true? Do you think the Church is needed for moral and spiritual development? And do you believe that the Church is of God, the body of Jesus Christ? Then let’s take all this to another level. Let’s support the Church by our prayers, our service, our presence and our gifts.

I mean, seriously, what is the United Church of Christ anyway? Its mission is to bring the Gospel to bear on all situations, both personal and social. How can we do that in Boynton Beach? Simply stated, we can do that by helping people in need, by building, by reconciling, by working for justice and peace, by healing and by teaching. My greatest challenge is to help you to begin to believe in yourselves again and to ignite your alive faith.”

He went on to thank the many people who led the congregation through the “wilderness” over those these 11 months including the leaders and various members of the congregation, Conference Regional Minister Rev. Dr. Raymond Hargrove and a local Rabbi. Pastor Jack closed his message, “...God knows how much you did and I thank you all for your prayers and faithfulness. You never let your memories outdistance your dreams and that is why WE ARE here.”

Don’t Forget About Security

In an e-blast to members at Christ Congregational UCC/ Miami on February 26, Interim Pastor Rev. Candy Thomas updated news about two recent break-ins and robberies they have experienced. Steps have been taken to address this new reality with a security assessment and plans for implementation of recommendations to not be so vulnerable in the future. She met with a security professional and went over the list of things that were taken. Some of the items taken were things that could be easily sold for cash, which might indicate someone having an addiction. Others didn’t seem to make any sense—art supplies, fabric, instant coffee, a tea kettle, her non-blooming Christmas cactus!

Rev. Candy says she wonders about the person or persons who broke in. What motivated him/them to do this? Does he/they have any idea how much the necessary repairs of broken locks ($600), a new, big window, and equipment replacement are costing the church? What kept them/him from vandalizing when there was no one to stop them/him? She shared that she would love to know his/their life story and if the intersection of his/their life with CCC could somehow be transformed from a crime to a turning point in his/their life. Church members prayed for him/them in worship the previous Sunday and she intends to continue doing so in praying that out of the bad good may come.

On a more upbeat note, a lovely memorial bench and flower urns honoring Gloria Fuller are now in the Garden Chapel, with thanks to Joan Chandler for spearheading the project.
Clergy in a growing number of our Florida congregations have created blogs, which are discussion or information sites on the web offering posts on various topics. Here are a few of them you may wish to check out. If you know of others, contact Celebrate Florida (celebrateflorida@uccfla.org) and we’ll include them in future issues.

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


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

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


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

Rev. Jim Coyl (Pensacola Beach Community UCC): (www.lamesov.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/

Trustees at Hope UCC/Rockledge are doing a long needed update to the choir room — replacing the wallpaper with paint, repairing and painting the ceiling to name a few things. Also, Trustees have added to the room a wall hung TV, a table with DVD player to be able to use the room for classes or any instructional class that needs a TV. Thanks to Paul and Betty for the TV, Darlene the DVD player and Bob Munchbach the installation, these gifts of time, expertise, elbow grease and equipment, the church has been financially blessed.

The SEEKERS at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota invited church members during Lent to help relocate and redesign the church’s current butterfly garden to be more xeriscaped. The Saturday morning efforts will result in a new central feature: a blooming Geiger tree that would be a memorial to all those whose lives have been impacted by COVID-19. The goal is to complete the project by Easter, so the area can be dedicated on Easter Sunday. A bunch of volunteers showed up at the church on Friday, February 26, to spread 150 bags of environmentally-friendly mulch around the campus to help keep the weeds away.

Celebrating a Beach Location

In 2019, Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach entered into an extensive remodeling project, of which a major consideration was building upon the church’s location on the beach. This entailed “sand and surf colors” when it came to paint, carpeting and tile. It also meant that the entry Commons space should be bright, welcoming and allow for visitors to sit and meditate. To accomplish this, the church selected Lynchburg Stained Glass in Virginia to create beautiful, contemporary scenes from the Gospels using narratives built around water. Especially unique to this glass company was its use of opalescent glass, which maximizes the natural light according to the hour of the day and seasonal movement of the sun. In this way the beauty of the glass is appreciated when viewed on the approach from outside on the Pavilion as well as from inside in the Commons seating area.

The windows depict Jesus’ Baptism, the calling of the twelve disciples (count the fish), the calming of the storm and the Seven Gifts of the Spirit. The windows on either side of the entryway are a reminder of our individual gifts and their importance to share with the church, for the good of Jesus’ ministry.
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 RickCarson1@gmail.com.

SURE (Sarasota United for Responsibility & Equity) held a Zoom session in early March to prepare for a Nehemiah Action meeting on Monday evening, March 29, via Zoom to encourage elected officials to support the adult civil citation program that will ensure non-violent, adult misdemeanors do not become a part of a permanent record and instead provide services/treatment as necessary. First Congregational UCC/Sarasota is one of 25 congregations in the county that participates in SURE and Nehemiah Action. Church members participated in a Zoom discussion on five Thursdays during Lent of NonViolent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg to help learn a new language and ways to connect with our deepest needs and how to make requests of others.

Members from Coral Gables Congregational UCC joined 40 other congregations for the annual PACT Rally for justice issues via Zoom on Monday, February 22. At the follow-up PACT Nehemiah Action assembly (via Zoom and drive-in) on March 15, Pastor Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner sat on the stage the entire meeting while church members Noel Cleland served as stage manager, Rev. Lisa Le Sueur directed the officials and County Commissioner Eileen Higgins and Rev. Aaron Lauer each spoke on behalf their particular issues.

Members of First Unit ed Church of Tampa were involved in the Hillsborough County HOPE Justice Ministry Network Zoom meeting on Saturday, February 13.

Members of Fort Myers Congregational UCC celebrated an International Women’s Day celebration on Zoom and FacebookLive on Saturday morning, March 6. The “Helping to Forge a More Gender-Equal World” event was sponsored by the Women’s March Fort Myers & Lee County and NOW.

GOOD SAMARITAN CHURCH/PINELLAS PARK participated in the Fast (Faith & Actions for Strength Together) Rally in Pinellas County on Monday, March 8, hearing committee reports on specific solutions for affordable housing, mental health care and reducing unnecessary arrests. The follow-up Nehemiah Action assembly later in the month voted on the recommendations set forth at the FAST gathering.

Sunday Seminars at the United Church of Gainesville recently included “From Conflict to Connect: Building Bridges of Understanding” to address the process of peace-building with people of different of interests on February 7 and “Bridging the Divide” on March 14 to consider guidelines to facilitate depolarization, conversations and debates.

Witness Wednesdays have returned at Faith UCC/Dunedin.
The ARM of the Florida Conference

by Rev. Donna Cooney (United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine) SC2ER Facilitator

The “Establishing an Anti-Racism Ministry” resolution was presented before the annual Gathering of the Florida Conference on October 10 and approved unanimously.

