



Pacific Northwest CONFERENCE NEWS

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Winter 2024-2025

Congregation's founding story stirs questions

Story of Chief Enoch and Anna being among the founders leads to study.

Since he came as pastor of Westminster Congregational UCC three years ago, Bob Feeny has expanded his awareness of indigenous history and colonial impacts.

The church participated last fall and winter in a study, "Wrestling with the Truth of Colonialism," offered by the Truth and Transformation Team of the Spokane Alliance. About the same time, Mary Rupert, a 20-year member, began sharing research she had done looking into the context of the church's founding story. Last spring, several members gathered to discuss the name of their Mayflower Room.

From Jan. 7 to March 7, Westminster will offer a Zoom series for its Tuesday
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Bob Feeny, pastor, and Mary Rupert, member of Westminster Congregational UCC in Spokane plan a winter series to continue exploring colonization and indigenous people.

PNC Board announces Annual Meeting and news

The Board of Directors announces events and plans for upcoming months.

- **The 2025 Annual Meeting** will be held Friday through Sunday, April 25 to 27, at the Yakima Convention and Event Center.

- **The board and conference staff** are partnering with the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ to receive anti-racism and cultural awareness training in fulfillment of the commitment the Conference made at Annual Meeting 2024, reported Designated Conference Minister Phil Hodson.

"From this training, we will be able to share a variety of available resources with the Committees on Ministry and local churches to increase our shared participation and learning," he said.

Board announces Annual Meeting, anti-racism training, N-Sid-Sen staff and website redesign.

- **The board has hired new staff** for N-Sid-Sen Camp and Conference Center on Lake Coeur d'Alene.

In January, Brian Wallace, who is coming from Missouri, will begin serving as the acting managing director at N-Sid-Sen.

"We are continuing to identify new opportunities for ministry and partnership to improve and stabilize the future

of this sacred site," said Phil.

- **Another change is that** the Conference will launch a new website offering many resources. Phil said the goal is for there to be easier ways to find access to grants and opportunities for clergy and local churches.

Ben Crosby, a retired UCC conference minister who lives in Wallace, will design one website with sections for the two camps and the Conference. He redesigned the N-Sid-Sen website.

- **Conference vice moderator** Esther Sanders invited folks to "prayerfully consider" serving on Conference committees or the Board of Directors.

For information, call 206-625-9790 or visit pncuccnews.org.

Churches invited to take next faithful steps

Conference Comments



By The Rev.
Phil Hodson
Designated
Conference
Minister

New
life
comes
across
PNW
Conference
as
The Divine
invites
us.

As we move through this Advent season, I have been thinking about all the exciting things I see “becoming” throughout the Pacific Northwest Conference! Our congregations are decorating for this sacred season of new life, and the physical spaces are warm, inviting and beautiful. The hymns and songs are rekindling hope and filling our hearts with joy. We are grounding ourselves in the peace of our traditions as we share the love of God with one another.

As a people committed to radical inclusion, I hope we take the time this season to proactively reach out and invite those we know into our sanctuaries for celebration. There’s no better time than Christmas Eve to introduce new folks you know in the wider community to your friends within the congregation!

As I think forward into 2025, I am considering the ways we can engage with our neighbors that are winsome and relevant. How we can draw on the traditions of the Church and our shared values to be both invitational and create opportunities for long-term relationship through growth in shared experience.

This is more than just inviting people to church. It is also about engaging with others where they are and offering meaningful ways to enrich their lives. That can look like a topical book study offered for six weeks on an issue that will be relevant in the public square in the days ahead or a traditional Bible study.

It can involve gathering interested community partners to lobby locally, at the state or national level, around issues of import in ways that leverage useful support so the most marginalized among us lead with their voices and experiences, and we who are not of the same experiences stand with them.

It can be putting together a group who care about connecting with individuals in our midst who cannot attend these experiences physically so that these persons are also able to participate in other ways in this meaningful work and know they are loved, appreciated and included.

At the Conference level in the new year, all of this will unfold for us in a variety of ways.

Recently, I led a workshop for one local church and had an informal discussion with another, inviting them to develop a **plan**, set a **purpose** and envision **tangible outcomes** to help each clarify a path forward that leads to abundant life.

Out of these opportunities, I would like to

set up six quarterly meetings with gatherings of PNC congregations—so I’m taking the discussion to more than one church at a time.

Let’s ask ourselves these questions: Our churches are doing good at doing justice and outreach to our communities, but we are not necessarily growing. Why is the church static? What we are doing is not working as we intended. Why? What is our activity beyond Sunday? How do we measure its impact?

I seek to help our churches as organizations articulate who we are, what we are and how we will live those out in measurable, tangible ways. What is our purpose? What is our plan? What are the tangible outcomes we want.

I do not come into this conversation with solutions, but to begin conversations with one another so that each congregation may set their vision and articulate it and live it out to make a tangible difference in their contexts.

I haven’t met a church that says it wants to die, so let’s talk about how we are living, how we want to live and what we want to become.

Let’s work together on a framework and time of reflection that will help congregations find their own visions and solutions. No two congregations are the same, so the outcomes will not be the same. We can, however, come together, share with each other and learn from each other.

To be the Church, we must be about Evangelism, Discipleship, Mission and Care. Without any one of those, we are not a church. If we do not have intentional sharing of the good news, we do not have a church. If we are not growing in faith, we do not have a church. If we do not live out a clearly articulated mission, we do not have a church. If we do not care for each other, we do not have a church.

Evangelism, discipleship, mission and care mean that we as churches are engaged in our neighborhoods, changing hearts, educating minds and transforming lives.

New life is coming across our Conference because the Divine is continually inviting all of us into it and each of us are saying “Yes.” I am excited to see all that unfolds and to celebrate this unfolding together at the Annual Meeting in 2025!

Wishing you a Blessed Advent and a Merry Christmas.

Transitions announced

Shalom UCC in Richland announces the passing of the **Rev. Stephen Eriksen**, who died on Oct. 21. He served the church and community for 22 years. His ministry was distinguished by his commitment to social justice, compassion and interfaith outreach, fostering connections with people of diverse backgrounds, including the Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist communities.

A service celebrating his life will be held at 1 p.m., Saturday, Jan. 25, at Shalom UCC, 505 McMurray St.

The **Rev. Bob Jackson** has passed away. We will provide more information as soon as we can.

The Committee on Ministry-West has approved **Adina Meyer** as a member in discernment at the October meeting.

The **Eastside Committee on Ministry** conferred member in discernment status on Faatauvaa (Va'a) Allaelua in September. He will be ordained in February at the Christian Worship Center in Anchorage, Alaska.

First Congregational Church, Bellevue will install the **Rev. Stevi Hamill** as pastor of spiritual formation at 3 p.m., Sunday, Jan. 5, at the church, 11061 NE 2nd St.

