Advocate.
SERVING SOUTH CAROLINA UNITED METHODISTS SINCE 1837

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New website coming!

Methodists and the monks

Photo by Ruth Wong

The monks pass through downtown Saluda as a crowd of more than 1,000 cheer them on.

UMCSC pastors, church members reflect as Buddhist monks pass through South Carolina on Walk for Peace

By Jessica Brodie

United Methodists were among the thousands of South Carolinians who gathered to watch Buddhist monks in January on their "Walk for Peace" through the Palmetto State.

Accompanied by their rescue dog, Aloka, the monks' pilgrimage started in Fort Worth, Texas, in October and will culminate in Washington, D.C. as they spread their message of peace, unity, love and kindness through mindful, mostly barefoot walking.

While some onlookers criticized and a few even heckled the monks, most gathered in support or curiosity as the monks trekked through the state, entering from Georgia near McCormick, on through Saluda and then Lexington toward Columbia, then up through Blythewood, Ridgeway, Great Falls and Rock Hill before heading into North Carolina. Their walk should end mid-February.

Huge crowds have surrounded the monks throughout their trip. In Saluda,

See "Monks," Page 12

St. John's UMC helps rural Kenya village get needed well

By Jessica Brodie

To get water, most of us simply turn on the faucet. Often we think nothing of wasting water; it's a given, something we've always had and never imagined doing without.

But for the people of Ntinyika, Kenya, water is far more precious—and hard to come by. Ntinyika is a small, rural community in Kajiado County, Kenya, about two hours south of Nairobi. There is limited electricity in the community and no running water. Part of the Maasai ethnic group of people who make their living raising livestock, including cattle, goats and sheep, they earn the equivalent of around $100 U.S. per month.

Every day, the people in the community—men, women and children—walk as far as two miles to gather water from creeks or bore holes, which is often dirty and unsanitary. They use this water for bathing, cooking and drinking.

Now, one United Methodist church in the Upstate is doing what they can to drill a well so the Ntinyika community can have a safe, easily accessible water source.

St. John's UMC, Anderson, is joining forces with Hope of Life Baptist Church in Austin to help install a well in Ntinyika that will bring significant improvement to the life of the people there, many who attend Hope of Life's sister church in Ntinyika.

See "Kenya," Page 13

Podcasts help pastors take faith past church walls

By Jessica Brodie

Jesus preached to thousands on hillsides and by the sea. John the Baptist took to the Jordan River and the wilderness. John Wesley's open-air preaching once found him standing atop his father's tombstone to reach the crowds.

Today, thanks to the internet's capacity to draw audiences from around the world, blogs, YouTube videos and TikTok testimonies are transforming hearts and lives.

Now, some pastors in South Carolina are using the popularity and widespread reach of podcasts to widen the net.

Two Greenwood pastors—the Revs. Jason Wilson and Robby Lybrand—have started a Two Pastors podcast to explore conversations about life, faith and everything in between. And one Columbia pastor, the Rev. Jeri-Katherine Warden Sipes, is launching a short kids' Lent Podcast to

See "Podcasts," Page 14

2025 apportionments close year at 78.4 percent

By Jessica Brodie

The South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church closed its books for 2025 with 78.4 percent of apportionments paid—the lowest percentage in more than two decades.

That translates to $9.2 million of the $11.7 million 2025 conference budget paid by local churches in the UMCSC. It's roughly $3.5 million less than the $12.6 churches paid last year on the 2024 budget.

However, Beth Westbury, the

See "78.4 Percent," Page 24

Advocate.

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The *Advocate* maintains copies of back issues for sale for up to one year, as long as the supply lasts. Postage may apply. To research or review articles published more than one year ago, bound copies of the newspaper are available for review at the *Advocate* office, Wofford College in Spartanburg and the South Caroliniana Library in Columbia.

Deadlines
Deadlines are the 10th of each month for the following month's paper (except July paper due June 6).

Letters and Op-Eds Policy
We welcome letters to the editor and commentary from guest writers who are members of or connected to United Methodist churches in South Carolina. Letters should not exceed 450 words, and commentary should not exceed 800 words. All submissions are subject to editing as needed to meet standards of grammar and style. We will not publish anonymous letters, letters praising or criticizing businesses by name, endorsements of or letters from political candidates, fundraising language or personal attacks. All submissions will be verified; include your name, phone number and church name with city and hometown. Email oped@advocatesc.org.

Obituaries
The *Advocate* prints death notices of clergy and their immediate families and laypersons who have served on conference boards and agencies or who work for the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Photographs
Photographs can be submitted to the newspaper for publication. High-resolution digital color images are preferred. Photographs should be in focus and should have proper exposure. People in photographs should be identified with names and ages, and a contact person with a phone number should be included. Email news@advocatesc.org.

Submissions
The *Advocate* encourages readers to submit items of interest to South Carolina United Methodists. There is no charge for running items involving activities or announcements. Items should be submitted as far as possible in advance of the event's date or the date of requested publication. They appear in the newspaper on a space-available basis. Email news@advocatesc.org.

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Book signings for bishop's memoir set for Jan. 28–29

Host churches are St. Mark, Mount Hebron UMCs

Bishop Leonard Fairley will visit two churches in South Carolina to sign copies of and speak about his acclaimed memoir, "Silver Linings."

All are invited to the events, set for Wednesday, Jan. 28, at 6 p.m. at St. Mark United Methodist Church, Taylors, and on Thursday, Jan. 29, at 6 p.m. at Mount Hebron UMC, West Columbia.

Fairley will speak about the book, as well as answer questions and sign copies. Books will be available for purchase at both events.

Fairley

"Silver Linings" 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. 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 published by the Advocate Press, the publishing arm of the *Advocate* newspaper.

In addition to being available for purchase at the book signings, the book is available as a paperback ($25) and ebook ($10) from https://advocatesc.org/store/books/silver-linings.

Bethel Park opens sanctuary a year after blaze

By Jessica Brodie

DENMARK—More than a year after a devastating fire severely damaged their church, Bethel Park United Methodist Church is worshipping in its sanctuary once more.

The historic church held its first service in its restored sanctuary on Christmas Eve, something its pastor called "a true celebration."

"To the members of Bethel Park—welcome home," said the Rev. Javy Rudolph Gwaltney, opening the candlelight service with open arms and a broad smile as he addressed the congregation. "It's been over a year since we've been able to worship here in this sanctuary, so know that tonight, as we begin this service, that we are filled with great joy."

What is suspected to have been three arson-related fires broke out at the church in the early hours of Nov. 9, damaging the church nursery, an upstairs Sunday school room and the library near the front entrance, leaving the church and its sanctuary unusable. Gwaltney said a firefighter happened to drive by the church on the way home from a false alarm at another church, so they were able to get crews on-site to fight the blaze very quickly.

However, even with the fast response, great damage was done. The front entrance area became ashes and charcoal, and the farthest corner of the building had layers of soot, Gwaltney told the *Advocate*.

Gwaltney expresses gratitude during the church's Christmas Eve service.

While the building was not destroyed, Gwaltney said there was an eighth of an inch of soot everywhere—the pews, the stained-glass windows, even the hundreds of individual tubes in the church's old pipe organ.

In the aftermath, Bethel Park found another place to worship temporarily, and Gwaltney started a GoFundMe page to collect funds for the church's $5,000 insurance deductible—a sum that was raised in just three hours.

Members are excited to be worshipping in their sanctuary again, though it will still be some time before repair on the church's social hall, kitchen and library are complete.

February Men N Ministry event to bring together generations

By Jessica Brodie

COLUMBIA—Men and boys from across the Palmetto State will gather this month for two days of spiritual renewal intended to bridge generations for Jesus.

Set for Feb. 20-21, the event will be held at Journey United Methodist Church with 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).

"I'm very excited about the event," said Dyron V. Anderson, president of the South Carolina Conference United Methodist Men. "We have a special emphasis on trying to regain youth and younger men, as we're missing a lost generation in many of our churches."

The event kicks off that Friday with a shotgun start at 10 a.m. for a daylong golf tournament at The Spur at Northwoods Golf Course. The golf tournament cost is $90 and includes lunch.

That night, Journey will host their popular "Cigars and Scriptures" fellowship event for men at 6 p.m.

Saturday 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 (includes lunch), $20 for Cigars and Scriptures, and $65 for the main event. Local church sponsorships are available for $300, while major church sponsorships are available for $600.

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

Advocate starts new Zoom-based Virtual Book Club

First book, 'Silver Linings,' set for March 3, 5

In an effort to foster community among United Methodists in reading Christian books, the *Advocate* is starting a new Advocate Virtual Book Club.

The Advocate Virtual Book Club will be held via Zoom, usually on the first Tuesday evening and second Thursday morning of each month and hosted by *Advocate* Editor Jessica Brodie.

The first Advocate Virtual Book Club will be held Tuesday, March 3, at 6:30 p.m. or Thursday, March 5, at 11 a.m.—two different time options for those who work during the day or with evening commitments.

"I'm excited about the Advocate Virtual Book Club," Brodie said. "As a book lover and author myself, I think it will be a great way to connect with other United Methodists who love books and want to be in community together as we talk about the issues addressed in these books."

The book will be "Silver Linings," the memoir authored by South Carolina Bishop Leonard Fairley and published by the Advocate Press, the book publishing arm of the *Advocate*.

Participants should purchase the book and read it throughout the month of February and then discuss the book at the March book club meeting. To get the book, visit https://advocatepress.org. It is also available on Amazon.

The Advocate Virtual Book Club is free, but participants must register to receive a Zoom link.

The project is the idea of Jill Deyton, a member of Zion United Methodist Church, Anderson.

To sign up, scan the QR code or go to https://forms.office.com/r/UZwWvwG2xR.

Called to be the light

United Methodists kick off year with Columbia prayer walk

Photos by Matt Brodie

Above, the Rev. Antoinette Gaboton-Moss, center, walks with others during the prayer walk down Main Street to the Statehouse.

Above left, a woman prays during the closing. Above right, McCoy-Bruce welcomes all to the church. Below left, Bishop Fairley urges people to PUSH: "Pray Until Something Happens." Below right, many from across the conference attended.

By Jessica Brodie

COLUMBIA—United Methodists from across South Carolina came together Jan. 4 in a prayer walk seeking collaboration, connection and community in the city and state.

The walk, which started at Columbia United Methodist Church, journeyed down Main Street and ended at the steps of the South Carolina Statehouse, where South Carolina Resident Bishop Leonard Fairley brought a word on the necessity of joining together to be the light God calls us to be.

"Lord knows we're living in days that need light," Fairley preached, drawing on Isaiah 60:1-3.

He lifted up the acronym PUSH, which stands for "Pray Until Something Happens."

There's no better to do this than right now, Fairley proclaimed.

"The new year is here. Now is the time to join our hearts and resources," he said to a chorus of amens. "Today we walk and pray because we believe what can be—because we believe what will be."

Fairley noted that many of the people the prayer walkers passed are marginalized, with no place to sleep that night and no proper meal to eat. He said that when he was a child, he also was marginalized. But together, we can be God's light to the marginalized and to all people.

"Today is the day," he urged the crowd. "Now is the time to work side by side."

The prayer walk was organized by Fairley along with the Rev. Ashley McCoy-Bruce, the Rev. Kermit Moss and Columbia District Superintendent the Rev. Fran Elrod. Wearing yellow and white, participants gathered at 3 p.m. in the sanctuary of Columbia UMC, one of the newest congregations in the conference, born of a merger of Greene and Main Street UMCs. Its multicultural congregation has a ministry to welcome all, reaching out to college students and the homeless and across widespread socioeconomics. They envisioned the prayer walk not only as a chance for their church to pray for ways they can use their building for the entire community but also for the conference to pray together for the city, state, nation and world.

McCoy-Bruce kicked off the event by welcoming all to the church, noting there is much to pray about.

"As Christians, this (prayer) is the best tool we have—a way to share the hope and love of Jesus Christ," she said.

Moss followed with an opening prayer asking the Lord to "do something amazing in our midst."

"God, help us not be afraid to plant seeds of love and hope in difficult places," Moss implored.

Elrod also welcomed the crowd, noting that she feels both amazed and excited by the gathering.

"It's a holy excitement—something new is happening across Christendom, and we are a part of it," Elrod said. "Today is a first step for us."

Several spring Salkehatchie work camps planned

This March and April, youth and adult volunteers will gather for their choice of Spring Salkehatchie mission opportunities.

While locations are still being determined, Spring Salkehatchie events will be held on the following dates:

- March 15-20
- March 22-27
- March 29-April 3
- April 6-11
- April 12-17

Youth ages 14 and older will team up with adults to work on homes in a community for people in desperate need of home repairs.

Spring Salkehatchie is designed to be like the summer Salkehatchie weeks.

Salkehatchie Summer Service, which started in 1978, is a weeklong mission experience that enables teens and adults to repair houses for people in need across South Carolina.

The cost for Spring Salkehatchie is $200 and requires registration. Adults must do a background check.

Registration is going on now for spring camps. To register, go to https://www.salkehatchie.org.

Registration for summer camps opens on March 1.

For questions, email salkehatchie@umcsc.org.

Thank your church admins, children's staff with an ad in the April Advocate

Deadline is March 10

In April, you have the opportunity to recognize administrative professionals and children's ministry staffers in your church with appreciation ads in the *Advocate*.

April 26 is Administrative Professionals' Day, and churches can celebrate their administrative staff and volunteers through special ads in the *Advocate*.

As well, April is the month of the young child, which is a good time to celebrate the work children's ministry staffers do with the church's children.

Three sizes are available (all 5 inches wide):

- Small (1" tall): $45
- Medium (2" tall): $91
- Large (4" tall): $182

Email text to atrussell@advocatesc.org or send to *Advocate*, 4908 Colonial Drive, Columbia, SC 29203; deadline is March 10.

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Perspectives.

Editorial
by Jessica Brodie

Real love

As I prepared to go to press on this edition, I found myself at the local pharmacy. Walking in, my senses were accosted by a sea of pink and red hearts and the sugary aroma of chocolatey treats, lining up to remind me that February brings Valentine's Day. It's the same with the grocery store, or whenever I open my email—ads and other paraphernalia trying to convince me to buy exactly the right gift for "that special someone."

We don't need a commercialized holiday to remind us to love each other, I know. But the fuss we, as a people, make over the holiday says a great deal about that deep longing within us for love. It's not only romantic love many of us long for but the most important kind of love—the agape love that is encompassed in our Triune God ... Father, Son, and Spirit, three in one.

Love created the world. Love sent his son to die for us. Love willingly trudged, carrying a cross, up a hill to his brutal and painful death. Love rose again, and love points the way. The Bible reminds us over and over again of God's great love, through the wider story as well as through direct statements: "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

True, sometimes our loving God punished his people. But pure, righteous love was and is always at the heart of all of it. It's the kind of love that longs for us to have a place in his heavenly kingdom forever and ever. The apostle Paul was not wrong when he said that without love, we have nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Love moves mountains. Love creates bridges through division. Love points the way over and over again.

Jesus said in John 15:1-17 that he is the vine and we are the branches. When we are connected to him, we can do supernatural, amazing things. That is because the Holy Spirit—part of the Triune God!—lives in our hearts. That's right, God himself lives in our hearts and enables us to do things we cannot possibly imagine. That perfect God-love allows us to love and forgive our enemies. It allows us to achieve God-sized dreams through the will and miraculous ways of God Almighty.

This month, evidence of love is sprinkled throughout the pages of this newspaper. We can see it from the way people welcomed the Buddhist monks on their peace walk throughout the South, to the way they're raising money to bring water to a desperate people across the Atlantic, to the bold new evangelism they're undertaking through podcasts and other tools. Love undergirds it all.

Sometimes the divisiveness around us—whether that's in our communities, our homes and families or even in our churches—threatens to bring us to our knees. But love—God-love—is far more powerful than that.

Remember: Light always overcomes the darkness. May God strengthen us, his people, as we do our part to be the love and the light so desperately needed in this world.

Reflection topic for March *Advocate*

What does your Lenten journey look like this year? Share with the *Advocate* at oped@advocatesc.org (include church name/city).

Bishop's Column
by Bishop Leonard E. Fairley

Love can guide the way

Like many of you, my heart breaks every time I turn on the news or scroll through Facebook or any social media platform. We seem to be spiraling down the dark pathway of forgetting the core essentials of the great commandment.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

What is essential to being a follower of Jesus Christ? This is the question that we each must ask ourselves in these troubling days. Is it following the right doctrine? Is it being able to quote and interpret Scripture? Is it being a political activist or socially prophetic, speaking truth to power? Is it belonging to a certain political party or watching the right news network?

What is the essential that will bring us out of this collective dark night of the soul? What is the one nonnegotiable core value for all who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ? Paul reminds us, "Strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31).

The more excellent way sounds and looks like this: "If I speak in the tongues of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing ... and now faith, hope and love abide these three, but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 13).

What if this was the measure by which we lived? I'll leave this where it is, and you decide. But as for me, I will stick with love.

"I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear" (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.).

Correction.

In the article "UMCSC Transition Teams Begin Work" (January *Advocate*), we reversed the members of the Logistics and Legalities teams. They should have been listed as follows:

Legalities/Property/Finance Considerations team members:
Terry Fleming
Brian Underwood
Keith Stewart
Kay Crowe (Advisory)
Beth Westbury (Advisory)

Logistics of District Reduction team members:
Ken Nelson
Steve Brown
Bob James
Sandy Shaffer
Martha Alewine
Brenda Fleming
Thomas Smith

We apologize for this error and, as always, sincerely strive to set the record straight.

Appointment Changes.

Bishop Leonard Fairley has announced the following changes of appointment:

Effective 1/1/2026
Columbia District: Mount Pleasant – Alexander James Christian (RL) (1/4)
Columbia District: St. John – TBS

Letters to the Editor.

Her name was good

An ICE agent shoots a 37-year-old American mother in her face. She was labeled a domestic terrorist with no proof. In her car was her pet dog and children toys. She is unarmed and says nice words, and he has five to 10 supporters with him around her car with arms. The agent goes home to his wife and children. Her child is motherless.

Who will be the next victim?

The dignity of life is being cheapened, and there is no moral conscience for these actions. There is a commandment in the Bible that says, "Thou shall not kill." How long will the American people tolerate this cruel behavior? Evil and sin are real.

"Lord, I am sickened. I am crushed tonight. Sin is horrible, Lord. It is ugly. It is dirty" (Michael Quoist, "Prayers").

God knows.