The Anti-Racism Ministry officially began the journey towards restorative racial justice by meeting via Zoom on November 5 with Rev. Dr. Velda Love, UCC Minister for Racial Justice. One component that we agreed upon early in the process was that Sacred Conversations to End Racism (SC2ER) would be the model that we would follow on this journey.

ARM has been meeting regularly via Zoom and when participants come back together on Thursday, April 22 — after a Holy Week and spring vacation break — we will begin taking turns sharing “What We’ve Been Digging Into.” Suggested time for each presentation is 5-10 minutes and will be followed by time for questions, observations and suggestions.

Our hope is that these presentations will provide an opportunity to discover our individual areas of interest. Awareness of our diversity will strengthen our ability to share with local churches.

As you dig in, please be sure to vet your resources. Who are you learning from? What is their agenda? What sources are they drawing from? And using our centering questions of “What am I learning? How do I feel about what I am learning?” will add richness, depth and meaning to our stories.

Here is a TEDx Talks video which you might find helpful as we listen to one another: https://youtu.be/4BZuWrdC-9Q

Questions about ARM or interested in joining? E-mail me at dcooney236@gmail.com.

At Coral Gables Congregational UCC during Black History Month, the church recommended two programs. On Tuesday evening, February 16, and Wednesday evening, February 17, members were encouraged to watch the PBS special, “The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song.” On Tuesday evening, February 23, on Zoom, there was a conversation around the series led by Rev. Dr. Geoffrey Black, former General Minister and President of the UCC.

The Church of the Open Door Congregational/Miami considered itself fortunate to have for Black History Month Rev. Dr. Art Cribbs speak via Zoom on Sunday, February 28. His message was “Disarming Racism”.

The Tallahassee Friends (Quakers) invited members of the United Church in Tallahassee to join with them via Zoom on Tuesday evenings from February 9-March 9 in a set of five weekly study sessions aimed at advancing racial justice and healing in the community. Session themes included: white power, the invention of whiteness and white privilege; undoing the lie of Black inferiority, healing racial trauma; antiracism and cultivating resilience; “seeing” systemic racism. The sessions included questions for reflection and a facilitated gathering for listening and worshipful discussion.

The United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine shared ten brief videos focusing on “Teaching Hard History: A Framework for Teaching American Slavery” from the Southern Poverty Law Center. Also offered was a book study group on Saturday mornings via Zoom with conversations inspired by the book Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent by Isabel Wilkerson.

The question raised and attempted to be answered for Black History Month in February at Sanibel Congregational UCC was “Why bother?” Seeing Black History Month as an early precursor of Black Lives Matter, the church engaged in a three-part Theological Studies session on Zoom entitled “Acting Against Racism.” It reviewed the history of anti-racism work and looked at ways to participate in such efforts going forward utilizing lecture, videos and small group discussion.

This stained glass at Trinity UCC/Chicago, is the backdrop for this silhouette of Henry Louis Gates Jr., creator of the PBS series, “The Black Church.” We are so honored to have six of our UCC ministers featured in the series. Learn how you can watch the new series for free #BlackHistoryMonth #BlackHistoryMonth2021 #BHM #BHM2021 #BlackLivesMatter #BLM
The Board of Missions at St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota has chosen to enter the national discussion on race. It believes that being a predominantly White congregation, it cannot speak with great experience about race relations but believes it can educate itself about issues of White privilege. A sub-committee has been organized to explore the UCC’s race curriculum. The immediate goal is to offer short courses – online or in-person – to small groups.

To acknowledge Black History Month, the Racial Justice Ministry at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach provided links to the award-winning podcast, “Black History in Two Minutes (or so)” about E.B. Dubois and recommended “The Black Church” documentary broadcast on PBS. In an effort to promote inclusive consumerism, the Ministry suggested checking out The Green Book of Tampa Bay, which offers a comprehensive directory of Black-owned businesses in the region. The group’s Behavior Choice Tip #1 is “Don’t be silent about a racist joke. Silence is support.”

Faith UCC/Dunedin held a Zoom meeting on Monday, February 15, attended by 30 members, to discuss: “How does Faith United Church of Christ live out and demonstrate our commitment to Racial Equality?” The Leadership Team hoped that through this dialogue the church could determine what options are best suited to meet the commitment of the church membership. Interested members continued to meet to brainstorm more than 40 ideas for future action. One idea being considered is Pastor Rev. Mike MacMillan’s suggestion painting “Black Lives Matter” in yellow over the church’s front drive. A Racial Justice Core Team has been formed to decide priorities, determine costs and funding options, consider a proposed timeline and recruit members to participate in the various projects.

There were two programs at UCC/New Smyrna Beach to recognize Black History Month. The first session was a group viewing and discussion on Zoom on Thursday evening, February 18, of the PBS documentary, "Charlie's Place." The second session on Thursday evening, February 25, was the PBS program, “A Seat at the Table - STAY WOKE!”

During their Wednesday “Sacred Conversations on Race” during March on Zoom, member of First Congregational UCC/Sarasota watched of the PBS series, “The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song,” hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Members of Fort Myers Congregational UCC were invited to join Women’s March Fort Myers on a Zoom and FacebookLive event Sunday afternoon, February 21: “Black History/Black Present/Black Future.”

The Conversation on Race at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park began on Wednesday, March 24, a 10-week series reading Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do by Jennifer Eberhardt.

Committee to Assess Racial Equity and Inclusion in UCC National Setting

The United Church of Christ is seeking people who have worked in the area of racial justice to apply for a new ad hoc committee.

It’s the next step in a racial justice and equity assessment led by the United Church of Christ Board. The UCCB announced this latest step in a March 1 statement. It was signed by the Rev. Traci Blackmon, associate general minister for Justice and Witness Ministries, and Yvette-Michelle Wynn, UCCB chair.

To apply, people will need a resume, a sample of their racial justice work and a referral from their UCC Conference, Association or congregation. The deadline to send these by email to Denise Pittman, pittmand@ucc.org, is April 30. Click here for more information!

From e-Celebrate, March 3
Leaders of Sojourners, “Revolutionary Love” Movements to Keynote General Synod 2021

Two leaders at the crossroads of faith and justice will keynote the 2021 national meeting of the United Church of Christ.

Valarie Kaur — who draws on her Sikh faith and culture as a filmmaker, civil rights lawyer and activist — leads the Revolutionary Love Project, “where love is a force for justice.” Rev. Adam Russell Taylor leads Sojourners, an enduring social-justice movement based in the nation’s capital. Both will speak during the UCC’s first-ever online General Synod, July 11-18. Registration opens April 13, here.

