

## In this issue



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**One pastor's trip to the Holy Land sparks thoughts about hope. See Page 3.**



**Kellybell UMC collects Thanksgiving food for local ministry. See Page 15.**

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# UMC to shine light of Christ through New Year Prayer Walk

By Jessica Brodie

COLUMBIA—This month, United Methodists will come together to shine the light of Christ in the City of Columbia and beyond

through a conferencewide New Year Prayer Walk.

The walk is designed to gather Christians in downtown Columbia to pray for collaboration, connection and community in the city

and state, something organizers say is sorely needed in the world right now.

“I pray our event will convey a spirit of genuine hope for Columbia and the state,” said one of the

organizers, the Rev. Ashley McCoy-Bruce, who serves as executive pastor of Columbia UMC.

The prayer walk will be held Sunday, Jan. 4.

See “Walk,” Page 12



## Spirited display

Nathan and other youth at Manning UMC, Manning, make Chrismon ornaments to hang on the Christmas tree in the church's sanctuary. The word “Chrismon” combines two words—Christ and monogram. Each ornament is a symbol that represents Christ in some way.

Photo by Kelly Gottheiner

# Year in review

A look back at the Advocate's 2025 pages, all filled with change, inspiration

By Jessica Brodie

As we gear up to start a new year, the *Advocate* has compiled a list of the major stories from 2025, a year

that brought everything from youth delegates at Annual Conference, a called Special Session, the inaugural cohort of the new Connecting Children in Worship and Prayer initiative

funded by the Lilly grant, and the first “official” same-sex wedding in a South Carolina United Methodist church.

Here's the month-by-month recap:

See “Year,” Page 11

# UMCSC transition teams begin work

By Dan O'Mara

Transition teams—established to implement changes approved at the special called session of the 2025 South Carolina Annual Conference in October—have begun their work.

On Oct. 18 at the special session, Annual Conference members voted to

reduce the number of districts in South Carolina to 10 from 12, and the Appointive Cabinet is working on finalizing the drawing of district lines. The newly formed Transition Teams are charged with working out the details of how to implement those changes.

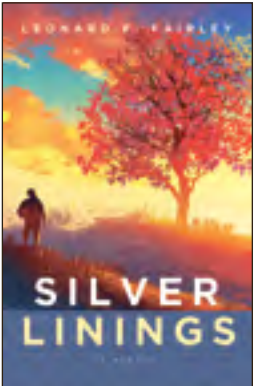
See “Transition,” Page 24

# Bishop's memoir earns accolades

South Carolina Bishop Leonard Fairley's memoir has only been out for a short time, yet it's receiving accolades calling the book “profound,” “touching” and “remarkable.”

Titled “Silver Linings,” Fairley's memoir is the riveting, inspiring and heart-wrenching coming-of-age account of South Carolina's bishop, who recounts his upbringing through the eyes of a young boy.

See “Memoir,” Page 24







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# Four new disaster recovery staffers hired

South Carolina Conference Disaster Recovery has recently increased its staff to better assist families recover from Hurricane Helene damage.

Four new people have been hired to help:

Joe Patton is the conference's new monitoring and evaluation specialist.

Theo White is the disaster recovery case manager serving in the Upstate counties.

Chan Spigner is the disaster recovery case manager serving in the Midlands counties

And Felix Truett is the disaster recovery case manager serving in the Lakelands area, which include Greenwood and the six counties around Greenwood County.

"We continue to partner and connect with local organizations and long-term recovery groups in many counties in the state," said Ward Smith, United Methodist disaster recovery director and construction manager for the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church. "We are striving together to help all the families needing assistance in their recovery from Hurricane Helene damage."

# Churches continue stepping up with food assistance

By Jessica Brodie

Many United Methodist churches throughout South Carolina have stepped up to bridge the ongoing food shortage facing the nation. Not only did they offer their regular, ongoing food ministries, but some significantly increased support and even hosted additional special collection drives.

Last month, as a way to help, the *Advocate* compiled a conferencewide list of food assistance available via South Carolina UMCs, which it distributed on the web and through social media.

Here are some additions to the list released last month. Find the full list at <https://advocatesc.org/articles/food-assistance>.

If your church offers a food pantry, blessing box or other similar program and you wish to be added to the list, send the details (including church name, address, city, what you offer, what days it is offered, other instructions, contact info, etc.) to [news@advocatesc.org](mailto:news@advocatesc.org).

**Anderson**  
St. Luke UMC, 607 E. Main St., Walhalla, offers a car-line pantry from 4:30-5:30 p.m. on the second and fourth Wednesday of every month. Volunteers bring food to people in their cars. On average, St. Luke feeds 220 families each time they offer the pantry. For more information: 864-638-3628.

**Columbia**  
Gilbert UMC, Gilbert, is supporting their local middle school by providing snack bags to students who may be experiencing food insecurity. Middle school administrators and counselors use the snack bags throughout the week for students to who become hungry while at school, as well as send food home with students for the weekend.

**Spartanburg**  
Gravely Memorial UMC, 7400 Lone Oak Blvd., Spartanburg, has a blessing box to the left of the church as you are facing it under a tree.



Gilbert UMC, Gilbert, volunteers meet weekly at the church to put the bags together and take to the school. "It is often the little things that make a difference and show God's love not just in words but in our actions," said Gilbert's pastor, Dr. Mark E. Thompson.

# Advocate survey to help newspaper improve, grow

How can the *Advocate* address your news needs better? How can we do better? What do you like (and don't like)?

The *Advocate* is working to more broadly understand the wishes and needs of its readers across South Carolina, offering a survey it hopes people will take.

"Completing the survey helps us better understand who our readers are, why they read the *Advocate* and how we can improve," said *Advocate* Editor Jessica Brodie.

To take the confidential survey, go to <https://advocatesc.org/survey>.

# New Hope helps HOPE, eNABLE offer 3D prosthetics

By the Rev. Jesse Rogers

Imagine you are a child who lost your hand because of an accident or violent injury. Perhaps you are the parents of a child who suffers a birth defect and is missing fingers. Maybe you are a homeless diabetic, and your leg has been amputated below the knee.

Where can you turn for help? What can you do to regain some semblance of a normal, productive life?

The doctors tell you that a prosthetic device can return the mobility lost, which gives you some hope. But then you realize that the cost of a prosthetic device ranges from \$3,000 to \$80,000. You cannot afford that kind of expense, especially since you either have no insurance or the policy you have will not cover it without an exorbitant and unaffordable deductible or copay. All your hope quickly fades, leaving despair and depression in its wake. What now?

An internet search offers a ray of hope when you come across an organization called e-NABLE, a nonprofit organization that uses 3D printing to manufacture custom prosthetic devices. The best part is they typically do not charge for the work or device. According to their website, e-NABLE is an online global community of digital humanitarian volunteers from all over the world who are using their 3D printers to make free and low-cost



HOPE Inc. members share how it works.

prosthetic upper limb devices for children and adults in need. The open-source designs created by e-NABLE volunteers help those who were born missing their fingers and hands or who have lost them because of war, natural disaster, illness or accidents.

There is a local chapter of e-NABLE at the University of South Carolina called Hands On Prosthetic Engineering (HOPE), Inc. HOPE is a nonprofit organization existing as a club of students who design and 3D print prosthetics in your community. The prosthetics are designed and created for free.

You will have no cost. Your hope rekindles.

On Nov. 16, New Hope United Methodist Church in Pomaria hosted two mem-

bers of HOPE Inc., Kavan Bojappa and Matthew Yvon, for the children's sermon portion of their worship service. Bojappa and Yvon showed the congregation some of the things HOPE creates and talked about how HOPE works to meet the needs of the community by supplying free prosthetics to children, the homeless and others.

After their presentation, a gift from the church of \$214.79 was presented to Bojappa and Yvon. The gift came from the church's Children's Change for Change offering. The gift will help purchase materials for the creation of prosthetic hands, fingers and feet for those who cannot afford them otherwise.

Jesus came to restore persons who were disabled in many ways. Matthew 12:9-13 provides an account of one such restoration. Scripture contains many more reports of Jesus' healing ministry.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to participate in his ministry to restore humanity. We may not all have the gifts of the students at HOPE Inc., but we can all support their work and the work of others in the e-Nable network.

If you know someone who needs help, reach out to HOPE at <https://handsonhope.ngo> or e-NABLE at <https://enablingthefuture.org>.

In doing so, you can rekindle hope for someone by helping restore the fullness of their humanity.





View from the “garden” looking outside on an Israeli settlement.



Dutch volunteer Rudi feeds the ducks, who live there along with chickens and doves.



Daoud shares about the ongoing struggle they face in their community.

# Pastor’s trip to the West Bank prompts reflection on hope

By the Rev. Tom Wall

*Editor’s note: This reflection is based on the author’s trip to that region in early November.*

Just 10 kilometers south of the birthplace of Jesus, Bethlehem, is a Palestinian Christian farm that has come to be a place and symbol for solidarity with those who are struggling to hold on to their land, their hope and their dignity over the last 75 years.

Known as the Tent of Nations, people from many countries come to learn firsthand about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to engage in dialogue from the perspectives of the three Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

The 100-acre farm is situated on a hilltop in the West Bank in Israeli occupied territory, where during the past several decades, Palestinian land has been stolen by the Israeli government to make room for five large Israeli settlements. A number of Palestinian communities and towns are interspersed. The towns go back to biblical times.

I discovered on my recent trip to the Tent of Nations that there was an outpost of some 15 new Israeli settlers homes just outside the fence that surrounds the farm. On my previous visit two years ago, the houses were not there. The land had recently been stolen by Israel from Palestinian farmers who have no recourse to challenge or fight for the occupied land. Sometimes land is taken through Israeli courts, and sometimes the land is taken by brute force. If the Israeli army is not enough to resist, Israeli settlers have proven to be even more violent and formidable foes. The land grab continues unabated, even accelerated, since the Israeli-Hamas war.

On the farm, volunteers come to help with practical chores. I fed the chickens, ducks and doves and watered newly planted olive trees. (Water has to be brought in via large tanks. Israel will not give water

to the farm. The 15 new settler homes all have running water.) Others were pruning mature olive trees and tending the vineyard. A few were working on the infrastructure.

On my earlier visit, it took only about 15 minutes to get to the farm, but now Israel has blocked the primary road and it takes at least 35 minutes to come the back way. Also, yellow painted gates have been installed between the various Palestinian villages. Without notice, a road could be closed making life even more difficult.

The Israeli army and settlers have erected signs at the gates. They read, “No future.” The strategy is to demoralize Palestinians and drain any hope they may have about a future of freedom and abundance.

In a meeting with Daoud Nassar and his family, they talked with great passion, pain and hope. Their family has had the farm for more than a hundred years. They have documents from the time of the Ottoman Empire in 1917 that prove their ownership. They have been fighting a legal battle in the Israeli courts for decades to keep their land. The worry now is that Israel will take it forcefully under the guise of security needs.

Daoud, a man of deep faith, explains the principles that guide them in the present peril for the long struggle. He says that even though the signs at the checkpoints say, “No future,” they choose to believe that the future is in God’s hands and that they are called to persevere and not lose hope. And he said that they do not return the violence against them but, like Jesus, they choose non-violent love. Once they choose violence, they give their enemies an excuse to expel them as a security threat.

Daoud’s older brother, Dahir, gives us a tour around the hilltop farm. We hear the Israeli jet fighters overhead. We enter one of several underground caves on the property. A similar cave only 50 meters away is where he and his parents lived for many years.

The cave we enter is a place of interfaith dialogues and meetings. The acoustics are wonderful, and one of the members of a Dutch group starts the group in singing. Dahir then interjects his song choice and leads all in a rousing rendition of “Joy to the world, the Lord has come ... .” (It’s November, and Christmas is coming.)

It struck me then that Bethlehem, Jesus’ birthplace, is only six miles away, and some traditions speak of Joseph and Mary’s inhabiting a cave where Jesus is born. I tried singing with greater urgency: “Let earth receive her King.”

The presence of our group of 10 international volunteers is helpful in running the day-to-day operations of the farm. But more than that, it is a Christian gesture of solidarity that shows the Israel government and the settlers that many others in the world are standing with those who are oppressed by injustice and violence. We don’t always realize how we can become icons of hope for the people who often feel deep despair.

Life in the West Bank is precarious and fragile. The future is uncertain. “How long, O Lord?”, people in Palestine and in all ages of suffering have cried out. The Palestinians and, yes, many Israelis, lament and invoke God’s reconciling presence. “The time is coming ... the time is coming,” says the Lord through Jeremiah.

In the meantime, feed the chickens, weed the vineyard, prune the olive trees, pick the almonds, embrace one another in solidarity, shout out so the world will know what is happening and sing Christmas songs of hope. May earth receive her true Sovereign.

*Wall, the pastor of Cayce United Methodist Church, Cayce, is putting together a young adult group to visit the West Bank in the summer 2026. Email him if interested at wallbrodie@gmail.com.*

## UMCSC to join others to help 500 Central Conference students pursue theological education for ministry

The South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church will join congregations across the world in an initiative to raise money for The Endowment Fund for Theological Education in the Central Conferences.

From now until May, churches are being encouraged to collect funds to support this one-time special offering across the entire denomination. The collection will culminate in what they’re calling Miracle Sunday on May 17.

The Rev. Faye Jones is South Carolina’s conference coordinator for this campaign, which is a joint effort between the Council of Bishops, Connectional Table and General Council on Finance and Administration.

Through the initiative, 30,000 congregations and their pastors worldwide are urged to do a special offering to help support 500 students annually to prepare for pastoral ministry across Africa, Europe and the Philippines.

More than a special Sunday, it’s a

bold movement of faith and generosity designed to raise funds to equip 500 people across the denomination who desire to pursue a theological education as they answer God’s call to ministry.

On the days leading up to Miracle Sunday, every congregation will have an opportunity to learn and embrace this mission and sow into the future of the church and help shape the next generation of leadership.

South Carolina churches and ministries can support this work by mailing a check to the conference office made out to South Carolina Conference Treasurer with “Miracle Sunday” in the “for” line. The address is 4908 Colonial Drive, Columbia, SC 29203.

An online opportunity to give can be found at [https://www.umcsc.org/miracle\\_sunday\\_donation](https://www.umcsc.org/miracle_sunday_donation).

For more information about the initiative, visit <https://www.endowftecc.org> or <https://www.endowftecc.org/worldwide-appeal-and-offering>.

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Advocate.

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Editorial  
by Jessica Brodie

More of him and  
less of me

As we go to press on the *Advocate* this month, my heart is preparing for Christmastime, when we celebrate the birth of our savior and the salvation he brought to us all who believe. My mind also turns toward the coming year and the new start we all have.

Many of us are considering resolutions—plans and goals we establish for right living this year. Maybe we resolve to exercise or eat better. Maybe we resolve to implement a new and deeper prayer practice or other spiritual growth activity that we believe will help us draw closer to the Lord. Plans and resolutions can be good, certainly. And there’s nothing wrong with taking care of our bodies, the earthly temples for our souls. It’s important to care for ourselves so that we not only respect the gift God gave us, but are better able to do God’s kingdom work. And there’s certainly nothing wrong with intentions for deeper spiritual practices.

But this year, I’m realizing a new thing: these resolutions, these plans and intentions that we sent for the coming year, are orchestrations that come from the self. These are things that we in our minds, and in our hearts, determine to do. Maybe they stemmed from an idea the Lord planted in our hearts, but they still stem from our own will, our own plans to do a thing, to set a course.

This year, instead of making resolutions, I want to stop for a minute with all the plans that I am making. Instead, I want to start simply opening my ears and my heart to how the Lord wants to steer me. Instead of *my* vision for how this year should go—how I believe I should be treating my body or what new habits I should take on or give up—I want to get out of my own mind. I want my mind instead to be consumed by the Lord.

Just like the strings section of an orchestra strives to tune itself to the concertmaster, I want my heart to tune itself to my creator.

I want more of him and far, far less of me  
I’m a human being, and of course I have a mind of my own and a will of my own. By nature, I’m going to want to make plans and strive to resolve.

But I’m learning the more I can rely on the Lord, the more I can tune my mind and heart to him, the better off my soul is, the more peaceful I feel, the more godly my actions become and the more mercy and compassion I display.

This “more of him and less of me” mentality naturally begets all the righteous living I would’ve wanted anyway—for inherently the Holy Spirit in me wants me to treat my body well, to get enough sleep, to move more and eat well, and to devote more time to prayer practices.

I wish you great peace this year, my friends. Let’s never forget that everything starts and ends and encompasses the Lord, now and forevermore.

Reflection topic for February *Advocate*

Why is honoring Black history important?  
Share with the *Advocate* at [oped@advocatesc.org](mailto:oped@advocatesc.org) (include church name/city).



Bishop’s Column  
by Bishop Leonard Fairley

A new thing

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”—Isaiah 43:18-19 (NRSV)

If we are honest with ourselves, we would admit that new beginnings are not always easy, and New Year’s resolutions are never easy to keep. But begin we must, even with all the unknowns that might await us.

There is something inherent in new beginnings that leads us to new places, new people and new possibilities. However, beginnings can be frightening.

John O’Donohue writes, “Beginnings often frighten us because they seem lonely voyages into the unknown. Yet in truth, no beginning is empty or isolated.”

The courage to take the next faithful step is the greatest challenge. We become content with yesterday because it seems easier to navigate what we

think we already know, to stay with the familiar, to stay safe within the boundaries and stay the same.

We were never meant to stay the same. Every new year, every new day is a new opportunity to paint something amazing and different on God’s canvas of the soul.

This is indeed a day of new beginnings where we can grow. There can be no growth and no new thing if we do not remain open and vulnerable to what is new and different.

Beginnings are new horizons that long to be seen and lived. What are the new things, the new beginnings God is calling you to see and live into in 2026?