Rev. John Culp, retired
West Columbia

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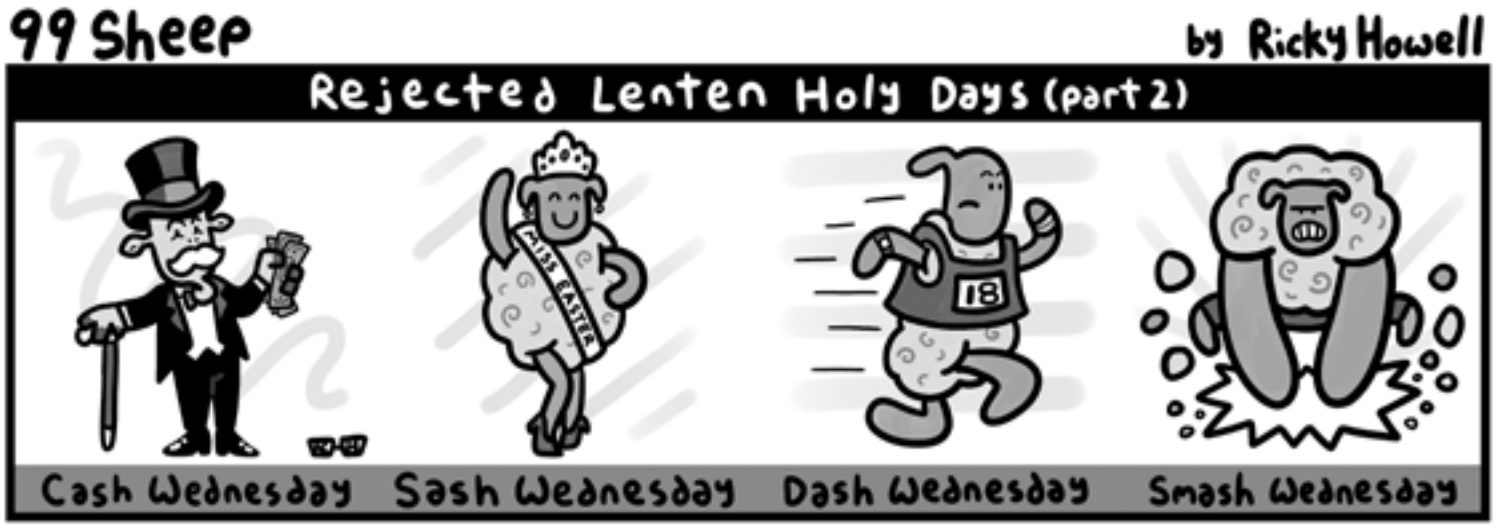

Humanity Behind Bars
by the Rev. Nichole Middleton

Seeing one another clearly

For the past year, this column in the *Advocate*, Humanity Behind Bars, has invited readers into a simple, intentional practice: pausing to see the humanity that exists behind fences, beyond labels and beneath assumptions. Month by month, we have lingered with stories that show incarceration does not erase dignity, worth or belovedness.

This year has unfolded amid deep uncertainty. Across our nation, vulnerable communities have felt exposed—caught in rising costs, strained systems and, within our denomination, efforts to heal after recent disaffiliation. These realities are not abstract; they show up in real lives, families and consequences.

This column has never been about politics. It is about people.

Faith does not allow indifference when our neighbors are hurting. To follow Jesus is to pay attention—to notice those pushed to the margins and to move toward them with courage and compassion. Scripture consistently reminds us that how we treat "the least of these" reveals something essential about our love for God.

Over the past year, I have witnessed resilience where despair might have taken root. I have seen men and women behind bars confront regret, embrace growth and dare to hope again. I have also seen how fragile that progress can be when support systems weaken—when resources vanish, voices are ignored or fear replaces mercy.

This moment calls for more than reflection. It calls for faithfulness.

The Church is uniquely positioned to respond—not with outrage, but with presence; not with division, but with discernment. Our siblings in Christ who are incarcerated, returning home or living on the margins need more than awareness. They need accompaniment. They need advocacy. They need the steady witness of those willing to show up, again and again.

Caring for the vulnerable is not a trend or a temporary concern. It is central to the gospel. When we choose to see humanity clearly—behind bars, behind circumstances, behind past mistakes—we reflect the love that first saw us.

As this column enters its second year, the invitation remains: Do not grow weary in seeing, listening, or acting. Now is the time to stand where Jesus stands. Now is the time to let faith be visible in how we love. Faithfulness is not passive—it is practiced.

Let us pray: Gracious God, open our eyes to the overlooked, strengthen our hands to serve and steady our hearts in mercy. Teach us to walk beside those who stumble, to embody your means of grace and to proclaim your gospel in faithful action. May we be instruments of your peace, channels of your love and witnesses to the transformation you bring. Merciful God, hear our prayer. Amen.

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.

Commentary
by the Rev. Mickey Fisher

Joseph and the Balm of Gilead

Most church folk know Joseph, one of the 12 sons of Jacob. And they also know Gilead, a small village hidden away in the Judean hill country.

Joseph was a favored son. While his brothers lived out in the field taking care of the sheep, Joseph stayed at home enjoying the indulgence of his dad.

The breaking point for the brothers was a "coat of many colors" given to Joseph by his father. The boy was not dumb, but he did a very dumb thing. He wore that coat out into the field where the brothers were at work. Fed up with his special treatment, they decided to get rid of the spoiled brat. They sold him to a caravan of traders who were traveling the trade route across the desert.

Yet the Joseph story is much more than that of a caravan crossing a hot, sandy desert. What makes it different is that it includes a very familiar spiritual titled, "The Balm of Gilead." It is Hymn 375 in the Methodist Hymnal.

Check it out and you will find no composer listed. At the bottom of the page it says, "Afro-American Spiritual." That means the author is unknown. So where did it come from?

"The Balm of Gilead" story could have come right out of a southern cotton field. Call to mind the movie "Gone With the Wind." In one scene, slaves are making their way down Tara's endless rows of cotton. They relieve their physical fatigue and spiritual yearning by singing:

Sometimes I feel discouraged
And think my work's in vain
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.

Note that last line: "Revives my soul again." The key word is "again." The slaves' need to be revived was a daily occurrence. For both males and females, there was no rest nor reprieve from the hard labor, the blistering sun nor the overseer's whip.

You may have noticed there is a mournfulness in many spirituals. The source of that mournfulness is not some momentary discomfort or pain. It has to do with the unbelievable sorrow and suffering of slaves, men and women held captive for forced labor. They were valued not for the quality of their character but for their uncompensated labor.

Why did slaves look to Gilead for comforting balm? Because there was no balm at Tara: no comfort, no healing, no relief. There was only work: back bending, unrelieved labor. And it was not to benefit the children of the laborers but to benefit the children of their masters!

Today there are far fewer cotton fields in South Carolina, but some of us are old enough to have picked cotton. We know what that long row feels like. We understand the injustice Joseph's brothers felt. We learned that conversation and singing with fellow workers can provide a distraction and relieve some of the tedium, but it does not compensate for the harsh labor and the denial of humanity necessary to sustain slavery.

Our fathers may be very like or very unlike Joseph's unwise father, but we cannot blame them for our problems. Much if not most of the grief we experience has a common source. That source is the face we see when we look in the mirror! Thank goodness the "Balm of Gilead" continues as an effective treatment for the pain we pile on ourselves.

Fisher is a retired elder living in Spartanburg.

South Carolina to get 12 delegates for 2028 General Conference

By Jessica Brodie

South Carolina will receive six clergy and six lay delegates to the 2028 General Conference, for a total of 12.

That's the word from the Rev. Melton Arant, coordinator of Clergy Services and secretary of the South Carolina Annual Conference.

Arant and other resident bishops and annual conference secretaries received their count information in December from General Conference Secretary Dr. Aleze Fulbright.

Fulbright announced Nov. 11 that the next gathering will have 708 delegates representing regional conference around the world. That 708 is 154 delegates fewer than the 862 delegates at the 2020/2024 General Conference, a roughly 18 percent reduction.

The 2028 General Conference is set for May 8-18, 2028, at the Minneapolis Convention Center in Minnesota.

Of the 708 delegates, 46 percent will come from the United States, while 54 percent will come from Africa, the Philippines, Europe and concordat churches.

Arant said elections will be held at the 2027 Annual Conference for the South Carolina delegates.

Submissions sought for 'Precious Pet of the Month'

Do you have a precious pet? 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.

Perspectives.

Commentary
by Minister Anna S. Bright

Love vs. hate: a heart battle

In a world filled with division, tension and social media debates hotter than a skillet on Sunday morning, we must ask ourselves: Are we choosing love, or are we choosing hate?

Please let me make this plain; love and hate cannot live in the same heart! One will always push the other out.

According to 1 John 4:20, "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (NIV). That verse does not tiptoe around the truth; it kicks the door down!

You cannot claim heaven and hold on to hate. You cannot worship with lifted hands and shouting on Sunday, then turn around and tear people down with your words on Monday.

As we already know, love is not always easy. Some folks make you want to lay down your religion just for a minute (help me, Lord)! However, love is not only about feelings; it's also about choices.

Consequently, when we choose love, we are choosing to reflect the heart of God. Romans 12:21 reminds us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Hatred is easy! It requires no growth, grace or discipline.

But love? It stretches and matures you. Love forces you to pray for people you would rather avoid, bless folks who wronged you and forgive others without receiving an apology.

Now that doesn't mean you become a doormat. Choosing love doesn't mean tolerating abuse or pretending wrong is right. It means you rise above it, choose peace over pettiness, compassion over contempt and healing over harboring bitterness.

Never forget what Jesus said in Matthew 5:44: "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Now that's a grown-up gospel: don't just love the people who love me, but love the ones who roll their eyes when I walk in the room. That is Kingdom-level love!

Please take some time and consider these two questions: Are you building bridges or burning them? Are you a peacemaker or a pot-stirrer of confusion?

Every day, we have the opportunity to choose love; that love is real love, and it has power. It heals, restores, confuses the enemy and transforms lives. Therefore, when hate tries to creep into your heart, kick it out with kindness. When offense knocks, answer with grace. If bitterness should come calling, remind yourself that love is not weakness; it is warfare.

Love is not just what God does; love is who God is.

Always abound in the faith, and never leave home without Jesus.

Bright is a member of Isaiah United Methodist Church, Walterboro.

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Commentary
by the Rev. J.T. Brown

Another way home

For pastors, it often feels like Sunday mornings come quick. Sure, we have the whole week to prepare for them. The truth is weeks fill up fast, even for pastors. That's the way I was feeling early this particular Sunday morning when I stumbled into the church, trying to strike that balance between having enough coffee and not too much.

In my tired state, I muttered a weary but honest prayer: "Holy God, help me to want to be here as I should, and help me to want to live where you would have me live. Bless those who will show up here looking for you. Bless my family. And help us all together to do something that is somehow in line with your will."

About an hour later, a few of God's faithful began to trickle in. It was then that my communion steward asked if we would be finished with worship in time to see the monks who were walking for peace.

Caught off guard, I said, "I hope so, would you like to ... ?"

She replied eagerly, "Ohh, yes! I would like that."

I rushed back to the office to google "the monks"—and discovered they would be passing by sometime during the hour we would be in worship.

As folks began to gather, I could feel the excitement in the air. At 8:55 a.m., five minutes before our service began, a guest walked in and asked to speak to me. He was helping to organize the March for Peace, and he was hopeful we might have a restroom available for them to stop and use.

"Of course," I said.

Just then a member of the church rushed in. She pulled me aside—now it was 8:58 a.m.

"Pastor, I won't be in worship this morning, I'm walking with the monks, but they're looking for a nice place to release her birds and have a prayer to honor monks. Could we do this out front?"

"Sure" I replied, "that'll be nice."

I took my position processing behind the acolyte, only beginning to process these conversations as I stood to bow before the cross on the altar.

I rushed through the liturgy, hoping the monk's arrival would coincide perfectly with my striking and meaningful benediction. Spoiler alert—it did not.

I lifted the bread, remembering Christ's thanksgiving for it, and breaking of it. But a bold congregant sheepishly edged down the center aisle, and gave me the cue.

"J.T., the monks are here!"

I paused for a moment, and then turned to the congregation.

"It sounds like the monks have arrived. Would you all like to go and welcome them?"

The overwhelming "Yes!" from the congregation made the next move clear.

I placed the bread back on the altar, not knowing whether to feel guilty or nervous or what, just sort of dizzy. I decided I needed a breath to process.

As the crowd cleared the sanctuary, I slipped out the side door and headed toward the restroom.

And there, I bumped into some monks. They were smiling, with a kind of peace and generosity that truly was more contagious than I expected.

"Hi," I said awkwardly, and they nodded generously, acknowledging me.

They broke custom to say a gentle, "Thank you for having us."

"We are so glad to see you," I replied.

Again, they nodded.

I made my way through what had suddenly become crowded church hallways to the front of the church, where folks were gathered. Excitement was all around—smiles, laughs, "how ya doins" and birds to be released in the front and fair lawn of Fair Lawn. The sun was shining; the weather was perfect. It was a kind of confusion and chaos that felt all right, almost childlike.

Police officers who traveled alongside the monks directed traffic and monitored the crowd. Our safety team and ushers stood on guard in a way that made me proud. Members of the church were observant but welcoming, protective of the church but comforting to the crowd. They got right to work welcoming folks from the community to this sacred space that we call home.

We enjoyed one another's presence, released birds and gave thanks for the short time we shared. And as suddenly as they had arrived, the gentle monks formed a line, nodded goodbye and made their way down the road.

The congregation made its way back into the church. I met them there, and said to them, "The Lord be with you," and they replied in kind.

We blessed the elements, sang our songs, pondered the mysterious nature of our world and received with joy what Christ had to offer to us—through bread and wine and one another.

So what is there to be taken from this strange day in ministry? Questions still bounce in my head and heart. The monks left gifts before they departed—flowers and a *khatag* (a Buddhist blessing scarf). They left memories of smiles and joy and a newfound hope of and desire for peace in the world, which is what I understood their intention to be all along. They left me confused, reading and trying to learn more about Buddhist monks.

Now they have moved on, toward some new place on the horizon, where I'm sure they continue to pray and chant and bless others joyfully. They did their work well when they visited us, and I trust they are doing it well still today. Maybe that's what the monks represent: the hope of what's happening in this human realm just beyond the horizon, and the trust, because of what's already been revealed.

Moments in life come and go. But if we can't learn to trust or hope for or be concerned about what is happening out there beyond us, and what is happening right here because of us, we might miss something special that God has for us.

Brown pastors Fair Lawn United Methodist Church, Columbia.

Virtual listening sessions to share Transition Teams' plans

By Dan O'Mara

Transition Teams have scheduled four virtual listening sessions in March to share plans they have developed to implement changes approved at the special called session of the 2025 South Carolina Annual Conference.

In October, South Carolina Annual Conference members voted to reduce the number of districts to 10 from 12, and the Appointive Cabinet is expected to have finalized the configuration of new district lines by the end of January. Members also voted to create a 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.

Each of the tri-district listening sessions – scheduled for the first four Sundays in March – will take place at 4 p.m. via Zoom. While they are planned as tri-district sessions, persons may participate in any session:

- March 1: Charleston, Walterboro and Orangeburg districts
- March 8: Columbia, Rock Hill and Greenwood districts
- March 15: Hartsville, Marion and Florence districts
- March 22: Greenville, Anderson and Spartanburg districts

The sessions will center primarily on the work of the Logistics Transition Team, which is studying and planning how to handle the logistics of reducing the number of districts. Participants will learn specifics, including which local churches will become part of newly configured districts and which will remain with their current districts. Participants will be able to submit questions during the sessions.

"Our goal is to help our churches, clergy and laity experience a smooth transition as we live into new realities," said the Rev. Ken Nelson, the Orangeburg District superintendent who is leading the Logistics Transition Team. "The work of the Logistics Transition Team is to help plan and execute the details related to records transfer, nominations, communications and potential further district reductions."

The Logistics Transition Team also is developing a Frequently Asked Questions document that it will share before the listening sessions, to allow participants to come prepared.

Other updates from the teams:

Legalities/Property/Finance Considerations Team

Team members have identified and prioritized multiple initial action items, including:

- Research and confirm that the conference's actions are aligned with the *UMC Book of Discipline*, Conference Standing Rules, existing contracts and other legal requirements
- Assess the unintended consequences of each action
- Schedule District Conferences to sell parsonages, as needed
- Identify all financial accounts in districts being eliminated
- Hire a title examiner to ensure all properties are identified in districts being eliminated
- Identify contracts, leases and agreements with the help of district administrative assistants
- Utilize a detailed district map to ensure all properties are accurately located
- Determine a plan for the Scuffletown property in the Greenville District
- Decide the distribution of assets of districts to be closed based on apportionments paid by churches

"Work is continuing to answer questions regarding the timing of district conferences, the allocation of financial assets, meeting Disciplinary requirements, and recommendations for changes to Standing Rules to enable changes," said the Rev. Terry Fleming, the Florence District superintendent who is leading the Legalities/Property/Finance Considerations Team. "The committee is actively asking questions about the possible unintended consequences of each action."

Reimagining Congregational Development Team

When the Annual Conference voted to create the new Office of Congregational Excellence, it replaced the full-time Extended Cabinet position of Director of Congregational Development with a part-time clergy appointment with the title of Director of Innovation & Strategy, to be supervised by the Director of Congregational Excellence, currently known as the Director of Connectional Ministries.

The Reimagining Congregational Development Team is evaluating the logistics of transferring the current projects and historical records of Congregational Development into the Office of Congregational Excellence.

The team is also evaluating what the role of Director of Innovation & Strategy will look like.

"Team members are evaluating historical records, historical information and guidelines, as well as the role of the director and Standing Rules," said the Rev. Chris Lollis, the Greenwood District superintendent who is leading the Reimagining Congregational Development Team.

Each of the Transition Teams is scheduled to meet again in February to continue their work.

Commentary
by Sandy Thrasher

Beauty behind the fog

This morning, the fog settled in so thick it felt heavy. My drive to work was slow, not only because I could not see far ahead, but because the whole world seemed quieter and weighed down. When I parked, the view I love was gone. No colorful sunrise, no pasture stretching out, no cows grazing–just a gray wall with the pasture fence barely showing through.

But I knew what was behind it. The cows were still there. The sun was still rising. The beauty had not vanished. It was simply covered by fog.

That has stayed with me today. I am learning that people can be that way, too. Sometimes life rolls in like fog and covers who they are. It may come from choices that went wrong, medical emergencies, grief, addiction, loss or things we will never fully know. The true person is still there. They are just harder to see, and too often the world walks past without stopping long enough to look beneath the fog.

At South Main Chapel and Mercy Center in Anderson, I have had the honor of becoming friends with several people who are living unhoused right now. Seeing the fog this morning made me think of two in particular. We talk. We laugh. We eat lunch together after church. I give rides when I can to the place where their tent is set up. I hesitate to call it "home," because everyone deserves better, but it is where they rest their heads at night.