UCC presents finance program

The Ministers' Financial Vitality Initiative (MFVI) helps eligible UCC authorized ministers develop a holistic approach for managing their finances through a community with other ministers, discussing their financial challenges.

Applications to participate in the January 2025 cohort of the three-year Faith and Finance program of the Pension Boards UCC are open until Dec. 31.

For information, email amy@npucc.org.

Pastor leads mission trips

The Rev. Michael Birnbaum, founder and director of Well Child International and of International Service Learning, will lead two winter mission trips.

One will be Dec. 28 to Jan. 4 from Phoenix to Baja, Mexico, and the other is Feb. 1 to 8, starting in Jan Jose, Costa Rica. Participants will help with local service projects, refugee relief projects, medical services, children's after-school outreach, light construction, meal programs, sewing

lessons or ELS tutoring.

For information, visit wellchildinternational.org/service-and-mission-groups.

UCC hosts tax webinar

A webinar on "Mastering the 2025 Tax Season" will be held online at noon ET, Wednesday, Jan. 15.

Elaine Sommerville, author of *Church Compensation, Second Edition* and a church law and tax senior editorial advisor, will present the latest federal reporting requirements for churches and federal income tax changes

for ministers

For information, visit <https://get.churchlawandtax.com/mastering-the-2025-tax-season-pbucc>.

Midwinter Retreat planned

The PNC-UCC Midwinter Retreat for middle school and high school youth in grades six to 12 will be held Friday to Sunday, Feb 7 to 9 at Pilgrim Firs Camp and Conference Center. It's a weekend of connection, inspiring activities and fun. Registration opens in December.

For information, call 360-876-2031 or visit <https://pilgrim-firs.org/calendar>.

Northwest Women's Retreat set

"Embrace Joy" is the theme for the 2025 UCC Northwest Regional Women's Retreat planned for Nov. 7 to 9 at Skamania Lodge in Stevenson, Wash.

The spiritual and motivational retreat is co-sponsored every three years by the Pacific Northwest and Central Pacific UCC Conferences.

The Rev. Danae Ashley is worship leader, and the Rev. Andrea Cano is keynote speaker.

For information, visit nrwr.org or follow on [facebook.com/groups/369665646394](https://www.facebook.com/groups/369665646394).

Men's Retreat is in person

"Born to Be Wild" is the theme for the 2025 Conference Men's Retreat from Jan. 30 to Feb. 2, at Pilgrim Firs.

Bill Comfort, retreat leader, will guide an interactive exploration on how wilderness influences who men are or can be as men.

Among the resources being considered are the Steppenwolf song, a Wendell Berry

poem "The Peace of Wild Things," a children's book "Where the Wild Things Are" by Maurice Sendak, and the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky.

Bill will send questions for discussions prior to the retreat.

For three nights from 7 p.m., Thursday to 11 a.m., Sunday, the cost is \$250. Thursday to 5 p.m., Friday is a silent retreat.

Dinner Friday through breakfast Sunday with two nights lodging is \$172. Saturday only with two meals is \$55. Information on financial assistance is available from Hans Dankers at jdank@msn.com. Those who don't need assistance may donate to the Men's Retreat Fund when registering.

Remote attendance by Zoom is not yet feasible. Planners recommend that participants by fully vaccinated for influenza and COVID.

The Conference Men's Retreat Planning Committee members are Charlie Torres, Don Jenkins, Hans Dankers, Jim Gaudino, Larry Kiriluk, Paul Withington and Rick Russell.

For information and to register, visit www.ultracamp.com/info/sessiondetail.aspx?idCamp=367&campCode=nss&idSession=483141.

OCWM offers webinar

Our Church's Wider Mission is offering pastoral support committee training for lay leaders and pastors with the Rev. Tara Barber from 4 to 5:30 p.m. ET, on Wednesday, Jan. 8.

There has been confusion about the role of these committees. The workshop will help congregations understand what it means to become a Pastoral Support Committee—what it is and what it is not.

Register at https://ucc.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZMkdeGvrD8iHt-216V04MIPVnemox21V_Cj7#/registration.

General Synod is July 11-15

The biennial 2025 General Synod of the United Church will be held July 11 to 15 in Kansas City, Mo.

The theme for General Synod 35 is "Into the Deep," based on Luke 5:4, which says, "When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.'"

For information, visit <https://www.ucc.org/general-synod-2025-online-registration-now-open>.

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Westminster hosts series on colonization impacts

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Night Talks on “The Land Is Not Our Own: Seeking Repair Alongside Indigenous Communities.” The eight-week series is developed by JustFaith Ministries in collaboration with The Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery.

“Its goal is to equip congregations to stand alongside Native communities in working for justice and repair,” said Mary, anticipating that the process will lay a foundation for trust and relationships so participants can acknowledge injustice, honor the interconnectedness of Creation and seek healing, repair and hope.

The series will take participants through lament as they hear historical truths related to how the Doctrine of Discovery generates power and wealth as it permeates U.S. laws and Church policies. The sessions also invite hope, joy and healing, celebrating Indigenous artists and activists, honoring the sacred connection of Creation and learning ways to partner with Native leaders in work for justice and repair.

The class is based on a book by Sarah Augustine, who says, “What was done in the name of Christ must be undone in the name of Christ. The good news of Jesus means there is still hope for righting of wrongs.”

The cost of the curriculum and books for this class is covered by a grant from the PNC-UCC. Mary and Bob will co-teach the class.

Mary’s interest in the Indigenous neighbors grew from her curiosity about Westminster’s founding story in which two of its founding members were Spokane Chief Enoch Siliquwya and his wife, Anna. They joined with missionary, the Rev. Henry Cowley, whose

biography, entitled “A Tepee in His Backyard” by Clifford Drury, document’s Cowley’s relationship with the Middle Spokane band.

Knowing of the hanging of Spokane Indians and the massacre of their horses by General George Wright, Mary wanted to know more about the context of their relationship and began researching more about the history, aware there are no current indigenous members.

Pastor Bob grew up in New Hampshire until he graduated from Plymouth State University in 2010 with a bachelor’s degree in American literature and film. During those studies he began to understand the brutality of colonization.

“As I started to grapple with the reality of American history, the ugly history related to colonists and indigenous people became clear,” said Bob, who opens worship with an acknowledgement that the land on which the church gathers to worship was stewarded by the Spokane people who suffered from genocide. Each week he calls for those gathered to work together with the Indigenous people of the area for justice.

He believes there is need to have a reckoning with “the way we went about colonialism” that was “disconnected from land and all creation.”

In university studies, Bob first engaged with early indigenous writings and became curious about indigenous history. .

After working in college housing for five years, Bob went to Chicago Divinity School, where he learned more of Indigenous people from a classmate who served a church on a reservation and from protests at Standing Rock.



A 1968 painting in Westminster UCC’s fellowship hall depicts the story of missionary Henry Cowley establishing First Congregational Church in 1879 with Spokane Indians to serve both Indians and white settlers.