God’s new thing waiting to be born in us requires us to have faith and courage to take the first step. Sometimes it is not the big steps, but small committed steps that lead to God’s new thing.

Start this 2026 journey not as a resolution, but as simple acts of faith each day.

Correction.

In the article, “Grove Hall Celebrates Pastor’s Anniversary” (December <i>Advocate</i> ), we	mistakenly noted that the Rev. Virginia Stafford was ordained, but it should have noted she was	licensed. We apologize for this error and, as always, strive to set the record straight.
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Letters to the Editor.

**Loving our refugee neighbors**  
My response/reaction to the *Advocate’s* focus question of the month (December 2025): How can my church show love for our refugee neighbors?

This question had little chance of being answerable, starting about 12 months ago, but today, it is not applicable. First thing is that I, personally, do not have a church, as such to invite anyone in, except the South Carolina Annual Conference. My comments will be based on that understanding. Secondly, I/we do not have any refugee neighbors anymore. A bunch of folks who call themselves the government have rounded them up, put them in cages and forcibly taken them to other countries (without due process). Some have been taken to countries in which they have never been or lived. This club of renegade wannabe dictators are so carried away with themselves that they are snatching citizens off the street and from their homes who have been in this country longer than most of them.

So I offer this little bit of advice; you may need to pull back on your sunbathing a little or altogether for a while. There seems to be a problem, especially with Honey Browns or Black Beauties, and many still cannot grasp the fact that stupidity comes in all shades. Sometimes, there are those who do not enjoy the privileges they have that they did not earn or deserve; they are so busy trying to keep others from the privileges they rightly deserve and have earned.

Imagine, if you will, if we were the nation we claim to be, the people God made us to be, the disciples we confess to be. The thought would not require reflection, because it has already been answered in our guidebook, Scriptures/the Bible: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to


walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8 NIV).  
What we could have done when we had refugee neighbors was to choose rightly to ensure that justice and love prevail; for “when the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn” (Proverbs 29:2 KJV). We can undo what we did or did not do.

First thing is to clean up what we messed up. Not simple; an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! Now that we are getting the message, God may move and prove that he is still in charge of our lives. I believe he will; I see the signs of the judgment. “No man (or woman) is above God’s law. Rich and poor must give an accounting for our deeds.”

May God have mercy on this nation and its people whom we love. Please hear our prayers!  
*Rev. Joseph Abram Jr., retired  
St. Matthews*

**Spiritual care**  
There is a health care crisis in our country. People are living longer, and the Baby Boomers are aging and having more health problems. This puts stress on the health system.  
There is a shortage of doctors, and physician’s assistants and nurse practitioners are used more. Hospitals and clinics are closing, especially in rural areas. Millions of Americans will suffer.  
The Republicans’ tax law slashed Medicaid for as many as 15 million Americans. Millions more will see their premiums more than double. Medical research and the promotion of vaccinations has been reduced or canceled. Many families cannot receive care for their elderly family members in skilled nursing facilities.

See “Letters,” Page 5



4908 Colonial Drive, Suite 207,  
Columbia, SC 29203  
803-726-6743  
[info@advocatesc.org](mailto:info@advocatesc.org)  
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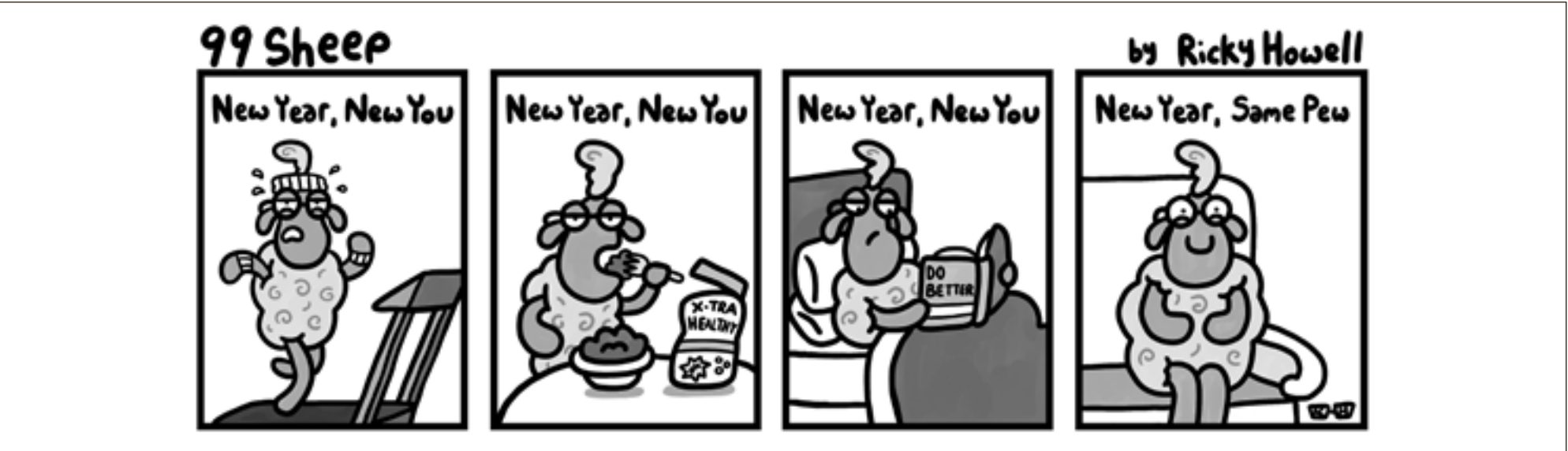
**Staff**  
Editor: Jessica Brodie  
[jbrodie@advocatesc.org](mailto:jbrodie@advocatesc.org)  
803-735-8772

Assistant Editor: Allison K. Trussell  
[atrussell@advocatesc.org](mailto:atrussell@advocatesc.org)

Marketing Coordinator: Katy Renfroe  
[krenfroe@advocatesc.org](mailto:krenfroe@advocatesc.org)

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Commentary  
by the Rev. Steven L. Brown

All the world in motion

God spoke, “Let there be light ... .”  
And light exploded and creation began. Planets were formed and galaxies assembled, and the earth began to move. Slowly it made its way around the sun, one year at a time, spinning on its axis, each and every day with the moon close by.  
Stars were formed during those early days of creation, bright stars and red stars, comets and constellations, supernovas and shooting stars. Land was shaped and placed, mountains erected and valleys carved out, continents and islands and deserts scattered across the earth. Rain fell, oceans filled, streams wandered, and rivers set in their courses. Fish swam and birds flew, bugs crawled and snakes slithered, elephants plodded and horses ran.  
People were fruitful and multiplied as they populated the world, traveling and trading, farming and building. They were nomads and explorers, warriors and merchants, farmers and metal smiths, city dwellers and nation makers. Civilizations rose and fell. Nations conquered and were conquered. Hour glasses ran. Clocks ticked. Bells tolled. Days, weeks, months, years and centuries passed. Time marched on.  
And one star, whose light may well have been formed from the first days of creation, sent its light out from light years away, making its way across space and darkness until it found its way to an eastern sky. It was seen by wise men, who mounted camels and gathered servants. From there they trekked for months across the desert and through the valleys, following a star and seeking a king.  
Caesar spoke, “Let all the world be taxed ....”  
And nations moved. Peoples of Italy and Britannia and Cyrene began journeys to their homelands to be counted. Africans,

Egyptians and Israelites made their way back to the ancient cities of their ancestors by boat or donkey or on foot. The world stirred and people groaned, a forced trip not of their choosing.  
And a young couple, Nazarenes from Galilee, made their way by weeks and hills to David’s birthplace. They moved about from place to place, looking for a rest stop, a shelter, a stable.  
Unseen by human eyes, angels swiftly flew from heaven’s throne. How long do angels take to move—hours, minutes, seconds or the beat of their wings? And as they sped from heaven to earth, shepherds moseyed their way to pasture lands. They led their flocks, stopping and starting as the sheep ate and wandered, as they followed a meandering path to a safe place for the night. They traveled together on a Bethlehem night.  
All the world in motion from heaven to earth. Across time and space, time and eternity. Planets revolved and comets soared. Through night skies and desert sands, over mountains and through rivers, people moved and they traveled. Seconds and hours, days and weeks. Months and years, centuries and lifetimes. Boats, caravans, donkeys and feet. Onward, forward. Miles and miles, light years and angel breath.  
Stirring, walking, plodding, shifting, ever moving, ever going and then ...  
All the world stops ...  
And holds its breath ...  
To hear a baby’s cry.  
Might we, in the midst of all our moving, doing, traveling and living,  
Stop ... And listen, too ...  
That we might hear God’s Word to us.  
*Brown is the Marion District superintendent.*



Commentary  
by Minister Anna S. Bright

A new year call for the believer

As we stand at the threshold of a new year—2026—the question before every believer is not simply, “What do I want to do differently?” but rather, “Who do I want to become in Christ?”  
The world celebrates the turning of the calendar with resolutions that often fade by February. However, for the believer, the new year is a sacred opportunity to pursue spiritual transformation, not temporary adjustment. The Apostle Paul speaks directly to this in Romans 12:2, ESV: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”  
Notice Paul does not call us to slight improvement, but he calls us to transformation. Transformation means change that is visible, intentional and ongoing. If we claim Christ but refuse change, then we are only wearing a Christian label without living a Christian life. As believers entering 2026, there are changes we should want to see in ourselves. We should want deeper prayer lives, not prayers we rush through while checking our phones, but prayers that linger in God’s presence. Some of us pray longer deciding what to watch on Netflix than we do talking to the Lord. We should want a greater hunger for God’s Word, recognizing that Scripture is not just inspirational; it is transformational.  
Paul further reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV): “There-fore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” If we are truly new in Christ, then old habits, attitudes and reactions should no longer feel comfortable. Growth means we become less quick to anger, less eager to gossip, less willing to compromise and more eager to forgive, more willing to love and more committed to holiness.  
The change God desires does not stop with us. As believers, we should also desire to see change in other people’s lives, not through judgment or self-righteousness, but through Christlike influence. When our lives reflect patience, integrity, humility and grace, others begin to notice. Some people may not read the Bible, but they read us every day! The new year should move us to ask some thought-provoking questions: Am I growing spiritually, or just aging faithfully? Am I influencing others toward Christ or blending in with the world?  
As we step into 2026, let us not ask God to bless our unchanged lives. Instead, let us surrender to the kind of change that glorifies him. May this be the year we do not just make resolutions, but experience renewal. When we allow Christ to change us, the change does not end on the last day of December. It carries on into eternity.  
Always abound in the faith, and never leave home without Jesus!  
*Bright is a member of Isaiah United Methodist Church, Walterboro.*

LETTERS

From Page 4

ties because of lack of finances. They are rejected and turned away.  
Jesus couldn’t afford his own tomb, and neither can thousands of people in this country. A modern funeral costs around \$7,000, while the median savings for Americans in 2025 was \$8,000, with many people living and dying with far less (Sojourners, November).  
Let us wake up and realize people will get sick and need medical care. We need to treat every life with

love and dignity. Who are the health advocates? As a Christian pastor, I believe we are to care for the sick and their loved ones.  
Billionaires, members of Congress and the president have health care. Insurance companies want the premiums to rise. Is health care just about money?  
There are insurance eyes, medical eyes and spiritual eyes. As Christians, we are to realize the dignity and worth of every life. There is a medical wilderness, and as Christians, we are to love and care for the sick. Christ says to care for the sick as he did.  
Let there be healing.  
*Rev. John Culp, retired  
West Columbia*

Advocate submissions sought for new ‘Precious Pet of the Month’ feature

Do you have a pet who is near and dear to your heart? Share a photo and brief story about your pet and what they mean to you in the *Advocate*.  
Whether your animal friend is furry or has feathers or scales, we welcome your submission. We’re hoping to begin this new ongoing feature next month.  
Email [news@advocatesc.org](mailto:news@advocatesc.org).





Humanity Behind Bars by the Rev. Nichole Middleton

Called to protect

We live in a moment where the cost of living rises faster than wages, where political tensions overshadow compassion and where systems meant to protect are strained. In seasons like these, the most vulnerable among us are often forgotten—their needs eclipsed by louder debates and competing priorities.

Yet it is precisely in times of instability that we must ask: Who do we, as people of faith, feel responsible for? Who are we called to protect?

Among the most overlooked are people returning home after incarceration. They face a world where opportunity is limited, housing unstable and meaningful employment scarce. The cost of living continues to climb while pathways to stability shrink. When society defines “the vulnerable,” it often looks past those who have already paid their debt and are striving to live differently. We must ask: Who stands with them when systems fail? Who shows up when the world turns away?

I see this daily in my ministry behind the fence—people shaped by mistakes, poverty, trauma or lack of opportunity, preparing to reenter a world where doors remain closed long after the gates open. Even small setbacks—a denied rental application, a job requiring a clean record, a missed appointment caused by unreliable transportation—can have large consequences. One unexpected bill can unravel months of careful progress. In these moments, hope becomes fragile, and faith can feel distant.

It is here that the church is called to model a different standard—the standard Jesus taught. Christ’s call does not measure worth by past failures, social standing or marketable skills. Scripture reminds us that God reaches for the lost, the overlooked and the weary. When we embrace this calling, we do not simply offer assistance; we take part in transformation. Every act of presence, every resource shared, every mentoring relationship is a sign that the church still embodies hope.

This work is not only advocacy—it is discipleship. To welcome and support those returning home is to reflect the mercy we ourselves have received. It is to trust that grace can build stability where chaos once reigned. Caring for the vulnerable is not optional, nor does it depend on political deals or economic headlines.

Human systems will always fall short. Yet the church can show up where structures falter. We can build bridges to stability—employment guidance, safe housing, mentorship, prayer and spiritual formation. We can offer steadiness where uncertainty dominates.

In doing so, we model a faith that is tangible and relevant. We become agents of transformation.

Though the world may define vulnerability through politics or economics, the church must recognize God’s definition: the least, the last, the overlooked and those longing for community. When we act on that calling, we testify to a God whose love transcends headlines and past missteps.

May the church see those returning home not as statistics or as “formerly incarcerated,” but as children of God—worthy of dignity, compassion and the chance to thrive. And in a world of rising costs and uncertainty, may our faith create the stability that society so often cannot provide.

Middleton is an elder in the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, endorsed by the United Methodist Endorsing Agency for prison ministry. She serves as a chaplain in the federal prison system.

‘Building Bridges Across Generations’

Registration continues for February conferencewide men’s retreat at Journey

By Jessica Brodie

COLUMBIA—Men across South Carolina are gearing up for two days of men’s ministry inspiration, fellowship and spiritual renewal.

The Men N Ministry conference-wide spiritual retreat is slated for Feb. 20-21 at Journey United Methodist Church, Columbia.

Held in tandem with a Boy Scouts Jamboree that weekend, the event will lift up the theme “Building Bridges Across Generations.” It is inspired by Psalm 145:4, “One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts,” and Luke 22:31-32, where Jesus says, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (NIV).

Dyron V. Anderson, president of the South Carolina

Conference United Methodist Men, said he’s excited about the event and what it will do in the lives of men.

The event kicks off Friday, Feb. 20, with a daylong golf tournament at The Spur at Northwoods Golf Course, followed by a “Cigars and Scriptures” fellowship event at 6 p.m. Friday at Journey.

The Saturday event starts around 8 a.m. with a full day of preaching, teaching and praise. Speakers include South Carolina Bishop Leonard Fairley, along with the Revs. Tyler Strange and Martin Quick, United Methodist pastors and authors.

Other guest speakers include the Revs. Jason Wilson, Matthew Alexander and Mallory Forte Nickerson.

The cost is \$90 for the golf tournament, \$20 for Cigars and Scriptures, and \$65 for the main event.

Local church sponsorships are available.

To learn more or register, go to <https://www.umcsc.org/men>.



Commentary by the Rev. Cy Rogers

We won

About the LGBTQ+ issue, we won! That doesn’t mean we got together to celebrate with barbecue, fireworks and flags. But we won big; everyone knows we won! It was like a successful divorce. People may want to be subtle about it, but how can we be when everyone knows we won?

And I love how the conversation has changed since we won. It used to be about emotions and stories and drama and feelings and manipulation and lawfare, but we won, and now we can claim we were right all along. Our history will reflect that we won; with winning comes being right. If the Japanese has won the war, it would be their version of the story that we would claim as true today; to the victors belong the spoils, and the truth.

Of course, it was a fight, and fights have a purpose. The purpose of this fight was to avoid negotiations on both sides. Why didn’t we want to negotiate? Because negotiation requires us to give up something, and we didn’t want to give up anything; both sides wanted a complete victory, and that is what half of us got. We won, they lost, and that is all that matters!

We wanted to defeat the other side, as they did us, regardless of the costs. And that is what we did—we crushed them!

And along the way, both sides suggested that the people on the other side were less Christian than they were; that’s what happens in a back-alley fight. By the time this church fight ended, some on the other side surrendered; others we allowed to leave, providing they paid for the churches they had built. Others left the UMC for other denominations, and still others just gave up on churches. They asked for terms, but we gave them none. We didn’t have to; we won!

And then, through the Judicial Council, and God’s love, we made sure they had no future recourse,

as they would have done to us.

But right or righteous, it came at a cost. To win, we had to bring in the heavy guns, and like we did to Japan during the war, the damage was substantial. Churches were split, churches were wounded, churches were killed, churches left; we are all casualties. But not to worry—a new glorious time is coming, assure our bishops. It is just around the corner!

But now comes the difficult part. Do we pay reparations to those in the LGBTQ+, who, for years, were discriminated against?

In our big churches, are we prepared to appoint openly LGBTQ+ people? Of our 10 district superintendents, couldn’t at least two be LGBTQ+? And how about an openly gay bishop?