They are kind. They are gentle. They worked most of their lives. One injury without insurance, one job loss, one crisis that snowballed into another, and suddenly the bottom gave way. They walk everywhere they go. They still hold hands when they cross the street. He steadies her when her back hurts. They thank God for small things most of us never think twice about.

After she fell, we were able to get a memory foam pad for their tent. You would have thought it was a gift fit for royalty. They were grateful, surprised, relieved, and so happy–not because it fixed everything, but because it meant someone saw them. They are an older couple who have loved each other through many ups and downs. Can you imagine trying to hold on to each other in a world that looks right through you?

The truth is that every one of us is only one accident, one tragedy, one bad choice or one diagnosis away from a life that looks very different.

So here is my heart today. When you see someone who seems hidden behind fog, slow down. Meet their eyes. Learn a name. Listen to a story. Support a place that helps. Share what you can, even if it feels small. To them it may feel like sunlight breaking through.

They are our neighbors. They are a child of God. And they are the very people Jesus asks us to love as we love ourselves.

Thrasher is the Anderson District lay leader.

Bishop Fairley urges all to come out of their comfort zones and do a new thing for God.

The Rev. James Friday addresses panelists from churches across the state who are doing church in new ways, from partnerships to mergers.

Dr. Martin Quick and Dr. George Ashford teach the crowd.

Photos by Jessica Brodie

Lights, Camera, Action: Laity Version

Laypeople gather for wisdom on faith, innovation and the future of the church

By Jessica Brodie

COLUMBIA—Hundreds headed to Journey United Methodist Church Jan. 9-10 for "Lights, Camera, Action," a convocation for lay church leaders designed to help them share the gospel and be God's church in the best ways possible.

The event, which also featured a number of online participants, gave attendees the chance to hear from a host of leaders offering wisdom on faith, innovation and the future of the church, including Bishop Leonard Fairley, Dr. George Ashford, Dr. M. Scott Hughes, Dr. Martin Quick and the Rev. James Friday.

They also got to hear first-hand "vital church" best practices from a panel of churches with direct experience in innovative leadership and growth.

"I am deeply grateful for how our laity showed up for the Lights, Camera, Action training. What stood out to me most was not just the willingness to learn new skills, but the openness of heart and spirit that filled the room. There was a genuine hunger to grow, to represent the church well going forward," said Ashford, one of the organizers of the event as well as pastor of the host church. "I'm excited about what's next. This was not the finish line, but a strong step forward. Lights, Camera, Action reminded me that when laity are equipped, the church's reach expands—and the message of Christ travels farther than we can see."

Open to the 'impossible'

The event kicked off Friday evening with "Tailgating with Bishop Fairley," complete with barbecue, music by DJ Steven Dantzler, a performance by comedian Jody Fuller and the chance to hear a live podcast led by Fairley and host Darci Strickland.

Saturday started early, with a time of worship and music led by Maurice Middleton, music director at Edisto Fork UMC, Orangeburg, then an opening keynote from Fairley.

Drawing from 1 Peter 2:9-10, Fairley reminded attendees that they have been lifted up as a chosen people who God called out of darkness into light.

"We are God's people—that's a big deal!" Fairley preached. "I believe God has placed in each one of our hearts this tremendous DNA, this thing called the Holy Spirit, that breathes upon us and calls us to live with imagination and creativity, not just any imagination but a holy imagination so that we may speak of the wonderful acts of God."

He urged all to come out of their comfort zone and do the new thing God calls us to do.

"We can no longer live by 'we've always done it that way,'" Fairley said to applause.

He said Jesus told us we can't put new wine into old wineskins, and indeed, new ideals require new ways of thinking and living. That's the purpose of the weekend's event—to help churches become equipped in new ways to do God's good work in their communities.

"Some of our churches, you're hiding your light! You're saying, 'We're too small; we don't have the resources.' But Jesus says you are the light of the world," Fairley said. "Come on, church. We've got to let the scales fall from our eyes. This world needs to know of a saving grace, needs to know a God who lives high and seeks low. We have messed around and loved this institution to death. But God specializes in bringing life out of death."

Fairley closed with a poem he wrote, "With different eyes," urging all gathered to see with new eyes and be open to God doing something impossible within us.

"What impossibility is God waiting to break in your church and in the South Carolina Annual Conference?" he asked.

Exploring AI as a tool

Next Hughes, associate general secretary of World Service and Discipleship Ministries, led sessions on innovation and ministry, diving into ways we can bridge the gap between artificial intelligence and the ministry.

Hughes explored what AI actually is, along with what makes it so unique, use cases, theological reflections, prompting advice and its real potential as a ministry teammate.

"The triune God is not threatened by AI," Hughes shared, noting that as a tool, AI can be extremely helpful, enabling projects to come to fruition in less time and with fewer people, ultimately helping God's ministry.

He shared the strengths versus the weaknesses of AI, noting strengths include writing, reasoning, pattern recognition, factual knowledge, memory recall, data analysis and speed.

Limits involve critical thinking, complex ambiguous scenarios, spatial reasoning, moral judgment and emotional intelligence.

It won't replace human beings, who are made in the image of God, Hughes said. But it can be helpful.

"Remember, AI is a machine, not a companion. It might look like a human, but it's 1s and 0s," he added.

Before the body, Hughes shared a practice session where he asked AI to help him write a stewardship letter for a church, demonstrating how learning how to be specific in prompting what we want from AI can help get better results. For example, instead of "write a stewardship letter for my church," a more specific request might be, "write a stewardship letter for my church's newsletter acting as an expert in church finances and a United Methodist scholar." Even more specific would involve adding context, such as "for Journey UMC in Columbia for new year 2026 in voice of Pastor George Ashford."

He showed attendees the results of the request, demonstrating how AI might be used in a helpful capacity for church leaders who already have much to do, ultimately saving time and possibly money.

Panelists share partnership stories

After a lunch break, the body heard from Elizabeth McCormick, mission engagement liaison for the General Board of Global Ministries, then a best practices panel titled "The Church Forward Lab" focusing on churches that have strengthened through partnerships, fellowships and relocations.

In a conversation moderated by Friday and Ashford, lay and clergy panelists shared their firsthand experiences of doing church in a new way. Ashford noted that their stories were being shared in the hopes that they can expand imagination about what God can do. As Ashford noted, "Testimony sparks faith; shared stories open doors."

Friday shared that of the 685 churches active in the South Carolina Conference of the UMC, 476 (70 percent) have 50 or fewer people, so getting creative is essential.

Panelists included Curtis Murph, Triune UMC, St Matthews; the Rev. Cindy Rumsey, Cornerstone-Epworth in Rock Hill; Hendley Williams, The Brook in Myrtle Beach; Roberta Balthroup, Hartsville Cooperative Parish; Isaiah Glover, Triune UMC, St Matthews; Allison Reese, Columbia UMC, Columbia; Napolian Smalls, The Brook; and the Rev. Ellis White, Edisto Fork, Orangeburg.

Williams and Smalls shared how their three-point charge came together to become one.

"We realized we'd do better if we merged," Williams explained. "If we pooled resources, we could provide better service, better ministry and grow the church."

Smalls agreed, noting, "We realized we were a dying church and sooner or later the conference was going to close us, so we pooled together and became one church."

Murph and Glover shared how their church, Triune, merged as one out of two other churches that had been talking.

"People get stuck in their ways and get comfortable where they are and are not willing to make changes, so we had to rock the boat," Murph said. "Every time a person died our membership dropped. Now our membership is growing and moving forward."

Rumsey shared how when she came to her church, the smaller church approached her.

"They said, 'We're not gonna make it—can we merge?' and I said 'Sure!'" she said.

Balthroup shared how the Hartsville Cooperative Parish was the brainchild of now-bishop Robin Dease, who invited five churches to come together in partnership. It ended up being just three, but those three are thriving and growing together.

White shared how Edisto Fork arose from four churches that came together 28 years ago thanks to the efforts of the Rev. Timothy Bowman, and today they are flourishing.

And Reese shared how her church, Columbia UMC, came from a merger of two churches that closed and is now flourishing as well, doing outreach both to college students, the homeless and others in the downtown region.

All shared what worked for them, including a strong leadership team, a prayer ministry and worshipping together before merger to help ease the transition.

What didn't work included personality clashes, such as "attitude problems," having too many different personalities, playing it safe and talking in circles.

They also shared how leadership helped build trust, which included everything from honesty and transparency to listening, communication, social media sharing and inviting others to be part of the process.

Continued, next page

Disaster Recovery

Q&A with the Rev. Shay Long

UMCSC disaster recovery volunteer coordinator

Long

How does the disaster recovery program help those affected by Helene?

South Carolina United Methodist Disaster Recovery connects survivors with counseling and support services to help them cope with the emotional impact of a disaster.

Case managers support community rebuilding efforts, including job programs, housing assistance and ongoing case management to help people get back on their feet. Disaster case managers provide clear guidance on how to apply for aid, what resources are available and ongoing updates about recovery progress.

Overall, the program is designed to address long-term recovery for people and communities impacted by Helene.

Why did you want to work in this position?

I have worked in public service helping people. I was ready to retire from my government position, and I had the opportunity to apply for a disaster recovery position. Now I am the coordinator for volunteers. I am still helping people, just in a different way.

How do the tasks that you are responsible for help the homeowner get the help they need?

The volunteers come in and do a number of things for the homeowner. They help families needing assistance in their recovery from Hurricane Helene damage.

How does your position contribute to the success of the program?

I coordinate our volunteers, who are the backbone of the program. Without volunteers, we could not accomplish the work needed. Not all insurance policies cover water damage, and the cost can be high. Volunteers help us to help the homeowners get their houses livable again.

What does South Carolina Disaster Recovery do?

South Carolina United Methodist Disaster Recovery works with local partners and organizations and long-term recovery groups across affected counties to help families needing assistance in their recovery from Hurricane Helene damage.

Ward Smith serves as the director of disaster recovery and the construction manager.

The Rev. Shay Long serves as the disaster recovery volunteer coordinator.

Joe Patton is the monitoring and evaluation specialist, monitoring all activities of the program to provide information so we can be more efficient and effective and prepare reports for donors.

Theo White is the disaster recovery case manager serving in the Upstate counties of Anderson and Pickens (and possibly others).

Chan Spigner is the disaster recovery case manager serving in Orangeburg, Saluda and Edgefield counties.

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

Volunteers are needed from across South Carolina and surrounding states to complete repairs and help families devastated by Hurricane Helene. Housing for volunteers, usually in churches, is also needed.

Please email Long at sllong@umcsc.org to register to volunteer. Also communicate with her if your church can host volunteer teams.

Still going strong at 101

Rudisill's amazing career and the church that centers her

By John R. Brooks

Photo by John R. Brooks
Rudisill

Visit Mary Alice Rudisill's home, and you'll see the latest jigsaw puzzle she's putting together on a table in her living room. Or she's preparing a Sunday school lesson. Or she's on phone calls with her son, daughter-in-law and adopted Russian granddaughters.

Nearby, she might be swimming in her Beaufort neighborhood pool when the weather is good, and occasionally, she drives to a nearby appointment or visits friends. Rudisill is 101 and maintains an active social and church life.

Important to her are close-knit family and friends and Carteret Street United Methodist Church, Beaufort, where she and her extended family have been members for more than a century.

Born in Beaufort in 1924, Rudisill recalls singing in Carteret Street UMC choir when she was young and reading aloud the Christmas story during those years. She also remembers the Christmas candles that didn't have protective wrappings for wax drippings in those days.

"My Bible, that I've had since I was six, has little splotches burned out where the wax had fallen on it," she said.

Her working life history, however, is a captivating story. Rudisill was appointed to work in several international civilian jobs for the U.S. government and related agencies after World War II. When the United States entered the war in 1941, the same year Rudisill graduated from Beaufort High School, she stayed home while her brothers joined the U.S. Armed Forces and a sister was married. Her plan was to attend business school, but she never finished.

Instead, Rudisill worked at the USO Beaufort, and shortly after, began a two-year contract with the U.S. Navy in Guam during the island's reconstruction after World War II. In those and other federal appointments, she managed and wrote correspondence and reports, kept track of calendars and appointments and performed other office tasks for political appointees and commanding officers, many of whom were generals.

"After I had started working with the USO, I was meeting so many young men from different places, and I heard their stories," she said.

She and her good friend, Esther Jenkins, both got jobs to work in Guam at the same time. Guam "was a culture shock," she recalls.

Rudisill returned to Beaufort in 1948 and worked in the Post Exchange Office at Parris Island.

In 1950, she joined the Foreign Service of the U.S. Department of State and was assigned to work on the staff of the political attaché in Pretoria, South Africa; in 1952, she then went to work for the U.S. Air Force in London, working for generals in administrative jobs in places such as the mapping section or war room. While stationed in London, Rudisill visited places in post-war Europe, especially Paris—where Esther Jenkins was now stationed—and she took train trips and visited ski resorts in Germany, and went to Ireland, where she recalled kissing the Blarney Stone. She also toured a game reserve in South Africa by car and slept along the way in mud huts.

"It was very unusual at that time for young, single women to be traveling the world by themselves," Rudisill said. "I would not trade that. It was a great experience. I loved every minute of it."

After returning to the United States, she met her future husband, Thomas, married and had two sons: Charles and Clint, who is deceased. The family lived in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Rudisill went back to work as an administrative assistant in 1962 in the Command Section of the 464th Troop Carrier Wing at Pope Air Force Base near Fayetteville until she retired in 1988, having worked for 13 different commanding officers.

Rudisill was awarded a civilian service medal, a first for an administrative assistant at Pope AFB. Rudisill moved back to Beaufort in 1999, and Thomas died in 2002.

Rudisill resumed an active membership at Carteret Street UMC. Most Sundays, she attends worship and is part of a group of teachers that lead an adult Sunday school class. She belongs to a women's circle and helps each year at the church's community bazaar. A church member and friend, Carolyn Matthews, usually brings her to church.

Rudisill chaired the worship committee, helping to establish a children's church service. She directed vacation Bible school for 10 years. She started a workshop that produced crismons for the congregation's Christmas tree, and they made crismons for Epworth Children's Home, Columbia. She helped implement a ministry to distribute flowers on the altar for Sunday services.

"The church is a focal point for her. It's a very important part of her life that keeps her in Beaufort," said her son Charles, a self-employed engineer in Apex, North Carolina.

Jackie Black, a Carteret Street UMC member and friend of Rudisill's for some 80 years, said at Christmas, Rudisill's tree "is a work of art," as are the homemade fruitcakes she makes. Black misses the chicken-liver dinners she and Rudisill once enjoyed regularly, but they still have long talks.

"We confide in one another," Black said. "There's nobody like Mary Alice. I'm very blessed to have a friend like that."

Continued from previous

'Generational intelligence'

Finally, Quick led a session on "All Generations Matter," diving into how understanding the various generations and their typical characteristics and differences can help people connect better in church.

He said that for the first time in history, churches have a vast number of generations all interacting with each other—The Greatest Generation (born before 1928), The Silent Generation (1928-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996), Gen Z (1997-2012) and Gen Alpha (2013-now).

All of these generations grew up differently, so we need to work to develop empathy and understanding of each one.

"Understanding the generations will help us better live into the new thing God is doing," Quick said, noting it helps us embrace and include people better. "It's important to have generational intelligence. It makes it easier to love one another as Jesus urges us to do."

Quick suggested churches begin doing what they can to have "all-age events" that involve participation across generations and not simply group gatherings segmented by age.

He lifted up ideas like meals, game nights and service projects as well as mentorship, listening sessions, shared leadership, storytelling sessions and tech training.

The event ended with a closing worship service by Fairley along with communion and anointing.

Maurice Middleton, music director at Edisto Fork UMC, Orangeburg, leads the body in worship.

Some gave thanks for family, church family, life, health and strength. Others prayed for our communities, world and government.

St. James Prayer Walk unites church, community

Members of St. James United Methodist Church, Sumter, took prayer beyond the church walls into the streets recently for a Fifth Sunday Prayer Walk.

Joining hands in unity and solidarity, prayer warriors—led by the Rev. Allen Nesmith, along with Nurture, Outreach and Witness Ministries—prayed and gave thanks to God for whatever was on their hearts. Some gave thanks for family, church family, life, health and strength. Others prayed for our communities, world and government.

Prayers for world peace could be heard as the nation's turmoil continues and for those who may be suffering and their faith being tested because of job loss or family burdens.

At the end of the Prayer Walk, Nesmith closed with a powerful, soul-stirring prayer.

The NOW Ministries offer thanks to their Technology Committee Chair David Johnson for making sure their voices and prayers could be heard by all along the streets.

Rock Hill 'Black Church Celebration' set for Feb. 22

Rock Hill churches will come together this month for the district's annual Black Church Celebration.

Set for Sunday, Feb. 22, at 2 p.m., the event will celebrated Black people in United Methodism.

Held at Bethel United Methodist Church in Edgemoor, pastored by Dexter Williams, participating churches are the Clover Parish, the Rock Hill Central, the Rock Hill South and the York-St. James charges.

All are welcome

Bethel UMC is located at 2588 Killian Road, Edgemoor.

Photos courtesy of Jacquelyn I. Duckett

Women of the church

The women at New Beginnings Mission United Methodist Church, Greenville, are an active group. At right, their United Women of Faith dressed in all white. Above, the women wear pink for breast cancer awareness in October.

Crystal Salters honored with Excellence in Teaching award

Salters

One United Methodist has received a high teaching honor.

Crystal Salters, a member of Friendship United Methodist Church, Nesmith, has received the Excellence in Teaching Award from the South Carolina Department of Education, an honor recognizing educators who demonstrate significant impact on student growth and grade-level achievement.

Salters also serves as a lay servant and communication coordinator for Friendship UMC.

Originally from Nesmith, Salters currently resides in Kingstree with her husband, Gregory Salters.

She is the daughter of Shelia Lee and the late Andrew Anderson and the granddaughter of the late Willie Joe and Bessie Pressley. She has taught at Kenneth Gardner Leadership Academy in Kingstree, part of the Williamsburg County School District, for the past four years and possesses a total of 11 years of teaching experience. During her tenure in Williamsburg County, she was also named Teacher of the Year for the 2024-2025 academic year.

She attributes her professional accomplishments to her faith in Jesus Christ, emphasizing that her achievements would not have been possible without this foundation. Despite the inherent challenges of teaching, she maintains that positively impacting even one child's life each day constitutes a meaningful success.

New Covenant sisters earn Teacher of the Year honors

By Wanda Shuler

Charley

Charley-Johnson

Two sisters at New Covenant United Methodist Church, Bowman, have both received the honor of Teacher of the Year for 2025-2026: Latoya Elaine Charley-Johnson and Amanda Charley.