In 2019, he graduated and served a UCC church in Massachusetts, drawn to the UCC in college by its progressive Christianity that contrasted with his experiences growing up in a Pentecostal church.

Since coming to Spokane, he has found Indigenous communities prominent, present and powerful in this region.

He notes that the story of the Cowleys founding the church with Chief Enoch and Anna, may have comforted some.

“The story of the church’s founding is true, but in the broader context, it was still connected with colonization,” he said. “Cowley may for his

time have been more sensitive to Indigenous people than other settlers. From all accounts, he did not want to destroy indigenous people, which some openly said they wanted to do,” Bob said. “He was still part of the system.

“For Christians, we need to recognize that no matter what we do or how we act, we are implicated in the big story,” he continued. “Christianity is a story that has had profoundly positive impact in many cultures and many lives, and it has also been party to some truly horrific things.”

Bob noted that Christianity

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Pastor believes that the stories we tell are important

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has sometimes been destructive of lives and cultures, like with the Doctrine of Discovery or making it illegal to do indigenous religious practices until the 1970s.

“We cannot separate ourselves from that element of Christianity,” he said. “The UCC has a long history on this continent and with the indigenous people of Hawaii, where it has done some work at telling truth and doing some repair.”

Mary commented that the UCC didn’t rescind the Doctrine of Discovery until 2016.

“Most weren’t even aware of it, but the Anglican church in Canada, where I grew up in Ottawa and Vancouver, rescinded it in 1996,” she said.

“People say we aren’t responsible for what happened back then. That’s true, but we need to take responsibility for what is happening now, and we can see, own and understand what happened,” she said. “Similar genocide has happened around the world, and we need to understand our own place in it, so we don’t continue to do that forever.”

Bob pointed out that how people tell stories about what has happened impacts how they think and live now.

“Humans are rational creatures but also myth making creatures. Life is based on the stories,” he said. “Science tells how we are here and what we are made of, but the decisions we make about how we live relate to why we think we are here.

“Most have a story. Some tell it in theological language and some mythically. Stories give us purpose and drive. If the story is based on the assumption that we have a divine

right to be here and own the land, we may carry out terrible things, said Bob, who is struck by indigenous people talking of a way of belonging to the land rather than talking of land belonging to them. “Belonging to the land is hard for some brains to understand.”

Before Thanksgiving Bob explained that Thanksgiving is a cherished tradition for many coming from a “tidy story” that includes Thanksgiving myths.

Ancestors who came for freedom were welcomed and helped by the Indigenous people of Turtle Island, but they did not “live happily ever after.”

Bob pointed out that while some colonists came for religious and political freedom, others came for economic opportunity. Some were children and had no choice.

“We cannot readily know every single person’s motivation for coming, but we can assume that like at every Thanksgiving Table, there were kind, loving people, and there were mean, cruel, hateful people,” Bob said.

“We cannot know the intentions of every person who came, but we can know that when the Mayflower landed on Nov. 21, 1620, a brutal process of colonization followed,” he said.

Bob pointed out that some native tribes welcomed the Pilgrims and some resisted. There were kind colonists and genocidal ones, the latter shaping colonial policy.

“As members of the United

Church of Christ, we are descendants of the Mayflower—a fact memorialized in the name of the Mayflower Room. Under the Doctrine of Discovery and girded by the belief that this was their Promised Land—to be taken by brute force—our ancestors carried out horrific acts of violence against indigenous peoples in colonization, against Black bodies, forcibly brought to this continent as slaves, against innocent women lynched in the Salem Witch Trials, and countless more,” Bob said. “We cannot change that, nor should we deny it.”

We need to both take responsibility for what is happening now, and see, own and understand what happened,”

Recently some church members met to discuss that the church has a Mayflower Room, when Mary wondered if indigenous people would be offended by that name.

She realized that some would be, but others would say, “Forget about a room’s name. Help us fix the justice system, the school system, the foster care system, fix the Missing Murdered Indigenous Women/People system, fix the systems that are screwing us.”

Bob agrees it’s important but not to turn a concern into naval gazing. To change the name of a room might mean spending time talking about it and making a decision.

“I think discussion is important. Names matter. It matters what we lift up and memorialize and what stories we tell but if we change the name and think we are done with it feels wrong,” he said.

Awareness of why predecessors called it the Mayflower

Room can have value, he said.

“Aspects of the story of the Mayflower are inspiring. People set out on a voyage and that took courage, but the outcome for indigenous people was not good,” Bob said. “Many were good, kind people, but I’m not looking for evidence to exonerate what happened because of colonization.

Mary said that looking back at history, “we don’t understand all the complexities. I have traveled around world and there are good people and bad people everywhere I’ve gone,” said Mary.

Bob noted that within the big story of European colonizers acting in certain ways, there were always people pushing against those cultural norms and advocating for change.

“We can choose which stories we tell. We can give thanks for the voices that have always called for humanizing one another,” he said. “We can learn to see the powerful indigenous resistance to colonization that continues to this day, as a legacy to lift up along with the stories of our ancestors. We can write new stories, and new possibilities, even as we remember the past—in all its complexity.

“We need to see the balance between the grand sweeping narrative and threads of the story that make it all up,” Bob said.

“Sometimes it’s about being in relationship and that takes time,” he said. “For the church, we need to continue to learn our history and tell a story that’s truer. We also need to find ways we may be in more meaningful relationship with Indigenous people and communities.”

For information, call 509-624-1366 or email pastorbob@westminsterucc.org.

Samoan pastor will be ordained in February

Since June, Faatauva'a (Va'a) Alaelua, pastor of the Christian Worship Center in Anchorage, Alaska, has worked with Morag Stewart and the East Side Committee on Ministry (E-COM), to complete requirements for ordination. The E-COM unanimously voted on Dec. 9 to approve him for ordination. His ordination on Feb. 2, 2025, in Anchorage will be shared with the PNC on the church's YouTube and Facebook.

Three representatives from the Pacific Northwest Conference UCC—Morag Stewart, Dawn Koloi and Karen Mooney—met in 2023 with the Christian Worship Center UCC and one other Samoan church in Anchorage.

Both churches and two Seattle churches were approved to join the PNC-UCC at the Annual Meeting in April at Plymouth UCC in Seattle.

Those churches are the Christian Worship Center and First LMS Samoan Congregational Christian Church of Anchorage, and First Samoan Congregational Christian Church #1 and Samoan Congregational Church #6 of Seattle.

Va'a hopes his ordination will strengthen his congregation and help him build collaboration among the four Anchorage churches, which are all within about 20 minutes of each other.

In his ordination paper, Va'a shared that his involvement in music ministries at various churches—Congregational, Methodist, Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventist, Baptist, Assembly of God and Full Gospel—has not just been a calling but also an opportunity to experience and appreciate a range of theological perspectives.