After all the talk, does anyone really think that one *Advocate* story about a same- sex marriage is enough? At least the *Advocate* did something. On the other hands, our cabinet has done absolutely nothing. It makes me suspicious; are our leaders afraid?

Why can’t we celebrate this victory with series of stories, or a special conference celebrating the LGBTQ+ contributions, or at least a special service at the Annual Conference honoring the LGBTQ+ community? Why are our leaders so quiet?

Wasn’t this whole thing about opening our churches and pulpits to LGBTQ+? Wasn’t it a justice issue? Didn’t we win?

Why are all the people, who had so much to say before, saying so little now? Didn’t anyone tell them we won?

I feel for the good people of the LGBTQ+ community. For the last 60-plus years they have been seeking equality, only to be denied it, once again, at the last minute—not by law, but rather because of the lack of courage on the part of our leaders.

And why are we not talking openly about this? Is it that we are afraid to admit that our inclusiveness has boundaries? Is our openness determined by our level of comfort? For all the talk before, why is it that now our leaders are as humble and quiet as church mice?

And why haven’t we given LG-BTQ+, like we have others, a million dollars? And why is it that, under our present bishops’ watch, we have lost millions of members? For what?

On the other hand, we won. Maybe now we can start talking about Jesus again and the bigger problem that creates!

Allow me to explain. During the fight, we allowed many people to speak, all except Jesus. The reason: We really didn’t want Jesus in this fight.

The way we maneuvered against each other—and suggested trash about each other, and used church law against each other—shows we didn’t want Jesus in any of this. That is why both sides, as we fought, gagged Jesus and put him in a corner, and made sure he never had a chance to speak.

And isn’t that exactly what the Temple authorities did to Jesus?

And just imagine what Jesus would have said. Maybe he would have told us to have communion together. Or maybe he would have told us to forgive one another, together. Or maybe he would have told us to love one another, especially those with whom we disagree, together.

But now, we are no longer together; now we sit at different tables. Can you imagine what a disaster it would have been if Jesus had been allowed to speak?

So finally, the good news: Jesus still loves both sides!

*Rogers is a retired South Carolina United Methodist elder now living in Mint Hill, North Carolina.*



Small church, big effort

In spite of the church's small size, members of Green Pond UMC, Smoaks, gathered to allow their social hall to be used as a rest stop for individuals participating in the FestiVELO Bike Event in November. Riders come from around the country and even internationally to ride one or more days of this event. There are riders of various levels of ambition and skill represented; they ride as many as 400 miles over the course of the weekend. Members of the church not only exhibited hospitality for the riders, but also got to learn a little more about them while riders enjoyed food, hydration and needed personal items. "It was heart-ening to watch all the regular attenders spend their Friday doing small things with great love," said their pastor, the Rev. George Palmer Hudson. "It was a kingdom moment."



Commentary  
by Sandy Thrasher

Dancing into the  
new year: a United  
Methodist people  
living in love

As we step into a new year, I keep thinking about who we are becoming as a people and as a denomination. The United Methodist Church has walked through a long season of change, and yet here we stand, steady and rooted in love.

Our mission reminds us of who we are called to be: The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully and lead courageously in local communities.

That mission is more than a statement. It is who we are at our best. It is the heart of the church I am proud to call home.

Over the holiday, I wore my "by our love" UMC shirt while out running errands. A woman stopped me and said, "I see you're from that church that separated." I smiled and said, "No, ma'am. I'm from the church that stayed. We stayed to love all God's children." She paused, looked at me, and then asked, "So you're still a United Methodist?"

I told her proudly that I am. I explained that we stayed because we believe in loving and serving others without question and without condition. We chose to remain solidly rooted in the belief that God's love includes all people. Every single one.

She stood quietly for a moment and said she hadn't thought beyond the separation part of what she'd seen in the news. Our conversation was pleasant, and before we parted ways, I invited her to come visit and see for herself what we are all about. When she walked away smiling, I remembered that sometimes a single conversation can shift a heart and change perspective.

I am grateful for our stance as United Methodists, grateful that we strive to love like Jesus and grateful that our welcome extends to all people.

We include. We love. We serve. We move forward together.

I also keep returning to something Bishop Leonard Fairley said in one of our first gatherings with him: "It's time to move from mourning to dancing."

Those words have stayed with me. Friends, look at who we are right now. Look at what God has brought us through. Look at what we hold in our hands as a denomination committed to love, service and hope.

We have every reason to step into 2026 with joy. We have the brightest and best light within us, the light of Jesus Christ, ready to shine through our daily lives, our ministries and our churches.

So here is my prayer and my challenge for the new year: Let us lay down the mourning and dance. Let us walk into this next season with joy, courage and the deep conviction that God is not done with us. Let us see every person not just as a neighbor or a stranger, but as a beloved child of God.

After all, we will never look into the face of someone God does not love.

May this be the year we live boldly, serve joyfully and lead courageously as one United Methodist people. Good things are ahead. Let's dance.

Thrasher is the Anderson District lay leader.

Alston Wilkes Society celebrates partnership,  
service, community at 2025 annual meeting

COLUMBIA—The Alston Wilkes Society gathered supporters, partners and staff from across South Carolina for its 2025 Annual Meeting, a celebration of service, collaboration and impact.

The event honored both internal team members and statewide agency partners whose dedication strengthens communities and helps rebuild lives.

AWS President and CEO S. Anne Walker opened the program by highlighting the organization's mission: serving justice-involved individuals, veterans, the homeless and at-risk youth through hope, accountability and second chances.

AWS internal awards

Walker presented the organization's top internal honors, recognizing exemplary service and commitment:

- Linda J. Allen Employee of the Year: Ashley Poston
- Barbara L. Rippy Part-Time Employee of the Year: Kenneth Parker
- AWS Volunteer of the Year: Long Branch Baptist Church's Break-

fast at the Branch Ministry

- Parker Evatt Veterans Home Volunteer of the Year: Freddie Brown Jr.

Agency partnership awards

AWS also celebrated outstanding public servants across the criminal justice, social service and law enforcement sectors:

- Federal Probation Officer of the Year: Daniel R. Schirra
- SCDC Olin Sanders Correctional Officer of the Year: Fonda Elaine Champion
- Mark Hart Probation, Parole and Pardon Agent of the Year: Jonathan Griffith
- DJJ James W. Sparks Youth Worker of the Year: Colleen Dempsey
- DSS Case Management Professional of the Year: Christie Hillers
- SCLEOA Law Enforcement Officer of the Year: Marc Miramontes
- South Carolina Trooper of the Year: Lance Corporal Chase H. Sprott

Each award was presented by

agency leadership, underscoring the deep connections between AWS and the professionals who work daily to support vulnerable individuals and safer communities.

A focus on wellness  
in law enforcement

Keynote presenters Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott and Director of Wellness Allison Farrell shared insights on the growing need for mental health support within policing. They introduced CJ, the Sheriff's Department's Crisis Intervention Dog, who provides comfort and grounding to officers experiencing trauma and stress.

Their message emphasized resilience, compassion and the vital role of wellness programming in public safety.

The event closed with gratitude for all who support AWS's mission statewide. From reentry support to veterans services to crisis intervention for youth and families, the organization reaffirmed its commitment to rebuilding lives and strengthening communities across South Carolina.

South Main Chapel & Mercy Center  
Restoring hope by helping one neighbor at a time

By Elizabeth Hiott

At South Main Chapel & Mercy Center in Anderson, ministry looks like compassion in action; shared meals, warm showers, steady relationships and stories of lives being rebuilt through grace and community.

One of those stories belongs to Jeffery, a man whose journey reflects the heart of South Main's mission.

Jeffery arrived at South Main unhoused, without identification and struggling with serious medical conditions that prevented him from working. While staying at the Salvation Army shelter, he began the long and uncertain process of applying for Social Security Disability Insurance, something that can take months or even years to complete. During this vulnerable season, South Main Chapel & Mercy Center stepped in to ensure he was not navigating it alone.

Through community support and ministry partnerships, Jeffery secured a safe place to live at a local transitional housing program designed for individuals in recovery, facing disability, exiting incarceration or experiencing homelessness. With help from South Main, he gained stability, case management support, spiritual care and renewed hope. Today, Jeffery is not only housed—he is healing, rebuilding and rediscovering the dignity he deserves.

Stories like Jeffery's are possible because of the daily ministry that takes place on South Main Street. Each week, the center serves neighbors facing homelessness, food insecurity, addiction, poverty and mental-health challenges by providing:

- Two hot meals Sunday–Thursday

- Showers, laundry and clean clothing
- Case management and benefit assistance
- Job and housing support
- Spiritual care, counseling and recovery groups
- Transportation to work through the Ride to Work Anderson program
- A safe, welcoming community where every person is seen and valued

South Main is more than a church; it is a living expression of United Methodist connectional ministry. Its work continues through the generosity of local congregations, individuals and supporters who believe every person is a beloved child of God.

South Main invites churches and community partners to upcoming events, including the recent Longest Night Service Dec. 21 at 6 p.m., a sacred time of remembrance for neighbors who have died while experiencing homelessness.

In May 2026, South Main will also host "Everyone Needs a Mammaw," a dinner honoring the women who have shaped and sustained our lives.

Through ministries of presence, compassion and practical support, South Main Chapel & Mercy Center is offering what so many desperately need, not just help for today, but a pathway to dignity, stability and restored hope.

To learn about supporting the ongoing ministry of South Main Chapel & Mercy Center, go to <https://southmainmercy.org>.

Hiott is the South Main Chapel and Mercy Center ministry associate.



## New Life launches ‘Advocate News Correspondent’ position

One church in the Walterboro District is launching a new servant leadership role designed to help the *Advocate* in its mission to share stories about God’s church at work in the world today.

New Life United Methodist Church, Walterboro, is launching its “*Advocate* News Correspondent” position, a unique position that connects their church family with the broader life of the South Carolina Conference and shares the Gospel through fresh, community-focused storytelling.

The *Advocate* News Correspondent is a dedicated liaison who gathers monthly news from congregational life

at New Life UMC. They are responsible for sharing timely updates with the *Advocate* for inclusion in both online and print outlets and are part of a proud tradition of journalism and faith-based communication that strengthens connection within the UMC.

New Life’s inaugural *Advocate* News Correspondent is India Jewel. A lifelong member of New Life UMC, she brings a wealth of experience and heart for service as an Army veteran, prayer warrior, Communications Ministry team member and vice president of United Women in Faith.

New Life UMC said this new role arose from a highly informative Listening Session led by Editor Jessica Brodie, Assistant Editor Allison Trussell and Marketing Coordinator Katy Renfroe.

New Life said the position matters because it strengthens community through transparent, timely communication; expands the church’s voice beyond Sunday services; elevates the Gospel by sharing stories of faith, service and mission in action; and engages both young and old readers with relevant content and dialogue opportunities.

“We celebrate Sis. India Jewel stepping into this pivotal role and invite everyone at New Life UMC to support and engage with the *Advocate* News Correspondent as we tell the stories of faith in action,” said the Rev. Angela Ford Broughton, New Life UMC’s pastor.

“Let’s grow together in connection, conversation and the Gospel.”



Jewel

## Aldersgate opens community ‘Peace Parlor’ during Advent

SUMTER—In recognition of the second week of Advent and its focus on welcoming the Prince of Peace, Aldersgate United Methodist Church opened its newly transformed Peace Parlor to the public from Sunday through Friday, Dec. 7-12.

The Peace Parlor was open daily from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The Peace Parlor was designed as a free, quiet and welcoming space where anyone in the community could pause, rest and reflect during the busy and often demanding holiday season. The room was intentionally curated to offer a calm, warm atmosphere for:

- Parents and caregivers on the go
- Local professionals needing a break
- Students and teenagers seeking stillness
- Community members desiring a peaceful pause

Light refreshments were available to nurture the body, mind and spirit. Visitors stayed for a few minutes or lingered longer. The hope was that all who enter would experience what Scripture promises in Psalm 46:10: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

“We created the Peace Parlor as a gift to our neighbors,” said Dr. Regina H. Moore, Aldersgate pastor. “Advent is a



The parlor served as a peaceful space to escape.

season of holy anticipation, and it often becomes a season of hurry. This space is our way of offering an invitation to breathe deeply, slow down and encounter peace.”

Safe Sanctuary and security protocols were in place throughout the week to ensure a safe environment for every guest.

## Williston UMC member, Bamberg Salkehatchie co-director named DonorsChoose Teacher Ambassador

The Barnwell County School District has named Deborah Edwards as a DonorsChoose Teacher Ambassador, a prestigious volunteer leadership role supporting teachers nationwide.

Edwards is an active member of Williston United Methodist Church, Williston, as well as co-director of Bamberg Salkehatchie, in addition to teaching at Williston-Elko Middle School.

DonorsChoose is a nonprofit organization that empowers the public to support public school classrooms. Teachers across the country use the platform to create project requests for the materials and experiences their students need. These requests are then fulfilled by donors, as well as corporate and foundation partners.

Since its founding, DonorsChoose has delivered more than \$1.8 billion in resources to classrooms across



Edwards

92,000 schools nationwide and continues to bring vital funding to school districts like BCSD.

To expand its impact and reach more classrooms nationwide, DonorsChoose

partners with outstanding educators who are passionate about helping their peers access classroom resources and funding opportunities. Edwards answered this national call and was selected from thousands of applicants to serve as a DonorsChoose teacher ambassador.

In this volunteer leadership role, Edwards will collaborate with teachers across Barnwell County School District and throughout South Carolina to guide them in creating and

posting successful DonorsChoose classroom projects.

“I am honored to serve Williston-Elko Middle School and BCSD as a teacher ambassador,” said Edwards. In the six years that I have been a part of the DonorsChoose community, 40+ ideas have become fully funded realities for our students. Working together, we are making a positive impact on our future”

Edwards’ service as a teacher ambassador reflects her deep commitment to public education, her school community and her belief in the limitless potential of every student.

“We are thrilled to have Mrs. Edwards represent our district and our state in this national program,” said Dr. Crissie Stapleton, BCSD superintendent. “Her leadership and commitment to her students and colleagues are truly inspiring.”



### Shared joy

Tabernacle UMC and Grace-Lynnwood UMC, Lancaster, held a fall fellowship event at Cane Creek Park Oct. 26. Pastor Kendall Healy led an outdoor worship service, and the choirs from both churches joined to sing. After the service, both churches enjoyed a fellowship meal and games on the lawn at the park.

Photo courtesy of Jodie Plyler

## Stallville hosts Christmas brunch at low-income senior facility

SUMMERVILLE—Members of Stallville United Methodist Church brought their annual Christmas fellowship to Redemption Towers in Summerville Dec. 5.

Food, music, fellowship and laughter filled the room as they hosted the annual Christmas brunch at this low-income senior living facility.

Stallville has been associated with Redemption Towers since 2018. They deliver non-perishable food items monthly as part of The Daily Bread Ministry. They also hold an annual summer ice cream social.

For the Christmas brunch, Stallville members brought and served a wide selection of food items prepared with loving hands to support the social lives of the residents and let people know that nobody will be



Stallville and Redemption Towers friends enjoy the brunch.

left out of Christmas cheer. The event was organized by Harriet Bechtol, leader of The Daily Bread Ministry, with the assistance of Alice Guertin, a resident and Stallville member. Accordion music was provided by

Stallville Music Director Sherry Pedersen.

There was a spirit of joy at the event, which included a visit from Santa.

The seven-year relationship between Stallville and Redemption Towers has also included monthly birthday cupcakes and transportation assistance for residents. This outreach has been rewarded with good feelings between the church and residents and has spawned several friendships.

The monthly food deliveries are part of the Stallville Daily Bread Ministry, which includes a blessing box and emergency food bags for the community. Stallville shows they love their neighbors by looking out for their local community.





During Wesley Chapel’s altar call, five young men dedicated their life to Christ



Delicious foods were a special part of the festivities, and all enjoyed a time of fellowship.



The parish’s combined Umoja Choir performed for all three occasions with fire and spirit.

# HDCP homecoming celebrations become time of unity

By Paulette Lunn

The heart of a parish is the cooperation and collaboration among its churches to further the Kingdom of God to create a community of love and faith that inspires and uplifts. At the “heartwarming” Hartsville District Cooperative Parish, October marked the homecoming celebrations of two of our three churches, St. John and Wesley Chapel United Methodist churches.

These gatherings exemplified the connection of community and presented a visible and tangible testament to faith and relationship. While unity is promoted, it is also the conduit to discover history and sustained legacy of the ancestral pioneers who built neighborhood strength despite the many obstacles that cluttered their path.

Each church honored the longevity of their temples, with St. John UMC celebrating 158 years of service and Wesley Chapel UMC commemorating 150 years. Each church proudly presented their growth as progressive units that are flourishing within the confines of a parish distinction.

With the benefit of holy friendships, these three

churches have forged a sense of unity with a shared sense of purpose and common values that elevate Sunday worship and propels their mission goals with passion, compassion and faith. These homecoming ceremonies highlighted the track record of a resilient people who persevered because of strong ties and enhanced standards.

Leading up to homecoming for both churches was Revival Week, where guest pastors infused the services and the congregations with a deeper push towards the true meaning of reverence. The parish’s combined Umoja Choir performed for all three occasions with fire and spirit. The common celebration of worship served to solidify God’s love for his people and the congregation’s profession of one faith.

Memorial tributes, family group competitions for fundraising, music ministry, community visitors, guest pastors, youth participants, the Man and Woman of the Year awards and delicious foods were all a part of the festivities reinforcing each church’s foundation. During Wesley Chapel’s altar call, five young men dedicated their life to Christ, highlighting the power of the Holy Spirit, which brought in new disciples.

The “heart-filling” accomplishments of each con-

gregation was inspired by their communication with God through his Word and their historical relationship. With exceptional sermons as their guide, each church spotlighted the goodness of God through devotion and community.