Monday, July 12: Valarie Kaur

Kaur is the author of the widely acclaimed 2020 book, See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love. She will speak Monday, July 12, at 8pm. She herself is no stranger to UCC audiences. Just in the past year, she was a featured speaker in a June 30 webinar with Rev. Traci Blackmon, UCC Associate General Minister. It was part of the UCC’s ongoing “Tuesdays for Nurture” series. Her November 2017 TED Talk, “Three Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage,” has drawn nearly 150,000 views on YouTube alone. Kaur is a graduate of Stanford University, Harvard Divinity School and Yale Law School.

“‘Revolutionary love’ is the choice to enter into wonder and labor for others, for our opponents, and for ourselves in order to transform the world around us,” Kaur wrote in “See No Stranger.” “… Loving only ourselves is escapism; loving only our opponents is self-loathing; loving only others is ineffective. All three practices together make love revolutionary, and revolutionary love can only be practiced in community.”

Friday, July 16: Adam Russell Taylor

Taylor, an American Baptist and Progressive National Baptist minister, will speak Friday, July 16, at 8pm.

He has led Sojourners since November 2020. With an action arm and a magazine, its mission is “to inspire hope and build a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church and the world.” Taylor’s global career has included work as: Sojourners’ executive director and political director; leader of the World Bank Group’s Faith Initiative; Advocacy vice president of World Vision; Executive director of Global Justice, mobilizing students for human rights and economic justice “following a radical and revolutionary savior.” He is a graduate of Emory University, the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology. He wrote the 2010 book, Mobilizing Hope: Faith-Inspired Activism for a Post Civil Rights Generation.

Hands & Hugs

Across the Waters

Christ Congregational UCC/Miami received $330 in contributions from members to support the Church World Service Blanket the World with Love campaign.

Kids at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park are “reading to feed” by raising dollars to help reach monthly goals so Heifer International can purchase a flock of chickens ($20), bees ($30), an alpaca ($150) and a cow ($500). Members and friends of the church are sponsoring the children to read and this helps raise the money.
As a special holiday gift for clients of its Food Pantry, Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park church contacted the nearby Save-a-Lot store where it purchases much of its pantry food and asked the butcher to cut small hams costing $5 apiece. These were distributed on December 21 and 22. The church marked Super Bowl Sunday on February 7 with a Souper Bowl event in which members made a display of soup cans collected ahead of time to show on Zoom after Sunday worship. The donated cans could be brought to the Food Pantry later. The church also hosted a drive-up meal for members of the AIDS Partnership, providing the 26 meals and asking for donations of $5 or more to help the purchase of the food. The church reported that in December its Food Pantry was open 12 days and served a total of 1,557 clients in 516 households. The total number served in 2020 was 10,455, and the greatest number of individuals served in a full year previously was 3,187 in 2015.

St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota once again participated in the Venice CROP Hunger Walk, which took place on Sunday afternoon, February 28. The Walk this year had all teams walking on the same day but with their own routes and observing CDC guidelines.

Rev. Booth Iburg at Eternal Hope UCC/Fort Walton Beach reported in her weekly message on January 28: "Yesterday as we were serving lunch at Catholic Charities, I noticed a man in his car and the car had a Jamaican decal. As we were finishing and beginning to pack up, I saw the car again and a man got out. I 'assumed' he needed a meal as I said, 'It's your lucky day, we have one meal left.' He smiled and told me he has been here before and loves watching the meal and how we all interact to some extent with each other. He smiled and handed me a $50 bill to help with our feeding ministry. God always comes through when we are a little discouraged, and gives us a blessing that says 'keep doing God's work.'"

On February 5 the UCC at the Villages conducted another successful “drive by” food drive to support the Wildwood Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen. In four hours they collected 2,200 pounds of food and $480 in cash. Sanibel Congregational UCC continued one of its “drop-off food drives” on February 14 where drivers pull up into the church portico, pop their trunks or open the back door and the masked/gloved volunteers unload the donations with the driver/passenger not having to exit the vehicle. The food is split between F.I.S.H. of Sanibel/Captiva and the Gladiolus Food Pantry.

On Saturday, March 13, Faith UCC/Dunedin hosted a workshop on Zoom about the Immokalee Farm Workers and the Fair Food program. It focused on “fair food in the time of COVID-19” and why the Fair Food Program is so important and such an issue of social justice.

The Central Brevard Sharing Center received 480 non-perishable food items from Hope UCC/Rockledge on December 19 along with $200. On February 3 and 6 the church hosted a drive-through drop off food drive and collected 310 non-perishable food items for the Sharing Center. In partnership with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Brevard, Hope UCC continues to bless the students at Cocoa High School and their families through the Cocoa High School Fresh Market. Poverty is widespread in the high school, and through a partnership with Second Harvest Food Bank, the Fresh Market provides fresh produce and non-perishable food to the students every Friday during the school year. The market obtains the produce free of charge and buys the non-perishable food from Second Harvest at 19 cents per pound. In addition to being supportive of the Fresh Market, Hope volunteers to serve as “The Peanut Butter Church.” A bin in the narthex is the collection spot for the jars, and recently 35 jars of peanut butter and five “snack packs” were delivered to Cocoa High.

North Port Community UCC had a food drive “drop-off” for the Salvation Army on February 22. Operation Attack (a ministry of a local Presbyterian Church) receives food and other items for those in need from 13 Pinellas County congregations including regular donations from Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg.
First Congregational UCC/Sarasota is in its third year of providing a monthly meal at a local Lutheran Church. The meals are prepared by Sandy Smith and other church members bake the cookies. Church member Rev. Stephen Hoffman provides a written prayer in each box.

As part of its Aging Well Speaker Series, Naples UCC offered a mid-February Zoom presentation on “Aging Well: Eat Better – Live Better.”

The weekly Lunch Bunch continues at the Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton – though on Zoom. Wednesday at noon is a time to catch up with friends for about 40 minutes, sharing recipes, family news, books being read and activities being enjoyed.

In February Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC collected two full barrels of food for the food pantry at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park.

The Compassionate Care Team at Pensacola Beach Community UCC is having a “Setting the Easter Table” for the families of the Navy Point Elementary School. The goal is to feed 12-15 families by collecting food such as hams (canned/regular), yams, canned vegetables, mashed potatoes, jar gravies, etc.

Fort Myers Congregational UCC continues to be the go-to source for pasta and sauces for the South Fort Myers Food Pantry. Donations are placed in the brightly-painted newspaper vending box under the Portico, where food items are emptied daily.

The Food Pantry at Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte distributed 147 bags of food in February. In all of 2020 487 bags were handed out.

The recent early March drive-by at the United Church of Gainesville brought in 588 pounds of non-perishable food that was delivered to Gainesville Community Ministries along with three overflowing vehicles of essential items for the Gainesville Area Aids Project.