Because they were engaging in mission and outreach through music, he said the churches did not identify them as belonging to another denomination but welcomed them as



Faatauva'a (Va'a) and Mafa (May) Alaelua at Plymouth Seattle.

brothers and sisters united by faith in Christ.

He explained that the lyrics he has memorized for choirs and praise team music were not just words, but “profound insights that deepened his relationship with God.” Hymns like “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” and the moving story behind it sparked profound contemplation about “how our love is firmly rooted in God’s boundless love,” he said.

“Similarly, ‘Great Is Thy Faithfulness’ led me to confront my weaknesses and shortcomings, yet reassured me that God’s faithfulness is unwavering, even when I stumble,” Va’a commented.

“I wanted to be ordained because I feel God calling me through the UCC,” said Va’a, whose parents were in the UCC. “I’m grateful the UCC lets us worship as we do and I appreciate the UCC theology.”

Va’a will be ordained in a four-way covenant between him, the PNC-UCC, the Chris-

tian Worship Center UCC and the Providence Alaska Medical Center, where he is chaplain.

Va’a values the UCC theology of loving, inclusion and interpreting the Bible openly, progressively and conservatively.

“I love the UCC emphasis on not judging and being open to gay clergy and members,” he said. “From a colored person’s perspective, I respect the UCC push for equality, justice and treating each other right. When I was vulnerable, the UCC accepted me.”

Va’a shared that the Worship Center involves about 11 families involved—totaling about 50 people. Then he corrected himself, realizing about 30 youth are involved—often bringing their friends.

“The congregation, made up of Samoans and others, are drawn because most of the worship and sermons are in English, guided by the Spirit. Who’s counting!” he said with a smile. “I’m here to minister to them and sing with them.”

Unlike in Samoa where Va’a found youth to be group oriented, he said the youth in Anchorage are more individualistic and influenced by American culture. He aims to foster a sense of teamwork and community among them.

Va’a lived in Honolulu until 1986 when he was 13 and his family moved to assist with the music ministry of a Congregational Church in Anchorage. His parents and the rest of his family have all been church musicians.

“When we came to Anchorage, there were few Polynesians, but now there is a big Polynesian community,” he said.

In 1998, Va’a left to study at Kanana Fou Theological Seminary, the Samoan Congregational Church seminary in American Samoa. His wife, May, his high school sweetheart whom he married in 1992, studied with him. Both earned a diploma after four years of study. He studied an extra year to earn a bachelor’s of divinity.

With scholarships from the church, he went to Pacific School of Religion in the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., to study in the master of arts in biblical languages, expecting to continue and to work in the doctoral program.

In 2008, however, the church elders asked him to come back and teach at the seminary in Samoa.

He taught for six years, and while the elders encouraged him to return to PSR, he chose to stay. In 2010, he was called to serve a parish in Pago Pago with a thriving youth ministry that attracted 200 to 250 youth.

“We focused on reaching out to youth in town, keeping them safe from drugs and violence,” Va’a explained. “We brought kids from the streets, giving them a place to hang out late at night through our different youth programs.

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Music is central to ministry to Samoan youth



Va'a Alaelua leads Christian Worship Center members from Anchorage in a praise song during the 2024 PNC Annual Meeting.

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“It was worship focused on the arts with a love for singing and dancing. We also had a program to preserve our culture and language,” he explained. “In American Samoa, many Samoans try to be as American as they can, and many children do not speak Samoan.”

Va'a involved the youth in summer camp programs that revived an old Congregational Church tradition called “Aoga a le Faifeau.” This program taught children basic math, writing skills, Bible stories and Samoan language and culture.

At the end of 2016, Va'a left and spent time working with his older brother, Kilifi, in Lawton, Okla. During this time, Va'a served as a case manager at the prison and assisted his brother in his church ministry. In late 2017, he was called to serve as lead pastor of another Congregational Church in Pago Pago.

“We had a large youth and music ministry, including one of the biggest choirs on the island,” he said, adding that many of their services, featuring a choir of up to 150 singers, can be found on YouTube.

Va'a began his musical journey playing the organ. While he learned to read music from his brother, Robert, he



Christian Worship Center with certificate from PNC-UCC.

also has the ability to play by ear. In addition to the organ, he plays piano, guitar, bass guitar and percussion.

In July 2021, Va'a traveled to Anchorage to support his sister after the passing of her husband, unaware she was battling cancer. She passed away in August.

Va'a and May then decided to step down from their ministry in American Samoa to care for his sister's children.

“I felt I would be a hypocrite to go back to the church I was serving and preach every Sunday about the importance of caring for family, while my own family was in turmoil in Anchorage,” he said. “We prayed for discernment, and God placed on our hearts to stay and help care

for my sister's three children, along with our three daughters. I didn't want to hurt the Samoan church, but we decided to prioritize the children's well-being.”

A friend encouraged him to apply for a hospital chaplaincy program at Providence Alaska Medical Center, where he was accepted into the CPE residency program. After the residency, he was hired as a permanent staff chaplain in November 2021. In March, he will be interviewed for certification by with Board of Chaplaincy Certification, Inc.

Meanwhile, some members of the second church he served in Samoa wanted to establish a new church in Anchorage. He joined their efforts, and they started the Christian Wor-

ship Center. Some of those families were Pentecostal.

Va'a contacted David Schoen, leader for the national UCC Congregational Vitality and Discipleship team to explore affiliating with the UCC.

While Va'a grew up appreciating traditional Congregational hymns, he now performs them with contemporary beats and full band arrangements to make them more engaging.

“Music is a big draw,” Va'a said. “We sing traditional hymns like The Doxology, Holy, Holy, Holy and How Great Thou Art, but in a contemporary style. By repeating the lyrics, people memorize the words, which helps teach the message.”

Va'a also incorporates story time for children to explain Gospel lessons.

“I present the stories in a way that children can understand, while keeping them theologically sound for parents to take to heart. I include humor and funny stories in my sermons because Polynesians love to laugh,” he added, “It's my nature. I like laughing and having a great time.”

Recently, Va'a shared that his church and youth music ministry received three grants from the UCC.

For information, call 907-444-6095 or email blessedmu-

Admiral UCC ready to transform building, lives

The Rev. Andrew Conley-Holcom, pastor of Admiral UCC, reported that a congregational meeting in November voted to donate their land and bring affordable housing to their neighborhood in a new project with space for their church.

The congregation plans move out of their church building in early summer 2025 when the preschool year ends and that in demolition of the building in planned to start within a few months of moving out. The plan is for Homestead Community Land Trust, a nonprofit organization that develops land and housing in trust, to complete the new building in 18 months.

During that time, Admiral will worship at St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church with low rent.

“We are on the vanguard of what more churches that grew in the baby boom era are experiencing as they can no longer maintain their buildings, but know their property, buildings and parking lots are valuable,” he said. “Some will sell, take the money and relocate. Others like us are staying to serve and become more engaged in the neighborhood.”