New Providence UMC, the third of this religious trinity, opted to close the doors of their church to join in the festivities of their sister churches. Sacrifice is also a vital part of the unity chain, and it was illuminated throughout the parish with partnership and trust.

Through fellowship and mutual encouragement, our parish finds the togetherness and support that it needs to continue to be successful. Philippians 2:2 expresses one of the principles that the parish is moved by: “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

For five years, shepherds Dr. Reginald Lee, senior servant, and the Rev. Lyndon Alexander II, associate pastor, have lead the “heartwarming” Hartsville District Cooperative with distinction. Through their leadership, the parish once again exhibited the qualities of love, faith and trust that are essential to move forward as one.

# Fall Pumpkin Patch sales at Carteret Street UMC top \$50,000

By John R. Brooks

Each fall, the grounds of Carteret Street United Methodist Church are filled with pumpkins, a sight familiar to Beaufort-area residents, who visit each year to buy pumpkins for the fall season.

This year, the congregation’s Pumpkin Patch sales—which included pumpkins and gourds of various types and sizes—totaled \$50,420.53.

This was the 25th year of the Carteret Street UMC Pumpkin Patch, which opened Sept. 21 and closed Oct. 31.

The pumpkins are provided to the congregation through a partnership with farmers at the Navajo Indian Reservation in Farmington, New Mexico. Because the Pumpkin Patch sales exceeded \$30,000, the congregation can keep 40 percent of the total, or \$20,169, said Ellen Fabian, administrative assistant for the congregation. Carteret Street uses its share to help fund youth ministry programs, she said.

The remaining funds from the pumpkin sales are returned to the Navajo Reservation.

Congregational members and staff volunteered to help staff the Pumpkin Patch, which was open seven days a week. Several school groups visited the patch, along with local residents and out-of-town residents who recalled visiting the patch when they were young. Each Wednesday evening, a story time for children (and adults) was held at the patch, staffed by volunteer readers. Pumpkin Patch visitors were provided with a short description of the partnership and a list of the congregation’s upcoming worship and social activities through the end of 2025, plus the 2026 dates for vacation Bible school, popular with many families in Beaufort.

The unemployment rate in the area where the pumpkins are produced is more than 40 percent, according to the congregation’s description. This project and others like it create about

25 full-time and 550 seasonal jobs, and nearly 100 percent of the people who produced the pumpkins are Native Americans.



This was the 25th year of the Carteret Street UMC Pumpkin Patch.

Photo by John R. Brooks

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Photos by Kelly Gottheiner




Christmas in Manning

Manning UMC, Manning, enjoys celebrating Advent in a big way, with caroling, Christmas parades, Advent readings and other holiday activities throughout the season. Pictured in top two photos, youth participated in the Manning Town Christmas Parade, held this year on Sunday, Nov. 30. In center two pictures, Manning members visit the crèche festival at Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Berkeley County, Dec. 2. At bottom left, the United Methodist Men hosted a large Christmas party in honor of the women of Manning UMC. At bottom right, a church member lights the first Advent candle, accompanied by an Advent reading.



A grand homecoming

First UMC, Marion, celebrated Homecoming Oct. 12. Many friends, families and church members gathered in attendance for this special occasion. The Rev. Joe Long, First UMC's pastor from 2004-2012, was the guest speaker for the event. Church members could not recall the date of the last FUMC homecoming, but all agreed Homecoming 2025 was a wonderful day.



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Top three DVD resources used in 2025 (seven tied for third place):

- 1. "Almost Christmas: A Wesleyan Advent Experience"
  - 2. "What Does It Mean To Be United Methodist?"
  - 3. "The Message of Jesus: Words That Changed the World"
- "The Book of Romans" (Efird Bible Study)  
"Because of Bethlehem"  
"Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple"  
"Jesus Revealed: The I Am Statements in the Gospel of John"  
"United Methodism 101 Updated Version: A Discovery CD-ROM"  
"Wesley and His Times"

The South Carolina Conference UMC Resource Center is your connection to DVDs and seasonal musicals. We are here to serve your church family. To reserve resources, call 803-735-8798 or visit <http://www.umsc.org/resource-center>.

Little Swamp's Harvest Night continues 'Lord's Acre' tradition

On Nov. 23, Little Swamp United Methodist Church, Smoaks, gathered for Harvest Night—a service of worship including giving thanks, special music and singing, a shared meal and fellowship.

Harvest Night has been a tradition at Little Swamp UMC for more than half a century. Birthed in the model of the "Lord's Acre Movement" that originated in Bluffton, Georgia, in 1922, this celebration has been a staple for this rural, farming community.

The original social movement had



The tradition has gone on for more than 50 years.

members setting aside one acre of farmland and donating the proceeds of "The Lord's Acre" to the church. Now, that has expanded beyond farmland to include pledges of a percent of income, projects of donated time and service and other items.

The proceeds have been used for building projects, ministry and more.

"Lord's Acre" has expanded from a single congregation in Georgia to an international and interdenominational phenomenon, even being featured in Time Magazine.

Mount Zion in Kingstree brings community together with annual Christmas Cantata

By Toni Strawther

For 18 years, Mount Zion United Methodist Church in Kingstree has hosted a Christmas Cantata.

The cantata began in 2007 when musical director Kendrick R. Huggins had an idea to bring the community together through choirs, musicians and narrators to tell the Christmas story.

"I saw the need to incorporate different styles and genres of music—traditional hymns, contemporary gospel, classical arrangements and even a few surprises to glorify God," Huggins said.

Since the first cantata at Mount Zion, the audience has grown to more than 230 people in attendance.


"The Christmas Cantata is the perfect way to kick off the season of Advent," pastor the Rev. Walter Strawther said. "The music, decorations and fellowship all help to prepare ourselves for Christ to be born in us again!"



More than 230 people attended.

**The Pain of Disaffiliation**  
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Bishop Willimon will discuss his book on disaffiliation, *The Church We Carry*, and answer questions. All are invited. No charge. Copies of the book are available for free.



Central United Methodist Church  
167 S. Irby Street | Florence, SC  
[www.centraimethodist.net](http://www.centraimethodist.net)



# YEAR

From Page 1

## January

January kicked off with a bang as the *Advocate* reported on the bishop naming members of the conference’s four new Jeremiah Teams. The *Advocate* ran a feature on a ministry started by two couples, members of Fair Lawn UMC, Columbia, devoted to feeding people affected by Hurricane Helene, and another feature on Port Royal UMC, Port Royal’s 12-year-old food outreach that helps thousands.

The Advocate Press published two more books: “Recollections: Stories from My Life in the Ministry,” by Dr. Roger M. Gramling, and “Raise Your Ebenezer: A Field Guide to Suffering,” by Dr. Ted Goshorn.

The *Advocate* also reported on youth delegates being sought for Annual Conference, the return to an in-person United Women in Faith Legislative Advocacy Day at Epworth Children’s Home and plans under way for February’s Men N Ministry spiritual retreat at Journey UMC, Columbia.

## February

February’s lead story was on how the conference closed its financial year with churches paying 90.24 percent of the 2024 budget. Next, came a feature on women from Ashland UMC, Columbia, offering their handmade “pillow-case clothes” to all in need after strife in Haiti grounds planes. Another feature shared how a robotics program has become a new draw for one church, Manning UMC, Manning.

The *Advocate* reported on how Simpsonville UMC is getting back on track despite a lawsuit forcing them to meet offsite. The *Advocate* also announced it would begin holding listening sessions across the state to gauge readers’ needs.

In another article, Connecting Children in Worship and Prayer leaders gathered for their first meeting, and 12 churches were being sought for grant assistance. And finally, the *Advocate* reported on how the conference’s new Jeremiah Teams held first meetings to help transform the conference.

## March

In March, the *Advocate* reported on how The Connection, a new Florence districtwide effort, was bringing together youth, as well as how the conference’s youth Revolution drew 900 to Columbia for three days of worship and learning. The *Advocate* also reported on the Jeremiah Teams’ continued work, offering initial reports, and how a United Women in Faith trip to Penn Center fostered needed Black history education.

Registration was announced for Annual Conference June 8-11, with the theme “See the Possibilities, Live the Promises,” and three “Spring Salkehatchie” work sessions were also announced. News on dementia care workshops, *Advocate* listening sessions and an *Advocate* survey closed the month.

## April

In April, the *Advocate* announced South Carolina would join conferences around the world this summer in voting on amendments passed at last year’s General Conference. It also announced that Jeremiah Teams were making strides toward their reports to Annual Conference.

In other news, the *Advocate* shared that three disaster response veterans had been hired to lead ministries: The Rev. LaTonya Dash as disaster response coordinator, the Rev. Sharon “Shay” Long as volunteer coordinator and Ward Smith as disaster recovery construction manager.

The *Advocate* reported on the successful Men N Ministry spiritual retreat, which urged men to make a difference in the church, and an upcoming men’s leadership revitalization meeting April 6, plus the expansion of the Native American elder basket program, now bringing statewide relief.

The *Advocate* also ran a feature on longtime staffer Pat Mack, who after 47 years of employment was still going strong. It also ran stories on a Legislative Advocacy Day that championed educational inequity, registration open for Salkehatchie Summer Service with 32 weeklong camps, and a service of lament held after the brutal murder of 13-year-old Ka’Niyah Baker.

## May

This month brought the reveal of the *Advocate*’s new logo and newspaper redesign, featuring a bold black and red color scheme, as well as the announcement that the newspaper had been honored with three more awards for journalistic excellence from the South Carolina Press Association.

The May paper also shared how one Midlands church—Union UMC, Irmo, made it possible for more than 250 people in Guatemala to see though their “Give Sight” mission campaign.

The Rev. Eddie Thomas was awarded the Order of the Palmetto for his longtime work with Good Samaritans ministry, and preparation for Annual Conference continued.

The *Advocate* announced the names of 12 churches tapped to launch a children’s initiative, and it shared how a church—St. Mark UMC, Greenville—remained in prayer after a teen was shot in its parking lot.

The paper also ran a feature on the Hibben UMC cold shelter keeping their neighbors warm, the Rev. John Culp being awarded an honorary Wofford doctorate, the James Monroe Mission House in Fountain Inn celebrating two decades, and the release by the Advocate Press of two more books—the Rev. Arthur Holt’s “Stories from my Journey” and Mark Barnette’s “Having Coffee with God.”

## June

June’s *Advocate* shared an overview of the Carolina Black Clergy Leadership Retreat, which helped leaders grow, restore and reconnect, as well as an update on churches suing to leave the UMC yet retain their property. It gave an update on Annual Conference preparations, plus announced the newspaper won three journalism awards from the Religion Communicators Council.

It also announced the release of the Advocate Press’s newest kids’ book, telling the story of Salkehatchie through a child’s eyes, and shared how churches were in prayer after a teen was shot in a police encounter; the teen was the grandson of one UMC pastor and the grandnephew of another.

In other news, Columbia College celebrated the grand opening of historic College Place, which was purchased by the college after it closed; 12 churches gathered for the Connecting Children grant launch meeting; and 32 retiring pastors answered questions about their time in ministry.

## July

The July *Advocate* featured full coverage of Annual Conference, held June 8-11 at the Greenville Convention Center. The four-day gathering saw passage of a \$10.3 million budget, commissioning and ordination of 15, voting on four constitutional amendments, passage of five new resolutions and one conference motion, celebration of 52 departed saints and the announcement of a called special session to review recommendations from the four Jeremiah Teams.

## August

In August, the *Advocate* ran a story on how Advent UMC’s Praise Band released a studio album as a gift to the church and community; what was possibly the first same-sex wedding held in a South Carolina UMC; a new church in Carolina Forest, near Myrtle Beach; how one church—Manning UMC—helped pay funeral expenses after sudden illness claimed a beloved 8-year-old member; and how Francis Burns’ 12th Freedom School hosted 33 scholars for reading and world changing.

The *Advocate* also announced winning two SCPA advertising awards; a new Will Willimon book exploring the disaffiliation of Buncombe Street; a feature on how the UMC connection enabled one church, Langley UMC, Langley, to get a donated organ; how goats helped Aldersgate UMC, Greenville, be better stewards of its parsonage yard; how O’Neal Street UMC’s Cooling Center offered relief during a heatwave; an upcoming UMCSC leadership convocation Sept. 8-10; and how filings were continuing in the UMCSC property lawsuit.

## September

September’s *Advocate* shared how the UMCSC was gearing up for the virtual called special session Oct. 18; a feature on two Hartsville UMCs sharing one space after a church roof caved in; the Holy Grounds coffee ministry at Augusta Road UMC, Pelzer; a child Lexington UMC actor in a short film addressing domestic violence; and survey results released by the Missional Priorities Jeremiah Team.

The *Advocate* also ran an article on the new Africa University solar power plant, which is boosting self-reliance for students; tri-district discipleship workshops slated for the fall; a Q&A with Willimon on his new book about Buncombe Street; and an update on this summer’s Salkehatchie camps, with the ministry now deemed “back on track” after the pandemic.

## October

October brought an article on the upcoming special session, slated to consider reducing districts and eliminating a Cabinet position. The *Advocate* also ran an article covering the pastors’ “Lights, Camera, Action” leadership event and how the state Supreme Court ruled that one judge would be handling all separation litigation.

In other news, the *Advocate* announced it would be raising rates because of rising costs; the UMCSC offered social activism guidelines; and a new disaster plan was released. It shared how the Lay Servant “Train the Trainer” event drew a large crowd; a feature on two churches that merged to become Triune UMC; Grace UMC, North Augusta, marked the 40th anniversary of its sanctuary rebuild; and how New Webster UMC’s equipment

upgrades enabled enhanced worship.

Finally, the *Advocate* announced its newest book, “A Moment to Breathe: Sermonic Reflections,” by Dr. Amenti Sujai and Dr. Daniel Hembree.

## November

In November, the big news was coverage of the called special session, announcing that South Carolina United Methodists approved two changes that impact how the denomination is structured in this state: 1) reducing the number of districts from 12 to 10 in South Carolina and 2) eliminating a Cabinet-level position in creating the new Office of Congregational Excellence, which will oversee the work of the Office of Congregational Development and the continuing work of the Office of Connectional Ministries.

In other big news, the conference’s legal team shared an update, noting 70 churches intend to leave the UMC. Repair issues are creating struggles for Killingsworth, a conference ministry, and deep need has prompted a restart of the Haiti School Lunch Program.

The *Advocate* ran a feature on how one year in, Woodland UMC, Rock Hill, is thriving through its dementia ministry. It also shared a story on Called SC, helping teenagers take the next step in discerning their ministry call. It also shared how the UMC was once again assembling Christmas stockings for children in Haiti, and how the Charleston District United Methodist Men held their first Men’s Day Program.

## December

Finally, the *Advocate* closed the year with a story about the way UMCs stepped up with food assistance across South Carolina in the wake of economic struggles and the government shut-down, along with a list of which UMC churches are offering food assistance in South Carolina. Additionally, the *Advocate* offered a feature on how a new ministry, A Way Home, has been helping local churches aid homeless families in Spartanburg, with tremendous impact on one host church, St. Paul UMC, Spartanburg. The *Advocate* also announced plans by Healing Guatemala, a UMC mission, to launch a major expansion for its Hospital Bethesda.

In other news, the newspaper announced that all four UMC constitutional amendments had been approved worldwide; Bishop Fairley’s release of his memoir, “Silver Linings,” through the Advocate Press; United Methodist Men have elected their first Black president in Dyron Anderson; Dr. Joseph E. Heyward has been honored with the Order of the Palmetto; and the *Advocate* was honored with two more journalism awards from the United Methodist Association of Communicators.

The *Advocate* announced organizers are planning a men’s retreat in February to bridge generations; the conference is hosting a lay leadership event in January; the conference’s new Inclusion Team members have been named and are tasked to help the UMCSC embrace empathy and praise diversity; and the conference noted it is hoping for 75 percent in apportionments for 2025.

Delegate counts have been released for 2028 General Conference, with the lowest numbers in many years. And the *Advocate* ran a feature on the STOMP exercise ministry in Johns Island.

*If you missed any of these articles, head to <https://advocatesc.org> to see them online. Subscribers can view PDFs of full editions.*



# WALK

From Page 1

The walk will begin at 3 p.m. in the sanctuary of Columbia UMC, located at 1830 Main St., Columbia. Participants will pray as they walk down the sidewalk to the steps of the State House, guided by church and conference volunteers. Those who cannot walk are invited to remain in the sanctuary and participate with prayers there.

South Carolina Resident Bishop Leonard Fairley will serve as the keynote speaker and prayer leader at the State House steps. In addition to Fairley and McCoy-Bruce, other prayer walk leaders include the Rev. Kermit Moss, visioning pastor at Columbia UMC, and the Rev. Fran Elrod, Columbia District superintendent.

McCoy-Bruce said the idea for a prayer walk stemmed from a Columbia UMC presentation by her and Moss to the bishop, conference staff and other local church clergy and laity about the possibility of an intended collaborative ministry building project. In its second year of existence, Columbia UMC is one of the newest congregations in the conference, born of a merger of Greene and Main Street UMCs. Its multicultural congregation has a specific ministry to welcome all, reaching out to college students and the homeless and across widespread socioeconomics.

Fairley mentioned the idea of a prayer walk in the conversation, and the idea took root.

While McCoy-Bruce has never organized a prayer walk, she's excited about the opportunity and hopeful the

walk will mobilize and encourage all to embrace collaboration, connection and community in the name of Jesus.

All participants are encouraged to wear yellow and white. Not only do those colors reflect the church season of Epiphany, but McCoy-Bruce hopes they will be a visual symbol of Christians "bringing the light of Jesus to the city and state."

Crossing guards and other volunteers will wear yellow vests, and there will be yellow ribbons on display.