Several churches had “food-related activities” designed for Lent

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota encouraged members to pledge commitment to a more plant-based diet during Lent as the environmental cost to produce a plant-based diet is dramatically lower than that of a meat-based diet. “Meatless Mondays” was suggested as an easy way to get started. Helpful links to recipes were provided. Members were invited to celebrate World Water Day on March 22 with dinner and a movie: “Brave Blue World” (on Netflix), a documentary exploring radical innovations being pioneered by creative locals in areas facing a crisis of fresh water; a list of recommended vegetarian/vegan restaurants was provided.

At Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park, members were challenged to “go without to go with others!” by giving up one thing for 40 days – clothes, snacks, take-out meals, entertainment --, estimating how much you would have spent on these items and then making a donation in the amount to the church’s Food Pantry by April 4.

Caring

The following appeared in the February The Messenger, the newsletter of Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park.

Client C: This 55 year old homeless man has visited the Food Pantry once a week since the beginning of the pandemic. He is an engineer and was working fulltime. When COVID hit, his company was forced to downsize and his job was eliminated. He was able to find another position and worked only two weeks before that company was closed permanently.

Every week he came and shared with the staff at the pantry how his job search was or was not producing employment. He continued to receive food and always stated his gratitude. The Monday after Christmas, he was one of the first people there. His eyes were sparkling behind his mask and he very quietly announced that he had a job and would start at Home Depot on Tuesday. He shared that he was first hired as going to work in the yard helping with lumber and other things stored there. Then when it was noticed his experience as forklift driver he was asked to demonstrate his ability to operate it.

He said, “Not only did I get a job but I got a promotion and a raise before I even started.” We, his temporary family, stopped all we were doing inside the pantry and joined him outside, clapping and cheering his success. We encouraged him to continue visiting us until he was settled into housing. He stood a little taller as he walked away quietly saying, “Thank you for caring about me.”
3 Great Loves is a denomination-wide story telling initiative, collecting and lifting up the stories of our local churches and affiliates about how we are living out God’s love and expressing love of neighbor, children and creation — the 3 Great Loves.

From knitting clubs making hats for newborns, collecting food for food pantries, starting a recycling program at your church, standing together against social injustice — these are the stories of 3 Great Loves and no story is too insignificant to share!

In keeping with commitments made when the Florida Conference moved our office to 9300 University Boulevard in Orlando, we were certified as a wildlife habitat by the National Wildlife Federation. This spring, we are expanding on that commitment in cooperation with a local beekeeping organization and have placed a bee hive on property for the pollinating of plants on our (and other) acreage. Care for the hive is being taken by volunteer enthusiasts and is intended as an important aspect of creation care here in our neighborhood. Thanks to office assistant Dana Ney for bringing this project to fruition and for upgrading the plantings in our front garden to make this an even better project.

Adapted from e-Celebrate, March 17

Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte is participating in a Habitat for Humanity build, most recently by helping paint the interior of a home, the family being a single father with one child.

Why were members of Hope UCC/Rockledge saving plastic bottle caps? When it comes to recycling they get no respect and they are often discarded as recycling plants do not have a use for them. But novel research now underway at Florida Tech may lead to a new, important future for these underappreciated bits of plastic — with the Indian River Lagoon as the beneficiary. Mesh bags filled with bottle caps are being placed in strategic locations within the lagoon to allow “good” bacteria to grow on them. These good bacteria can convert and remove excess nitrogen from the lagoon through a process called denitrification, helping clean the water and contributing to the prevention of harmful algal blooms. The bags can be moved to other parts of the lagoon, with the accumulated bacteria helping improve water quality in whatever areas they are needed. The church collected and delivered over two pounds of these useful throw-aways. And to show they are as concerned about the land as the water, to acknowledge Earth Day the Justice and Witness Committee planted and blessed an oak tree in February.

Naples UCC offered a six-part book study via Zoom that began in February using Cathedral on Fire by Brooks Berndt. The urgency of the climate crisis requires that we act as if our cathedrals and churches are on fire. Indeed, God’s creation can be seen as one grand cathedral on fire with burning forests and rising temperatures. Amid this dire situation, the book focuses attention on the unique and vitally needed gifts that churches can offer. The book is written with poetic passion but also with an eye toward the practical as every chapter ends with suggested, field-tested actions. Also in February the Green Team held a Zoom presentation, “Recycling: What You Need to Know.” Now the Green Justice Team (GJT) is known as the Environment Subcommittee of the Justice Committee. The recent founding of the NUCC Justice Committee has highlighted the fact that engaging in justice ministry will require addressing many different issues. Recognizing that it did not need or want to be a separate group, the GJT asked to be affiliated with the Justice Committee as the Environment Subcommittee and will continue with the same mission statement: “We affirm the essential role Naples United Church of Christ must play in inspiring new behaviors and participating in non-partisan political advocacy to protect and sustain God’s creation.” Meetings are held on the second Thursday of the month via Zoom.
The Green Team at Sanibel Congregational UCC presented a Zoom program in February on “Regenerative Soils Regenerative Life” about the basics of soil health and how it impacts the ecosystem. In another February initiative, the award-winning film “Kiss the Ground” was Zoomed. Later there was an online workshop in March sponsored by TOGETHER – A Way Forward, which is an interfaith environmental initiative on Sanibel and Captiva Islands. In the three mornings of the workshop, participants were able to gain tools that were designed to ignite their active hope, increase their inner resources and help them experience their unique place in a life-sustaining society. The church is also partnering with Bat Yam Temple to enlist a few members to spare 20 minutes once or twice a week to read on Zoom with local students needing some support to be successful.

First Congregational UCC/Orange City threw a baby shower on April 18 to benefit the DeLand Pregnancy Center. Donations included items like diapers, blankets, socks and toys.

In reaching out to neighbors near and far, members of First Congregational UCC/Orange City participated in its Alternative Gift project that collected $497 for Church World Service and provided hygiene and baby kits and collected money for blankets for the UCC Disaster Program. The church is collecting food for “Back Pack Buddies,” a program working through the local schools that distributes food to families in need in Orange City where one in five children go hungry on the weekends.

The CIA Committee at the United Church of Gainesville invited members and friends to join in another “drive-by” donation event -- Valentine gift bags to brighten the lives of the homeless in Gainesville. It was held “after church” on Sunday, February 14, when volunteers transferred donations of suggested items to colorful handmade drawstring cloth bags that were later delivered to neighbors at Grace Marketplace and St. Francis House.

Jim and Mickey Moore come most Tuesday mornings for a couple hours to Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park’s nursery and pack 44 bags for food-insecure children. Twenty of the bags go to the Head Start students and the other 24 bags are distributed from the food pantry for children ages 1-11. They work alone in the room so they are safe from COVID.

The Communion offering that was received on Sunday, February 7, at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg was an important way to “love your neighbor” as the collection helped with rent, utilities, transportation and other basic needs for people in the church family as well as the community at large.