Andrew—who has served Admiral 10 years, his first church after graduating from Pacific School of Religion in 2014—sees this as an authentic moment for the church to live into the radical economic vision for the world, stepping out of capitalistic assumptions. He also sees churches picking up from the Poor People Campaign message that budgets and how organizations spend money are moral statements.

“The church should be about collective security,” he said. “This is the right time to be the church, to be a pastor and to have conversations.”

As churches pivot from



Andrew Conley-Holcom, pastor of Admiral UCC, is with two members, Anita Shafer and Peggy Rich at the PNC Annual Meeting 2024 in a discussion on small churches.

their buildings, they are making decisions for the next 50 years, not to keep doing what they have been doing but allowing creative ministries to emerge.

“It is a time for the death and resurrection of baby boom churches,” he said, “as people inherit from the generation who built church buildings that no longer serve us. I’m excited. We can now more clearly think about our mission and use the wealth from our buildings.

Andrew grew up attending Wayside UCC in Federal Way. He earned a bachelor’s degree in 2005 in anthropology and a master’s degree in anthropology and genocide studies in 2010 from Western Washington University. He is chair of the PNC-UCC Dismantling Racism Task Force, which he says is a group getting together to continue the conversation started by PNC clergy of color at Annual Meet-

ing in 2019. The Task Force was instrumental in developing the resolution for staff and board members to receive anti-racism training and is working to advance anti-racist growth across the conference.

“We are working with the Church Development Committee to plan a symposium for February to share the work that has been done with Church Development Committee (CDC) anti-racism grants,” he said, before turning back to the housing that will replace the church.

Because Homestead is intentional about inclusion, Admiral UCC is discussing who they want to build community with, to make sure the project is inclusive and impacts generational wealth and generational equality so there is meaningful impact on poverty and racism, he said.

Andrew is aware of the

anxiety some white people feel about addressing racism and doing it right. He believes it’s important for the denomination and conference to articulate clearly what anti-racism and solidarity mean.

“That’s also important in relationship to articulating and advancing our Christian values in our neighborhood—including through current programs such as an arts group and children’s activities.”

Helping spearhead the building negotiations and details is Mike Piraino. He was drawn to Admiral in 2020, after 10 years as a member of Alki UCC, because the church was across the street from his home and he knew Andrew from Alki-Admiral combined church functions.

Mike, who graduated in 1989 from Purdue University in

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Church builds affordable housing, neighborhood

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Indiana in aerospace engineering, came to Seattle in 1990 to work for Boeing. He graduated from Seattle University's Law School in 1995 and worked with a law firm serving Boeing on product liability.

He then moved into corporate finance and securities law and worked with and at technology companies for the last 30 years. Now he works remotely as chief operating officer for ORCA Computing, a United Kingdom-based quantum computing company.

He grew up Catholic and his wife was Lutheran, so they looked many years for a church before finding Alki. They joined Admiral during COVID, and were excited to learn the congregation was looking at providing affordable housing and options for the future of the church, said Mike, who had participated in a discernment process at Alki.

Admiral was looking at options for remaining viable as a church: sell the property and move; develop part of the land and use funds to renovate the aging building or partner with an organization to bring affordable housing to people in a new structure that included church space.

Admiral chose the third option after connecting with Homestead and learning it had a way to help make the project a reality.

The church decided to donate the land to Homestead to develop affordable housing, and the church would have space in the project.

"We will tear down our building, build affordable housing and be a resident in the project," Mike said.

Homestead secures funding so housing on the site is affordable for those earning less than 80 percent of the area median income.



Mike Piraino helps Admiral develop affordable housing.

Photo courtesy of Mike Piraino

"Our focus has been on being a neighborhood church as costs skyrocketed and pushed out many people," he said. "Our ministry is focused on social justice, and this project allows us to provide affordable housing in the neighborhood we have been part of for more than 120 years."

Part of the land was originally lands of the Coastal Salish or Duwamish Tribe.

"We researched titles to learn how church came to own the land and benefitted from exclusionary practices. We are on unceded ancestral land of Duwamish. The land was never really ours, so we needed to benefit those traditionally excluded," Mike said.

He explained that the U.S. government never honored the treaty with the Duwamish, so the land the church sits on was never formally ceded to the U.S. Government, but it granted those lands to settlers anyway. The U.S. government granted land the church sits on to the family of a U.S. soldier who fought and died in the Seminole Wars in Florida, he said.

"The land grant includes my house," Mike added.

Speculators acquired land from the family. Through that chain of title, the church came

into possession of the land.

"It's hard saying it is our asset," Mike said. "We felt called to do something with the land that was thoughtful and inclusive. We had discussions with the Duwamish tribe."

As Admiral's pastor, Andrew engaged in dialogue with tribal members, who expressed appreciation for the choice, Mike said.

"We partnered with Homestead because they focus on home ownership. The affordable homes would be owned, creating generational wealth to bring families out of poverty," he said. "It has impact on future generations. Homestead assures the housing remains affordable in perpetuity."

The 21-unit housing project will be 13 town houses and eight condos.

"Homestead helped us work closely with the neighborhood throughout the process, including inviting design inputs and keeping folks in the neighborhood informed on parking, safety and congestion," he added.

"Homestead's experience working with neighbors is important because we want to continue our ministry in the neighborhood," Mike said. "We want to do it in a way that is perceived as positive, while

bringing affordable housing and diversity to the neighborhood.

When Admiral started working with Homestead two years ago, the average price of a neighborhood home was \$939,000, and the average rent of one-bedroom was \$1,895 a month—affordable only to upper middle class.

In the 25 years Mike has lived there, the cost of living has increased dramatically, pricing many out.

"Addressing people unjustly excluded is a big deal for us as a church focused on social justice," he said.

"We seek to live our beliefs and communicate to the community what we are about," he said. "Our work to bring social justice is not just talk. The focus on tolerance, inclusiveness and social justice attracted me to the UCC."

Homestead encouraged the church to go through a process to visualize its future and how it interfaces with the community, and then to decide what it needed physically as a church structure to do all of that.

Since signing an initial memorandum of understanding with Homestead in July 2023, Admiral teams and committees have worked with Homestead to negotiate and sign a formal purchase and sale agreement. They then worked on the project details and design with Homestead's architects and advisors.

Mike said Admiral hopes construction will be completed in the first half of 2027.

Peggy Rich, one of about 40 members at Admiral, looks forward to tearing down the old building and building low-income housing with space for families with children to live together in community.

For information, call 206-932-2928 or visit admiral-church.org.

Alki UCC embodies caring for community

After a journey of preparation through varied churches and types of ministries, Emily Tanis-Likkel felt her skills matched the ministry leadership needed when she began ministry in 2022 at Alki UCC.

She and Alki emphasize embodying faith.

Through the years, Alki UCC has found ways to embody its faith in the West Seattle neighborhood on Puget Sound.