Fairley noted about the walk, "Prayer has always been a powerful witness that connects us all. It is my prayer that this act of walking the city together in prayer will bind us together in our efforts to do what the Lord requires of us."

He quoted Micah 6:8, emphasizing the word "walk," which asks, "And what does the Lord require of you (us) but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (NRSV).

Elrod said the connectional UMC innately fosters a spirit that shares the joys and challenges of the community.

"Walking together, while stopping to pray for our neighbors, is one way of witnessing to who we say we are as the body of Christ. We cannot simply say we are community; we must

model it, as well.

"The Prayer Walk invites the gathered community to take a holy risk. Main Street will be holy ground as we call upon God to bless the businesses and people within, those who still find themselves without shelter, elected leaders and anyone who comes to downtown Columbia.

"People yearn to experience hope in the future. What better way to begin a new year than to witness to our hope in Christ by loving our neighbors and covering them in prayer?"

McCoy-Bruce said they hope to create space downtown that the district and denomination can use for collaborative mission and ministry to all.

"We aim to keep in mind the needs of our neighbors like the unhoused, college students, commuters, other churches, businesses and new residents," she said. "This prayer walk is open to anyone interested and will offer prayers for everyone. Now is a time to offer the hope of Christ to a hurting world, united together in his love."

All are welcome and invited to participate in the prayer walk. If the weather is bad, participants will remain in the sanctuary to pray.

For more information, call or email Columbia UMC at 803-779-0610 or email [office@colaumc.com](mailto:office@colaumc.com).



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## January 'Lights, Camera, Action' laity event now open to all serving in lay leadership positions

By Jessica Brodie

The South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church is now expanding registration for their January Lights, Camera, Action Lay Leadership Convocation to all laity in local churches who serve in positions of leadership.

The Lights, Camera, Action Lay Leadership Convocation is set for Jan. 9-10, 2026, at Journey UMC, Columbia.

Registration is now open at <https://www.umcsc.org/lead>.

Participants can register to attend both Friday and Saturday, or Saturday

only. There is no cost for this event, and a limited number of \$50 reimbursement scholarships are available to help cover hotel expenses.

Anyone serving in one or more of the following lay leadership positions in their local church is encouraged to attend, and there is no limit on the number of attendees from all local churches.

Those positions include church council chair, lay leader, lay member to annual conference, SPRC chair, finance chair, trustees chair, church treasurer, United Methodist Men or United Women In Faith president, young adult representative, youth ministry representative and nominations chair.

Organizers encourage people to register now before all of the seats are gone.

The event begins Friday night with "Tailgating with Bishop Fairley," complete with barbecue and fixings, as well as a performance by comedian/speaker Jody Fuller. Check-in begins at 5:30 p.m., and the event is from 6:30-8:30 p.m.

A full day of programming is planned for 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, with check-in starting at 8 a.m.

The Lights, Camera, Action theme focuses on those three aspects. "Lights" refers to being seen and present, shining the gospel clearly and widely both online and on the ground. "Camera" refers to the mission and vision—where are we pointing our lens, and how do we refocus on discipleship and community impact? "Action" refers to engaging, equipping and expanding, moving strategically and boldly with purpose and power.

This is a hands-on learning opportunity, so attendees are asked to bring an electronic device (laptop, tablet, smartphone).



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# SEJ BMCR marks 56 years of prophetic witness

By Rev. Amiri B. Hooker

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—The Southeastern Jurisdiction Black Methodists for Church Renewal gathered Oct. 30 to Nov. 1 at the historic Scarritt-Bennett Center and Denman Building for their 56th Annual Meeting. With the theme “Our Time Under God Is Now—To Inspire, Influence and Impact,” the event drew from Galatians 6:9-10.

The three-day event, co-sponsored by Africa University, convened clergy, laity and justice leaders from across the region to renew the prophetic mission of the Black church within The United Methodist Church connection.

### ‘To See What Can and Should Be’

The meeting was called to order by Pamela Shoffner, SEJ-BMCR coordinator (Western North Carolina), with the opening prayer offered by the Rev. Walter Strawther (South Carolina). Greetings followed from Bishop David Graves (Tennessee-Western Kentucky Area), Bishop Harry L. Seawright (AME, 13th Episcopal District) and Dr. Sondrea Tolbert, executive director of the Scarritt-Bennett Center.

The highlight of the opening plenary came with the keynote address from South Carolina Resident Bishop Leonard Fairley, whose sermon-lecture was both poetic and prophetic—a call to holy imagination and moral courage.

“In the midst of darkness, even in the midst of trials and tribulations, I want you to imagine what is holding—not only what is, but what can and should be,” he shared. “There is a moral argument in this universe, and though the arc bends slowly, it bends toward justice.”

Fairley challenged the assembly to live into God’s “What Is”—to move from passive belief to active transformation.



South Carolina attendees of the 56th SEJ-BMCR gather for a smile.

“Our call,” he declared, “is to use our voices to speak for the voiceless. Power corrupts, but prophetic imagination redeems. What if we rebuilt the Black church not for survival but for leadership?”

### Renewed purpose and prophetic unity

Following the keynote, the Rev. James Amerson, vice-coordinator of General BMCR, reminded attendees that unity remains at the core of the Methodist witness:

“What are the first three letters of the word United? U-N-I—you and I,” Amerson said. “In an era of polarization, we are called again to be truly United Methodists. We have been through disaffiliation, through pandemic, through storms—but God still calls us to prophesy to dry bones that they might live.”

Reports from caucuses across the SEJ highlighted vital ministry: South Carolina’s Year of Jubilee legislation forgiving \$3.4 million in church debts; Tennessee-Western Kentucky’s initiatives for small-membership congregations and mental health; and dynamic youth leadership development across the region.

### Workshops, panels and “next” conversations

A dynamic panel discussion titled “How Do We Inspire, Influence and Impact the Church and Community?” featured Tennessee State Rep. Vincent Dixie, Sen. Charlane Oliver and Nashville Councilwoman Delishia Porterfield, facilitated by Dr. Sheila Peters of Fisk University. The dialogue bridged faith, policy and community engagement, urging United Methodists to bring their moral witness into public life.

Dr. Olu Brown, founder of Impact Church and gubernatorial candidate for Georgia, led the Normalizing Next® workshop—equipping churches to embrace innovation and transition without fear. His message was clear: “The future is not coming; it’s here. Our faith must adapt without abandoning its roots.”

### Worship, witness and the Word

Worship remained the heartbeat of the gathering.

The Holy Communion Service, led by Dr. Paula Smith of Gordon Memorial UMC, Nashville, centered on wholeness, healing and the power of grace amid exhaustion.

Dr. Nichole Middleton (South Carolina), author and prison chaplain, led Bible study and the closing worship, reminding the body that “social holiness must always meet people behind bars, behind pain and behind prejudice.”

Music ministry by Jarvis R. Wilson, Dr. Cynthia Wilson and The Meharry Medical College Choir infused each service with soul and joy.

### Banquet and Black College Fund

At the 56th Annual Banquet, Bishop Julius C. Trimble, general secretary of the UMC General Board of Church and Society, issued a stirring charge rooted in Luke 4:18–19: “Justice,” he said, “is what love looks like in public. Jesus didn’t build institutions—he built movements. To be United Methodists is to transform the world by being the church, not just attending it.”

During the Black College Fund Celebration, participants honored the legacy of historically Black colleges and universities supported by The United Methodist Church. Dr. James E. K. Hildreth, president of Meharry Medical College, emphasized faith-driven excellence in education and health equity. The Meharry Choir offered a moving performance that lifted the spirit of the evening.

### A call to inspire, influence, and impact

Throughout the weekend, participants were reminded that BMCR’s mission is not nostalgia—it’s now. As Shoffner declared in her greeting: “Our time is always now—to do good, to strengthen the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of our people and to leave an impact upon those we encounter.”

From Nashville’s sacred ground, the 56th SEJ-BMCR gathering sent forth its members renewed for ministry, justice and transformation—ready to answer God’s “What If?” with holy action.

*Hooker is congregational specialist for the Florence and Marion districts of the South Carolina Conference of the UMC.*



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All pantry items were donated by members of the congregation.

## St. Paul hosts food giveaway

CAMDEN—St. Paul United Methodist Church hosted a holiday food pantry giveaway on Saturday, Dec. 13, from 11 a.m. until 1 p.m. at the church.

The successful event was sponsored by the church’s Outreach Ministry, its trustees and its pastor, the Rev. Leatha Brown. All pantry items were donated by members of the congregation as part of the church’s commitment to

serving the community.

Prior to the event, volunteer church members gathered to bag meals and essential household items, preparing to serve at least 50 families in need.

St. Paul UMC plans to continue operating the food pantry to assist families in the Knights Hill area and surrounding communities who are experiencing food insecurity.

## SCADP protests recent execution

South Carolinians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty continues to speak out against the recent execution of Stephen Bryant.

On Nov. 14, South Carolina executed Stephen Bryant. His execution marks the fifth execution this year, the 50th execution in the state since 1976 and the third execution by firing squad in less than a year. South Carolina is now tied with Utah for the most firing squad executions since 1976.

“The state of South Carolina executed another man, Stephen Bryant, in our society’s name by firing squad. A man who, like other people executed in South Carolina these last 15 months, was a victim of other peoples’ violence long before he committed violence against others,” said United Methodist pastor the Rev. Hillary Taylor, SCADP’s executive director, just after Bryant’s death.

The mission of SCADP is to abolish the death penalty and catalyze criminal justice reform in South Carolina.

Learn more about their work at <https://www.scadp.org>.

## Trinity continues 30 years of love through Thanksgiving meals

What began as a youth project in the 1990s has evolved into a church tradition at Trinity United Methodist Church in Honea Path.

Like many traditions, this one began from the vision of one person. Kathy Donnalld was working with the youth and also delivering for Meals on Wheels in the Honea Path community. Because Meals on Wheels doesn’t deliver a meal on Thanksgiving, she saw an opportunity for the youth to participate in preparing meals for her clients when another church in the area, Whitefield Baptist, offered to fix meals. Donnalld carried a group to Whitefield to help them prepare meals, and during the process, she decided that it would be easier to perform the same service at Trinity.

The next year, meals were prepared at Trinity for Meals on Wheels, as well as police, rescue squad members and other civil servants who had to work.

Her project has become a legacy of feeding the poor and lonely on Thanksgiving, as Donnalld died several years later after a brief struggle with cancer.

Over the years, the program has expanded to include the community at large. Announcements in the local newspaper, fliers distributed at the food pantry and word of mouth invite people to call the church and request a meal. Teresa Warner, church secretary, screens the calls and prepares a list of recipients. Sunday school classes donate money to purchase the supplies, Honea Path Presbyterian donates the dessert and the United Methodist Men cook the turkeys,



The project has become a legacy of feeding the poor and lonely on Thanksgiving, which have been donated by church members.

On Nov. 27, Trinity members prepared and delivered 200 meals for the community. The plates included the standard Thanksgiving fare of turkey, dressing, gravy, macaroni pie, green beans, roll, cranberry sauce and a piece of pound cake. The turkeys were cooked on Tuesday night and carved up on Wednesday morning. Small groups of people came during the day to carve turkey, package slices of cake and prepare single servings of cranberry sauce.

On Thanksgiving morning, church members and others gathered to prepare the plates. The assembly line was set up to allow participants to move from station to station to receive turkey, dressing, gravy and all the other fixings. The plates were assembled by address for delivery.

The church members were joyful as they departed with packages of plates to deliver on their way home. In all, 41 people gave their time to prepare, package and deliver the meals this Thanksgiving.



**Pastor sponsors school trip to nation’s capital**

Dr. James Williams, of Williams Funeral Home and pastor of the Lamar-Ebenezer Charge, donated \$885 to Millwood Elementary School recently as sponsorship for the school’s fifth grade trip to Washington, D.C. His donation will help ensure that students experience the nation’s capital, gaining invaluable learning experiences outside the classroom. Millwood Elementary School expressed heartfelt gratitude, noting Dr. Williams’ dedication continues to positively impact the lives of many in Lamar.

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# Ministries.



Between 9:30 a.m. and 1 p.m., one food box was given to each of the nearly 400 families who came from across the region. Here are scenes from the day.

## Wesley UMC Ladson distributes 10,000 lbs. of food to families in need

LADSON—Wesley United Methodist Church prayed for a way to help the community impacted by the recent delay of SNAP benefits.

After communicating with other pastors about possible resources and agencies, the Rev. Curnell Graham, pastor of Wesley UMC, was offered 3,000 pounds of food from the Low-country Food Bank to be picked up within two days

A volunteer offered his large commercial vehicle for the pickup. After seeing Wesley had more capacity, the food bank increased the amount to 10,000 pounds, including fresh fruit, vegetables and a limited amount of meat.

Quickly, an all-hands-on-deck message circulated through the church membership for anyone available to meet at the church to unload and organize the load for individual food packages.

The day of drive-through distribution, the first car arrived at 7:45 a.m. Soon, the lot was filled with three lanes of vehicles.

“We decided to begin handing out the food because the traffic began backing up,” said Graham.

Between 9:30 a.m. and 1 p.m., one food box was given to each of the nearly 400 families from Ladson, Summerville, Monks Creek and the surrounding communities, as well as

Orangeburg.

The multigenerational volunteers served through directing traffic, signing in recipients, handing out packages and providing food for the volunteers. An estimated 500 hours by 45 volunteers over two days made this effort possible.

Jade, one of the young adult volunteers, was inspired to participate, recalling food drives at her grandfather’s church.

“He had all of our family come and help with Thanksgiving and Christmas,” Jade said. “We never know what someone is going through.

Amy Graham, a volunteer registering the recipients, remarked on the

diversity of people she represented.

“I looked into the faces of veterans, the elderly, college students, White, Black, Hispanic—all who need a little help,” she said. “I’m glad we are here for them. These faces could be any of us.”

“I was most impressed by the amount of energy and enthusiasm evident in the congregation while rallying community members,” Rev. Graham said. “It is a blessing to be in a position to meet this pressing need for those who are food insecure and suffering during the government shutdown and delay of SNAP benefits.”

Wesley hopes to have another distribution in December.

### Lending a hand at Thanksgiving

Through the generosity of Buford Street UMC, Gaffney, their congregation collected canned and boxed goods for families in need this Thanksgiving season. The church also provided several local families with all the essential items needed to prepare a traditional Thanksgiving meal.

Photo by Angela P. Peeler



## Centenary United Women in Faith welcome speaker Valarie Williams

The United Women in Faith of Centenary United Methodist Church hosted an inspiring and spirit-filled gathering Nov. 15, welcoming guest speaker Valarie Williams, president of the Antioch UMC United Women in Faith unit.

With warmth, wisdom and a dynamic teaching style, Williams delivered a powerful message titled, “What Is in Your Spiritual Pocketbook?”

Speaking to a packed fellowship hall, she encouraged the women of Centenary to examine the spiritual “items” they carry each day—those that weigh them down and those that empower them in their walk with Christ.

Drawing on Hebrews 12:1, Williams reminded the audience that just as a woman checks her purse for what she needs and what she can release, believers must also be intentional about the spiritual burdens, habits and heart-postures they hold onto. She challenged the women to remove the “weights” of guilt, past mistakes, bitterness and unrealistic expectations and instead fill their spiritual pocketbooks with faith, prayer, peace and God’s word.

Her message was delivered with a blend of storytelling, Scripture and relatable imagery that deeply resonated with the Centenary UWF members. Laughter, reflection and heartfelt



United Women in Faith and Sorors of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. pose for a picture with speaker and Soror Valarie Williams.

“Amen” filled the room as Williams guided listeners toward spiritual renewal and intentional living.

Following the program, the women expressed their appreciation for Williams’ uplifting message, noting that her words offered both encouragement and practical spiritual guidance.

The Centenary UWF leadership shared their excitement about inviting her back for future gatherings.

The event served as a meaningful reminder of the mission of United Women in Faith: uplifting women, nurturing spiritual growth and strengthening community through fellowship and service.



Photos courtesy of Laura Gunter



**Lyttleton Street packs meals for Rise Against Hunger Meal**

Lyttleton Street UMC, Camden, packed 27,500 meals for Rise Against Hunger on Wednesday, Nov. 12. Over the years, the church has packed more than 109,000 meals. More than 200 volunteers ranging in age from 4-90 were able to participate. The church raised \$12,000 ahead of the event to pay for the meals and the transportation needed to get them to the final destination.



**Church collects Thanksgiving food for Interfaith Ministries**

Kellybell UMC, Hartsville, donated 68.42 lbs. and 150 fl. oz. of food Nov. 16 for Thanksgiving to Interfaith Ministries, located in Hartsville. Above, the Rev. Mary Burnell gathers with some of her congregation for a picture on collection day.

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# Ministries.

## Native American Committee to host Tribal Bus Tour

The South Carolina United Methodist Native American Committee will host a three-day bus tour of the South Carolina Native American tribes this year.

The tour is an effort to help people learn about where tribes are located and the rich, cultural history and traditions of South Carolina’s Native American peoples.

The dates are March 20-22. The bus tour will feature stops at the Catawba Reservation, a fire ceremony with the Waccamaw tribe, drumming with the Edisto tribe, historical tribal presentations, a traditional Native worship service with drumming on Sunday and more.

The cost is \$100 per person. The fees include the bus, hotel rooms, Chick-Fil-A lunch on Saturday and admission fees. All other meals are at the participants’ expense. The hotels will offer breakfast.

Bus seating is limited, so it is first-come, first-served, with the registration form and money.

The tour will depart Mission Lakes in Gaston on Friday, March 20, promptly at 7:30 a.m. The tour will end at Mission Lakes on Sunday, March 22, at approximately noon after the worship service.

Deadline for registration is Feb. 15. There will be no onsite registration.

