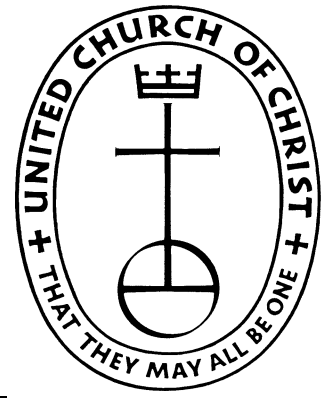


**First Christian
United Church of Christ
Newsletter
March 2017**



Lent IS A TIME TO
GROW **W**
CLOSER TO *Christ*

The Season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday (March 1st) and runs for 40 days, ending on April 16th, Easter Sunday. The 40 days do not include Sundays, as each Sunday is its own a day of celebrating the Resurrection. Lent is a season where Christians focus on simple living, prayer, and service in order to grow closer to God.

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PASTOR'S COLUMN

The forty days immediately preceding Easter mark a season known as Lent. "Lent" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word, "lencten" which means "the time of the lengthening days." It's something that is hard not to notice of late. Just a couple of months ago, the sun came up late and went down early. It often felt like much of each twenty-four-hour day was spent in darkness.

Now the days are lengthening and Daylight Savings Time is almost upon us, then evenings will get even longer. With warmer temperatures, both flowers and trees are starting to bloom. New life is springing forth all around us. There may still be cold weather ahead, yet we know what is coming – we've already had a taste of it – that is what Lent is all about, only on a spiritual level.

The season of Lent begins on March 1st with Ash Wednesday and will culminate on April 15th, Holy Saturday, the night before we gather to celebrate the joy of Resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. Yet there is still a long distance to travel between Ash Wednesday and Easter, and that road passes through the cross. As a result, Lent has always been a time of contrition and repentance. It was human sinfulness that nailed Jesus to the cross, and so Lent becomes a time to look within our own hearts and consider our own need for spiritual healing, forgiveness and redemption.

Jesus' ministry began with temptations in the wilderness and ended in pain on the cross. There was much darkness that he had to endure before the light of Resurrection broke forth. But Easter did come, and that light is sure. Therefore, no matter how long the shadows may be that have touched our lives and touched our world, the seeds of Easter have been planted, and God is faithful and true and will nurse those seeds to the point where they sprout and bloom. But we can't get to that point quickly. Just as the slowly lengthening days brighten, you and I need to move methodically from our wilderness lives to the cross before we can fully appreciate the miracle of Easter.

As we make this journey, something is required of us. The church has traditionally asked people to give something up for the season of Lent – as a symbol of self-denial and contrition. But I wonder if perhaps this year something else might be in order. What if rather than giving something up, you and I added something to our lives? What if you and I were to commit ourselves to a specific action that would promote resurrection in the world around us? What if we were to put some of our time and energy into a program or cause that would promote life and health in the face of death – dealing forces?

What if we were to volunteer at Allied Churches or deliver Meals on Wheels? What if we were to read with children in a school or visit the lonely in a nursing home? What if we were to attend an NAACP rally and stand up for racial justice? Or perhaps we might help bring hope to at-risk kids through a program we heard about at our clergy association meeting today, the Young Musicians of Alamance program. It's hosted by First Reformed and reaches out to children through music. The possibilities for service are endless, but the need is so great! What are your gifts, skills and talents that might cause a spark of hope to ignite amidst all the shadows of life?

Easter is coming. As you and I make our way through Lent, may the life and light that is promised help transform not only us, but the world in which we live.

Mark

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REVELATION'S STUDY

The Book of Revelation is probably the most unique piece of literature in the entire Bible. It has been used and misused by countless people over the centuries. Last year, Dr. Lynn Huber, from Elon University, helped us to begin making sense of this confusing book.

Lynn is an Associate Professor and Director of Religious Studies at Elon. She also happens to be an expert on Revelation. After the general introduction to the book that she provided last year, we invited her to return to look more closely at the seven letters to the seven churches that occur early in the book.

As she describes the nature of her class, Lynn writes, "The seven letters or messages that open the Book of Revelation are tantalizingly specific. The details in the letters point to the specific conflicts and troubles experienced by the Christian communities in Asia Minor. Join us as we explore these letters and think about what they might have to say to our contemporary context."