In 2022, the church called Emily, who believes in expressing spirituality by embodying faith in movement, story and action.

“Churches need to be a beacon of hope in their communities,” said Emily. “In our diversity of race, culture, disability and ability, personality, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, we reflect God, who wonderfully reflects all we are and do.”

Since its founding in 1909, the church has been a center not only of social activities—music, poetry, shows, parties and luncheons—but also for social justice, family counseling, food and housing security, welcoming immigrants, supporting Black Lives Matter and Pride, and serving weekly meals with the Westside Interfaith Network.

In 2003, Alki UCC began sharing its building at 6115 SW Hinds in West Seattle with Kol HaNeshamah, a progressive synagogue.

“Sharing our space and nurturing the relationship takes understanding and listening with awareness that our values, cultures and traditions differ,” said Emily, aware from living in a multigenerational household with her husband, children and parents—the necessity of clear communications.

“Jewish people are marginalized, so at Alki UCC we make sure not to post things or use decorations that might



Emily Tanis-Likkel has served Alki UCC since 2022.

Photo courtesy of Jennifer Butner

make members of the Jewish community uncomfortable,” she said. “It’s important to communicate, not make assumptions and have grace.

“When we put out art, we converse on how they feel about it,” she said.

For example, members made a bird feeder out of an old Christmas tree and leaders said it was fine – but some in the Jewish community were uncomfortable and felt it was too Christ-massy.

“I assumed they would not like green boughs as too Christ-massy, but they saw the greens as life-giving and not just about Christianity,” Emily explained.

When Emily came in July

2022, she and the rabbi then became good friends, but the synagogue now has an interim rabbi.

Member Kristen Michel told of a moment that epitomized why she values the synagogue’s presence.

“They rent from us and are our partner. We learn from each other,” she said. “One day when I was attending a church class on Islam in the narthex, the woman presenting was wearing a hijab and Jewish worshipers in the sanctuary were wearing yarmulkes. They were both in our church with us.”

In August 2023 and several times in February and March 2024, the Pride and Black Lives Matter flags the church dis-

played outside were vandalized and then replaced. After the fifth time, they sought a different response.

Cinda Stenger, chair of mission and outreach, said they asked a local artist create a sign on wood to express the church’s message of love and justice, using words of the prophet Amos, quoted by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Let justice roll down like water.”

The artist outlined a river of grace flowing from a torn edge. One Sunday last May, members painted the image of water and words.

“We decided to use art to move from confrontation,” said Emily, adding that they also installed better security and asked neighbors to email if they saw anything suspicious.

Alki UCC partners with Fauntleroy UCC’s Immigration Task Force in its journey to become an immigrant welcoming UCC church.

One Sunday in 2022, two mothers and two children from Peru came to the church. Speaking to them in Spanish, members learned they needed food, clothing and housing. Working with Fauntleroy UCC, they met those needs and found housing with an Alki member. More family came.

They were not granted asylum, so Alki and Fauntleroy are exploring next steps, said Vicky Smith, who has helped with Alki’s refugee ministry first with Cambodians and 20 years later with Afghans.

The Alki mission and outreach team works with the Westside Interfaith Network (WIN), in which several faiths sign up to donate, cook and serve the weekly meal, “The Welcome Table” on Saturdays for 100 to 150 immigrants, low-income seniors and unsheltered neighbors.

“We provide toilet paper, toiletries fresh produce and

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Church's pastor meshes with role embodying faith



Left: Wooden sign installed from entry way roof is sturdier than the Black Lives Matter flag that was vandalized.

Below: Church and community members joined in a May 19 Collaborative Art and Social Justice event to paint the sign as a creative action in response to repeated vandalism.

Photo courtesy of Alki UCC

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other food to help during the week,” said Cinda. “For the unsheltered, we provide backpacks, sleeping bags, tarps and warm coats,” she added.

Some members volunteer at the Westside Neighbors Shelter and the Second Chance tiny homes village.

That ministry team also explores ways to respond to the climate crisis, to address racism and offer education and advocacy on issues.

Emily's ministry of embodying faith grew over the years.

Growing up near Grand Rapids, Mich., the daughter of a Christian Reformed pastor—who later became Presbyterian—she knew at the age of eight—when she was baptizing dolls—that she was called to ministry.

After two years at Calvin College, Emily married and moved with Brett to finish communication studies at Seattle Pacific University in 1999. Brett, who is in tech, readily found a job. In 2003, she graduated from Fuller Seminary's multi-denominational Seattle program and was ordained in 2005 in the UCC.

“I found the UCC while riding a bus to class. Repeatedly, I saw an ad about Plymouth UCC's Feed Your Soul lunch-time program and jazz service. The ad showed Kris Ostrem, one of my professors at Seattle Pacific,” she said.

“I had never been to a UCC church. The moment I walked in the door, the denomination of my youth rolled off my back. I felt embraced,” said Emily, who became an intern at Plymouth.

She believes the next few years of her pilgrimage made her a better pastor.

Emily, Brett and baby Eva moved to Bainbridge Island, where Emily became associate pastor of Eagle Harbor Congregational, UCC. Their son, Day, came along a few years later.

Feeling called to church planting, Emily began a new ministry, Tapestry. They moved back to Seattle, where she was trained in and taught Nia, a holistic movement practice. Emily also developed a method of integrating Scripture with movement, called Embody the Story, which she has taught to intergenerational groups.”

Next, she taught at Presbyterian and Lutheran preschools and then at a Lutheran middle.



She also served as minister of spiritual play at Valley and Mountain United Methodist Church, where she used Godly Play as a way to introduce children to Scripture.

From 2018 to 2022, she served as family life minister at St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church in Seattle.

In August 2022, Emily was called as a bridge pastor of Alki UCC and in December was called to be their pastor.

“God prepared me for this ministry through my ministries in other denominations with children and families,” she said.

“The church is in a healthy place with about 50 attending on a Sunday. Last spring in assessing my ministry, they suggested I could be more challenging in my sermons,” she commented. “That gave me permission to be bold and edgy in my sermons.

In her ministry, Emily acknowledges that each person is of infinite worth and value.

“Humanity bears the image of God,” she said. “Everything that we are, God is.

For information, call 206-935-2661 or email pastor@alkiucc.org.

Pam Peterson sums up transition at N-Sid-Sen

As Pam Peterson ends nearly two years as designated managing director of N-Sid-Sen, the PNC Camp and Conference Center on Lake Coeur d'Alene, she most valued working with "all the people"—57 volunteers for summer camps and 35 volunteers through the year.

"Everyone is so passionate about the sacred space of N-Sid-Sen, and working with volunteers has been a highlight," said Pam.

She has also found that the seven churches she preached at—fewer than she had hoped to reach out to—have a fervor about the camp and feel ownership of this sacred space as a conference camp. She sees their commitment to continue youth and family camping.