Each served in different schools and exemplifies excellence in education.

The sisters are the daughters of Barry and Elaine Charley.

Charley-Johnson currently teaches sixth and seventh grade at William J. Clark Middle School in Orangeburg. She has been teaching for seven years and has been a part of the Magnum Program at William J. Clark for two years.

Charley currently teaches fourth and fifth grade at Marshall Elementary in Orangeburg and has been a part of the Magnum Program for six years.

As graduates of Claflin University, the sisters share a common educational foundation and a passion for shaping young minds. Their recognition reflects years of hard work, faith and dedication to teaching as a calling.

Proverbs 22:6 reminds us of the importance of training up the next generation. We congratulate these outstanding educators and pray continued blessings over their lives and ministries in education.

Shuler is part of the New Covenant UMC Communications Committee.

Golden Gems tour civil rights museum

CAMDEN—Members of Camden First United Methodist Church, known as the Golden Gems, recently took a trip to Rock Hill, where they toured the Friendship 9 McCrory's Civil Rights museum and experienced a glimpse of the past.

The building visited was originally constructed in 1901 and housed McCrory's Five and Dime from 1937 to 1997.

On Feb. 12, 1960, Black students from Friendship Junior College in Rock Hill were denied service at the McCrory's lunch counter but remained on the premises, engaging in a "sit-in" protest. This event marked one of the earliest demonstrations highlighting segregation in public spaces in downtown Rock Hill. These protests continued for more than a year.

As the Golden Gems learned, the Friendship 9 were ordinary men who performed an extraordinary act, inspiring us to face injustice with courage and hope.

The members had the privilege of talking with David Williamson Jr., a distinguished member of the Friendship 9, to reflect on historical experiences. The Golden Gems also attended a luncheon at the Kounter Restaurant located within the museum. The members of the group were able to sit in the actual chairs at the counter where the sit-in took place.

Led by Frederica Brown, the group toured the Friendship 9 McCrory's Civil Rights museum and experienced a glimpse of the past.

The Golden Gems is a group at Camden First UMC for individuals aged 65 and older. Both church members and community residents can join.

The church's pastor is Dr. Norman A. Brown, with Carrissa Maddox and Laura Jones serving as co-chairs. The trip was organized by First Lady Frederica Brown.

St. Paul honors Senior of the Month all year

St. Paul United Methodist Church in Camden believes in honoring those whose lives have helped shape their faith, fellowship and community. Each month, they take time to recognize a Senior of the Month, noting it is a meaningful way to give flowers to those who have walked faithfully before all and continue to be a blessing.

St. Paul said their seniors are living testimonies of God's grace. Through decades of service, prayer, sacrifice and love, they have strengthened families, nurtured ministries and poured wisdom into generations that follow. Whether serving quietly behind the scenes, offering a kind word of encouragement or remaining steadfast in faith through life's seasons, their impact is immeasurable.

A cherished part of this recognition is the moment when their pastor, the Rev. Leatha Brown, along with her husband, Mark Brown, presents the Senior of the Month with a beautiful bouquet of flowers or a monetary gift. Church members also join in by sharing gifts, heartfelt words of appreciation and loving messages both in person and through social media, making the moment even more special. These heartfelt gestures bring visible joy and gratitude, as the seniors are deeply appreciative and genuinely excited to be acknowledged and celebrated by their church family.

This recognition extends beyond the walls of the church. They honor seniors who worship with St. Paul regularly as well as those who may now reside in nursing homes or are unable to attend in person. Though circumstances may change, their place in the church family never does. As Scripture reminds, "Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness" (Proverbs 16:31).

Their smiles, words of thanks and humble reactions remind the St. Paul family just how meaningful this honor truly is.

Celebrating their seniors is more than a moment—it is a ministry. It is a reminder to pause, reflect and express gratitude for the shoulders they stand on. Their faith stories continue to inspire, their prayers continue to cover and their legacy continues to guide.

St. Paul members said they are so blessed to recognize their Seniors of the Month and look forward to continuing this celebration throughout 2026 as they honor other seniors in our church. They hope each one always feels appreciated, celebrated and deeply valued always.

Mount Zion begins monthly 2026 prayer focus

By Toni Strawther

KINGSTREE—Mount Zion United Methodist Church has begun a monthly prayer focus for this year.

"Every ministry in the church must begin with prayer. It is a vital part of ministry," said their pastor, the Rev. Walter Strawther. "The word of God tells us Jesus began with prayer before choosing his disciples, as it is written in, Luke 6:12-13 (ESV): 'In these days he went to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles.'"

Mount Zion has identified four core values of prayer they will begin focusing on: love, witness, compassion and commitment.

The month of January began with love as the prayer focus.

Strawther says, "We pray to be more loving within our congregation, community, county, state, nation and world."

Love was January's prayer focus.

Pastors meet with laity to strengthen church engagement

Two Rock Hill District pastors—the Rev. Athena Dickey-Cathcart and the Rev. Dexter Williams—recently met with laity of their district to engage in meaningful conversation centered on "Lights, Camera, Action" and the shared responsibility of supporting pastors and strengthening the local church.

During the meeting, participants discussed the vital role of laity in ministry, including their duties to encourage, partner with and uplift pastors in leadership and service. Emphasis was placed on collaboration, clear communication and active involvement in church life as essential elements for a healthy and thriving congregation.

The conversation also focused on practical ways to re-engage communities and welcome people back into the church. Topics included outreach, visibility, hospitality, creativity in worship and ministry and empowering members to serve both inside and outside the church walls.

The meeting served as a reminder that when clergy and laity work together with purpose and passion, the church becomes a dynamic place of connection, growth and renewed commitment to Christ's mission.

Collaboration, clear communication and active involvement were lifted up as essentials.

Faith, Hope and Love in Action
The United Women in Faith of Wesley Chapel UMC, Lake City, demonstrated their purpose through service and holiday giving. During Advent, a Christmas worship service was held with the residents of the Dr. Ronald E. McNair Nursing Home, which included a sermon by the Rev. Louis Ashley. Christmas gifts were brought for the residents. The youth of the Lake City Boys and Girls Club also received Christmas gifts. Betsy Graham serves as the unit president. At left, Women prepare gifts for the youth of the Lake City Boys and Girls Club. At right is a photo of the nursing home visit.

Photos courtesy of Dorothy McClam

Photo by Lily Stricklin

Shandon contemporary turns 25
Shandon UMC, Columbia, will celebrate the 25th anniversary of their LifeLine Contemporary Service on Sunday, Feb. 15, at 11:05 a.m. in the gym. All are invited. The service will honor God's faithfulness and celebrate the rich history of LifeLine. Many pastors, musicians and others instrumental in the life and growth of this ministry will be present, including the Revs. Cam Treece, Todd Davis, Jonathan Tompkins and Josh McClendon. A luncheon will follow. To attend the meal, register by Feb. 9 at https://www.shandonumc.org/upcoming-events.

Photo courtesy of Donna Glenn

Wreaths Across America
On Sunday, Dec. 14, Lawrence Chapel UMC, Central, participated in the annual Wreaths Across America ceremony in memory of their veterans and to honor their service. The D. W. Daniel High School's JROTC Color Guard presented and helped lay wreaths. The church extends much appreciation to Helen Hedden and the LCUMC Cemetery Foundation for making all the arrangements for this special service.

A Christian brotherhood
The Dorchester Parish United Methodist Men held a meaningful men's program Dec. 14 centered on the theme, "The Footsteps of a Good Man Are Ordered by the Lord." Men from across the parish and neighboring UMCs gathered in worship, fellowship and reflection. The program was led by Pastor Alfonza Jones and Men's President Benjie Moorer. Worship included Scripture, prayer, music and a presentation on the history and mission of United Methodist Men. The Rev. Curnell Graham of Wesley UMC delivered the preached word, offering encouragement for men to trust God's direction in their daily walk. The service concluded with fellowship, remarks from parish leadership and a spirit of unity that reflected the strength of Christian brotherhood within the UMC.

Photo courtesy of Stephanie Ponds Henry

Sharing some cheer
The New Haven UMC church family in Bishopville prepared and gave out Christmas boxes full of goodies and cheer. Here, New Haven pastor the Rev. Sharome Henry and stands with Staff-Pastor Parish Relations Committee Chair Adell Anthony.

MONKS

From Page 1

reportedly 1,000 people crowded into downtown; the community itself has a total of 3,000 people.

More than 10,000 gathered in Columbia, while thousands watched in Rock Hill as they made their way toward the state line.

The Rev. Ed Stallworth, who pastors O'Neal Street United Methodist Church, Newberry, said he went to Saluda to see the monks walk for peace, but he was surprised by what struck his heart.

"What moved me most was the people," Stallworth said. "In a small town, over a thousand people from every walk of life showed up, inspired by hope. That same hope calls us to live the way of Jesus, the Prince of Peace."

Jonathan Creswell, a member of St. Mark UMC, Greenwood, headed to a rural area to watch the monks' walk with his sister. He said he wondered if there would be anyone there, but when they rounded the curve at the church, there were cars parked on both sides of the road for at least half a mile. When the monks rounded the bend in the road, Croswell said it was unforgettable.

"No clapping, high fives, not like a parade—they were walking quickly together with their dog leading the way. The people lining the road were young, old, Black, White, from all over. Some people handed the monks flowers as they passed," Creswell said. "It was meaningful and poignant with a sense of joy in the air."

He said he and his sister followed the monks up to a church, where they took a seat on a tarp for a rest. He said he was touched by their drive for peace—a drive Christians share with Buddhists despite religious differences.

UMCSC pastor the Rev. Darlene Kelley said she was giddy over the chance to pet Aloka, the monks' "peace dog."

"Even though the monks are much different than us, I know Jesus is a peacemaker and died for all of us, including them," Creswell said. "If we tend to wall ourselves off from people who are not like us, we lose opportunities to learn about other cultures, practices and people. Learning about others makes us stronger Christians."

Another St. Mark member, Jennifer L. Goldman, said she was motivated to see the monks because she wanted to pet Aloka, the Peace Dog.

"God often provides motivation and understanding of larger things for me through an animal, and this was no exception," Goldman said. "I had no idea what to expect as we planned to attend the walk. We live in times where people would rather be loud with their opinions than attempt to understand another's point of view, so I really did not know how the monks would be received."

In spite of the large crowd gathered, Goldman said, "You could have almost heard a pin drop as they reached the top of the hill and passed by."

She said many people gave them flowers or shared encouragement with them as they strode by.

"They were such a powerful, purposeful presence even though they walked silently together. Several people wept, and it was evident that most of us were emotionally overtaken by these monks from far off places that none of us knew."

Goldman said the monks stopped for lunch near a church, and one of the monks solemnly collected the flowers they had all been passed that day and made his way around each gravestone, placing a flower and saying a prayer.

She was delighted to have the opportunity to pet Aloka and listen as the monks said their grace before their meal.

"It was a surreal moment. The large crowd stayed silent so we could all hear what was happening. There was no clamoring for a better view. Everyone stood in solidarity to listen to the message of these men passing through to share their message of peace, loving-kindness, and compassion."

Goldman said she is a firm believer in Jesus Christ. However, the monks added to what she knows about Jesus.

"They helped prove that coming together to love others does not have to be loud. It does not have to be flashy. It doesn't even require that we believe the same thing," Goldman said. "What it requires is believing that it can happen and taking action to show that we believe it."

She added jokingly, "And having a dog increases your chances exponentially."

For the Rev. Darlene Kelley, pastor of Trinity UMC, West Columbia, getting the chance to see Aloka was the real draw, though she was excited about the monks' Walk for Peace and the message of love and kindness they shared.

She got the chance to see them—and pet Aloka—when they stopped at Brookland UMC, West Columbia, for lunch Jan. 10.

"I think the thing that struck me was when we walked out of Brookland you had no idea there were so many people in the street—that was overwhelming! There were so many people waiting to see the monks, just to get a glimpse of them. There were people lined up along the fence, and one guy handed them walking sticks. I kept thinking, 'It's hard to get people to church, and yet people must be longing for something – they're longing."

When she finally got to pet Aloka, she was overjoyed.

"I was fangirling! I was going to cry, Kelley said, laughing. "There's a even a little white spot on his head that looks like a heart!"

The Rev. Mark Payne, who pastors Brookland UMC, he said the experience was heartening. And, as a follower of Jesus—the Prince of Peace—he couldn't help but support the peace walk.

"It was an opportunity for us to reflect the love of Christ to the monks and the surrounding communities. It was also an opportunity to bring the faith community and political leaders from our community together in one place for one purpose: that of being instrument of love and peace," Payne said.

Payne said that as everyone assembled in the fellowship hall once the monks arrived, the real presence of God was palpable.

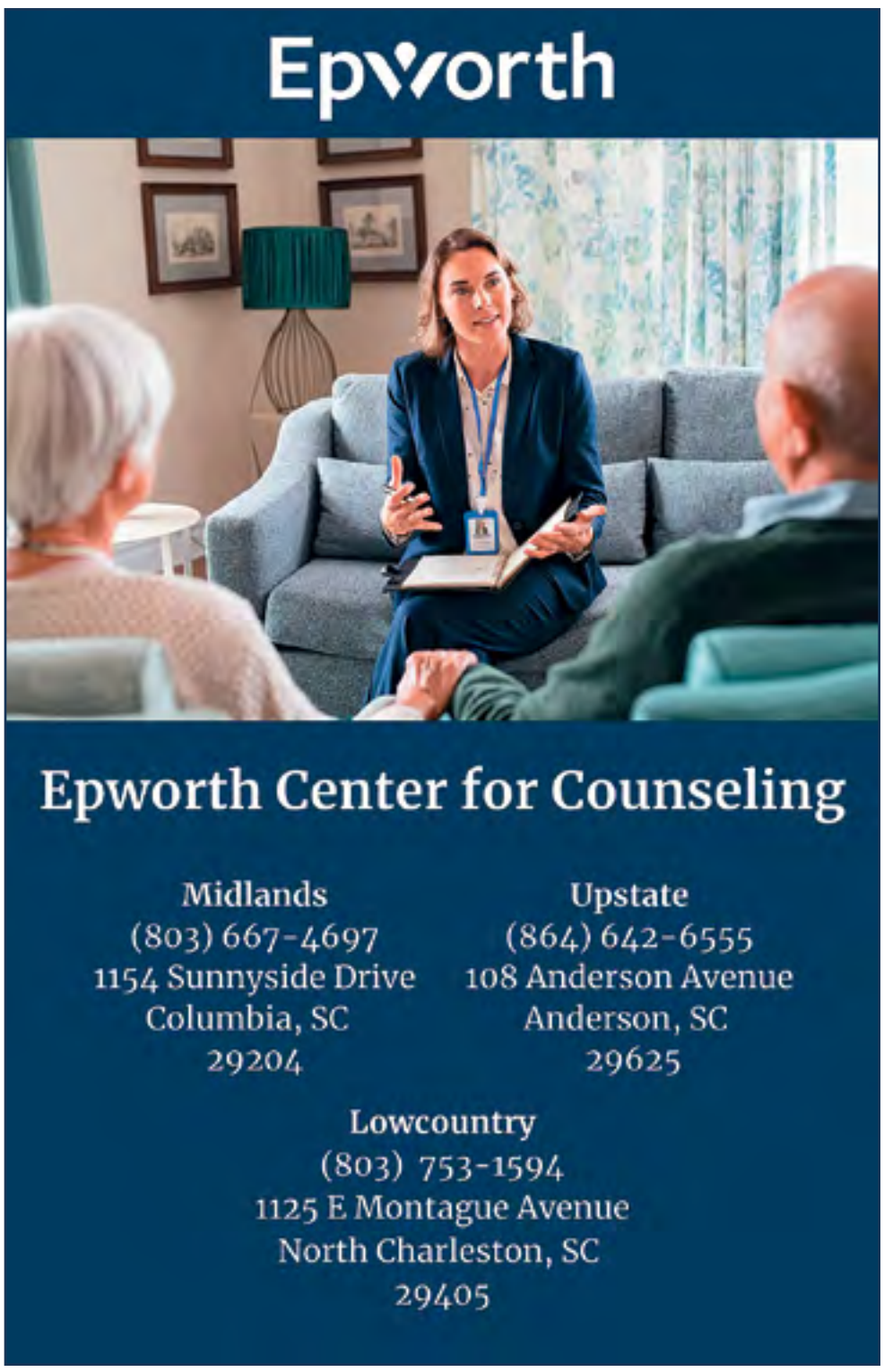
"I was overwhelmed with love, hope, peace and joy," Payne said. "I broke down crying more than once. It was a sobering reminder that God is present and uses diversity to bring about unity."

The Rev. J. T. Brown, who pastors Fair Lawn UMC, Columbia, got to join with the monks and be part of a release of white doves into the morning sky—a symbol of their shared wish for a world at peace. The monks happened to pass by their church as the congregation was in the middle of their morning worship, and they paused the service to go out and be with the monks for a time.

"In a world where we can see the witness of folks like the strange monks, who carry so little and give so much, what is there to be learned about worry, control, giving, receiving and simply caring?" Brown reflected. "I'm grateful for the blessing they gave to our church, and the blessing the congregation gave to me in the way they received the strange happenings."

"Peace doesn't just happen. It happens when people, like the monks, work for it, walk for it and give themselves over for it. What a holy mystery."

(Read his personal reflection on the monks' visit on Page 6, and watch a Facebook video of the dove release at https://www.facebook.com/reel/1947256302526034).



KENYA

From Page 1

The well would mean clean water for the people as well as their cattle, and it would reduce the time needed to carry water from other water sources.

The project is spearheaded by St. John's member Chip Reaves, who has been involved with missions to Africa since 2007. He said. "We have this opportunity to make their lives so much better and show the love of Christ as the church, and that's what's really important to me."

A tug of the heart

Reaves started getting involved with African missions in 2007 after getting to know several African refugees who became members of his former church, North Decatur UMC in Decatur, Georgia. At first, Reaves helped from afar. When he was invited to do a monthlong mission trip in Rwanda, he balked at first; as the self-employed owner of a computer service franchise, Reaves thought there was no way he could leave work for that long to do overseas ministry.

But God nudged hard, and Reaves found himself in Rwanda helping to build a tin-roofed church for a community in need.

One trip led to another, and since then, Reaves has not only traveled back and forth to the continent but also overseen projects remotely from home.

Last year, he and his wife, Maren, were invited by his friend the Rev. Paul Sebineza, an African refugee-turned-pastor who now leads a church in Austin, to join Sebineza's family for a wedding in Kenya. There, he met Pastor Joseph Shilalo, of Ntinyika, who implored them for help. Shilalo shared the community's dire needs, and Reaves' heart tugged.