In honor of World Water Day at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota the Green Team at the church sponsored a speakers’ event on Zoom on March 21. The guest speakers were David Douglas, an expert on global water and sanitation issues, and Chester Trow, who is spearheading a drive to make good drinking water accessible to the homeless in St. Petersburg.

The Outreach Ministry at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach continues to participate in the ongoing, non-perishable food drive that benefits the food pantry at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park (a great example of covenant between our UCC congregations) and St. Pete Free Clinic. PAG is collecting new twin sheets, comforters and pillows for the local chapter of “Sleep in Heavenly Peace,” a group dedicated to building beds for children in need.

The worship theme at Coral Gables Congregational UCC on February 21 was “Again and Again: God Meets Us.” Member Celine Clark created a beautiful illustration from a line in Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner’s message, centered around these words: “There is nowhere we can go that God is not with us. Marnate in the vastness of that.”

Through the month of February Christ Congregational UCC/Miami collected donations to purchase blankets through Church World Service in memory or honor of a loved one to be given to those in need. (the cost of a blanket is $10). Christian Outreach sponsored this mission opportunity.

In 2004, the Clergy Letter Project began as a way for religious leaders to take a stand supporting both religion and science. As people of faith, they wanted to show their confidence in science, even as they remained confident in their religious belief. Through the years, this project gained attention and additional support. A yearly focus is encouraged during the middle of February to help congregations take a stand advocating for science and arguing that science is not a threat to religion. St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota joined numerous congregations of Christians, Muslims, Jews and others, to celebrate “Evolution Weekend.” At the heart of the worship service in which congregants thought and prayed about science and religion, they heard a Midrash (an interpretive retelling of scripture) on Genesis 1 written by member Roger Hooverman (who earned a PhD in nuclear physics from the University of Wisconsin and taught physics at Union College in Schenectady, NY)

Faith UCC/Dunedin is reaching out to its members for volunteers to help make its benevolence dollars count. The church has budgeted $500 per month to donate to organizations that would benefit from its giving, and volunteers can help ensure that the dollars are going to worthy causes through research to identify such recipients.
Creation Justice Webinar: Evangelical Christianity & the Climate Crisis

With the size and political power of evangelical Christianity, its relationship to the climate crisis is critically important. To address this subject, a Creation Justice Webinar featured Dr. Robin Veldman, author of The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelical Christians Oppose Action on Climate Change, and Kyle Meynard-Schaap from Young Evangelicals for Climate Action. The webinar was offered on Wednesday, February 10. To receive a recording click here.

Adapted from e-Celebrate, February 3

COVID Vaccination Help

Many seniors over 60 have been challenged in their efforts to sign up for the COVID-19 vaccine. We’re aware of the assistance being offered by some of our congregations to help members of their church families navigate the often confusing system to get vaccinated. Hats off to Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour, Spring Hill UCC, Sanibel Congregational UCC, Faith UCC/Dunedin and Naples UCC for being among the congregations lending a hand.

3 Great Loves

Self-Care, Hope & Empowerment

Using a grant it received last year for mental health care in a rural setting, the Turning Table program at the United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine is partnering with groups in the Black and Latinx communities of Putnam County to develop “self-care” programs. The focus is to use the grant to empower each community to create its own type of self-care programs. Based on conversations with the communities last year, the term “self-care” is being used in place of “mental health” to reduce stigma.

The goal is to help the organizations create two or three programs this year. One of the first created under the grant was a “Girl Talk Teen Retreat” on January 30 directed at Latinx girls. Two different groups in the Black community are also creating self-care events.

In addition, the Turning Table is supporting a new ministry called “SHE” (Self-Care, Hope & Empowerment) for women. This ministry will meet monthly for a year beginning in January and will be empowered with funds from the mental health grant.

Funding for these self-care programs will be supplemented by funds raised with the Naturally Tough 5k event.

Please send your 3 Great Loves story to Lynn and Sheila.

Students Benefit from Hygiene Drive

On January 23 Hope UCC/Rockledge’s Growth and Development Committee sponsored a drive-through drop-off hygiene drive to benefit the Brevard Schools Supply Zone in Cocoa. The 415 items collected were distributed to students pre-K through high school in 30 of the top impoverished schools in Brevard County.

Items included packages of razors, shaving cream, toothbrushes, toothpaste, dental floss, new underwear, feminine hygiene products, soap, body wash, shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, body powder, combs, brushes, hair ties, lotion, personal cleansing wipes, hydrogen peroxide and hand sanitizer.
Greetings to all from the officers and board members of Florida UCC Women. We recently held a Zoom conversation to discuss the status and future of the organization as well as to check in on the various women’s groups in the regions throughout the state. As you might expect, involvement and activities of the various groups vary widely from “nothing has been happening,” to online activities, to limited attendance in-person events to “our women are no longer meeting.” No matter the level of involvement you have in your church, all Florida UCC women are welcome to participate in our state-wide group! The pandemic has had an obvious impact on our endeavors planned for the remainder of last year as well as 2021. The Florida annual gathering of women, usually held in May, was cancelled for both 2020 and 2021. We will consider holding an event in 2023 if there is interest. The Southern Regional Conference gathering, originally scheduled for October 2021, has been rescheduled to 2022.

So, how can you continue to stay connected to the Florida UCC Women’s group now? Here are a few things you can do:

• Check out and join us as a member on the Florida UCC Women’s Facebook page (we are listed as: Fl. United Church of Christ Women).
• Check out the Florida UCC Women’s webpage – www.fluccwomen.org
• Participate in our Reading for Renewal program, which we are continuing and expanding this year. A new list of titles will be posted within the next two months. Our new Mission Study topic will be racial injustice.

In addition to providing the book list, we are working on setting up online book discussions. Stay tuned for updates about those discussion groups and how they will work.

We welcome any suggestions you have regarding the future of Florida UCC Women and/or ideas of what type of activities you would like to see the group consider. Please feel welcome to send those comments to me via e-mail (terric57@yahoo.com).

Stay healthy and connected!

UCC Women Around the State

The Women’s Retreat 2021 at the United Church of Gainesville, “Reset & Remerge,” was held on Zoom on the afternoon of March 13.

The Come Alive! women’s group at First Congregational UCC/Winter Park had an exciting virtual event on Sunday afternoon. The focus of the programming on that day was “Culturally Responsive Teaching: Becoming Aware of Implicit Bias and Microaggressions.” Guest speaker was Kelly Strykul, a public school teacher who also leads training on culturally responsive teaching.

The women’s retreat at Sanibel Congregational UCC on Wednesday, February 10, was led by Associate Pastor Rev. Deb Kunkel. The topic is “The Wisdom of Aging” and looked at what aging affords the opportunity to gain, especially with spirituality. It was a chance for women to share vestiges of their faith stories that shape where they are now as well as nurturing relationships and making new friends.