If you are interested in going on the Native American bus trip, contact Zan Tracy Pender at [tracypender@hotmail.com](mailto:tracypender@hotmail.com) (email preferred) or 803-905-5672. He will send you the registration form and answer any questions.

The Florence District UWFaith Executive Team gathers for a smile. In front from left are Katherine Sabb-Graham, vice president; Melissa Epps, president; and Anita Simon, E&I. On the second row from left are Dorothy Murray, treasurer; Pearl Brown, reading program; and Azilee Dickey, SEJ vice president. On the third row from left are Trinette McKnight, communications; Shirley Woodard, chair of CON; Pearl Pressley, secretary; Mildred Cunningham, CON; Betsy Graham, CON; Stephanie Bolden, CON; Lutie Brown, CON; and Connie Dennis, CON.



## Florence UWFaith executive team wraps year with fellowship, planning, purpose

By Melissa A. Epps

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”—Acts 2:42 (NIV)

The Florence District UWFaith Executive Team closed out the year with its annual Lunch and Meet, gathering at Green Frog Social House in Lake City for a time of connection, celebration and forward planning.

The afternoon began with a meaningful moment of pause and reflection as members shared what they are most thankful for, which was an uplifting reminder of gratitude, faith and community.

exchange, the team focused on mapping out priorities for 2026 and finalizing arrangements for the upcoming Local Officers Training. Their thoughtful collaboration demonstrated a continued commitment to strengthening leadership, empowering members and preparing for a successful year ahead.

Despite ongoing changes within the conference, Florence District United Women in Faith remains steadfast, continuing to stay positive, lead with intention, inspire one another and grow together as a vibrant community of women committed to service and purpose.

*Epps is Florence UWFaith president.*



**Coats for kids**  
Woodland UMC Men, Rock Hill, donated coats recently for the children at Rock Hill Head Start. The men coordinated the donation of 63 coats for all of the boys and girls at the school, continuing a yearly mission started several years ago. Pictured are the coats in bags sorted by gender and sizes, with two of the Head Start administrators.

Photo courtesy of Bob James



## United Women in Faith by Debra Schooler

### Making a difference together

Happy New Year from the United Women in Faith. We are excited to begin another year of growing our faith and serving vulnerable women and children.

The United Methodist Church of South Carolina’s website says this about United Women in Faith: “United Women in Faith seeks to connect and nurture women through Christian spiritual formation, leadership development, creative fellowship and education so they can inspire, influence and impact local and global communities. We are a powerful, fearless force driven by God’s love and united in sisterhood. With a focus on women, children and youth, we act for justice and transform communities.

“Bold action, like faith, takes courage. Our bravery is inspired by God’s love and our powerful commitment to improve the lives of women, children and youth. United Women in Faith works for justice through compassionate service and advocacy to change unfair policies and systems that harm women, children and youth—from racial and gender injustice to economic inequality, climate issues and more.”

This describes our purpose and what inspires us to do the work we do. We are the hands and feet of Jesus. Always asking for his guidance, we meet, we act, we educate, we participate, we advocate, we give and we work to better the lives of all of us.

The United Women in Faith support 90 projects and community institutions across the United States. Here in South Carolina, we support Killingsworth Home, which serves women that need a place to overcome addiction, abuse and prison time. It’s a place to heal so they can begin their lives as healthy women.

The Bethlehem Center in Spartanburg serves children, youth and the elderly that are in the margins and need help. The center provides nurseries, after school programs, classes and a place to meet for community members.

We support and empower women in 39 countries to become leaders to make a difference in their communities. We fund scholarships and training to these women and youth to help them fight the oppression that holds them down. We help them fight poverty with job training and resources to make their lives better.

Want to know more? Join us so you can help make a difference. Go to <https://uwfaith.org> and become a member. It is easy and free. Every UMC is directed by the *Book of Discipline* to have a United Women in Faith group at their church. Ask your church leaders how to become a member of the units/circles that are active in the church.

When I read the stories on the website of all that we do, how we spend our money and ways we can help, I get excited. We help change lives. Read the stories and get inspired!

If you don’t have a United Women in Faith group near you, you can join online at our website and meet with other women who want to help but can’t meet in person or don’t have a unit near them. We are a sisterhood, inclusive of all races, gender identities and religions, strong in our faith and our commitment to make life better for women and children. The more women that join us, the larger our impact.

Please contact me at [debrajschooler@gmail.com](mailto:debrajschooler@gmail.com) for questions or comments. Help us make a difference!

*Schooler is SCCUWF president.*



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# Ministries.



## Epworth News by Beth Williams

### Acts of kindness

As you read this, the new year has begun, and all of us at Epworth wish you a very happy 2026.

We also want to thank you for the support and kindness you provided to Epworth in 2025. I wish to express my gratitude to all of you whose generosity, love and compassion at Christmas meant so much to the children and families who Epworth serves. This year your gifts to Epworth, both in tangible presents to the children who live on our campuses and financial support for Epworth’s programs and services, were very generous and proved once again your spirit of love and compassion. Please know how much all of us at Epworth appreciate the support and kindness you provide throughout the year.

2025 brought many wonderful programs to Epworth in its service to children and families across South Carolina. We were pleased to open the Family Resource Center in Columbia. The center serves families throughout Richland County and neighboring areas by offering family-centered support designed to strengthen households facing a variety of challenges. The goal is to help families find the programming and resources to meet their basic needs and to find avenues for improving their lives to maintain a viable, healthy family unit.

An Epworth staff member works one-on-one with families to assess their unique needs and connect them with the right services—either directly through Epworth or from trusted community partners. Some of the services that the Family Resource Center provide include the provision of tangible resources to families like food, clothing and other essential items; parenting education and support classes; individual and family counseling; and career development and job training opportunities.

Epworth continues to have a thriving foster family program, which includes a special center for kinship families to help them accept the responsibility and work that come with caring for a child in their family who has had to be removed from the birth family because of abuse, neglect or some other negative factor. Epworth assists kinship families in a wide variety of ways, from helping supply them with tangible needs for the new family member or helping them negotiate the legalities that accompany the kinship process.

Our other initiatives continue to flourish—programs for our residential children and youth, as well as our other programs that cover a wide range of services and initiatives for children and families. Epworth’s services at our regional offices all over South Carolina also continue to expand.

As this new year of 2026 progresses, we at Epworth look forward to serving more of our state’s children and families. We appreciate the support and assistance that you provide to us as we endeavor to help families enjoy healthier, safer and happier lives.

Aesop, the famous ancient Greek storyteller famed for his fables, once said, “No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.” Thank you for all the acts of kindness you will send Epworth’s way in 2026.

*Williams is the chief executive officer of Epworth.*



Members of Cumberland UMC hand-delivered meals to individuals, ensuring all had a hearty Thanksgiving feast.



## Cumberland, fraternity give out Thanksgiving meals

By Dr. Martin Luther Quick

FLORENCE—In a heartwarming display of community spirit, Cumberland United Methodist Church joined forces with the Chi Iota Chapter of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. and Faith Chapel to distribute 500 Thanksgiving meals to those in need throughout the Pee Dee region.

This collaborative effort by a group called “Created to Serve” kicked off on Wednesday Nov. 25, with a flurry of activity in preparation for the holiday.

More than 400 turkeys were expertly smoked, while dedicated volunteers worked tirelessly in the kitchen to prepare generous portions of stuffing, greens and candied yams. An assembly line was set up to ensure each meal

was prepared with love and care, reflecting the community’s commitment to service.

The culmination of this effort came to fruition as volunteers began delivering the Thanksgiving meals across the region. Members of Cumberland UMC hand-delivered meals to individuals, ensuring that those who might otherwise go without had a hearty Thanksgiving feast.

In addition to individual deliveries, Cumberland also delivered meals to local organizations, including the Austin Wilkes Home, which provides housing for recently released prisoners. This collaboration ensured that a portion of the meals were delivered to some of the most vulnerable members of the community.

Further extending their reach,

the Cumberland team worked closely with the South Carolina connection through the Hartsville Co-operative Parish, led by Dr. Reginald Lee. They arranged for 100 Thanksgiving meals to be picked up and distributed among three churches in Hartsville, broadening the impact of this generous initiative.

“This is what community is all about,” said one member from Cumberland UMC. “We are grateful for the partnership with Omega Psi Phi and Faith Chapel, along with the support from everyone involved in making this possible. Together, we can make a difference.”

This collaboration stands as a reminder of the power of community and the importance of giving back, ensuring that no one in the Pee Dee went without a warm meal during Thanksgiving.

# Native American Ministries.

## Native American representative training set for Feb. 7

Mark your calendars: The 21st annual Native American representative training is slated for Saturday, Feb. 7, at Columbia United Methodist Church, Columbia.

The *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, Para. 654, states that all churches are required to have one person per charge (without regard to race) to be the church’s Native American representative. As such, the Native American Committee trains this person. The Native American representative is the contact person between a church and the NAC; secures a calendar date to observe Native American Ministries Sunday; encourages awareness and appreciation of Native American history, traditions and spirituality; advocates for inclusion of Native Americans within the conference; provides reports to their church; and assists with the South Carolina Native American Comprehensive Plan.

Columbia UMC is located at 1830 Main St., Columbia. Registration starts at 9 a.m., and the training starts at 9:30 a.m. Lunch is provided. There is a \$10 nonrefundable registration fee. If a person does not register, the fee is \$15.

The training will end no later than 3 p.m.

NAC T-shirts and polo shirts will also be available for purchase. T-shirts purchased with registration receive a \$3 discount.

The training features historical information about American Indians, especially the South

Carolina American Indians, as well as myths and stereotypes, Native American spirituality and the mission and function of the NAC. After lunch, NAC provides an orientation into a traditional worship service for American Indians, which may include drumming, singing and flute playing. There will be a surprise for some participants.

New Native American representatives should attend, along with anyone interested in the mission and advocacy for Native American Ministries,

especially Cabinet members, UMC staff, district superintendents and pastors.

Schoolteachers, who are responsible for Native American social studies standards, should also consider attending to improve historically and culturally accurate information.

If you are planning to attend, contact LaShella Kirkland at 803-374-8243 or LaShellaKirkland@live.com to receive a registration form.

Registration deadline is Jan. 28.

## Share your mission trip stories and photos

Have you taken a mission trip lately? Share it, and a couple of your favorite photos, with the *Advocate*. Who knows? Your trip might inspire an idea for a future trip in the heart of one of our readers.

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New Media Kit:







Photo courtesy of Lillie T. Page

Student Day at St. Phillips

United Methodist Student Day was held Nov. 30 at St. Phillips UMC, Marion. The speaker for this special occasion was Keith Joseph Coward of Dillon. Coward presented a powerful message to the youth on not letting sin define who they are. Coward emphasized that God doesn't define us by our mistakes. When we mess up, God has the ability to forgive us because of the blood of his son, Jesus Christ. When one sins, we need to turn to God—not away from him. Coward's message was enjoyed by all. Also that day, students were presented with awards for their achievements. Pictured are Mr. and Mrs. Coward and their son, Kase; the Rev. Ardell Washington Sr. (church pastor); and students.

Revolution 2026 set for new venue

COLUMBIA—Registration continues this month for Revolution 2026, the annual youth gathering of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Set for Jan. 30-Feb. 1, this year's theme is "Seek First," centered on Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Youth from all across the conference will gather at The DoubleTree Conference Center. That means, for the first time, youth groups participating in Revolution have the option of staying on-site.

The Rev. Jason Cook, senior pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Roswell, Georgia, will bring the message as the featured speaker each session.

Mary-Michael Brenner, creative director at Home Church in Roswell, Georgia, will lead the youth in worship throughout the weekend. Brenner brings a deep love for worship and a steady conviction that leading people to encounter the presence of God is one of the most sacred things she gets to do in this life. Registration is now open.

Groups who register by Dec. 31 receive free Revolution 2026 T-shirts. Learn more at <http://scmyp.org/revolution>.

Columbia College appoints Lawrence as interim vice president of development

Columbia College President John H. Dozier has appointed Bruce M. Lawrence as the school's interim vice president of development.

Lawrence brings more than 20 years of experience in higher education, nonprofit leadership, environmental advocacy, business development and international institutional advancement. He began his service to Columbia College Nov. 24.

Lawrence most recently served as director of development and fellow at St Hugh's College, University of Oxford, where he led a global development and alumni relations program serving more than 10,000 alumni and donors. Under his leadership, St Hugh's more than doubled its annual fundraising revenue and strengthened

giving across annual, major and legacy programs. He secured several seven-figure gifts and helped build a legacy society valued at approximately £25 million. His work also included transitioning alumni and donor engagement to digital formats during the pandemic, which increased participation while reducing costs.

Before Oxford, Lawrence founded and led StrategicCents LLC, a Columbia-based consulting firm supporting nonprofits with fundraising strategy, campaign planning, branding and grant development.

His prior roles include service with Conservation Voters of South Carolina, BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina, Make-A-Wish Foundation, and Goodwill Industries.

Youth talents wanted for the Advocate

Are you a child, youth or young adult United Methodist with writing or artistic talent? We would love to feature your contributions in the *Advocate*.

Whether it's a church- or faith-related photograph, drawing, painting, essay, poem or story, share your efforts with the *Advocate*, along with your name, age and church name and city.

Email it to [jbrodie@advocatesc.org](mailto:jbrodie@advocatesc.org) or mail to Editor Jessica Brodie, *Advocate*, 4908 Colonial Drive, Columbia, SC 29203.

If you're mailing it and would like your submission returned to you when we're finished, let us know and we will do so.

After 43 years, Trinity's Preschool still going strong

Trinity Preschool at Trinity United Methodist Church, Honea Path, was started in 1982. And today, the preschool is still going strong.

The preschool was started by Kay Collins, a member of Trinity UMC, and Charlotte Black, who at the time was teaching 4-year-olds at Chiquola Baptist Church. Collins and Black spent the summer gathering items like tables, chairs and school supplies. Simultaneously, the little house next to the church, which was located in the vicinity where the playground and cook shed are now, was renovated for a preschool.

Black was only there three months when Chiquola asked her to come back as their director. Harriet Smith took her place, and shortly after that Kathy Donald, another Trinity member, took over the preschool.

Trinity Preschool has had many children and teachers over the past 42 years. Collins and Black started

with 25 kids comprising two classes; a class of 4-year-olds and a class of 3-year-olds. This school year, Trinity Preschool has 33 students making up three classes consisting of 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds.

The staff consists of three teachers and three teacher assistants. One staff member is also the preschool's onsite administrator. The preschool director is a former elementary school principal.

Trinity Preschool is "intentionally Christian and developmentally appropriate."

The preschool follows the Anderson School District 2 calendar and runs from August through May. They meet five days per week from 8-11 a.m. with early drop off starting at 7:30 a.m.

Over the years, they have developed an excellent reputation in the surrounding areas and always have parents who want their children to attend Trinity Preschool.



Photos courtesy of Kelly Gottheiner



Robot champs!

Manning UMC, Manning's youth robotics team competed Dec. 13 in North Charleston against 26 teams. Their hard work paid off, and the team won first in robot performance.



Applications open for Advocate \$1,000 college scholarship

Deadline is March 1

Scholarship applications are being accepted now for the *South Carolina United Methodist Advocate* annual \$1,000 college scholarship.

The scholarship is for South Carolina United Methodist students for the 2026-2027 academic year who are planning to attend or is attending one of the four United Methodist colleges in South Carolina: Claflin University, Columbia College, Spartanburg Methodist College or Wofford College.

Students ideally will have an interest in communications, journalism or business.

Requests for the scholarship are due March 1.

Required are an application with an essay, a college or high school transcript, and a letter from the senior pastor of the applicant's home church or a college chaplain confirming the applicant is a United Methodist and describing their participation.

Learn more about the *Advocate's* scholarship details and download the application at <https://advocatesc.org/scholarships>.

For questions, email [jbrodie@advocatesc.org](mailto:jbrodie@advocatesc.org).



# Why intergenerational worship matters for the future of faith

By Toni Taylor

The Connecting Children in Worship and Prayer Lilly Grant Initiative is helping South Carolina United Methodist churches rediscover that worship is most powerful when every generation prays, learns and leads together.

What is emerging in the first cohort is part of a wider intergenerational movement in the church that research shows deepen faith for both children and adults.

**A new story for worship**

Across the first 12 congregations, pastors and lay teams are learning that intergenerational worship is not simply seating children beside adults but creating intentional moments of interaction, conversation and shared practice. This aligns with intergenerational ministry research, which defines Christian practices as “shared rhythms” that help all ages grow together toward Christ, rather than programs that segregate by age.

The Lilly Endowment-funded initiative in South Carolina is designed to foster a culture of belonging in worship, with children seen as full participants rather than guests in “adult church.” Through this five-year cohort model, as many as 60 churches will be supported to experiment, reflect and embed these practices in the long-term life of their congregations.

**Why children need the whole body**

Decades of faith formation research show that children’s long-term discipleship is strongly shaped by close relationships with adults and older youth who model prayer, Scripture engagement and service. Children learn the “language of faith” not only in classrooms but by watching and joining adults as they pray aloud, respond to Scripture and participate in the sacraments.

When children are welcomed as active worshipers—asked to help lead prayer, read Scripture with support or share testimonies in age-appropriate ways—they experience church as their spiritual home rather than a place they will “grow into” later. This sense of belonging is especially critical in a culture where many families feel disconnected from institutional religion and are looking for authentic, relational communities for their children.

**How adults grow by learning from children**

Intergenerational worship also transforms adults. Leaders in various denominations report that when children pray spontaneously, ask honest questions or respond creatively to Scripture, adults are reminded of humility, wonder and dependence on God.

Through the Lilly Endowment’s, Nurturing Children through Worship and Prayer Initiative, we learn that engaging children more fully in congregational worship can renew adults’ faith as they see the gospel afresh through the eyes of the young. Adults who mentor and worship alongside children often describe a renewed sense of calling and purpose, recognizing that discipling the next generation is not an extra program but central to the church’s identity.