He and Sebineza put their heads together and consulted with Bishop Peter Olonapa of Maasailand Chistian Ministries in Kenya.

While Olonapa is not a United Methodist bishop, Reaves said that distinction isn't important in Kenya. There, when small churches in that region have a need, they start reaching out to all the churches until they find a bishop willing to help. Olonapa was more than willing, and he also agreed to supervise the operation onsite—much needed given the rampant opportunity for corruption and fraud, not to mention culture and language differences.

In November, Bishop Peter Olonapa came from Kenya to meet with Chip Reaves and Dr. Stephen Love about the project. From left are the Rev. James E. Moore, Olonapa's wife Emmah, Olonapa, Love and Reaves.

The villagers of Ntinyika must walk two miles for water daily.

In November, Olonapa came to South Carolina, where he met with Reaves and Dr. Stephen Love, St. John's pastor, about the project. Now, it's full speed ahead, with St. John's members actively excited and raising money to get started on the well.

Seeking $50,000

The well is an expensive undertaking in an area where water is scarce. Initial funds paid for an engineering survey to see if there was potential for a well. The detailed report revealed that water was indeed there, but because of climate change they would need to drill down more than the 150 meters they hoped would be necessary. Their well would need to be 270 meters deep.

"We got lots of quotes, and the cheapest is $28,000 U.S.," Reaves explained.

They set their fundraising goal higher—$50,000—for pipes and filters or if they hit unexpected obstacles.

As Reaves noted, "We don't want to have a half a project and them end up with nothing."

They have started raising funds from St. John's members as well as from the surrounding community, and now they are hoping all churches in the conference will prayerfully help.

Called to help 'the least'

One way they are raising money is through a performance from the Hope of Life/Faith Gospel Choirs, comprising a group of East African refugees now living in and attending Sebineza's church in Austin.

Set for Feb. 7, the choir is traveling at their own expense from Texas in order to perform in a benefit concert at St. John's to raise funds for the well.

Once the funds are raised, Reaves said the process of drilling a well is "fairly quick"—roughly two weeks.

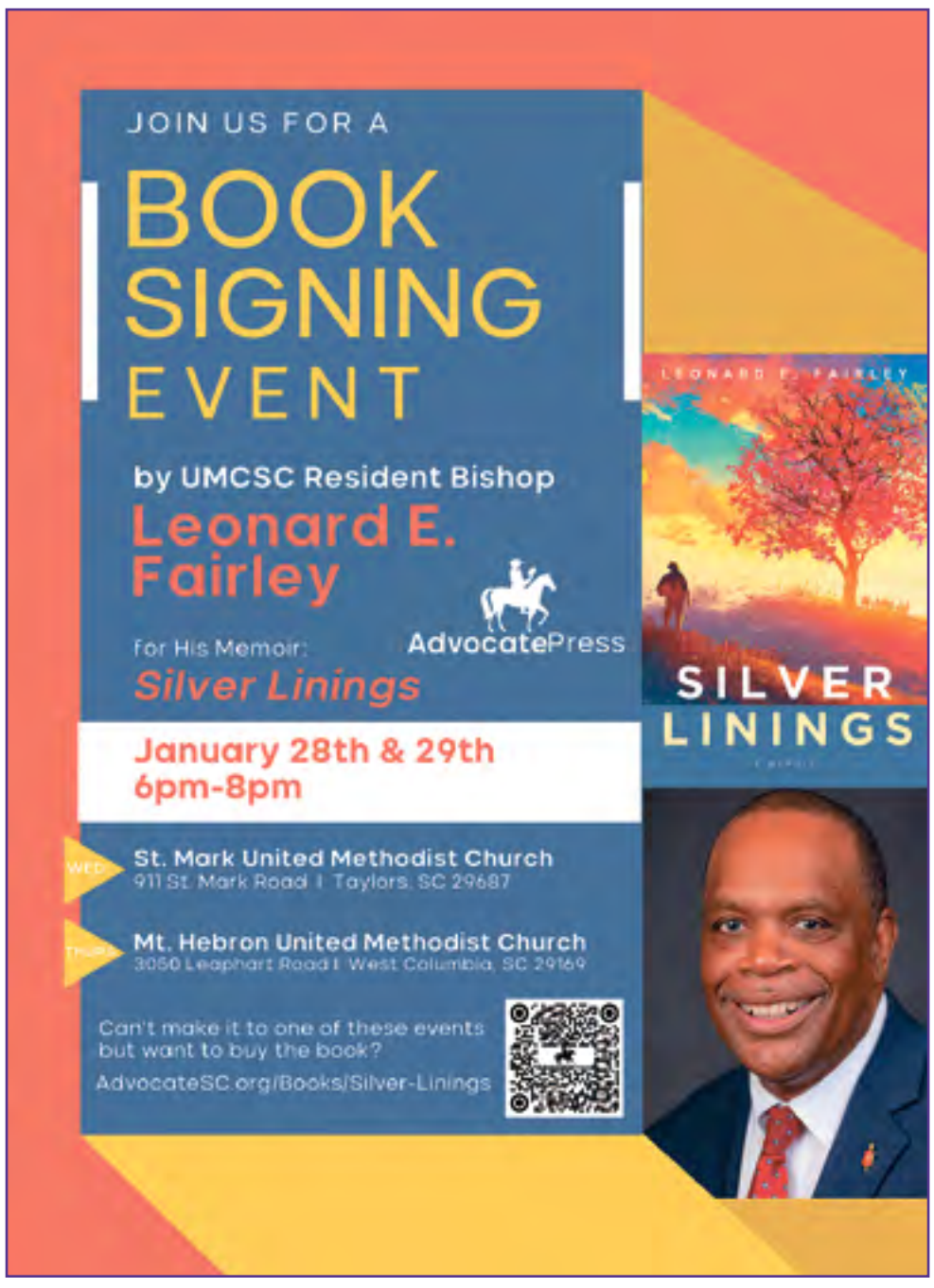
"In a perfect world, we would raise money by March and have the well by April, but we'll see what happens," Reaves said. "I'm encouraged by the response so far. I'm hoping for good things."

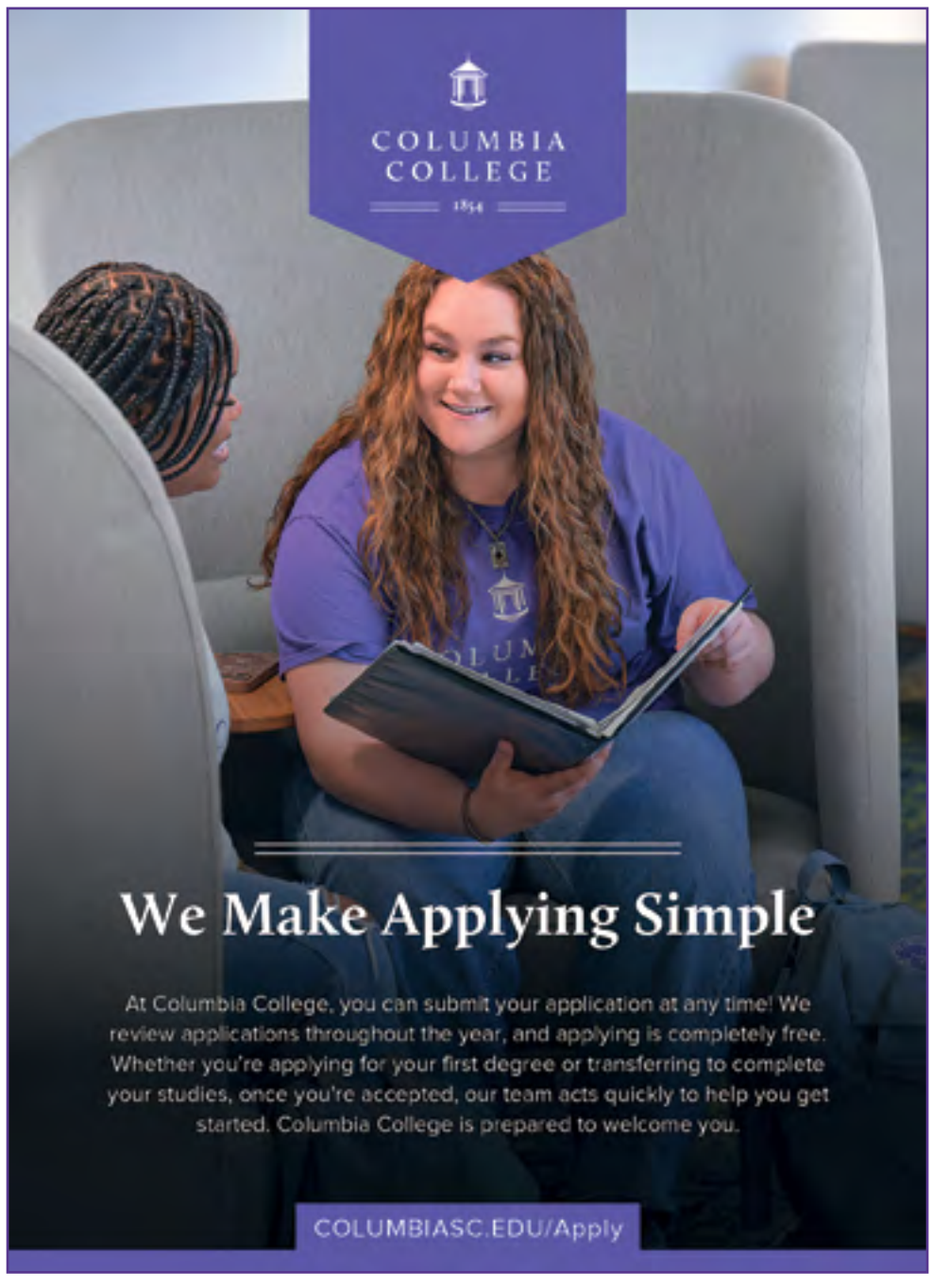
Reaves said that it's important that God's people do what they can to help what Jesus called "the least of these" (Matthew 25:45), and the people of Ntinyika are certainly these.

"When we're called to love our neighbor, the challenge is that there are a lot of local mission opportunities, places with needs in South Carolina or even in Latin America, where it's easier to see them as 'our neighbor,'" Reaves said. "But these people in Kenya, they are still our neighbor, still our brothers and sisters, but they're so far away from anybody who has the kind of financial resources we have in the U.S.

"If we don't make the effort to bridge those distances ... they're never going to get the help they need."

Costs include the drilling of the well along with borehole casing and lining, water testing and analysis, pump installation and water storage (with solar setup). To learn more or to help, visit https://stjohnsanderson.net/africa-well-project.





PODCASTS

From Page 1

help elementary-aged children strengthen and explore their spirituality.

"We spend so much time in the car—why not use this time to be productive and have this moment in a world of chaos?" Sipes said.

She often listens to short podcasts with her three elementary-aged sons and knows firsthand how impactful that time can be, and she wants other families to have that same opportunity.

Lybrand says podcasts are relatively simple and extremely flexible.

"It is easier as far as the equipment and setup needs as well as editing requirements, and it gives the listener a chance to listen when it works for them instead of having to be in a certain location at a certain time," he said. "It also gives us the ability to reach people further off. We have listeners not only in South Carolina, but also North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Minnesota and New York, based off of Spotify analytics. Those are all people that we would otherwise probably not reach."

The Rev. Jason Wilson (left) and the Rev. Robby Lybrand record their weekly Two Pastors podcast.

The Rev. Jeri-Katherine Warden Sipes works on her weekly short kids' Lent podcast, "From Dust to Dawn."

Two Pastors: Wrestling with Real Questions

Wilson serves as senior pastor and Lybrand as associate pastor of St. Mark United Methodist Church, a two-campus large church in Greenwood. But they have a deep friendship that goes beyond serving their church.

"We're buddies," Lybrand said; they and their wives spend time hanging out and doing life together.

Once a quarter, their church brings both campuses and all four worship services together for one big combined service, and Wilson and Lybrand preach that service together. Wilson said they discovered they have a unique, helpful way of counterbalancing each other that leads to a deeper, more thought-provoking message. The congregation noticed that, too.

"People were like, 'Y'all mesh so well and feed off each other so well—y'all should think about doing a podcast,'" Wilson said.

Wilson, who is decidedly not tech-savvy, looked to Lybrand, who he calls their "tech guy."

"Holy cow, do not ever give that boy an idea you don't want him to take serious." Wilson laughed. "Within a week, that joker sent me an email: 'This is what we need to do, the equipment we need to have, and the good news is we have all the equipment and I can get us set up on Spotify.'"

Their first episode dropped Jan. 7, with a new episode every Wednesday at noon.

"I thought it was a cool opportunity," Lybrand said. "It fired me up to have an opportunity to let people hear us talk about life and our faith and how we navigate this stuff."

Wilson and Lybrand say the podcast gives them the chance to talk about faith matters that go beyond what they normally discuss in sermons.

Their Jan. 14 topic discussed the Buddhist monks' Walk for Peace that took them from Texas through South Carolina en route to Washington, D.C. Another explored the ways we talk to one another and how our words can both help and hurt. Future episodes will tackle everything from whether our pets will be in heaven to finding the sacred in the secular.

Wilson said the feedback has been positive. "We've kind of been surprised people are actually listening to this," he said. "We thought maybe our moms would, but it's heartening to know other people seem to appreciate it."

They're heeding any constructive criticism they receive and trying to grow and create as best as they can.

"It really is fun to sit at one end of the table and talk about our lives and talk about how life and faith collide," Wilson said.

Lybrand agreed. He thinks it's helpful for people to understand that even pastors explore faith matters and are not perfectly enlightened and wise on all matters of theology, and exploring new perspectives is something all of us should do.

"Sometimes people get this idea that pastors have it all together, have it all figured out, have an answer to everything, and hopefully if they hear us wrestle with ideas, they'll realize they're not the only ones who don't have it all figured out," Lybrand said.

"We want people to know everyone has questions and everyone has doubts," Wilson added. "None of us are exempt from the stuff of life. Maybe we can offer a word of encouragement—this is something we've experienced, we've been through. We're not sure it's right, but we're all working through life trying to follow after Jesus."

They plan to do one podcast a week for the year, then assess where they are. They're actively recruiting topics to discuss. People can either email them with topic ideas at 2pastorspodcast@gmail.com or fill out this form at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/9TWSNW6.

To find their podcast, search for "Two Pastors" on Spotify, iHeart Radio or Amazon Music or "Two Pastors Robby Lybrand Jason Wilson" on Apple Podcasts.

Kids' Lent Podcast: A Short Sabbath Moment

Sipes, a United Methodist elder, is currently serving as the director of children and family ministries at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Columbia, and she has a heart for reaching children in new ways beyond what we do on Sundays.

After all, she said, "We only get families for one hour a week, and you can only do so much faith formation in one hour."

As the mom of three boys ages 6, 9 and 11, she also understands how important it is that parents find creative ways to make time for faith exploration in everyday life.

She said she often listens to short storytelling podcasts with her kids when driving to practices and going to and from school.

"We spend an obscene amount of time in the car, but we can use that time," Sipes said, noting the time is a sabbath moment in a world of constant rushing. "It's just a small moment, and you have a captive audience in the car. They're not going anywhere, you're not going anywhere, and you can listen to this story and have a five minute conversation."

She felt like a Lent podcast would help kids understand the real reason behind the season and its culmination on Easter. Just five minutes in length, the podcast would help pique their curiosity and nurture spiritual growth.

"Eighty percent make up their minds about faith before age 12," Sipes said. "The stage of spiritual development parallels the academic and physical. By third grade, you kind of know where you are on this. So we have to take these years very seriously—how do we as parents use the space we are in?"

She said her kids like it, and the fact that it's short makes it palatable.

"Kids have so many questions about the serpent, and Adam and Eve, and were they the only ones, and you don't have to have all the answers and come at it factually. It's really just sitting with wonder and curiosity. It's just this moment in our world of chaos where we can come back to the truth of these stories and see how God is there through it all, from the very beginning."

Sipes likes to use a calm voice in her podcasts, which makes it a little different from other kids' ministry outreach efforts.

"Sometimes we try with kids curriculum to make it flashy and cool. Let's just sit with a story without all the flashing lights, with calmer storytelling and calm music," she said.

She also has an Advent podcast, "From the Stars to the Stable," in the same vein. She's planning a companion series to help parents dive deeper and connect with their children in better ways, along with Advent companion books.

Find both podcasts on Spotify. The Lent podcast will be on Spotify beginning Ash Wednesday, Feb. 18; search for "From Dust to Dawn." For the Advent podcast, search "From the Stars to the Stable."

Do you know of other South Carolina United Methodist podcasts? Share them with the Advocate*. Email news@advocatesc.org.*

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Love in action: The 'Auntie Project' at work

Above, some of the "aunties" gather with the supplies. Below. the "aunties" pack items for the young women.

By Dr. Tara Cunningham Cantey

The United Women in Faith at Friendship United Methodist Church in Nesmith ended 2025 with a service project to support local area elementary and middle schools, demonstrating their commitment to faith in action and compassionate outreach.

Known as The Auntie Project, this initiative focused on supporting young girls during what they call "that special time of the month" by providing much-needed feminine hygiene products.

Through the Auntie Project, members of the United Women in Faith donated, assembled and carefully packed feminine hygiene items and comfort supplies for girls attending local elementary and middle schools in Williamsburg County. Each package also included a heartfelt note reminding every young lady that she is loved, valued and wonderfully made, offering encouragement alongside practical support.

The goal of the project was to ensure that no young girl feels embarrassed, unprepared or unable to focus on learning because of a lack of basic necessities.

The schools served through this outreach included Hemingway Elementary School and M. B. Lee Middle School in Hemingway, as well as Kenneth Gardner Elementary School and Kingstree Middle Magnet School in Kingstree.

Each package was prepared with prayer, intentionality and care, reflecting the nurturing role of an "auntie"—one who offers guidance, support and love.

The Auntie Project was created in response to a growing awareness that many young girls face challenges during this important stage of development, often in silence. By addressing this need, the United Women in Faith sought to promote dignity, confidence and consistent school attendance while reminding students that their community cares deeply about their well-being.

The dedication, compassion and unwavering commitment of the women of Friendship United Women in Faith continue to shine through their faithful service to the community. Their mission is to uplift and encourage women, children and families with joy while honoring God through faithful service and love in action.

Dr. Ernest Frierson, pastor of Friendship UMC, provides spiritual leadership and steadfast support as the ministry lives out the gospel through service and advocacy.

As the year came to a close, the Auntie Project stood as a meaningful expression of Christian love in action. Through this outreach, the United Women in Faith affirmed their calling to serve with compassion, ensuring that young girls are supported, valued and reminded that they are never alone.