"There is a strong core of support, especially in the eastern part of the conference, but also among Westside churches," she said, pleased that some new members of the Outdoor Ministries Committee are passionate about the program at N-Sid-Sen.

She sees the strongest support among those who have connected with N-Sid-Sen for more than 20 years and sees that they are working hard to bring younger families on board.

"There is intergenerational commitment and relationship building that gives promise for the future," Pam said, adding, it's not just for sustainability but for regenerative action to continue building the camp.

Pam looks forward to helping onboard her successor, Brian Wallace, who brings 15 years of hands-on site management and marketing experience.

While she recognizes it's hard to hear the energy behind a list, she shared an overview of what she has accomplished for the camp since she came in April 2023.

• **A full risk assessment** on fire mitigation with the camp's



Pam Peterson has attended Westminster Congregational UCC in Spokane since serving at N-Sid-Sen.

Photo courtesy of Pam Peterson

insurance company, led N-Sid-Sen to firm up procedures and make improvements.

"We contacted AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps, bringing a team of young people to do fire mitigation such as cutting down bushes and trees," said Pam.

Two other groups came out to volunteer for work camps and at other times, providing work for the camp and "camp time" for the volunteers. They made the trees that were cut down into firewood.

• **There were several** efforts to promote N-Sid-Sen and build relationships.

N-Sid-Sen offered two community open houses for the East Side Lake Coeur d'Alene Fire Department and Harrison.

Staff participated in events in two communities, Harrison and Carlin Bay.

In person and by Zoom, Pam preached in seven PNC churches, as well as attending regularly at Westminster UCC in Spokane, a strong partner of the camp.

She also recruited six new church groups in traditions other than the UCC.

• **Pam arranged for** N-Sid-Sen to coordinate a lifeguard camp, training five people, four

to be lifeguards at the camp and one from the community.

N-Sid-Sen also developed a waterfront safety plan with the guidance of Drew Demery, who trained the lifeguards and helped develop that plan.

• **Pam continued** the expansion of the internet services for the camp that Mark Boyd, former managing director, started. It is now available in all the main lodges.

• **For meals, Pam brought** on a national food service company, Upper Crust, to run the summer camp kitchen. In the off season, N-Sid-Sen used caterers.

"Having no kitchen boss the first year meant I spent more time in the kitchen before Upper Crust came on board," she said.

• **For the summer of 2024,** Pam helped create a role of volunteer chaplain. Dana Sprenkle, a trained chaplain in Richland and member of Shalom Richland UCC, was chaplain for both staff and campers.

"I had to do hands-on management, so couldn't be pastoral presence I hoped," she said.

• **Pam has helped develop** a site management plan for the future, compiling a list of the state of all of the buildings and grounds, and the state of the

infrastructure—water system, septic system and utilities.

"We upgraded the propane system, which will save about \$8,000 a year," she added.

She also sees the need to make the site more user friendly for people who are aging, as well as demand for the simple cabins where campers can connect to nature.

"**My job was one of** transition, looking at the history of the camp, assessing the needs, encouraging volunteer leadership, envisioning the future and preparing transition to next settled camp director," said Pam.

Pam has appreciated just being at N-Sid-Sen: "Swimming in this lake has been healing. The water is sacred. I appreciated access to walk in the woods with my dogs. It has been a blessing to be here."

"I enjoyed the gift of loons especially in the fall. In September and October 2023 there were 75 loons. Normally there are just two," she said.

In her 30-year career, Pam worked in early childhood education, nonprofit administration, substitute teaching, hospital chaplaincy, pastor of churches in Connecticut, New York and Montana, and studying and training others in transitional ministry with Presbyterians before coming to N-Sid-Sen.

Dates have been set for several summer camps with You and Me Camp Sunday to Wednesday, July 20 to 23 and Kids Camp July 23 to 26.

Family Camp is Sunday July 27 to Saturday, Aug. 2, and Camp Together is Saturday, Aug. 2 to Friday, Aug. 8.

The Senior High, Middle School and Intermediate Camp dates have not yet been set, because the Outdoor Ministries Committee is still working to recruit camp co-directors.

For information, call 406-426-8715 or email pastorpam@n-sid-sen.org

Forks pastor finds community relationships key

Warren Johnson, pastor of Forks First Congregational United Church of Christ on the Olympic Peninsula, is amazed how he became a pastor in the community where he grew up.

“God took a church janitor and made him the pastor,” he said, offering the example of what God did in his life to inspire others.

In September, he was the first pastor ordained at the church in 122 years.

He is building the church through his relationships with people in his involvements in such community programs as the West End Business Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Food Bank and Forks Community Hospital.

Warren, who has attended the church regularly since 1985, felt called to ministry in 2008.

That year, the church was down to six members with \$20,000 in the bank, in a building with a diesel furnace, plaster falling off the walls and single-paned windows. He became a lay pastor, was licensed in 2014 and was ordained in September 2024.

“**Small churches need** bivocational ministers they can afford to pay,” he said.

Warren worked in the woods industry until he was 30, cut meat until he was 40, studied and then taught computer classes at Peninsula College until he was 50. Soon after he was called to ministry, he became a corrections officer with the Corrections Department. Sixteen years later, in 2023, he retired to complete his ordination requirements and focus on the ministry.

The church was founded in 1902 and moved into its current building in 1955. The church then had 300 members but split and half left when the church voted to join the UCC, Warren said. Others joined Lu-



Warren Johnson is with his wife Cathy at Annual Meeting.

theran, Bible, Methodist and Disciples churches. The rest of the decline came from deaths.

Now the church has 35 members with 50 attending worship and 16 attend a Sunday Bible study before church in recent weeks.

“Since 2008, we have put \$400,000 and a labor of love into the church, adding a heat pump, a new roof, double-paned windows and several coats of paint. This summer, volunteers helped put in a new lawn and sprinkler system,” he said. “Now it is fixed up and used every day of the week.”

Forks is a town of 3,000 people with 13 churches.

“Being across from the high school, we are the church that does the most in the community, so many see us as the community church,” he said.

The church’s outreach includes a food pantry emptied daily by families in need, homeless people, high school students who come after school and high school students who are couch surfing and take food to families they are staying with.

In late September, the food bank received a \$6,150 grant from Haller Foundation to stock food. It spends about

\$500 a month for food, said Warren, who is president of the food bank board.

The church recently fed about 350 people for its annual Harvest Dinner, which raised \$3,800 for nonprofits that meet at the church.

“In November, we filled 400 food baskets, and 374 families received them,” he said. “We usually serve 330 families a month.”

Nonprofits at the church include Grief Support Group, Soroptimist Women’s Group, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, West End Business Association, Clallam County Management, Sarge Place for veterans, Senior Lunch second Wednesdays, Volunteer Fairs, Santa’s Breakfast with Kids, free movies and more.

The building is available free for activities, groups and events.

“If an indigent person dies and there is no money for loved ones to bury him or her, we sponsor the service,” Warren continued.