**The wider intergenerational movement**

Cohort 1 churches sit within a grow-



Photo courtesy of the Rev. Brian Underwood  
During worship, 3-year-old Vera hears about the star and tree, love and smiles. She is encouraged to draw and shares what she experienced during worship with others through art.

ing intergenerational movement in North American churches. Ministries, networks and seminaries are calling congregations to move from age-segregated programming toward intentionally intergenerational communities where worship, fellowship and service regularly place generations in relationship with one another.

Leaders describe several common shifts: from “children’s ministry” as a separate silo to discipleship shared by the whole congregation; from performance-oriented worship to relational participation; and from a teacher–learner hierarchy to a vision of all ages apprenticing in faith together. These shifts mirror the aspirations of Connecting Children in Worship and Prayer as South Carolina congregations experiment with storytelling, the arts, and shared leadership in worship.

- Key emphases of the intergenerational movement include the following:
- Belonging: Every age is treated as indispensable to the body of Christ, with particular attention to children who can easily be overlooked.
  - Mutuality: Adults teach children, but children also reveal God’s grace, curiosity and trust in ways that challenge and refresh adults’ faith.
  - Everyday practices: The focus is on simple, repeatable practices—shared prayer, Scripture reading, blessing, conversation—that can be carried from worship into homes and neighborhoods.

**Practices like PrayGrounds**

One concrete example of this movement is the growing use of “PrayGrounds” in sanctuaries: designated spaces within the worship area where children can engage with worship through quiet art materials, age-appropriate Bibles and tactile activities.

When thoughtfully integrated, these spaces communicate that children are not distractions to be managed elsewhere but essential members of the congregation whose presence is welcomed right in the heart of worship.

Research and field experience indicate that PrayGrounds and similar practices work best when they are connected to the flow of the service—so that what children color, build or hold in their hands relates to the Scriptures, prayers or sermon themes. This reinforces that they are participants in the

same worship, not merely entertained on the sidelines, and it supports families who want to keep their children close while still engaging deeply in worship themselves.

**The cohort journey and upcoming training**

The South Carolina initiative’s cohort model mirrors best practices highlighted by the Lilly Endowment, which encourages churches to learn together over time in communities of practice. By gathering pastors and lay leaders from 12 diverse congregations, Cohort 1 has become a laboratory for shared learning, honest reflection and mutual encouragement as teams try new approaches to intergenerational worship.

As Cohort 1 churches enter the fourth quarter of the first year, the February training led by Valerie Grissom, author of “All Ages Becoming,” will help teams move from ideas to detailed planning. Grissom’s work emphasizes intentional design: asking in each service how children, youth, adults and elders will pray, respond to Scripture and interact with one another so that worship “looks, sounds and feels” like the whole body of Christ.

**Planning questions for congregations**

Where in the service can children and youth speak, create or lead so their gifts bless the whole congregation?

How can adults be prepared to welcome children’s contributions with gratitude rather than judgment, watching for how the Holy Spirit might speak

through them?

What spaces—like PrayGrounds, prayer stations or storytelling moments—visibly signal that children are not only present but central to the worshipping community?

How can we make our worship experience more age appropriate for all generations?

**Looking ahead in South Carolina**

Over the next five years, Connecting Children in Worship and Prayer aims to impact about 60 churches, 500 children and more than 7,000 church members, reshaping the culture of worship across the South Carolina Conference. The *Advocate* has reported on the launch of the initiative, describing how pastors and laity are gathering with “laughter and conversation” to imagine worship that engages all generations.

Our emerging testimony is that when children are fully present and involved in worship, the entire congregation changes: children discover that they belong, adults learn again to receive the kingdom as little children, and the Holy Spirit meets the church in fresh ways. This is the story we can continue to tell—grounded in the local experiences of South Carolina congregations and connected to a wider movement that trusts God to form all ages together in the body of Christ.

*For questions, or if you want to learn more, contact Toni Taylor at ttaylor@umcsc.org or visit <http://umcsc.org/children>.*

# ADVOCATE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

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The scholarship is for students who are South Carolina United Methodists and are planning to enroll or already enrolled at one of the four United Methodist colleges in South Carolina:

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Brenda Branham Clark

ROCK HILL—Brenda “Dedee” Branham Clark, mother of Samantha McManus, died Nov. 25, 2025. Mrs. McManus is the wife of the Rev. David McManus, pastor of Manning United Methodist Church, Manning.

A memorial service was held Dec. 6 at Greene Funeral Home.

Mrs. Clark is survived by her two daughters.

Mary Watson Duffie

WEST COLUMBIA—Mary Watson Duffie, widow of the Rev. George S. Duffie Jr., died Nov. 22, 2025. Funeral services were held Dec. 6 at Mount Hebron United Methodist Church.

Memorials may be made to Mount Hebron UMC, 3050 Leaphart Road, West Columbia, SC 29169; or to Oriental UMC, 404 Freemason St., Oriental, NC 28571.

Mrs. Duffie is survived by her two sons and daughter.

Rev. Walter Gene Fuller Sr.



Fuller Sr.

FORT MILL—The Rev. Walter Gene Fuller Sr., a retired elder of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, died Nov. 22, 2025.

Prior to his retirement in 1995, Rev. Fuller served the Green Pond Circuit, Mountain View-Few’s Chapel, Lancaster-Zion, Fountain Inn, Hilly Hill, Dillon-Main Street, Kings Mountain Chapel, Buford-Tabernacle and Bethel charges.

A private service will be held at a later date.

Memorials may be made to Providence Care, 500 Lakeshore Pkwy., Rock Hill, SC 29730.

Rev. Fuller is survived by his two daughters and son.

Rev. Colen Giles Jr.

KINGSTREE—The Rev. Colen Giles Jr., father of the Rev. Cheryl Giles Johnson, died Nov. 20, 2025. Rev. Johnson is the pastor of the St. Thomas Charge, Huger. Her husband, the Rev. Lee Johnson is the associate pastor at the charge.

Funeral services were held Nov. 29 at Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church, Salters.

Rev. Giles is survived by his three daughters and two sons.

Rev. George C. Howell

ALBANY, Ga.—The Rev. George C. Howell, father of the Rev. Jeremy Howell, died Nov. 25, 2025. Rev. Howell is the pastor of Red Bank United Methodist Church, Red Bank.

Funeral services were held Nov. 29 at Mathews Funeral Home with burial in Crown Hill Cemetery.

Rev. Howell is survived by his wife, Barbara Croft Howell, two daughters and son.

Donald D. Smith

WEBSTER, N.Y.—Donald D. Smith, father of Donna Foote, died Nov. 16, 2025. Ms. Foote is the accounting manager in the South Carolina Conference Treasurer’s Office.

A memorial service was held Nov. 19 at Anthony Funeral and Cremation Chapel with burial in Webster Union Cemetery.

Mr. Smith is survived by his two daughters.



Photos courtesy of Deidre Harley



A busy summer of ministry

This summer was filled with blessings and celebrations at Salem UMC, Florence. In June, they celebrated the mother of the church, Susanna Hines, who celebrated her 100th birthday. In August there was a Back to School Bash for the children and youth in the community. That Saturday evening, the Young Praise Children and Youth Choir and the mass male and women’s choirs joined together to offer an inaugural special combined concert celebration. Many said there was a praise party happening! On Sunday morning, the church’s Silent Praise worshipped the Lord with a special dance routine. Then in September, Salem held their annual Women’s Day Program with Lay Servant Monica Murdaugh, who left members with a thought-provoking question from Matthew 6:24: “Do you understand the assignment?” All said it was a powerful service.



Worldwide News.

Church delighted to be on ‘Tacky Light Tour’

CHESTERFIELD, Va.—Woodlake United Methodist Church celebrates its inclusion on the Richmond Times-Dispatch’s Tacky Light Tour. To be included, a display must have a minimum of 40,000 lights. The Virginia Conference has a video explaining why the church wanted to make the “tacky” list.

Artificial tree farm welcomes kids with special needs

COOPERSVILLE, Mich.—Having a child with sensory issues, allergies or a physical disability can limit a family’s activities during the Christmas season. But Faith Community Church is making sure no child is left out through its inclusive holiday experiences. The United Methodist congregation’s sensory- and ability-friendly artificial tree farm brings joy to families with special needs.

Switcher Studio named mission partner

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—The General Council on Finance and Administration, the denomination’s finance agency, announces Switcher Studio as an official Ministry Partner. Switcher Studio works with churches of all sizes to produce professional-quality livestreams using equipment they already own.

Camping immersion experience planned

NEWARK, N.J.—The United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries Association plans to hold its fourth Immersion Experience on Feb. 18-23 at Asbury Hills Camp & Retreat Center in Cleveland, South Carolina. The event is a key component for certification for United Methodist camp and retreat ministry.

New effort empowers church communicators

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—United Methodist Communications and Africa University have joined to establish a training program for African communicators within The United Methodist Church. Together, the United Methodist agency and university are offering an eight-week certificate in strategic communications management. Only people chosen by their bishop are eligible to apply.

Firm plans to target churches with pro-Israel ads

DALLAS—Worshippers at several United Methodist congregations in Texas may soon be targeted with propaganda from a foreign government attempting to shore up its lagging support among U.S. Christians. According to a filing by Show Faith by Works, a California-based company, the “geofencing” campaign is aimed at increasing support for Israel while stressing “Palestinian ties to Hamas.”

Goals met, advocacy group shuts doors

CHICAGO—With the overwhelming ratification of worldwide regionalization, the board of the advocacy group Mainstream UMC announced that its work is done and it is shutting down. The board also announced that it voted unanimously to entrust the group’s remaining assets to Reconciling Ministries Network, which advocates for the full inclusion of LGBTQ church members.

Bishop responds to pastor’s transition

LIVERPOOL, N.Y.—On Nov. 23, the Rev. Phil Phaneuf announced to the congregation at North Chili United Methodist Church outside of Rochester that she is transgender and beginning her transition. “I’m not becoming a woman but giving up pretending to be a man,” she said. Bishop Héctor A. Burgos-Núñez affirms her ministry and servant leadership, celebrating the gifts she continues to share with the church.

Bishops share Advent message

WASHINGTON—As the season of Advent begins, the Council of Bishops urges all United Methodists to embrace the denomination’s new vision in preparing their hearts for the coming of Christ. The vision statement reminds all that the UMC “forms disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections.”

Addressing the suffering of Palestinian Christians

BETHLEHEM—Five United Methodists were on hand for the Nov. 14 launch by Palestinian Christians of “Kairos Palestine II, A Moment of Truth: Faith in a Time of Genocide.” Representatives from the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, United Methodists for Kairos Response and the Philippines Ecumenical Peace Platform were joined by Christians from nearly 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania and the Americas. The Kairos document issues a call to Christians everywhere “to stand with Palestinian Christians and all Palestinians to address the violence and suffering experienced in Gaza and increasingly in the West Bank and Israel.”

Courtesy UMNews





Above, former pastors share a smile. From left are Dr. Charles L. White Jr., the Rev. Wade Wyatt and Dr. Marvin L. Caldwell. Below left, DeQuilla Walker, family historian, speaks. Below right, White Jr. brings the culmination.



# Green Pond UMC celebrates 155 years of faith, legacy, community

By Mrs. Nichole Moss Nickens

CLOVER—Green Pond United Methodist Church marked a historic milestone in November as the congregation gathered to celebrate 155 years of ministry, fellowship and faith in the Clover community.

The anniversary theme, “Coming Home,” reflected the deep roots, enduring traditions and spiritual legacy that have guided the church since its founding in 1870.

The weekend-long celebration brought together members, former pastors, community partners and family descendants who returned to honor the church’s impact on generations. The atmosphere was filled with worship, joy and reflection as Green Pond rejoiced in more than a century and a half of God’s faithfulness.

One of the most treasured elements of the celebration was the unveiling of the 155th Anniversary Commemorative Booklet. This keepsake highlighted church history, photographs, family tributes and ministry milestones. It was lovingly dedicated to the Rev. Cassandra Pasley Jackson, whose leadership and spiritual influence remain deeply woven into the fabric of the congregation. Members expressed heartfelt appreciation to the anniversary committee and volunteers who meticulously designed and organized the booklet.

The anniversary events also featured a semiformal banquet Nov. 15 held at Bethel Presbyterian Family Life Center, which served as a time for fellowship, celebration and reflection. The banquet program included moving tributes, historical reflections and special acknowledgments of members whose families have been part of Green Pond UMC for decades.

Green Pond’s current pastor, Dr. Fred P. Moore Jr., offered words of encouragement, gratitude and vision, recognizing the church’s powerful legacy while challenging attendees to continue building upon it.

Guest speakers included Cary Grant, Robert W. Wright and Dequilla Walker, who all highlighted Green Pond’s longstanding commitment to discipleship, its leadership within the Clover community and the importance of preserving the stories and traditions that have sustained the church since the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. The banquet provided a space for laughter, storytelling and heartfelt appreciation for the church’s past and present leaders.

The celebration reached its peak Nov. 16 during the afternoon culmination service, where former pastor Dr. Charles L. White Jr. returned as the guest preacher. White, remembered fondly for his passionate leadership and deep love for the congregation, delivered a stirring message that honored the church’s history while encouraging members to remain faithful to God’s call in the years ahead.

His sermon reflected on the endurance of the saints who built Green Pond from humble beginnings into a thriving spiritual home. The congregation welcomed him with joy, expressing that his presence added a deeply personal and emotional touch to the anniversary. White’s return reminded many of the transformative pastoral leadership that has shaped Green Pond’s mission over several generations.

As the weekend concluded, members expressed renewed energy and excitement for the future. Green Pond UMC remains dedicated to its mission of worship, community outreach, discipleship and spiritual growth. The 155th anniversary was not only a celebration of where the church has been but also a powerful reminder of the bright future God continues to reveal.

Through more than a century and a half of change, Green Pond UMC has remained a beacon of faith, community and hope in Clover, South Carolina. The congregation looks forward to many more years of ministry with gratitude, commitment and unwavering trust in God’s grace.



## From the Archives by Dr. Phillip Stone

### Advice for the local church historian

Often, January sees turnover in offices in the local church, and so this is as good a time as any to offer a refresher course in the duties of the local church historian.

If you have agreed to serve in this role, thank you for your willingness to learn about the role and help in your church’s ministry of memory. Still, you might be wondering just what you’ve signed up for. Let me offer some words of reassurance: No, you don’t have to write a new history of your congregation.

We use the title “historian” for the office, and that’s certainly part of the job. You are responsible for helping interpret and share your church’s history with the congregation and with the larger community. You can use this role to help explain the history of The United Methodist Church, the role the church has played in our country and in your community and what your church has done in its life.

You are also an archivist, responsible for preserving the records of the past and collecting the records of the present. What does it mean to keep the church’s records? The *Book of Discipline* makes the local church responsible for its records. The most important records that churches should be keeping include membership records, including baptisms and marriages, and the business records of the church, such as the minutes of church council, committees, budgets and audits. Other items, such as the newsletter or worship bulletin, programs from events, photographs, church directories and even newspaper clippings can be worth keeping. Any insurance policies, contracts or active files should be kept in the church office. Bills, vouchers and giving records are not archival materials and can be safely destroyed

after a few years. Many churches may have older records, such as old membership registers or quarterly conference ledgers. These are definitely archival materials and should be kept.

As far as a history room, church records should stay in a secure space that is climate controlled. Try to keep moisture and bright light away from the materials. A fireproof vault isn’t necessary, but it is good if you have one. The main point here is to keep things in a place where they can’t walk away.

The reference to records from both the past and present is important here. As an archivist, you are not just responsible for the past, you’re responsible for collecting the records that the church produces today so that members in the future understand what happened today. My pastor at Bethel UMC in Spartanburg, Rev. Brad Gray, preached a sermon on All Saints Sunday titled “Being Good Ancestors,” and I think that’s a job the church historian can help with. We can be good ancestors for generations to come by keeping these records from the past and the present so that they can continue to tell the church’s story. So be aware of the present as much as you are of the past and think about making a record of today for the next generation.

The main responsibility of the church historian is to use your gifts to help the members of your congregation learn more about your church and how it has evolved over the years. I hope some of these suggestions will help you embrace and enjoy your new role.

*Stone is archivist for the South Carolina Conference and Wofford College. Read his blog at [https://blogs.wofford.edu/from\\_the\\_archives](https://blogs.wofford.edu/from_the_archives).*



**Emmanuel marks 155th church anniversary**

Emmanuel UMC, Camden, celebrated their 155th church anniversary Nov. 2 with the theme, “God Is in Charge.” This special occasion was a moment for church family, supporters and community to feel connected and proud of their shared journey. The Rev. Levern Epps, pastor of Mount Beulah UMC, McBee, delivered the anniversary message. Emmanuel’s ministry is dedicated to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Members gathered for a photo while wearing their royal blue T-shirts in honor of their pastor, Dr. Jerry L. Dicks, and First Lady Shelia White-Dicks.





Adult Lessons  
by the Rev. Cathy Joens

About the  
Author

*Joens, a deacon,  
is director of  
church relations  
for Epworth.*

Jan. 25  
Building Your Crew  
Lesson Scripture: 1 Thessa-  
lonians 2  
Background Scripture: Acts  
5:17-42; 1 Thessalonians  
2ood  
Key Verse: 1 Thessalo-  
nians 2:14, “Brothers  
and sisters, you became  
imitators of the churches  
of God in Judea, which  
are in Christ Jesus. This  
was because you also  
suffered the same things  
from your own people as  
they did from the Jews.”