Cantey is president of Friendship UWFaith.

Mount Seal women help families with incarcerated parents at Christmas

HEMINGWAY—The United Women in Faith of Mount Seal United Methodist Church again helped make a difference at Christmastime in the lives of families with incarcerated parents.

United Women in Faith is an organization of devoted women who work to improve the lives of women, children and youth. In 2024, Mount Seal's women started supporting the Angel Tree Prison Ministry. The ministry's purpose is to share the love of Christ by delivering Christmas gifts and personal messages to children on behalf of their incarcerated parents. The gifts help strengthen family bonds, offer hope and remind children they are not forgotten.

While Mount Seal is small in number, their members have big hearts. This year, with the love and support of their church family, they were able to make a difference in the lives of four families, 14 children and two other community children.

The women noted every child deserves to feel loved, remembered and valued, especially at Christmas.

Through Angel Tree Ministry, they had the opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus, delivering not just gifts, but hope.

This year, they were able to make a difference in the lives of four families, 14 children and two other community children.

Church members stand with the items.

The blankets will provide needed warmth.

Harmony UMC supports Bethel Homeless Men's Shelter with donation of 47 blankets

EDGEMOOR—Harmony United Methodist Church recently partnered with neighboring congregations to support the Bethel Homeless Men's Shelter through a blanket donation outreach held Saturday, Dec. 13.

Thanks to the generosity of multiple churches, a total of 47 blankets were donated to help provide warmth and comfort to men served by the shelter during the winter season.

Monetary contributions came from Harmony, Bethel, Mount Olive and New Hope UMCs, making the effort a true example of churches working together in ministry.

The outreach was spearheaded by Jackie Kennedy, whose leadership and dedication helped bring the project together and ensure its success. Through shared compassion and collaboration, the participating churches demonstrated their commitment to serving those in need within the community.

This meaningful act of kindness reflects the heart of Christian service and the impact that collective giving can make when congregations unite for a common purpose.

United Women in Faith
by Patricia Armstrong

New year, same faith

It's a new year with new hopes and new dreams. The excitement of new possibilities is fresh on our minds and in our hearts.

The reality that the ringing in of a new year didn't miraculously wipe away past worries and concerns is more evident for some than others, but there is also the reminder of hope, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassion fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness."

The United Women in Faith invites you to walk faithfully and boldly with us in 2026 as we strive to live out our faith by living out our purpose. Driven by God's love and united in sisterhood, we work to improve the lives of women, children and youth. Every day, we show up. We take action. We get it done. And we invite you to join us.

UWFaith are actively involved in ministries in the local church, community, state and world. In addition to our ongoing efforts, we've established two national priority focus area (and two focus area for South Carolina Conference UWFaith): Just Energy For All and Ending Mass Incarceration and Criminalization of Communities of Color.

One of our major advocacy event is Legislative Advocacy Day. LAD is a day of training, networking, fellowship and inspiration. Join us March 17 at Epworth Children's Home for LAD. This year's theme is "Racial and Environmental Justice For All."

Program participants include Appleseed Legal Justice Center (attorney Jennifer Rainville), Conservation Advocacy Alliance, and Women's Rights and Empowerment Network (Aisha Jones). For registration information, visit https://forms.gle/wfX3eG7NeCmb49hx8.

Come be a part of this dynamic sisterhood. There is a place and space, in person and or digitally, for you. Learn more at https://uwfaith.org/get-involved/become-a-member/.

New year, same faith. We believe love in action can change the world.

Armstrong is social action coordinator for South Carolina Conference UWFaith.

Augusta Road reaches out to their neighbors through food ministries

By Denise Morgan

PELZER—In Luke 10:29-37, Christ defines neighbors as anyone in need whom you can help. Using that standard makes our neighborhoods larger and harder to know well.

Folks who are struggling aren't always visible to their neighbors. But luckily, Augusta Road United Methodist Church is blessed with people who have vision to see what others don't.

About 10 years ago, Augusta Road's youth minister, Monica Barricks, was involved with our local Woodmont High School. Currently, all students get free breakfast, and some get free lunch. The students who Barricks worked with had food security issues; they ate at school during the week but had less available on the weekends.

That was when the church began providing backpacks of food.

On Thursdays, Ron Young, a church member who took over when Barricks moved to Bluffton, delivers food to the high school. Master Sergeant Scott Redovian's JROTC class receives the items and sorts them into backpacks that are picked up by the identified students. Each backpack contains three dinners for Friday, Saturday and Sunday; two breakfasts; two lunches; and two snacks for Saturday and Sunday. Dinners are usually canned soup with protein, breakfast (usually instant oatmeal, grits or pastries) and lunch (usually macaroni and cheese or canned pasta). Snacks are usually small containers of fruit or small bags of peanuts.

We don't generally provide extra food in advance of a long weekend or a holiday break. Sometimes if a student doesn't pick up his or her backpack, those goods become inventory that will be used to supplement other distributions.

The number of students may vary from week to week. The school's population is roughly 2,100 students, and we currently serve five students in the backpack program.

The Backpack Ministry is one of several ways our church works with the high school. At Thanksgiving, we provide turkeys and baskets of food for some 10 to 15 families. This year, we were delighted when some of the cheerleaders and the basketball team helped us unload our truck full of pumpkins for our Halloween fundraiser.

Our efforts to feed our community include filling our Blessing Box, located at the fire station across the street, with its lighting and 24-hour security. These items are canned and other non-perishables that don't stay long in the box. Recently, a local Eagle Scout project made improvements to the box after some seven years of constant use.

As we learn with the Good Samaritan, the question isn't so much "Who is my neighbor?" but more "Who can I be a good neighbor to?"

Morgan is a member of Augusta Road UMC, Pelzer.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Hal Crosswell

UMVIM sends 2,400 Christmas stockings to Haiti

This year, the UMVIM Christmas Stockings program for Haiti was very successful thanks to many churches in the South Carolina Conference. UMVIM was able to send approximately 2,400 Christmas stockings via Agape Missionary Flights. They were distributed among the churches in the Jeremie and Leon districts of the Methodist Church of Haiti. In spite of the large number sent, many more were needed. Pastor Seraphim, the superintendent of the Jeremie and Leon districts, which have approximately 33 churches, was in charge of the distribution. He said that although the stockings helped many children to have a little happiness this Christmas, there were many who unfortunately were not able to receive one. He expressed his heartfelt gratitude to UMVIM-SC for providing these Christmas stockings for the children there and hopes this program can continue in the years to come.

Epworth News
by Beth Williams

A longtime legacy of care

On a cold January day in 1896, Epworth opened its doors for the first time to become a home for children across South Carolina whose parents had died or who for some reason were no longer able to care for them.

Established by the Methodist Church, Epworth welcomed two children on its opening day.

This year we celebrate Epworth's 130th anniversary—many decades filled with compassionate care and loving support for thousands of children over the years.

On that first day back in 1896, Epworth began a legacy for children where their fears turned into feelings of security and belonging, and their sadness at leaving their homes evolved into the happiness they experienced with the love and support from Epworth staff members. They had a safe, warm place to live; they had nutritious food; they were supported in a new class in a new school; they made new friends; they found a spiritual home; and most of all, they were wrapped in the compassion and nurturing that Epworth gave them. This legacy continues today in 2026.

For 130 years, Epworth's service to children and families in South Carolina has evolved from its initial role as primarily a residential setting to today when Epworth's initiatives span a wide spectrum of services to children and families in our state.

The residential program has shifted its emphasis over the years to focus on older children and youth, and a plethora of other service areas have been developed to address the changing panorama of needs in South Carolina for children and families, many of whom have been underserved or have experienced abuse and other trauma. The need is greater than ever to assist families in maintaining safe, nurturing homes for their children and to provide foster care programs, include kinship care, for children who are no longer able to remain with their birth families.

Epworth's three areas of focus, which align with our foundational mission, are prevention, foster and kinship care, and our residential program. These three areas comprise a broad base of Epworth's services and programming. In its work with families, Epworth strives to provide families with the assistance and resources they need to stabilize the family unit and create safe, sustainable family life, thus preventing family dissolution. In its foster and kinship care programs, Epworth trains, supports and brings resources to foster families who accept the responsibility of nurturing children they bring into their homes. And in its residential programs, Epworth continues to provide safe and healthy environments for children, older youth and families to live and grow.

With the opening of satellite offices across South Carolina offering many of its programs to more children and families, Epworth is continuing and expanding its legacy of hope, support and compassionate assistance to many of our state's most vulnerable citizens. What began in 1896 to address the needs of children at the turn of the 19th century continues today with Epworth's focus on giving hope and guidance to successive new generations.

Williams is the chief executive officer of Epworth.

Happy 90th Birthday, Heyward King

It has been such a privilege to be raised by Heyward and Susie King. Together, they have been the best parents, molding and shaping each of us through God's grace and godly wisdom. Daddy has truly been the backbone of our family, always reminding us to "put God first, then family, and things will work out." We are filled with gratitude for all he has done for us, and with each passing year, for the good life God has given him.

Daddy, God knit you together in your mother's womb and blessed you with wonderful parents—Heyward and Frances King—who raised you in the small town of Lake City, South Carolina, and at Lake City United Methodist Church. God gave you the gifts of football and track at the University of South Carolina, and you worked hard to develop and excel in those gifts.

You were also blessed with Mom, Susie Floyd—the love of your life—and your marriage continues to set a beautiful example of Christ and the Church. Our family, and the wider community, have been blessed by your many years of leadership at W. Lee Flowers.

You have been further blessed with—and continue to be a blessing to—four wonderful children, along with grandchildren and great-grandchildren (still counting!).

But more than anything else, what we celebrate today is God's faithfulness to you and to our family. "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments" (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Because you and Mom have loved God and put Him first in your lives—as your own parents did—God continues to bless us as your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. And because you are leading us with such a godly heritage, we desire to pass that same legacy of faith on to our own children.

Daddy, you have been given the greatest gift: faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. We, your children, have witnessed your genuine faith and your desire to share it with others. Praise the Lord—your children have all become believers too! We see you continually loving and serving your church, your family, and your community.

Your generosity has shaped our families, our communities, our nation, and has made real for so many the Kingdom of God.

You not only read your Bible daily, but you live it out. You trust God at His Word, knowing it is the most important guide in your life. Because of what God is pouring into your heart, we are all receiving the blessing of a godly spiritual leader.

John 7:38 says, "Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." Daddy, we see that living water flowing through you, and what a joy it is to witness.

We love you dearly and are so very grateful for you. Happy 90th Birthday!

With love, your family

Young Methodists.

Wesley Foundations
by the Rev. John Sterling Poole

College students in mission

During the months of November and December, students at the Charleston Wesley Foundation organized a food drive to gather supplies and raise money in order to supply Trinity United Methodist Church's Blessing Box in the heart of downtown Charleston.

This was directed specifically at the students in the Wesley Foundation; there was no calling parents, sending emails to professors or anything like that. It was about students trying to feed hungry neighbors in Charleston, and the fruit was evident.

From our group of approximately 70 students (split between Trident Tech, The Citadel, College of Charleston and the American College of the Building Arts), students gathered enough nonperishables to fill several shelves of the Blessing Box the Monday before Thanksgiving.

Then in December, Cooper Harbol, a senior at The Citadel and one of the student leaders who organized the drive, and I went to Food Lion to purchase more nonperishables with the $135 raised by students. Cooper diligently selected a variety of items in order to offer choice to the neighbors, and he kept nutritional value in consideration while he tried to stretch the $135 as far as he could.

Perhaps this impresses you; perhaps it does not. But what should be highlighted is the fact that these college students did it on their own. A goal of campus ministry is to show and teach students on how to do ministry, and a group of four students came together to plan out collection, advertisement, delivery and more. Those students are Isabella Knapp (senior at College of Charleston), Dezi Johnson (junior at College of Charleston), Hannah Kelley (junior at College of Charleston) and Cooper Harbol, and my hope is that each of them feels a little more comfortable striking out and organizing something like this in their local churches in the future.

Hannah Johnson (left) and Dezi Johnson (right) fill the Blessing Box alongside peers.

College students care deeply and love to help others, and that gets overlooked too often. Campus ministries are working hard to impart practical ministerial experience and leadership skills in order to develop church members who may very well end up in your church's pew or another church's pew.

This work is being done now. This work is happening, and this work is reliant on the support of local congregants, Sunday schools and churches through their prayers, presence, service, witness and especially gifts.

Through that support, stories and opportunities like this can continue.

Poole is director of the Charleston Wesley Foundation. To learn more about each Wesley Foundation: https://linktr.ee/UMCSCWesley.

Youth Spotlight.

My grandpa, my papa: Who is he?

He is a husband, a father and the best papa I could have ever asked for. He has lived many lives. He was a firefighter, a policemen and my favorite, a pastor.

Michael Leonhardt loved talking about God. He would tell everyone about his talks with God, even from when he was in scouts.

God helped my grandpa find an oak leaf. The words he heard were, "I am an oak." My papa is now able to talk to him face to face about many things. I am sure he is thrilled to be there.

My papa has made such an impact on everyone who has had the opportunity to talk to him. He was and still is (in the spiritual world) the nicest, sweetest and definitely funniest man. He would make up fun stories about everything right on the spot. Those stories would be dragged out for so long, but they were the best. He was grateful for anything, and his main thing was his family. He even wrote about his last birthday he spent with us and he expressed how much he enjoyed it.

He is such a gentle man. He doesn't like violence. He hates nails in trees. He always saves bugs. He is God's pacifist.

I am very proud of the man he was and is. I am forever grateful to have had him in my life. He is remembered, loved and God's pacifist.

He is my papa.

By Patience Passmore, age 15
Rock Hill Circuit UMC, Rock Hill

Salkehatchie gathering set for Jan. 31 at Mount Hebron

Calling all Salkehatchie participants, as well as anyone interested in the service mission.

The second annual Salkehatchie gathering is set for Jan. 31 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Mount Hebron United Methodist Church in West Columbia.

This year's gathering will include a time of worship, lunch ($5/person cash or check) and sharing Salkehatchie experiences.

There will also be activities for both youth and adults.

If you are interested in attending the gathering, email salkehatchie@umcsc.org with the subject line "2026 Gathering."

Camps & Retreat.

Camp Sunday March 1

Take a moment and imagine the smell of campfire smoke, the crackle of flames beneath roasting marshmallows and the sound of laughter filling the air. Sounds like the magic of camp! While we can't transport you there just yet, Camp Sunday is March 1, and we can bring camp to you. Camp advocates would love the opportunity to share with your church about the life-changing impact of Camps & Retreats Ministries at Asbury Hills, Camp Providence and Sea Islands. Whether through an in-person visit or by providing materials and a video to share with your congregation on March 1, they are excited to partner with you. Many have encountered God in powerful ways at Asbury Hills, and they want to help share those stories and experiences with others.

One story that expresses the power of camp comes from a camp family from this past summer: This summer, we welcomed a camper back for a second year at Asbury Hills who came from a difficult home life. He came his first summer through our camper scholarship program, and his grandmother reached out last year, hoping he could return to camp.

We never want finances to be a barrier for a camper who can benefit from the love and community camp provides, and so we welcomed him back to camp this summer. Though this camper struggles at times with friendships and anger, our staff walked alongside him with patience and care, and he had another incredible week. A few weeks later, his grandmother shared joyful news: he had been baptized, which she credited directly to his camp experience! Each week at camp, we see seeds of faith planted that continue to grow long after campers return home.

God uses Camps & Retreat Ministries in awe-inspiring ways for both campers and staff, transcending the physical space of Asbury Hills. To learn more, get materials or have us speak at your church, call 864-298-0125 or email info@sccarm.org.

Cecil Williams to Claflin grads: 'The world rewards the brave, the curious and the bold'

"Your future will not grow in the soil of your comfort zone. Great things seldom happen when we cling only to the familiar. Doors open when we are willing to stretch, to learn and to step forward," said Cecil Williams, renowned photographer, author and inventor whose stirring photographs chronicled the Civil Rights Movement in South Carolina and beyond.

Williams made his remarks during his keynote message at Claflin University's Fall 2025 Commencement Convocation.

Claflin conferred bachelor's and master's degrees to more than 160 graduates during the ceremony Dec. 12 at the Jonas T. Kennedy Health and Wellness Complex.

Williams drew inspiration from a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he chose "Dreamers Bend Reality" as the title of his speech.

According to Williams, Dr. King once said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Williams, who earned a bachelor's degree in 1960 at Claflin, said he spent most of his life walking into rooms he was not supposed to enter.

"I wasn't expected to witness moments in history such as Thurgood Marshall arriving in Charleston, South Carolina, to engage in the Briggs v. Elliot court case, which I photographed at 14 years old," Williams said.

Briggs v. Elliot was a landmark 1950 South Carolina lawsuit by Black parents challenging segregated schools, seeking equal conditions and buses. It became one of the five cases combined into Brown v. Board of Education, ultimately leading the Supreme Court to declare school segregation unconstitutional.

From left, James A. Bennett, Claflin University President Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack and Cecil Williams gather at Claflin's Fall 2025 Commencement Convocation.

"The signers of the Briggs petition of Clarendon County, South Carolina, were the catalysts for the Brown v. Board of Education case," Williams said. "They are my favorite heroes, not only for South Carolina, but my favorite heroes of America."

Williams told the audience he witnessed and photographed another seminal event: the protests that led to the Orangeburg Massacre, "where young brave men—just about your age—from South Carolina State, Wilkinson High School and Claflin put their lives on the line for freedom, justice and equality."

The incident involved the fatal shooting of three young men, and many others were wounded when South Carolina highway patrolmen opened fire on student protesters at South Carolina State College (now University) on February 8, 1968. He described the event as another example of how "experts sometimes forget something essential—that dreamers can bend reality."

Williams and Actively Black founder Lanny Smith launched a partnership that inspired the apparel company to produce a line of its stylish "athleisure wear" with an iconic image of Williams drinking from the "Whites Only" water fountain. Video and photographs of Williams modeling a hoodie on the runway during New York Fashion Week in September 2025 went viral, increasing global awareness of Williams' legacy as an artist and civil rights activist.

"I walked with a little swagger and a whole lot of fear because 55 million people were watching live and online," Williams said. "So, I relied on my Claflin confidence. I put on my sunglasses, I said a little prayer and I walked. Courage starts where confidence ends. The world rewards the brave, the curious and the bold."

"The universe is not waiting for the perfect version of you. It is waiting for the courageous version of you, the one who walks before the applause, before the approval, before the guarantee. Graduates, life is a journey. And we each have our own destiny."