The Women Engage series at Naples UCC on Thursday morning, February 18, focused on “Mental Health and Addiction in Collier County: A Community Response” led by co-presenters from the Collier County Coalition for Health Minds. Covered were issues involving suicide and opioid addiction, learning about warning signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety and suicide and the role of faith communities in addressing them. The March session on Zoom was “Conspiracy Theories: What, Why and What to Do” led by Assistant Minister Rev. Dr. Sharon Harris-Ewing.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC held a women’s Lenten retreat, “What Light Shines Through,” via Zoom on Saturday morning, February 27. It explored the artwork, blessings and poetry of Jan Richardson, the art of Sashiko, time to refresh and share in Communion. A gift bag for participants was provided two weeks earlier that contained materials participants would need.

In Miami at Christ Congregational Church, the CCC Women’s February meeting was a book Zoom discussion of The Invisible Half by Brit Bennett.

Women of First Congregational UCC/Sarasota were invited by the Sisterhood of Temple Beth Shalom – their next door neighbors – for a Zoom meeting on Wednesday afternoon, March 3. The program was a “show-and-tell” in which each of the participants were able to share about an item of special meaning.

To celebrate International Women’s Day, members of Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park held a Zoom Pop-Up Event, “Trivia: Guess Who?” The Sunday, March 7, event was a night of education about historical women from many categories.


Essays, photos and artistic expressions are welcomed.

The Women’s Fellowship at Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte met in March 4 for a program that featured a biography on Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat who assisted in the relocation of Jews during World War II. This was part of a continuing series on Christians who changed the world.
Hope UCC/Rockledge held a combo outdoor bake sale, Christmas cottage sale, yard sale and blood drive on December 12. Over $2,700 was raised for its general fund — and the nine pints of blood donated will help save 27 lives. Upon hearing from a social worker of a mother and children moving into a home having no furniture, they were allowed to “shop” at the yard sale free of charge for whatever they needed. The social worker wrote the church: “It means so much for families to see that other people care and love for them! Life is such a struggle but when you know there are people behind you to help you, it makes your struggle a lot easier! I can’t thank you enough.”

Sunday worship at Sanibel Congregational UCC on February 7 was a pulpit exchange with Temple Bat Yam (which shares space with SCUCC). Rabbi Stephen Fuch’s sermon title was “How to Walk Humbly with Our God” based on Micah 6:6-8. Dr. John’s message was “Hot Lips, Cold Hearts.”

An account has been set up at the United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine to assist church members/friends and their families who are experiencing hardship related to COVID-19.

On February 7 members of the United Church in Tallahassee heard via Zoom an interpretation of the results of a congregational survey (Congregational Assessment Tool) that had been taken to assess congregant thoughts on the church’s health, its top priorities, strengths, areas that need attention and the type pastor to Call who would be a good fit. “Listening sessions” followed with a congregational meeting on March 14. At the United Church of Gainesville, the first set of survey results arrived in early February -- part of the church’s newly-adopted Three Year Plan. It is committed to periodically check in with each other to assess how well church programs are meeting the congregation’s needs for spiritual nurture, connection and accessibility. Members of Faith Family UCC/Brandon participated in a “town hall” type Zoom event on Sunday, February 21, to have an open discussion on the church’s future and its finances. Members were asked join in times of intentional prayers for discernment about their church and its path moving forward by participating in a weekly prayer service on Wednesday evenings with a special emphasis on this topic.

For Marge Miller, a member of Faith UCC/Dunedin and its Anam Cara Women’s Circle, lighting candles (or better yet for safety, battery operated tea lights) has become a regular practice for praying for people in need of prayer. Having a “lit” candle became a visual symbol that helped her remember. When a prayer request came, she decided to write the person’s name on a slip of paper (Post-It note flags work well) and attach it to the candle. As the number of candles increased, she needed to create a space in her home for them so she cleared a shelf over her desk where she spends a lot of time. She gathered up many of the artifacts collected over the years from various faiths – a mezuzah, menorah, hand crosses, nativity scenes, icons, Buddha, a singing bowl, smudge stick. All of this created an altar — a sacred space — that housed the candles. The
candles are lit for various needs – health issues, of course, but also for finding a job or an apartment or even a companion dog.

Naples UCC will be welcoming Rabbi Dr. Rachel S. Mikva as its 2021 Distinguished Speaker during worship when she preaches on Sunday, April 11. In preparation for her sermon, congregants are encouraged to read her book, Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and participate in a one-evening book study the week before. After worship she will continue sharing the message of her book in an afternoon lecture. Dr. Mikva recognizes that Scripture’s abiding relevance can inspire great goodness, such as welcoming the stranger and extending compassion for the poor, but its authority has also been wielded to defend slavery, marginalize LGBTQ individuals, ignore science and justify violence. She will share how these three faiths have transmitted their sacred stories along with built-in tools to do the necessary work of taking on dangerous religious ideas and fostering self-critical faith. Following on Monday her lecture is “Pursuing Justice and Peace for Israel and Palestine.” Rabbi Mikva is the Rabbi Herman E. Schaalman Chair and Professor of Jewish Studies and Senior Faculty Fellow of the Interreligious Institute at Chicago Theological Seminary.

Members of Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach were invited to donate new twin sheet sets and comforters in February for Sleep in Heavenly Peace, a group of volunteers dedicated to building, assembling and delivering top-notch bunk beds to children and families in need.

Spring Hill UCC will be holding its Rummage Sale and Flea Market on Saturday, April 10, and space is being made available for vendors.

It’s “Stewardship Mondays” at Fort Myers Congregational UCC where members are receiving a brief e-mail note every Monday with inspiration for becoming a happier – and more generous – Christian. As they write, “Stewardship is not about the church’s need to receive...it’s about the giver’s need to give.”

Due to COVID, North Port Community UCC had to shift gears when it came to its annual all-church retreat. Instead it offered an outdoor mini-retreat on Saturday, March 20, at historical Spanish Point in Osprey to reflect upon all that the church and its members have been through over the previous 12 months. There was a gathering time with Pastor Rev. Attila Szemesi followed by an on-your-own tour of the environmental complex. That was followed by a coming together for personal observations and discussions and the afternoon concluded with a picnic lunch.

The Drive-In Church at Faith Family UCC/Brandon on February 7 was a success, attracting lots of smiling faces and raising about $1,000 between offerings and its Super Bowl fundraiser.

Several of our congregations — including Faith UCC/Dunedin, North Port Community UCC, Faith Family UCC/Brandon and Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte — have come up with personalized face masks to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Be sure to make the print large enough to be read at a physically-distanced 6 feet!
Valentine’s Day worship at Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton was outside under shady trees. There was special music, individually-wrapped desserts for everyone. The children created beautiful Valentines to share with elders, some of whom live in assistance residences. Remembered were 17 lives taken three years ago at nearby Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School.