Our Sunday School Classes will combine for this special event and will meet in the Bray Fellowship Hall at 9:30 am each Sunday morning. Classes will start on February 26th and continue on March 5th and 12th. Invite a friend and plan to join us for this special opportunity.

SABBATICAL UPDATE

Since the February newsletter, there are some updates on plans for my sabbatical this summer. Beth Kennett and I have had a number of conversations, both by email and in person, and she is interested in serving as our interim minister while I am away. We are presently working on details of the job description.

This would be a part-time position with our boards and committees stepping forward to carry the load for their ongoing work and projects. But there is also a possibility that, through her teaching at Wake Forest Divinity School, Beth might be able to have a student intern work with her. The stipend for an intern would be covered by a special grant from the school. We are still waiting to hear if this might work out.

Beth is excited about the prospect of returning to First Christian for the summer. And, as someone remarked at a recent Deacons meeting, "If Beth was the interim, we wouldn't need to go through the 'getting to know each other' stage. We already know each other and could start work at a whole new level!"

I will keep you posted on any new developments, but for now, things are moving forward in a very positive way!

Mark

THE SUPPER CLUB – NEXT GATHERING

The Supper Club's next gathering will be on March 7th at 6:00 pm at Valerio's Italian Restaurant, 120 East Front Street beside the Paramount Theater. To make a reservation, please call Eleanor Lovgren at 226-2671 by March 2nd at 8:00 pm. All are welcomed. Everyone pays their own bills. Invite a friend!

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DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME BEGINS

Get ready to lose an hour of sleep. On March 12th, we will be going back on Daylight Savings Time. Before you go to sleep Saturday night set your clocks forward one hour. Then prepare to start enjoying evenings filled with more light.

ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING OFFERING – MARCH 26TH

One Great Hour of Sharing enables the United Church of Christ to reach people and communities affected by disaster, displacement and poverty. Through One Great Hour of Sharing, we provide assistance for families and communities around the world, helping them become stronger, healthier and better equipped to address hardships and catastrophes.

The 2017 theme for the offering is “*You are here*,” which could easily be the response to a question provoked by tragedy, fear or suffering: “Where are you, God?” Psalm 145:18 echoes the refrain throughout scripture that God is nearby. As soon as a person calls on God, God is here.

“*You are here*” shows the church uniting to respond to the many critical needs present in our world today. Our support is given through partner organizations responding to health, education and agricultural development needs, refugee initiatives, and both international and domestic disaster response.

When we give, as the United Church of Christ – individuals, groups and congregations – it means that the church can stand strong, in the midst of need whether it is nearby or far away. When God’s love abides in us, we are

moved to respond with our own material goods to the needs of other members of God’s family.

Thank you for your support. Whether you are a new supporter, or long-time supporter, every gift matters. Every gift allows us to say, “*You are here*.”

Our OGHS offering will be collected at First Christian on March 26th. Checks should be made out to the church, but write “OGHS” on the memo line. And thank you for your generous support.



WOMEN’S FELLOWSHIP NEWS

The Margaret Lightbourne Circle will meet Monday, March 6th in the Bray Fellowship Hall at 1:30 pm. Each member is asked to read the Book of Mark and bring their Bible to the meeting.

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THE AL-AQSA FREE CLINIC IS UP AND RUNNING

Many thanks to all who contributed food to the new free health clinic in town, the Al-Aqsa Clinic housed in the Burlington Mosque. This is the same building that used to house Life's Journey UCC on Mebane Street. The clinic itself is located in a newly renovated space that used to be occupied by Sunday School rooms above the fellowship hall. The space is warm and inviting and will provide a much-needed service in our community.

Many thanks also to our Board of Deacons who made a contribution to help provide gift cards to all who visited the clinic on its opening day. Working together we can all make Burlington stronger.

ART SHOW EXTENDED

As you may have noticed, the art in First Christian's art gallery at present is by Stewart Haithcock, Elsie Bolick's son. His work is both fun and whimsical. If you haven't yet seen it yet – stop by!

Since Stewart didn't get a full month for his display in February, we've invited him to keep his art up for the month of March. Stewart has also made a very generous offer. If anyone is taken by any of the celebrity portraits that he has done, Stewart has said that the portrait can be yours for an appropriate contribution to the church. Just let us know which portrait you are interested in and we can reserve it for you. At the end of March, you may take it home.