Williams and James A. Bennett, executive vice president and director of external affairs for First Citizens Bank, received honorary doctorates of Humane Letters during the ceremony. In addition to his distinguished career in the banking industry, Bennett was a member and a former chair of Claflin's Board of Trustees.

Claflin also honored 36 alumni from the "Silver Class" of 2000 during this year's commencement.

"To the Fall Class of 2025—you are an amazing group of scholars," said Claflin President Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack.

Columbia College graduates 210+ in December ceremony

COLUMBIA—Columbia College celebrated the accomplishments of more than 210 undergraduate and graduate degree recipients during its December commencement ceremony held Wednesday, Dec. 17, at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center.

Surrounded by faculty, staff, family members and friends, graduates were honored for their academic achievement, perseverance and readiness to step into lives of purpose and leadership.

South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster delivered the featured commencement address, offering reflections on public service, leadership and the responsibility graduates carry to use their education in service to others and their communities.

Gov. McMaster offers a word on confidence.

"You have been given an education that can open every door," McMaster said. "You should face your future with enormous confidence. There is a leader in you waiting to wake up, waiting to climb, and waiting to excel."

Student speaker Jocelyn Tucker-Cain, who received a Master of Arts in criminal justice, reflected on the shared journey of the graduating class and the support systems that made their success possible.

"Standing here today feels both humbling and surreal," Tucker-Cain said. "Every late night, every long day and every obstacle brought us to this very moment. And today, we can proudly say we did it."

She also spoke to the sense of belonging she found at Columbia College and encouraged her fellow graduates to carry that confidence forward.

"Columbia College became more than an institution; it became a family that taught us perseverance, resilience and the power of believing in ourselves," she said.

In his charge to the graduates, President John H. Dozier acknowledged the faculty, staff and families whose support shaped the graduates' experiences and success.

"You didn't get here alone," Dozier said. "And you don't go forward alone, either."

Since its founding in 1854, Columbia College has prepared generations of graduates to meet the world with courage, purpose and service.

"Today, you carry that legacy forward," Dozier said.

Dozier also encouraged graduates to live out the meaning of the college's motto, Non Quem Sed Quid, meaning "Not who, but what."

"We measure you by what you do, how you lead and how you serve," he said. "Wherever you go, strive to make your corner of the world better because you were there."

As graduates stood to move their tassels from right to left, officially marking the conferral of their degrees, the ceremony concluded with celebration as the Class of 2025 joined the Columbia College alumni family.

Applications open for Advocate $1,000 scholarship

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

The deadline is March 1.

Daniels

Partridge

White

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.

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.

Last year the *Advocate* awarded three scholarships awards because of extra funds made available—to Sarah Daniels, Sarah Grace Partridge and Shelby White. Normally, the *Advocate* only awards one.

Learn more and download the application at https://advocatesc.org/scholarships, or email jbrodie@advocatesc.org.

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 to 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 can do so.

Revolution set for Jan. 30–Feb. 1

Cook

COLUMBIA–When youth across South Carolina gather this month for Revolution, they'll be at a new venue, the DoubleTree Conference Center.

That means, for the first time, youth groups participating in Revolution have the option of staying on-site.

The annual youth gathering of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church is 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."

Online registration has closed for the event, but those who wish to attend can register at the door of the event.

The Rev. Jason Cook, senior pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Roswell, Georgia, will bring the message as the featured speaker each session. Cook has started and sustained multiethnic churches, including Iron City Church in Birmingham and Fellowship Memphis in Tennessee. He credits God's providence for allowing him to be a part of multiethnic movements in four major southern cities that were prominent in the Civil Rights Movement.

Mary-Michael Brenner, creative director at Home Church in Roswell, Georgia, will lead the youth in worship throughout the weekend.

Learn more about the event at http://scmyp.org/revolution.

Second cohort of children's grant churches begin learning journey

By Toni Taylor

South Carolina United Methodists continue a conference-wide journey to help congregations rediscover something both ancient and urgently needed: worship is most powerful when every generation prays, learns and leads together.

Through the Lilly Endowment–funded "Connecting Children in Worship and Prayer" initiative, churches are learning that intergenerational worship is more than seating children near adults. Rather, it is intentionally creating moments of interaction, shared practice and belonging in the center of congregational life.

As we step into 2026, the initiative is grateful to announce the start of 12 churches participating in Cohort 2. While they begin this foundational learning journey, Cohort 1 churches move into Year 2–a critical phase where inspiration becomes implementation.

This overlap is by design: a steady, repeatable cohort cycle allowing a rhythm for churches to learn together over time, test practices in real worship settings and build a long-term culture change rather than experience just one-time events.

Cohort 1: From vision to implementation

Cohort 1's first year was like a "collaborative classroom" of shared learning as pastors and lay teams from 12 congregations experimented, reflected and encouraged one another while challenging assumptions. They explored what intergenerational worship could look like through quarterly training with partners like Portico, Narrative 4 and Messy Church.

Now, Cohort 1 moves into Year 2 with a focused shift: reaching their goals through conferences, workshops, book studies, resources and coaching support tailored to each church's intergenerational vision.

The three core goals that guide Cohort 1 remain steadfast:

1) Belonging: Creating cultures where children and youth are recognized as full participants in worship, not guests waiting to grow into the church later.

2) Increase Ways Children Lead Worship and Pray: Expanding concrete opportunities for children's voices, prayers and leadership to shape congregational worship.

3) Intergenerational Worship: Designing worship experiences that intentionally place all ages in relationship, learning and serving together.

In Year 2, churches will shift from training to more specific resources and support to successfully reach their goals: Coaching: 1:1 coaching model and small group coaching model provide research-based support to successfully reach specific target goals; prayer focus designed to support parents, children and families with faith formation and discipleship through small groups, book studies and retreats; a 12-week communication curriculum designed for children to build the necessary skills and confidence needed for leading worship; Story Exchange training for 50+ youth will equip them as N4 facilitators and leaders in the South Carolina Conference; and Leadership/Mentorship by a Cohort 1 church will provide support to a Cohort 2 church as they begin their journey, increasing partnership, collaboration and encouraging leadership.

Cohort 2: The journey begins

With the launch of Cohort 2, a new set of congregations will begin the same guided journey–learning from each other, trying practices and sharing stories alongside other churches in their cohort.

This initiative is built around a multiyear cohort model intended to support churches over time as they embed intergenerational worship and prayer into the long-term life of their congregation.

Each year through 2029, a new cohort will begin while previous cohorts continue deepening their work–creating a steady stream of learning, experimentation and transformation across the South Carolina Conference.

Impact across the conference

By 2029, this initiative aims to touch 60 cohort churches engaged in intentional intergenerational worship; 500 children experiencing belonging and leadership in congregational worship; and 7,000 church members whose faith is renewed as they encounter the gospel afresh through the presence and participation of all generations, including children.

Beyond these numbers, the initiative is building toward additional outcomes that will strengthen families and equip children through published prayers by children shared across the conference; a speaking curriculum for children available to all churches; a full-day conference bringing together South Carolina leaders to share learning and inspiration in the area of intergenerational worship; family-children retreats to deepen faith practices, discipleship and spiritual support in homes and communities; and expanded use of Portico for all things learning and leading in the conference.

Please continue praying for Cohort 1 as they deepen their work in Year 2 with purpose, courage, faithful experimentation and targeted coaching, and pray for Cohort 2 as they begin their journey that God is present in this work.

For questions or to learn more about bringing your church into a future cohort, email at ttaylor@umcsc.org or visit http://umcsc.org/children.

Worldwide News.

Praying for peace in Greenland

NUUK, Greenland – Amid renewed threats by the Trump administration against Denmark and the autonomous Greenland government, Lutheran Bishop Paneeraq Siegstad Munk of Greenland spoke with the World Council of Churches about her prayers for peace in 2026. "This is a question of human rights, dignity and respecting international laws and treaties," she said. Her prayer comes as United Methodist leaders from across the denomination prepare to meet in February in Denmark.

Church in Germany plants seeds of hope

FLENSBURG, Germany – Germany Regional Conference Bishop Werner Philipp has launched an initiative titled "Hope on the Way," which is rooted in the everyday life of local congregations. Philipp will visit churches in his three conferences for the next several years. At every stop, an apple tree will be planted – a sign of faithfulness, patience and God's hidden work.

Lenten devotions available

BIG ISLAND, Va. – Lent starts early this year with Ash Wednesday on Feb. 18. The Society of St. Andrew, the ministry that fights hunger, invites congregations, small groups and individuals to its 40-day Lenten devotionals centered around the theme "Blessed Are the Meek." The ministry asks a $2.50 donation per booklet ordered.

Church council in Venezuela urges prayer, peace

SAN CRISTOBAL, Venezuela – The Council of Evangelical Methodist Churches of Venezuela has issued a statement regarding the U.S. military incursion into Venezuela on Jan. 3. "As the Church, we cannot remain indifferent to the uncertainty affecting so many Venezuelan families," said Bishop Thoby Ramírez on behalf of the council. "We do not agree with war, violence or any form of imposition that threatens life, human dignity and human rights. Violence, from whatever source it may come, will never be the path to building a just and peaceful nation."

North Carolina center boosts Montana ministry

DENVER – The North Carolina Rural Center has accepted the Mountain Sky Conference as a partner in its Connect Church Hub Cohort. The conference plans to use the Connect Church grant of $375,000 to provide coaching over three years to 25 United Methodist churches in rural Montana.

Wespath celebrates launch of Compass plan

GLENVIEW, Ill. – Wespath has launched the Compass Retirement Plan, a future-focused retirement plan for United Methodist clergy. "Compass marks a new chapter of sustainable retirement benefits for clergy who serve the Church," said Andy Hendren, Wespath's general secretary and chief executive officer. "While change can be challenging, the transition to Compass is change rooted in John Wesley's teachings about stewardship and Wespath's mission to continue caring for those who serve for many generations into the future."

Bishops urge prayer, peace after federal shootings

MINNEAPOLIS – Bishop Lanette Plambeck, who leads the Minnesota and Dakotas conferences, calls on United Methodist congregations to be places of refuge and prayer in the days ahead after Renee Nicole Good was fatally shot in Minneapolis during a federal immigration enforcement operation. After federal agents shot and wounded two people in Portland, Oregon, Greater Northwest Area Bishop Cedrick D. Bridgeforth also expressed lament and called for United Methodists to be practitioners of peace while following their baptismal vows to "resist evil, injustice and oppression."

Applications now open for scholarships

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – The United Methodist Higher Education Foundation has opened applications for scholarships to help fund the 2026-2027 school year for United Methodist students hoping to attend a United Methodist-related college or seminary. Every year, the foundation awards up to $2 million in scholarships.

Jewish congregation hosts church in time of need

SAVANNAH, Ga. – When Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church was unexpectedly displaced after the ceiling collapsed this past summer in its historic sanctuary, worship did not stop. In a demonstration of interfaith hospitality, nearby Congregation Mickve Israel offered the church a temporary home including for its annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols celebration and its Christmas Eve services.

Courtesy United Methodist News

Obituaries.

Annette Bledsoe Anderson

LAURENS—Annette Bledsoe Anderson, wife of the Rev. Vernon Anderson, died Jan. 2, 2026. Rev. Anderson is a retired member of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church.

A memorial service will be held at a later date.

Memorials may be made to St. Jude Children's Hospital, 501 St. Jude Place, Memphis, TN 38105; or to Shriner's Hospitals for Children, 950 W. Faris Road, Greenville, SC 29605.

Mrs. Anderson is survived by her husband and two sons.

Philip Arthur Brandes

COLUMBIA—Philip Arthur Brandes, father of David Brandes, dies Dec. 16, 2025. Mr. Brandes is the husband of the Rev. Laurie Brandes, pastor of Asbury Memorial United Methodist Church.

Mr. Brandes is survived by his wife, Sylvia Ann Fabrizio, three sons and three daughters.

Rev. Daniel Walker Chamblee

Chamblee

MYRTLE BEACH—The Rev. Daniel Walker Chamblee, a retired elder of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, died Dec. 13, 2025.

Prior to his retirement in 2023, Rev. Chamblee served the Loris Charge, Wayne, Wayne-Bethel, Bethel-Ebenezer (Simpsonville) and Brown Swamp charges.

Funeral services were held Dec. 17 at First Methodist Church.

Memorials may be made to First Methodist Church of Myrtle Beach, 901 N. Kings Hwy., Myrtle Beach, SC 29577.

Rev. Chamblee is survived by his mother, his wife, Jeanie Chamblee, and three daughters.

Herbert Gadson

HOLLYWOOD—The Hon. Herbert Gadson, father of the Rev. Telley Lynnette Gadson, died Jan. 2, 2026. Rev. Gadson is the superintendent of the Hartsville District of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Funeral services were held Jan. 10 at Sandhill UMC, Ridgeville, with burial in Old Wesley UMC Cemetery.

Mr. Gadson is survived by his wife, Linda Dingle Gadson, two sons and daughter.

Sylvia E. Gain

MANNING—Sylvia E. Gain, wife of the Rev. George R. Gain, died Dec. 4, 2025. Rev. Gain is a retired member of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Mrs. Gain is survived by her husband and two daughters.

Rev. Velma Martin Haywood

Haywood

ORANGEBURG—The Rev. Velma Martin Haywood, a retired elder of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, died Jan. 12, 2026.

Prior to her retirement in 2014, Rev. Haywood served the Bamberg Circuit, Ladson-Wesley, Orangeburg Circuit and Easley charges.

Funeral services were held Jan. 19 at North Orangeburg UMC with burial in Belleville Memorial Gardens.

Rev. Haywood is survived by her husband, Cole Haywood Sr., and two sons.

Rev. Joaquin Enrique Polin

Polin

SPARTANBURG—The Rev. Joaquin Enrique "Jack" Polin, a local pastor of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, died Jan. 7, 2026.

Rev. Polin was serving Gravely Memorial UMC at the time of his death, having been appointed there in 2017.

Funeral services were held Jan. 17 at Gravely Memorial UMC.

Memorials may be made to Gravely Memorial UMC, 7400 Lone Oak Blvd., Spartanburg, SC 29303.

Rev. Polin is survived by his wife, Deborah.

Bettye Faye Rivers

WEST COLUMBIA—Bettye Faye Rivers, retired episcopal administrator for the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, died Dec. 29, 2025.

Funeral services were held Jan. 9 at Caughman-Harman Funeral Home, Lexington, with burial in Cannon Memorial Park, Fountain Inn.

Mrs. Rivers is survived by her husband, Joe Brown, and two daughters.

Fredna J. Scott

SIMPSONVILLE—Fredna J. Scott, widow of the Rev. Gareth Scott, died Dec. 26, 2025.

A memorial service was held Jan. 17 at Mauldin Methodist Church, Mauldin.

Memorials may be made to Mauldin Methodist Church, 100 E. Butler Road, Mauldin, SC 29662.

Mrs. Scott is survived by son and daughter.

Arthur L. Shuler Sr.

DURHAM, N.C.—Arthur L. Shuler Sr., brother of the Rev. Albert Shuler, died Jan. 11, 2026. Rev. Shuler is the pastor of St. Paul United Methodist Church, Orangeburg.

Funeral services were held Jan. 18 at Duke Memorial UMC with burial in Salisbury National Cemetery on Jan. 20.

Mr. Shuler is survived by his wife, Bernice, daughter and three sons.

Bertha Mae Johnson Thomas

SUMTER—Bertha Mae Johnson Thomas, mother of the Rev. Charlie Thomas, died Jan. 13, 2026. Rev. Thomas is the pastor of Unity United Methodist Church, Lugoff. His wife, the Rev. Brenda J. Thomas is the pastor of Good Hope Wesley Chapel UMC, Camden.

Funeral services were held Jan. 20 at Antioch Union Methodist Episcopal Church, Pinewood.

James Alfred Thomas

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif.—James Alfred Thomas, brother of the Rev. J. P. Thomas, died Dec. 7, 2025. Rev. Thomas is the pastor of the Greeleyville Parish, Greeleyville. His wife, the Rev. Pernerva Thomas is the pastor of St. Paul-Elliott United Methodist Church, Elliott.

Services were held Dec. 22 at North Kingstree Baptist Church, Kingstree.

Mr. Thomas is survived by his wife, Chong, his three daughters and son.

Rev. Samuel Simpson Warwick

Warwick

ROCK HILL—The Rev. Samuel Simpson Warwick, a retired elder of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, died Jan. 8, 2026.

Prior to his retirement in 2013, Rev. Warwick served the Heath Memorial-Pleasant Grove, North-Limestone, Grace Lancaster, Mill Creek-McLeod and Reidville Road charges.

Rev. Warwick is survived by his two sons and two daughters.

Rev. Patricia Serena Wood

Wood

GREENVILLE—The Rev. Patricia Serena Wood, a retired elder of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, died Dec. 9, 2025.

Prior to her retirement in 1998, Rev. Wood served the Easley-Zion, Indian Branch, Whaley Street, Grace and Epting Memorial charges.

A memorial service was held Jan. 10 at St. Matthew UMC.

Memorials may be made to Epworth Children's Home of South Carolina, 2900 Millwood Ave., Columbia, SC 29205; or to St. Matthew UMC, 701 Cleveland St., Greenville, SC 29601.

Photos courtesy of Deidre Harley

154 years strong
Salem UMC, Florence, celebrated 154 years of ministry with a Gala Banquet Saturday, Dec. 13, at the Greek Orthodox Church with approximately 150 guests. Attendees included former pastors who had served Salem, along with members who are currently serving in the ministry as United Methodist pastors. Current and former members and members of the community also attended. Entertainment was provided by members of the church with an inspirational and thought-provoking message from one of the sons of Salem, retired United Methodist pastor the Rev. Ebbie Abraham. The celebration concluded Sunday morning with a special message from Florence District Superintendent the Rev. Terry Fleming (bottom right, with church pastor the Rev. Brian Mungo). At top, the choir gathers for a smile, while at bottom left, the event was a festive and dressy occasion.

Historical Society
by the Rev. Joseph D. Kovas

Scouting continues to inspire

Before beginning this article, I would like to express I am very grateful and thankful for the opportunity to serve as the new president of the Historical Society of the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church. Your prayers are coveted as we seek to build upon a ministry of memory and a legacy we have received as John Wesley's descendants.

Since 1920, Methodists have had a relationship with the scouting movement in America. One person who chronicled their involvement in scouting as a lifelong Methodist was Dan C. Stowe. Stowe served as a scoutmaster for many troops throughout his scouting career from Troop 13 in Cayce to Troop 655 in Cheraw. Many of the troops he served were supported by a Methodist congregation.