For Valentine’s Day, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota invited its members to send a valentine to the church members who are alphabetically before and after them in the church directory. And, if they wanted to take this invitation up a notch, it was suggested they send valentines to the people they usually sat around on Sunday mornings.

The United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine shared with its members in time for Valentine’s Day two videos of member Trish Maggio — professional singer and musical theater performer — and pianist husband Vince performing love songs.

Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner (Coral Gables Congregational UCC) remembered ahead of Valentine’s Day that one of her favorite moments in the life with her church family together as a congregation was five years ago when couples were invited to renew their vows to one another. She admitted that what could have been a pretty hokey event turned into one of the most meaningful occasions she had the privilege of sharing in over her many years of ministry.

Naples UCC offered an “Afternoon of Love” on February 14 that featured its Chamber Choir and guest soloists Javier Abreu and Rebecca Richardson sharing favorite love songs like “Moon River,” “When I Fall Love,” “Embraceable You,” “My Funny Valentine” and “My Girl.”

The United Church of Gainesville organized a “drive-by” donation event that gathered items to fill Valentine gift bags that would brighten the lives of those experiencing homelessness in Gainesville. A list of suggested items to drop off was provided, and the Youth Group gathered, sorted and stuffed the bags. More than 50 bags went to St. Francis House and over 100 to Grace Marketplace.

Autumn and Nina made Valentines for the folks at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg.
My name is Tony. I’m a member of the United Church UCC–DoC, A Peace and Justice Community. I’m also a member of the LGBTQ+ community. I wanted to share with you how the United Church has touched my heart.

My journey called me to find a church where I could grow and enrich my relationship with God. This journey took me to the United Church UCC-DoC. From day one I felt accepted, and I settled in right away.

It wasn’t until two years later that I came out as transgender. There were some surprised faces and many questions. Most did not even know. All did not care. My story brought us closer actually. UCC has an Open and Affirming covenant, meaning all are welcome here. No matter who you are or where you’re at on God’s journey, you are welcome here. I felt this straight in my heart into my soul! What? I can say I’m trans and not burst out in flames?

The accompanying picture depicts the hand of God coming through the clouds offering unconditional love. God offers that love to us freely. The picture is also a depiction of how the people of the United Church offer their love just as freely. I feel like I’m part of a family! So, as I accept what has been offered so freely, may I also pass that love onto the next!

Thank you, United Church, for accepting me as a part of your loving family! You truly are “A peace and justice community!”

From CONNECTIONS Newsletter, United Church UCC-DoC/St. Augustine, March 21

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<tr>
<th>DISCUSSIONS / SEMINARS / PRESENTATIONS WE’RE HAVING... via Zoom, or other livestreaming</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Take Control of Your Money &amp; Get Ahead in 2021” (Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour)</td>
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<td>“Words Can Bring Life and/or Death,” “Squandering the Gifts,” “Religious Institutions: What’s the Message?” and “Giving Up on Religion” (UCC/Fort Lauderdale)</td>
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<td>“How Christianity Became Christianity” (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)</td>
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<td>“Wisdom, Forgiveness of Nature, Speaking Up for the Voiceless and Helping Others Make a Difference” (Christ Congregational UCC/Miami)</td>
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<td>“Sojourner Truth,” and “The Life and Work of Flannery O’Conner” (Sanibel Congregational UCC)</td>
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<td>“Amanda Gorman’s Inaugural Poem” (First United Church of Tampa)</td>
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<td>“Legal Aid Service of Collier County: Ensuring Equal Justice for All,” “The Middle East: Sacred Ground for Three Religions,” “Aging of the Eyes: Macular Degeneration and Cataracts” (Naples UCC)</td>
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<td>“Journeying through Lent with the Coalition” Every weekday morning during Lent and Easter, the UCC ONA family continued to offer a contemplative service of Taize Morning Prayer at 9 and 11am in the Coalition’s Zoom Chapel, Monday through Friday. They also gathered at 10pm on Sundays for Compline—an ancient experience of prayer, silence and song at the close of day. Each service was about 20 minutes and drew from ancient Christian practices of daily prayer, although in inclusive, non-binary language.</td>
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| "Feed the hungry and help those in trouble then your light will shine out in the darkness and overcome it." 

Picture concept: Tony Datillo. Picture artist: RJ Royster |
BOOKS WE’RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER...
via Zoom, or other livestreaming

_Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents_ by Isabel Wilkerson and _The Invisible Half_ by Brit Bennett (Christ Congregational UCC/Miami)

_When the Disciple Comes of Age_ by Diarmuid O’Murchu (First United Church of Tampa)

_Bel Canto_ by Ann Patchett and _Things You Save in a Fire_ by Katherine Center (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park)

_The Dutch House_ by Ann Patchett, _A Long Petal of the Sea_ by Isabelle Allende, _Gateway to the Moon_ by Mary Morri and _A Yellow Raft in Blue Water_ by Michael Dorris (Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton)


_This Tender Land_ by William Kent Krueger, _Anxious People_ by Fredrik Bachman, _Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents_ by Isabell Wilkerson and _Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages_ by Phyllis Rose (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

_Florida_ by Lauren Groff, _Mother Country_ by Irina Reyn, _The Twenty-something Soul: Understanding the Religious and Secular Lives of American Young Adults_ by Tim Clydesdale and Kathleen Garces-Foley and _Just Mercy_ by Bryan Stevenson (Hope UCC/Rockledge)

_Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks_ by Diana Butler Bass (Faith UCC/Dunedin)

_Forward Together: A Moral Message for the Nation_ by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II

Sandy James-Nogai, the Librarian at Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda, recently reported: “We had seven people at Gilchrist Park for the first Book Talk Tea. It was so good to see everyone again and to share the books we have read over the past nine months. Everyone wore masks and social distanced and it worked well. “

_Lakewood UCC/ St. Petersburg_ now has a Little Free Library in front of its office, using a reclaimed and refurbished _Tampa Bay Times_ tabloid dispenser. It is stocked with a variety for all ages and tastes.

Youth Ministries

Youth Around The State

Rev. Talia Raymond hosted a Lenten study for teens via Zoom each Wednesday during Lent at the United Church of Gainesville.

Middle school and high school youth at Coral Gables Congregational UCC were able to participate in Lenten studies on Sunday. For middle schoolers it was _SENSE: Remembering the Life, Teachings and Resurrection of Jesus_, which was on Zoom Sunday afternoons. For older teens it was _The Awakened Life: Meditation and Mindfulness for High Schoolers_ that was held on Sunday mornings in the Courtyard.
The Christian Education Committee at Hope UCC/Rockledge put together activity packets for the families of its younger youth and their siblings. Contained in the packets were games, recipes, color sheets, the nativity story and crafts. The packets were hand-delivered or mailed during the first week of Advent.