And many thanks to Stewart for his kind generosity!

LIGHTBOURNE SCHOLARSHIP DEADLINE – MARCH 1ST

The James H. Lightbourne Jr. Scholarship was established to assist needy and deserving high school graduates and college students who are members of the United Church of Christ in the Southern Conference to achieve their educational goals. The deadline for all applications is March 1 of each year. Applications must include an official copy of grades/transcript.

Each scholarship recipient must be a member of a church in the United Church of Christ, Southern Conference and enrolled for the coming fall as an undergraduate in a college, community college, or technical school. Any student, who received the Lightbourne Scholarship for last year is still eligible but must submit a written request for renewal and the most recent copy of his/her college transcript. All other students must submit an application.

If you have graduating high school students in your church that could possibly benefit from this fund, please encourage them to seek information and/or obtain an application. Applications are available in our church office.

DO THINGS LOOK BRIGHTER AROUND THE CHURCH

They should! Through a special conservation program at Duke Energy, we were able to replace the majority of the light bulbs in rooms that we use most often with energy efficient LED bulbs. This work was done at a greatly reduced rate and the actual cost to the church was covered by a generous contribution from two of our members. (Many, many thanks!) And the best part is that there should be significant savings to the church over time. One of the people working on the instillation said "In April, compare your March power bill with the bill from last year. You'll be amazed."

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UPCOMING EVENTS IN THE BROADER CHURCH

- “Dare to Dream: An Ecumenical Educational Conference on Peace and Justice in the Middle East” will be held March 24-25th. The featured speaker at this event will be the Rev. Mitri Raheb, Co-founder, CEO and President of Bright Stars of Bethlehem, a world-renowned champion for peace; Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, Palestine and recipient of the 2015 Olof Palme peace prize.
Friday’s event will be held at the White Memorial Presbyterian Church (1704 Oberlin Road in Raleigh) from 6:30 pm – 8:30 pm. There is a \$6 charge for a buffet dinner. Then on Saturday there will be an interfaith conversation and lunch from 10:00 am – 12:30 pm. This event will be held at the Church of Reconciliation (110 N. Elliott Road in Chapel Hill). A \$10 fee for a catered lunch will be charged. Then at 7:30 that evening, there will be a time of storytelling and music featuring Dr. Raheb and David LaMotte. For more information contact Kathy Huffstetter, 919-815-1748.
- “Creation Justice Pathways in North Carolina” is the name of the event sponsored by the Southern Conference’s Creation Justice Network and the NC Council of Churches. It will be held on March 24-26 at Parkway UCC in Winston Salem.
We will kick off with a potluck on Friday evening at 6 pm, followed by our presenters on Saturday, 9:00 am – 2:30 pm: Marilyn March-Robinson, Environmental Defense Fund; Rev. Dr. Rodney Sadler, NC NAACP and Justice Action Mobilization Network; Nicole Johnson and Susannah Tuttle, NC Council of Churches and NC Interfaith Power and Light; and Dr. Daniel Vermeer, director of Duke University’s Energy Development and the Global Environmental department. There is no fee, but donations will be accepted to cover the cost of lunch on Saturday. For more information, contact Karen Richardson Dunn, krichdunn@gmail.com.

UPCOMING EVENTS FOR WOMEN

- On Friday, March 3rd, Church Women United will celebrate the World Day of Prayer with a special program. Gather at the Springwood Presbyterian Church (1422 Springwood Church Road in Burlington) at 10:00 am. Attendees are encouraged to bring breakfast items that will be contributed to Allied Churches.
- On April 1st from 9:00 am – 2:00 pm the Church Women of Eastern North Carolina Association will meet at the Elon Community Church UCC (271 W. Williamson Ave in Elon). The theme is: “Women of Reflection... Lessons of Resiliency.”
 - Learn from the Gospel Truth as well as workshops. Be strengthened by testimonies and prayer. Enjoy skits, music, fun and games, and much more.”
 - Registration cost is \$5. The reservation deadline is March 15th. (Make checks payable to ENCA Church Women and sent to 2884 Wycliff Road, Raleigh, NC, 27607.)
 - For additional information contact the Rev. Tanya Bast at 919-236-5728.