Stowe shared in his memoir, "A Scoutmaster Remembers," that while serving as the scoutmaster for Troop 65 in Atlanta, he took a group of scouts to the Cricket Grill after the troop had set up a scout exhibit for St. Mark Methodist Church. On the way to the restaurant, they invited a boy who was not a scout to come with them to the restaurant. After this, the young man became involved in the scout troop and fell in love with scouting. He also became very involved in the youth ministry at St. Mark. The young man's mother called the scoutmaster and expressed her appreciation for her son's happiness in scouts and in the church. Scouting for Dan Stowe was truly a ministry.

Sunday, Feb. 8, will mark the 116th anniversary of Scouting America and will also be Scout Sunday. The opportunity to celebrate scouting ministries on the official founding day on Scout Sunday is remarkable and one that comes rarely; the last year this happened was in February 2015.

How can your local congregation use this beautiful opportunity to celebrate and recognize scouting ministry? If you do not have a scout troop, how could Scout Sunday this year be an opportunity for your congregation to pray together for a scouting program in your local community?

Kovas serves as the president of the Historical Society. Kovas is the senior pastor of First United Methodist Church, Cheraw. He is also an Eagle Scout and Vigil Honor Member of the Order of the Arrow, scouting's National Honor Society.

From the Archives
by Dr. Phillip Stone

Claflin: Heart and soul of the 1866 Conference

Given Methodism's historic interest in education, it is no surprise that one of the first tasks South Carolina's community of Methodist freedmen and freedwomen undertook was founding an educational institution.

Claflin University emerged in the Reconstruction era to offer an opportunity to those in South Carolina who had not been able to pursue formal education. This new university was instrumental in helping build a new society in the Palmetto State, and the church rightly saw a role to play in building that new society.

The history of Claflin and of the 1866 Conference are tightly interwoven, and they shared leaders. The Baker Biblical Institute in Charleston, founded to give some theological training to the formerly enslaved men who were going to lead congregations, preceded the 1866 Conference's organization by a few months. When Bishop Osman Baker organized the new missionary annual conference to serve the freedmen on April 2, 1866, it further demonstrated the need for trained clergy. By 1868, the new conference had some 56 churches and 13,000 members on the rolls.

Two clergy, Alonzo Webster from Vermont and Willard Lewis from New York, located an abandoned college site in Orangeburg and persuaded Massachusetts philanthropist Lee Claflin, who was also a Methodist, to provide funds for establishing a college. They also sought funds from others with a letter that argued that "intelligence and virtue [were] the only hopeful basis of reconstruction in church and state. It was our faith in God and our cause ... that induced us to run the risk of making this purchase."

Claflin received its legislative charter in 1869 from a South Carolina General Assembly with significant Black membership. Its first board of trustees was integrated, with four White and four Black members. Revs. Webster and Lewis were two of the trustees. The four Black trustees were Samuel Weston, Joseph Sasportas, Abram Middleton and Thomas Phillips. Weston and Sasportas are noted as being pre-Emancipation leaders "in the old regime of Charleston."

By 1871, Baker Institute had merged into Claflin, creating a theological department in the university. Claflin also had a semi-public department, as the South Carolina State College had its beginnings in Claflin's agricultural department. One of the trustees elected by the Conference around 1872 was Francis Cardozo, who was one of the leading figures in Reconstruction-era South Carolina. Educated at the University of Glasgow, Cardozo was secretary of state and lieutenant governor before leaving the state after the end of Reconstruction.

Over its life, the 1866 Conference met six times specifically at Claflin and another seven times in Orangeburg, where they would presumably have held some events on the campus. The conference's leadership was interconnected with that of the university, and the university itself provided an education at all levels to a group of people who desperately wanted it. Close to 70 percent of the ministers who served the conference in a 50-year period had studied at Claflin.

The university's influence on the church that nurtured it cannot be understated.

Stone is archivist for the South Carolina Conference and Wofford College. Read his blog at https://blogs.wofford.edu/from_the_ archives.

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Bible Study.

Adult Lessons
by the Rev. Michael Henderson

About the Author
Henderson is a retired South Carolina United Methodist elder and serves as the chair of the Advocate *Board of Trustees.*

Light, life and salvation

Feb. 1
Parental anxiety
Focal Passage:1 Thessalonians 3
Background Texts: Acts 16:1-5; 19:21-22; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; 1 Thessalonians 3
Key Verse: "Now Timothy has returned to us from you and has given us good news about your faithfulness and love! He says that you always have good memories about us and that you want to see us as much as we want to see you" (1 Thess. 3:6).

Neuroscientists tell us that our brains are hard-wired for negativity. Being aware of possible dangers and threats kept our ancestors alive. Nightly news always starts with "breaking news" of increasingly severe problems. An old axiom for arranging news is, "If it bleeds, it leads." And while our brains may be wired for negativity, our spirits are always in need of praise. Psychologists report that more change occurs with a carrot than with a stick.

Paul is offering the "carrot" to the Thessalonians. Like most of the letters of Paul, there was much to be said about troubles, quarrels, difficulties and hardships. This is not because the early church was so much worse than the church today, but because it was human.

There is always something going on, some way we can improve, some way (as John Wesley put it) we can move toward perfection. Yet that news of correction and guidance is always accepted more when it is preceded by honest praise. Paul expresses his happiness and love for the people in Thessalonica for most of his letter, before gently encouraging them to love and support those who lead them spiritually more fully (1 Thess. 5:12-23).

Many pastors and church workers leave their ministry because they are constantly exposed to negativity. You can never do enough, it seems, when caring for others. While people may give them occasional compliments, they hear negative feedback more loudly than any others. That's why praising others, especially those with responsibility for caring for people, is so important.

A couple of questions to consider: Who was the last person who honestly gave you praise, and how did you feel? Who was the last person you gave honest praise to, and how did they respond?

Praise can make all the difference in the world.

Feb. 8
People get ready
Focal Passage: 1 Thessalonians 4
Background Texts: Matthew 24-25; 1 Thessalonians 4
Key Verses: "Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won't mourn like others who don't have any hope. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14).

In 1964, Curtis Mayfield wrote what *Rolling Stone* magazine called one of the greatest songs of all time. In 2021, Rolling Stone named "People Get Ready" the 122nd greatest song of all time. The song was included in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's 500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll. "People Get Ready" was named as one of the Top 10 Best Songs of All Time by Mojo music magazine and was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1998. In 2015, the song was selected for preservation in the National Recording Registry because of its "cultural, historic or artistic significance." Martin Luther King Jr. named the song the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement and often used the song to get people marching or to calm and comfort them (from Wikipedia).

Originally recorded by The Impressions, the song has been covered by artists as varied as Bob Marley and the Wailers, the Chambers Brothers, Bob Dylan, Rod Stewart and Jeff Beck. Mayfield said the song's inspiration "was taken from my church or from the upbringing of messages from the church. Like there's no hiding place and get on board, and images of that sort."

Paul reminds the people of the church in Thessalonica that the realm of God is coming—whether we understand it to be a physical return of Christ or the eventual, inevitable reign of God among all of us. All things and all people will be reconciled to God and reunited in that time. If we believe that, it shapes the way we live in the world today, not as people without hope, but as people preparing, getting ready.

A couple of questions to consider: How are you personally getting ready for the ultimate reign of God in your world? How is your group (Sunday school class, small group, church) getting ready?

Feb. 15
Armor up
Focal Passage: 1 Thess. 5
Background Text: Revelation 11:15-19
Key Verse: "All of you are children of light and children of the day. We don't belong to night or darkness" (1 Thess. 5:5).

I have a confession to make. I like the nighttime. I enjoy daylight, when you can see everything clearly and appreciate the views, but there is something mysterious about the other half of our day. I was raised on Neil Diamond's song "Thank The Lord For The Nighttime," and would sing along with Louis Armstrong about the "bright blessed day, the dark sacred night." Although it begins with a declaration of light overcoming darkness, most of the Gospel of John takes place at night (Nicodemus' visit with Jesus, Jesus walking on water, the Last Supper, Jesus' arrest, Peter's denial and Jesus' resurrection). As Ray Charles sang, "Night time is the right time to be with the one you love."

When Paul wrote of light and day, darkness and night, he was not writing of physical light or lack of it. He was writing of a deeper brightness, a deeper darkness, the light or darkness of our minds and souls. It is from there that our lives are directed. That inner light helps us to see the paths our lives should take. And if there is no light within us, we can become lost even on the brightest of days. If there is light within, the darkest night holds no sway over us.

So how do we live as children of light? Paul presents a few points to consider. Stay alert and sober. Let faithfulness and love surround you like a shield. Let the "hope of salvation" protect your mind. Listen to the ones in charge of your spiritual care, and care for them in return. Let the peace of Christ rule in your life. Do this as individuals. Do it as a group.

Questions to consider: What do you do to be aware of the light of Christ within you? How can your group let that light shine more brightly?

Feb. 22
Problems, pleas, promises
Focal Passage: Lamentations 1:7-20
Background Texts: Psalm 113; Lamentations 1
Key Verses: "Because of all these things I'm crying. My eyes, my own eyes pour water because a comforter who might encourage me is nowhere near. My children are destroyed because the enemy was so strong" (Lamentations 1:16).
"God lifts up the poor from the dirt and raises up the needy from the garbage pile to seat them with leaders—with the leaders of his own people" (Psalm 113:7-8).

Our church season changed Wednesday. We moved from Epiphany, the season of light, to Lent, the season of repentance. It began with Ash Wednesday. Perhaps you attended an Ash Wednesday service and had ashes smudged on your forehead. You heard, "Remember, you came from dust, and to dust you shall return."

Death. It's the great equalizer, the common denominator. We will not all be wealthy. We will not all be powerful. But we all will die.

Many of us were raised on the false idea that, as followers of Jesus, we should never have sadness, grief or pain. We should not express those pains, fears and regrets that haunt us. We have even avoided using words like death. We no longer have funeral services. We have "celebrations of life." And while we do want to acknowledge and remember all the good that a loved one has given us, we also need to recognize our own pain, loss and often anger. We also need the reminder that we are all heading that way. And, if there is no death, then there is no resurrection and hope for eternal life.

So during these 40 days (not including Sundays—each is a "little Easter") we take time to remember our sins, confess them to God and each other and hear words of forgiveness, reconciliation and hope.

Our key verse from Lamentations expresses the fear that we are alone, that no one hears us and that no one cares. The Psalmist, though, reminds us that God hears us, responds to us and lifts us. We are not alone. Repent, and believe the gospel.

To consider: When was the last time you poured out your whole heart to God? What was God's response?

Children's Sermon
by the Rev. Meg Cook

Transfiguration

Date: Feb. 15 (Transfiguration Sunday)

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9

Props: A Transformer toy (one that changes form)

First: Welcome the children. Then hold up the Transformer in its first form (vehicle) and ask: Does anyone know what this is?

(Pause for responses. They may say the vehicle name, but they may recognize it's a Transformer.)

Say: It's a Transformer. This toy can change.

(Transform the toy slowly so the children can see it change from a vehicle to a robot.)

Wow, right? Our toy changed! Same toy, but totally new look!

Today's Bible story is about a time when Jesus changed and stayed the same, too. The gospel of Matthew calls it the Transfiguration. That's a big word that means "changed so we can see something new."

Jesus went up a mountain with his friends, the disciples. While they were there, Jesus' face began to shine, and his clothes became bright and glowing.

But here's the important part: Jesus didn't stop being Jesus. Jesus didn't turn into someone else. Jesus revealed his divinity, that Jesus was God's son. And a voice said from the clouds on the top of the mountain, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Whoa, can you imagine being on the top of a mountain and then your friend starts glowing and changes and then a voice calls out? The disciples were terrified. Can you show me your terrified faces? (Pause to admire the faces; pay a compliment or two.)

We were pretending, but those disciples were really scared. But Jesus told them to get up and don't be afraid. When the disciples got up, Jesus was back to looking like himself, and they followed Jesus down the mountain.

(Hold up the Transformer again.) Jesus was transfigured, changed before their eyes, but he was still Jesus. Kind of like the Transformer, it's the same toy, but we see it differently after we know it's more than meets the eye.

Pretty cool, right? Will you pray with me?

Prayer: Dear God (echo), we love you (echo). Thank you for Jesus (echo). Help us listen to Jesus (echo) and follow Jesus (echo). Amen (echo).

Cook, the pastor of Grace United Methodist Church, Columbia, is the author of two children's books from the Advocate Press: "Herbert the Hippo" and "Herbert the Hippo In the Moment." Find both of the books at https://advocatepress.org.

Happenings.

Event Calendar.

January

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

Jan. 30-Feb. 1—Revolution, DoubleTree Hotel and Conference Center, Columbia. http://scmyp.org/revolution

Jan. 31—Second Annual Salkehatchie Gathering, Mount Hebron UMC, West Columbia, 11 a.m.-3 p.m., $5. Email salkehatchie@umcsc.org.

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 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—Claflin University Concert Choir presents "Sunday Melodies," Columbia UMC, Columbia, 3 p.m.

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

Feb. 15—25th Anniversary of LifeLine Contemporary Service, Shandon UMC, Columbia, 11:05 a.m. To register for luncheon: https://www.shandonumc.org/events

Feb. 16—Presidents' Day

Feb. 18—Ash Wednesday

Feb. 18-23—United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries Association Immersion Experience, Asbury Hills Camp & Retreat Center, Cleveland.

Feb. 20-21—Men N Ministry Retreat, Journey UMC, Columbia. Register: https://www.umcsc.org/mennministryretreatreg/

Feb. 22—Rock Hill District Annual Black Church Celebration, Bethel UMC, Edgemoor, 2 p.m.

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

March
Women's History Month

March 1—Camp Sunday. 864-298-0125

March 7—Paths to Wholeness Annual Signature Brunch, Orangeburg Country Club, Orangeburg, 10 a.m. $55. Register: https://forms.gle/s6wTDL1HERBS27Lr9

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 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)

April 5—Easter Day

April 10-12—Theotokos Confirmation Retreat, Hinton Life Rural Life Center, Hayesville, N.C. https://hintontheotokos.org

April 19—Native American Ministries Sunday

April 22—Earth Day

UMCSC to help students in Africa, Europe, the Philippines pursue pastoral ministry

The South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church is participating in an initiative to raise money for The Endowment Fund for Theological Education in the Central Conferences.

South Carolina United Methodists will join congregations across the world for the initiative, a one-time special offering across the entire denomination organized by the Council of Bishops, Connectional Table and General Council on Finance and Administration.

The Central Conferences comprise Africa, Europe and the Philippines.

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 the campaign.

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.

To support this work, South Carolina churches and ministries can mail 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.

For more information about the initiative, visit https://www.endowftecc.org.

Native American Tribal Bus Tour set for March

Registration is going on now for a three-day bus tour of the South Carolina Native American tribes this year.

Hosted by the South Carolina United Methodist Native American Committee, 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.

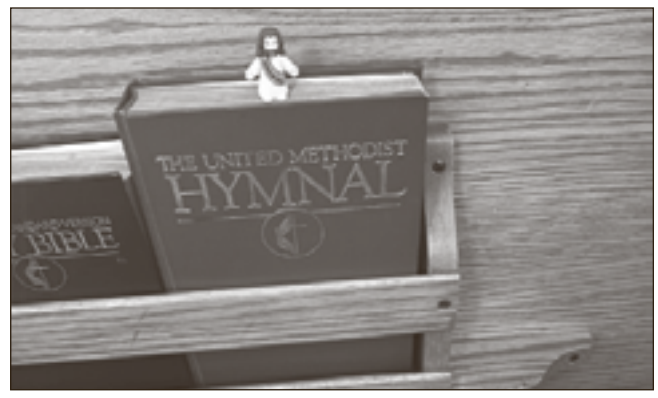
The dates are March 20-22 and will feature stops at the Catawba Reservation, a fire ceremony with the Waccamaw tribe, drumming with the Edisto tribe, historical tribal presentations, a traditional Native worship service with drumming and more.

The cost is $100 per person. 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.

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

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

Contact tracypender@hotmail.com (email preferred) or 803-905-5672 for a registration form.



Share a little Jesus

The congregation at Philadelphia UMC, York, has been encouraged to share a "little Jesus." Little Jesus figures have been placed throughout the church, and members are asked to take a couple with them each week to leave in places they go throughout the week. The hope is to remind folks that Jesus can be found anywhere and is always with us.

Classifieds.

Marketplace

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Job Description – A responsible adult female to work at a transition home with residents who are emerging from crisis situations. All staff are responsible for assisting and helping the residents to reach their most achievable goals and to have reasonable knowledge of decision-making skills in references within the house rules. The Support Staff plays a crucial role in ensuring the smooth operation of the house; provides timely recorded notes or dossiers when required; ensures the safety of residents by maintaining the house rules, facility security, and reporting any potential hazards. The position requires one to move swiftly through the house and be able to climb stairs.

This is a part-time Position with 2 to 3 overnights per week (no benefits offered). Must be available to work weekends and rotate holidays; take part in a brief on-the-job training and regular virtual staff meetings. We welcome volunteers to work along with the staff. Call or email to schedule an interview time.

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UMCSC's treasurer and director of administrative services, said that when you add in the $800,000 provided through the apportionment rebate, "We collected $9,981,093 on a total budget of $12,511,557 (before subtracting the rebate) for 79.77 percent of the total budget."

The fund with the lowest collection rate is the District Parsonage/Office fund, at 75.92 percent. The fund with the highest collection rate is Interdenominational Cooperation at 88.11 percent. Westbury noted the funds with the lower budgeted ask, such as Interdenominational Cooperation, show the higher collection percentages.

"I suspect this is because churches that do not pay 100 percent will pick smaller amounts to pay at 100 percent," Westbury said.

Of the 714 churches paying apportionments in 2025, 483 (68 percent) paid 100 percent of their apportionments; 126 churches (18 percent) paid $0.

The Walterboro District saw the highest percentage of apportionments paid, with a collection percentage of 99.3 percent. Orangeburg District came in second place at 95.9, and Marion District came in third at 91.8.

Westbury said the conference Council on Finance and Administration looks forward to congratulating the Walterboro District at Annual Conference.

Collection has begun for 2026 apportionments; the budget for 2026 is $10.3 million.

The 2027 budget is being drafted now and goes before the conference for approval in June.

Apportionment Giving Through the Years

2025: 78.4%	2013 89.7%
2024: 90.2%	2012 87.0%
2023: 88.8%	2011 84.2%
2022 89.2%	2010 83.2%
2021 91.7%	2009 84.0%
2020 87.2%	2008 86.1%
2019 90.0%	2007 86.8%
2018 90.9%	2006 86.0%
2017 92.3%	2005 78.7%
2016 92.0%	2004 78.9%
2015 91.1%	2003 87.8%
2014 89.5%	2002 90.9%

https://www.umcsc.org/treasurer

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