Children’s  
Sermon  
by the Rev.  
Meg Cook

Paul’s first letter to Thessalonica

Jan. 4  
Walk This Way  
Lesson Scripture: John  
14:1-14  
Background Scripture: John  
13:1-38  
Key Verse: John 14:6-7, “Je-  
sus answered, ‘I am the  
way, the truth, and the  
life. No one comes to the  
Father except through  
me. If you have really  
known me, you will also  
know the Father. From  
now on you know him  
and have seen him.’”

I have walked a lot of paths while hiking, and I have taken wrong turns on half of the paths I’ve taken. Many of us can relate to taking wrong turns or getting lost for a time. It seems to be part of our human condition. While traveling, we look for signs; use maps or trail blazes; or we find someone who knows the way and follow them.

Jesus tells the disciples on his last night with them, “I am going away.” He has been teaching them and showing them for all of his ministry; yet Thomas asks the “way, the truth and the life.”

Jesus began his ministry by saying to the disciples, “Follow me.” He served as a guide for them so they would not get lost. Now, with Jesus leaving, the way seems murky. Jesus re-minds them and us to follow him, for he is the way. He reminds them and us that he will be with us (Holy Spirit) and he will equip them and us to follow the path he has laid for them and us. We can trust this, even as we take wrong turns.

Jesus is always there to show us the way home to safety. I am glad Jesus walks with me when I hike, but I’m even more glad that he walks with me through life, showing me and us the way.

In what ways do you experience God showing you the way? Where is God for you when you take a wrong path?

Jan. 11  
Bearing the Fruit of Love  
Lesson Scripture: John  
15:1-17  
Background Texts: Psalm  
80, John 15:1-17  
Key Verse: John 15:5, “I  
am the vine; you are the  
branches. If you remain  
in me and I in you, then  
you will produce much  
fruit. Without me, you  
can’t do anything.”

Vineyards are fascinat-ing. There is so much care that goes into making a good grape. The soil must be tended; the vines must be taken care of and pro- tected. I remember going to a vineyard where roses were planted at the end of every row of vines. The roses were there to help the vinedresser know when bugs were on the vines.

Grape vines take a lot of tender loving care and intentionality to produce the best crop. The vine- dresser is with the vine every day. The branches are often pruned to give the best energy to the vine that holds the fruit. It is all about producing good fruit. God wants us to bear good fruit. He is our vinedresser (our Lord).

Jesus said,” I am the vine, and you are the branches.” He calls us to stay attached, close, connected. He is with us every day.

If we stay close to Jesus, the vine, we will grow, be nourished in his word and bear good fruit. We will bear not just “okay fruit” but good, excellent fruit that can be used to feed the king- dom of God. As good fruit, we will serve others, share the Gospel and offer clarity about what it means to fol- low Christ.

God, the vinedresser, did this for us. He watches over us every day to make sure we are growing in the right direction.

What are the times where you have felt pruned for the better? Can you recall moments where you felt closest to God?

What do you need in order to recognize disease in your life?

Jan. 18  
Imitation Game  
Lesson Scripture: 1 Thessa-  
lonians 1  
Background Scripture: Acts  
17:1-15; 1 Thessalonians 1  
Key verse: 1 Thessalonians  
1:6, “You became imita-  
tors of us and of the Lord,  
for you welcomed the  
message in the midst  
of severe suffering with  
the joy given by the Holy  
Spirit.”

Paul and Silas went to Thessalonica to share the Gospel, and a church was born. People who had worshipped other gods, people who were Jewish

and people with no faith all believed the message of Jesus Christ as good news! They formed a church. None of this was done without a battle of sorts.

While Paul and Silas were in Thessalonica for the first time, riots broke out, and they were beaten, jailed and eventually thrown out of town and told to never come back.

Time went by. Paul and Silas continued their mis- sionary journey in different towns and met Timothy. The three of them and others made a team that would revolutionize the message of Christ in the region.

Paul had not forgotten the church of people in Thessalonica. He knew that they were under constant threat and harassment. Paul sent Timothy to check on them, and Timothy found them faithful. They had been imitators of the witness that Paul and Silas provided on their first visit.

The Thessalonian church was holding the course in faith, hope and love. There were no idols being wor- shipped, and Christ was being proclaimed despite the great pressure offered by those against Christ and his missionaries.

They learned how to fol- low Christ authentically by listening and learning from Paul and Silas and made that true to their lives. They were inspired and had no need to be an imitation, a fake look-alike follower of Jesus; rather, they were the real deal—disciples of Christ who believed that Christ would guide them in free- dom and love to make more disciples.

Timothy came back from his visit and shared all that he had experienced.

Paul responded with a letter to the Thessalonians applauding them for their faithfulness and disciple- ship.

A couple of things seem important in this story: We are to be imitators not imita- tions. As we trust in God and live in faith, hope and love, we can share authenti- cally God’s love. God’s love changes ours and others lives.

When have you been inspired to deepen your faith? Who are the people who encourage and inspire you? What are the dangers to your faith?

The people of Thes- salonica remind me of the movies “Sandlot” and “The Bad News Bears.” These stories are about a ragtag and diverse group of kids who come together to make a winning baseball team. It is a messy story filled with characters with a wide range of differences and issues, learning how to trust and love one another. Does this sound like 1 Thessalo- nians 2 to you?

Paul and his team come to Thessalonica to share the Good News with God-fear- ers (those Jews who seek Christ), as well as Gentiles, no-faithers and Samaritans. This ragtag diverse group is witness to the authentic message and consistent be- havior of Paul and his team. They witness their deep belief, their work day and night, their willingness to suffer and their unwavering belief in God. They hear the passion and logic of follow- ing Christ.

Like I shared in the last lesson, Paul writes this let- ter applauding the church because they have taken what they learned and witnessed and remained strong. This ragtag and diverse group has learned to trust one another over the power brokers of both religious sect and state. I picture that they are using their gifts to share the Gos- pel in the way that it was modeled for them and the church is growing despite persecution.

We are a ragtag and diverse of people. We share what we are learning and have learned with those in our sphere of influence. To do that, we much lean on each other, use our gifts, be authentic and passionate: Be imitators of Christ.

What do you need to let go of to share the Gospel? Who is on your team? What does “be an imitator of Christ” mean for you?

Are you interested in being on the team that writes Advocate Bible lessons? Email jbrodie@advocatesc.org.

Fishers of Men

Date: Jan. 25  
Scripture: Matthew 4:18-23 (Fish-ers of Men)  
Props: A big, goofy fishing hat covered in shiny lures (toy ones, or paper lures you make). Think of a bucket hat or even just a ballcap. There may even be a fisherperson in your church you can borrow from, or have them come to church wearing their own hat.

Do: Welcome and settle the chil- dren.

Say: Good morning, friends! I am so glad you’re here today. You might notice I’m wearing, well, something a little “interesting.” (Point to the hat.)

Ask: What do you think of my hat? Pretty silly, right? It’s covered in fishing lures. Sometimes fishers use bright and shiny lures, like these (point to lure or hold one in your hand), to get a fish’s attention.

Say: I’m wearing this silly hat to help us think about what gets people’s attention ... in a good, godly way! Today in our Scripture read- ings, we’re learning a story about the very first people Jesus called to follow him. Fishermen named Peter, Andrew, James and John. Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Ask: Now, did Jesus mean catch- ing people with fishing lures like what’s on my hat? (Let the kids answer, “Nooo!”) You’re right. These lures help fishers catch fish. But we don’t need shiny hats or sparkly things to help people come close to God.

Say: Jesus calls us to “fish for people.” That means being the kind of person who attracts others with kindness and love. Just like different lures attract different kinds of fish, different acts of love “catch” people’s attention.

Our “lures,” the things that help people feel God’s love, are things like:

- Being kind
- Sharing
- Including someone who feels lonely
- Helping someone who’s sad
- Saying “I’m sorry”
- Praying for others

These are actions Jesus used to fish for people. And Jesus invites us to do these actions, too. You know what’s amazing? Every one of you can be a fisher of people. You don’t need a silly hat or fishing lures. You just need a loving heart.

And when you show that love, people feel it, like a gentle tug, and they come closer to God.

Will you pray with me? Dear God (echo), we love you (echo). Help us to fish (echo) for people.(echo). Help us to be kind (echo), to share (echo), to include (echo) and pray for one another (echo). Amen.

Cook pastors Grace United Methodist Church, Columbia.



# Happenings.

## Event Calendar.

### December

Dec. 21—Winter Equinox

Dec. 24—Christmas Eve

Dec. 24-26—United Methodist Center closed

Dec. 25—Christmas Day

Dec. 31—New Year’s Eve/Watch Night

### January

Jan. 1—New Year’s Day (United Methodist Center closed)

Jan. 3—UMM 2026 New Year’s Breakfast, Aldersgate UMC, Sumter, 9 a.m.

Jan. 4—Epiphany Sunday

Jan. 4—Prayer Walk, Columbia UMC, Columbia, 3 p.m.

Jan. 9-10—"Lights, Camera, Action: Leading and Learning for Laity," Journey UMC, Columbia. <https://www.umcsc.org/lead>

Jan. 11—Baptism of the Lord

Jan. 11—Human Trafficking Awareness Day

Jan. 12—Orangeburg District Connectional Ministries meeting, St. Mark UMC, North, 6:30-8 p.m.

Jan. 15—Last day to pay 2025 Apportionments

Jan. 16-17—LSM School (Columbia District), Ashland UMC, Columbia, 4:30-9 p.m. (Fri.), 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. (Sat.), \$40. <https://www.umcsc.org/codistlsmreg/>

Jan. 16-19—2026 ENCOUNTER Winter Youth Retreat, Chris Singleton, speaker, Lake Junaluska, N.C. <https://lakejunaluska.com/spiritual-renewal/youth-ministry/>

Jan. 18—Human Relations Day

Jan. 19—Martin Luther King Day (United Methodist Center closed)

Jan. 23-25—2026 ENCOUNTER Winter Youth Retreat, Andrew Mochrie, speaker, Lake Junaluska, N.C. <https://lakejunaluska.com/spiritual-renewal/youth-ministry/>

Jan. 24-25—LSM School (Rock Hill District), Cornerstone UMC, Rock Hill, 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (Sat.), 2-5 p.m. (Sun.), \$35. <https://www.umcsc.org/rockhillonlineregistration/>

Jan. 25—Ecumenical Sunday

Jan. 27—International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Jan. 28—Registration deadline, 21st Annual Native American Representative Training

### February

**Black History Month**

Feb. 7—21st Annual Native American Representative Training, Columbia UMC, Columbia, 9 a.m. \$10. Contact LaShella Kirkland, 803-374-8243 or [LaShellaKirkland@live.com](mailto:LaShellaKirkland@live.com) for registration.

Feb. 8—Scouting Sunday

Feb. 13-16—2026 ENCOUNTER Winter Youth Retreat, Andrew Mochrie, speaker, Lake Junaluska, N.C. <https://lakejunaluska.com/spiritual-renewal/youth-ministry/>

Feb. 14—Valentine’s Day

Feb. 15—Transfiguration Sunday

Feb. 15—Registraton deadline, South Carolina Tribal Bus Tour. Contact Zan Tracy Pender, 803-905-5672 or [tracypender@hotmail.com](mailto:tracypender@hotmail.com) to register.

Feb. 16—Presidents’ Day

Feb. 18—Ash Wednesday

Feb. 20-21—MenNMinistry Retreat, Journey UMC, Columbia. Register: <https://www.umcsc.org/mennministryretreatreg/>

Feb. 28-March 1—Theotokos Confirmation Retreat, Hinton Life Rural Life Center, Hayesville, N.C. <https://hintontheotokos.org>

### March

**Women’s History Month**

March 8—Daylight Savings Time starts

March 9—Orangeburg District Connectional Ministries meeting, St. Mark UMC, North, 6:30-8 p.m.

March 13-15—Theotokos Confirmation Retreat, Hinton Life Rural Life Center, Hayesville, N.C. <https://hintontheotokos.org>

March 17—St. Patrick’s Day

March 20-22—South Carolina Tribal Bus Tour, \$100. Contact Zan Tracy Pender, 803-905-5672 or [tracypender@hotmail.com](mailto:tracypender@hotmail.com) to register.

March 20-22—Theotokos Confirmation Retreat, Hinton Life Rural Life Center, Hayesville, N.C. <https://hintontheotokos.org>

March 29—Palm/Passion Sunday

### April

April 2—Maundy Thursday

April 3—Good Friday (United Methodist Center closed)



**Fitness among the faithful**  
Dr. Jacob White of Shepherd UMC, Sumter, delivered an informative presentation on men's health, vaccines and HIV as part of the church's fifth Sunday "Getting Fit for Kingdom Building" educational series, which provides financial, mental and physical health resources to the community. The Rev. Gwendolyn T. White serves as the church's pastor.



**Getting crafty**  
Manning UMC, Manning, held its annual craft bazaar Nov. 15. While the church made some money, the focus was for the bazaar to serve as a community fellowship event.



Photos by Kelly Gottheiner



**Sandy Grove helps Operations Christmas Child**  
Sandy Grove UMC, Jefferson, lives out their mission to reach out to the world as disciples of Christ as they work with Samaritan's Purse Operations Christmas Child for their annual project. They were blessed to prepare 335 boxes with the help of Mount Elon to start the process. They were also blessed to be involved in the end of the process, as members and their pastor, Marion Loretta Cooper, took a group of 16 to volunteer on Saturday, Nov. 30, to process boxes for shipment. By the end of their shift, they had processed 67,282 boxes on their way to Ecuador and Paraguay. As of press time, a total of 826,114 boxes were processed so far. It was truly a labor of love, and church children refer to it as "going to Santa's Workshop." Church members said they look forward to helping with even more boxes next year as they help bring the joy of Christ to a child around the world.

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# TRANSITION

From Page 1

In the first gathering of the Transition Teams in December, Bishop Leonard Fairley, resident bishop of the South Carolina Conference, cited Luke 22:42 in setting the context for their work.

“None of us wants to do this,” Fairley said. “Oftentimes, I think we miss the will of God because our own will gets in the way; what we want and what we think should happen gets in the way.”

“So how do we discern what the will of God is for our annual conference?”

How do we determine what the will of God is for our districts? How do we determine what the will of God is for our staffing in our current reality? How do we pray and discern the will of God?”

Jesus himself showed us how to respond when God asks us to do something we may not want to do, Fairley said: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”

“For us, I think the first way to discern the will of God is to insert that word, ‘nevertheless’; insert the words ‘not my will, but your will, be done.’”

There are three Transition Teams: Legalities/Property/Finance Consid-

erations; Logistics of District Reduction; and Reimagining Congregational Development.

**Legalities/Property/Finance Considerations**

The Legalities/Property/Finance Considerations team is tasked to research and confirm that the conference is aligned with the *UMC Book of Discipline*, Conference Standing Rules, existing contracts, legal ramifications, etc.

Members:

- Ken Nelson
- Steve Brown
- Bob James
- Sandy Shaffer
- Martha Alewine
- Brenda Fleming
- Thomas Smith

**Logistics of District Reduction**

The Logistics of District Reduction team will plan and execute the details of records transfer, nominations, communication and other logistical details of reducing the number of districts,

building off the report of the Workload subgroup of the Jeremiah Team.

Members:

- Terry Fleming
- Brian Underwood
- Keith Stewart
- Kay Crowe (Advisory)
- Beth Westbury (Advisory)

**Reimagining Congregational Development**

The Reimagining Congregational Development team will handle logistics of transferring the current projects and historical records of Congregational Development into the Office of Congregational Excellence and plan for what the role of the Director of Innovation & Strategy will look like.

Members:

- Chris Lollis
- Anthony Hodge
- Michael Toms
- Laura Hill
- Brian Gilmer
- Brenda Cooper
- James Friday (advisory)
- Millie Nelson Smith (advisory)



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# MEMOIR

From Page 1

Fairley grew up as one of nine children to a single mother in Laurinburg, North Carolina. And while he experienced a great deal of suffering and difficulty, times that caused him to question life's circumstances and even his faith, Fairley shares how he learned ways to straighten out the question marks of his life into the exclamation points of purpose.

“Silver Linings’ is truly one of the best books I’ve read this year—and I read a lot,” said Jessica Brodie, editor of both the *Advocate* and its publishing arm, the Advocate Press, which published the 398-page book. “It brought me to tears in places, yet left me utterly inspired and heartened.”

United Methodist Bishop Paul L. Leeland called Fairley’s memoir “a harsh, yet profound, picture of the realities of poverty and racism while embracing the enduring qualities of loyalty, family, devotion, perseverance, love and faith. This is a journey of hope and healing, inspiring us to embrace



the God-given relationships that shape our lives and help us recognize how we might overcome the polarization that too often divides us.”

United Methodist minister Dr. Bart W. Milleson said of the book, “Seldom

have I read a memoir written with such clarity that I feel like I’m the character described by the author. ... As you read ‘Silver Linings,’ you will sense God reaching down, touching and bearing Leonard’s pain. You will feel God reaching down and bearing your pain, too.”

Susan Newton Graebe, residency in ordained ministry coordinator for the North Carolina Conference of the UMC, said Fairley’s book is uplifting.

“Leonard Fairley has every reason to be bitter,” Graebe noted. “Born into a world of racism, poverty, injustice and crushing circumstances, in ‘Silver Linings,’ Leonard shows us how something altogether different took root in his life, shaping him to see and feel God in everything. From his birth story, the apartment he called ‘the coffin in Queens,’ his grandma’s back porch bathtub and beyond, Leonard leads us through his remarkable life with authenticity, truth and loving care. As you read it, take heart. You are headed into deep waters that may very well pull you under and spit you out in a different place. Trust Leonard’s story to lead you where you need to go, then invite it to take root in your life as well.”

“Silver Linings” is available now as an ebook and paperback on Amazon at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1966237103>.

The book will be available directly from the *Advocate* in January; pre-order now at <https://advocatesc.org/store/books/silver-linings>.



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