The Toddler Tuesday program at Church by the Sea/Bal Harbour on February 2 featured a special appearance by a groundhog, who delivered a special message about being patient with God’s timing. On February 15 the story was told of Jesus’ own baptism. For Lent, Sunday School children were mailed coin collection boxes they used to decorate during virtual class as they learned about the role of stewardship, artificial candles (representing light) were sent to older children and stuffed doves (symbolizing the Holy Spirit) to the younger ones as reminders of God’s promise and the Children’s Chapel on Sunday, March 21, was a braided bread making class.

A Pop-Up event at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park on the fourth Sundays of each month is “Child-In-Us-All Chapel.” Here on Zoom all ages -- kids and their grown-ups and all who are young-at-heart -- are welcome to sing fun songs, dance together, color prayers and join in Biblical storytelling. Sunday afternoon, March 21, was “Fancy Night” at which everyone was encouraged to put on their fanciest outfits (however defined) for an time of playing games and reading stories. Fancy Night Packs were delivered to families ahead of time so they’d have everything needed.

The Faith Formations Ripples children’s group at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach has begun meeting in-person again. Kids ages three years through 6th grade can join (with masks!) to engage in activities, crafts and discussion. For those not ready to gather in-person, take-home materials are being made available.

PreK and elementary Sunday School at Coral Gables Congregational UCC offered “A Family Journey Through the Season of Lent” via Zoom. Packets of materials containing stories, questions and activities were sent to families.

Children at the United Church of Gainesville received an introduction to Ash Wednesday worship and Lent in a Zoom presentation from Rev. Talia Raymond on February 17.

The children at Pensacola Beach Community UCC are going through the alphabet, choosing a different characteristic and Bible verse each Sunday to help reinforced that characteristic – such as A for attitude, B for boldness, C for courage and D for discernment. The verses are short and can even be used as memory verses for family members to review during the week. As an example, D can be used for “discernment” and using Philippians 1:9-10 as the verse: “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” The session can end with an appropriate prayer such as “Dear God, Please help our students discern what is true and good, and give them the strength to live out your truth in love. Amen.”

It was Forty Days-Forty Items for Sunday Schoolers at Fort Myers Congregational UCC. For every day of Lent, kids were challenged to remove from their closets one thing they no longer wear, place it in a “trash” bag and at the end of 40 days donate the collection to a place that can really use the items. Also, Sybil Macbeth has been offering “praying in color” templates for Lent along with a lot of ideas about how to use them with examples.

Please send us your news.

We want to share your happenings with all our Florida churches.

Emails, newsletters, e-blasts are always welcome.

Send to: RickCarson1@gmail.com
The supply of COVID-19 vaccines is beginning to keep up with the demand, but there is a long way to go until all who choose to receive the vaccine have the opportunity. As people receive the vaccine there is a sense of relief when it is completed. One of our sons, who is an ICU nurse in Indianapolis, expressed that to me once he was done receiving his shots. He has been treating COVID patients since the beginning of the pandemic. I was able to get the vaccine through Publix; I also felt a bit of relief as well.

Getting your mind off vaccines and the virus is hard. The pandemic has changed every person’s life. Our hearts go out to those who have lost a loved one or have contracted the virus. The pandemic is a worldwide disaster, and one of the many issues people are dealing with is the emotional and spiritual toll on ourselves. The pandemic is not over, and the effects of the pandemic will be around for some time. If you find yourself struggling emotionally or spiritually, reach out to someone. There are qualified people that can assist others recovering from stress and trauma.

Not to add more stress to our lives, it will not be long until hurricane season is upon us and we need to turn our attention to preparing for when and if a storm will head our way. We all know what should be done ahead of time -- unless you are a new resident of the state. If you are new to Florida, talk with someone who has been here for several years. Towards the end of May, there will be ample information in print, television and online about preparing for hurricane season. This is a friendly reminder to begin your preparations: start your generator and make a list of things you need to stock up so when the tax-free days come nearer hurricane season you have a list ready. As always, the first question is, “Do I evacuate or shelter-in-place?”

Emergency Clean-Up Buckets

One thing your church can do to help is put together Church World Service emergency clean up buckets. The UCC national disaster ministry continues to offer a $250 matching grant if a church wants to put together buckets. Churches in Florida and across the country do this on a regular basis. Here is the link. 
https://www.ucc.org/disaster_ unc_matching_grants_for_cws_ kits_home_page/

Should your congregation put together buckets, there are two options that work best for the Conference. Designate a place to store them in your church facility. The second option is to find a warehouse locally run by a non-profit (like the Salvation Army) which may be able to store them. If you choose to find warehouse space, do that before the buckets are put together. It works well when a congregation stores the buckets locally. When they are needed in your area it is easier to distribute them.

Prior to Hurricane Irma in 2017 there were buckets stored at the Conference office in Orlando, and it was not a convenient place for the buckets to be stored for quick distribution. The church I serve in Naples, Mayflower Congregational UCC, had almost 30 buckets stored onsite. We brought them to the Lee County Salvation Army office shortly after Irma. There were several homes that flooded in Lee County near the Imperial River, and the buckets were quickly distributed. At Mayflower, once the buckets were used, we applied for another grant and have another 30 on hand ready-to-go. Another benefit is that your church makes local contacts that can come in handy should a disaster happen in your area.

The UCC Disaster Response

To learn more about what the United Church of Christ is doing nationally in disaster response, log on to www.ucc.org/disaster. The UCC has a new Minister for Disaster Recovery, Lesli Remaly, who brings a wealth of experience to the position. The UCC disaster response concentrates on long term recovery efforts partnering with other denominations and agencies pro-
Providing small grants and volunteer work trips. The work trips have been on hold since the beginning of the pandemic, and the UCC is still not encouraging people to go and help yet. It may be time to start thinking about a volunteer work trip in 2022. There is disaster recovery work to do in the Florida Panhandle and in other parts of the country. You may find out about places where you may go and work by logging on to the UCC disaster page. The site provides a wealth of information on a variety of topics the UCC works on and encourages people to become involved and use their gifts in disaster response.

Over the last few years, our state has had its share of disasters both natural and human-caused. If you are interested in becoming more involved with volunteer disaster response in the state — or maybe as a long-term volunteer through the denomination -- please be in contact with me at revalcoe@gmail.com. I would be glad to talk with you about your interests, gifts and talents. It would be helpful to have people from different parts of the state who are willing to volunteer and be appointed the person from your region.

We have seen the horrendous destruction and struggles of so many in Texas due to record-low temperatures, loss of power, snow, ice damage and so much more recently. Due to contributions to the wider church through Our Church’s Wider Mission, help has arrived in Texas on UCC congregational behalf to tend to those who are in desperate need.

Partners in Texas have already secured water, food, safe housing and clean-up but the need is far from over. If you would like to contribute to Texas relief, you are invited to go to the national UCC website here: www.ucc.org/giving/donate-now/general-donation/