“Many who do not go to church consider us their church because we welcome all, no matter where they are on their life journey,” he said.

“Many visit, come back

and then attend regularly, glad that we are a liberal church or glad that we are a conservative church or glad that we focus on building a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” he said.

Warren also builds relationships on Thursdays as hospital chaplain, praying staff at 8 a.m., visiting acute care patients at 9 a.m., Thursdays and leading a Bible study for residents at the long-term care facility at 10 a.m.

At the hospital and care facility, he often sings with people.

“Sunday is for God and God’s Word. Sermons are to lift spirits and feed people,” he said. “This is my fifth time through the lectionary. I have a file of my sermons, so I review them to keep offering fresh ideas.”

Much of Warren’s time is spent counseling people.

“People need someone to listen to them. With all the tech, they spend too much time on their phones. I meet with people face to face,” he said. “I help people deal with grief to move them from letting their loss consume them so their grief grows smaller so they can move on in life.

“Grief may be from losing a job or a traumatic event, not just death. If people do not deal with their small traumas, a big trauma can overwhelm them,” said Warren, who has had training in grief, trauma and elder abuse counseling.

“I love being a small-town pastor, but I can’t go to a store often, because someone is always coming up and asking me to pray for or with them,” Warren explained.

Now 68, he said people sometimes ask how long he will be a pastor. His response is “When the Lord done with me.”

For information, call 360-374-9382 or email wrijfork@hotmail.com.

Pilgrim Firs has filled all weekends during 2025

While Mark Boyd, managing director of Pilgrim Firs, is on sabbatical from Nov. 16 to Feb. 16, Zac Norenberg, assistant director, has been in charge of the camp.

Mark is on-site but focusing on getting his poetry and photography published as a book, with some breaks spending time in Ocean Shores, a favorite spot for him and Julie.

Zac has been at Pilgrim Firs since 2022, coming after working seven years at Pilgrim Point, the UCC camp in on Lake Ida in Alexandria, Minn. where he spent weeks in the summers from kindergarten through high school.

“Growing up in UCC camps, I discovered who I was, and I see that happening for adults as much as for children,” he said.

While working on a bachelor’s degree in global studies and human rights, he started working with the Minnesota Conference as camp registrar and stayed to work year round with the associate conference



Zac Norenberg, assistant director at Pilgrim Firs, finds a vine of cherry tomatoes in the PRIDE Garden.

Photos provided by Pilgrim Firs

minister on faith formation. ing director of Pilgrim Firs, was Wade Zick, former manag- from Minnesota and let Zac

know about the opening for assistant director there.

Zac noted that for 2025, Pilgrim Firs weekends are filled for 50 weeks.

The other two weekends are part of the two months at the end of December for down time and camp maintenance.

The Our Whole Lives (OWL) training for facilitators to offer training in their local churches in Nov. 22 to 24 trained 50 facilitators for all age levels.

“OWL is a curriculum that helps participants make informed, responsible decisions about their relationships, health and behavior in the context of faith,” Zac described. “It equips participants with accurate, age-appropriate information across several subject areas,” Zac said.

Pilgrim Firs hosts and co-sponsors the camp for the United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalist Association, led by Amy Johnson and Tandi Rogers.

PNC churches participating were First Congregational UCC Bellevue, First Congregational UCC Walla Walla, United Churches of Olympia, University Congregational UCC and Broadview UCC Seattle and Westminster UCC Spokane.

The last of 12 weeks of the 2024 Warrior Pathh programs was held in early December.

“The program is here with eight first responders—police, fire fighters, medics, veterans and others—and eight staff of the PTSD Foundation in Gig Harbor for a full week, using the camp exclusively for three months of the year,” he said, noting that they pay extra for the exclusive use of the site.

“What drew me to camp through my life is to see how transforming camp experiences are, but in the Warrior Pathh camps I really see lives changing. Those who come are

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Oou Whole LivesL training camp participants gather at Pilgrim Firs.

Campers experience challenge, renewal, healing

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suffering the worst of PTSD. Many were ready to take their own lives," he said.

The week at Pilgrim Firs begins 90 days of intensive training, most of which is on-line, staying in touch, meditating and taking care of themselves.

"Pilgrim Firs is the first time for many to have three meals a day," he said, as representing how they do not take care of themselves.

Zac said he has learned a different view than he had of police in Minnesota.

"These are actual people who need care," he said, "telling of one firefighter who came to the scene of a car accident and pulled out the body of his brother.

This last year, four of the groups were just women, because some experienced sexual assault.

"Warrior Path camps are a lifesaving, healing ministry," Zac said.

"We continue to be humbled by the stories they share, the songs they write and the life-changing ministry we are able to provide," he said. "In exit surveys, 99 percent of the students indicated that had they not attended the transformative week at Pilgrim Firs, they would have decided to depart from this world in the near future.

"We are beyond grateful to be engaged in this ministry that is not only life changing but also directly saving lives."

For those coming to Pilgrim Firs, it is a place people come to be inspired and while they are here they experience a new version of themselves, he commented, referring to artists and musicians who come to camps and practice their art in community, inspiring each other and gaining a new passion, a more authentic version

of themselves than they have chiseling stone alone in the garage or practicing music alone.

"The serenity of the site lends to people healing. One church retreat was here the week after the elections. Folks come for AA group retreats. The energy of their healing is infused in the site," he continued.

Zac appreciates, too, the healing that comes from groups who come to the site for retreats and return to their work to alleviate poverty, advance disability rights or pass on their language and culture to a new generation.

"Through the year of retreats, I see people are able to put their faith values into action to make meaningful change," he said. "I'm drawn to the UCC as an amazing avenue to bring change in the world."

PNC churches that used Pilgrim Firs for retreat in 2024 were Fox Island UCC, First Congregational UCC Bellevue, United Churches of Olympia, Suquamish UCC, and the following Seattle churches, St Paul's UCC, University Congregational UCC, Taiwanese Christian Church UCC, Alki UCC, Liberation UCC and Fauntleroy.

Zac gave an overview of PNC and other camps scheduled in 2025 at Pilgrim Firs.

The Conference Men's Retreat is Thursday to Sunday, Jan. 30 to Feb. 2.

The Mid-Winter Youth Retreat is Friday to Sunday, Feb. 7 to 9.

The March Work Camp is Monday to Wednesday, March 24 to 26.

The Post-Easter Clergy Retreat is Monday to Wednesday, April 21 to 23.

The Free Community Picnic with Kitsap Pride is Sunday, June 8.

Samuel Martinez Memorial Work Camp for family and friends of former youth camper



PTSD sufferers embraced after walking the Pilgrim Firs labyrinth. Each carried a stone representing the weight they carry with them every day. At the center they let it go and leave it behind.

Sam Martinez is Friday to Sunday, June 27 to 29.

You and Me Camp and Kids Camp will both be Sunday to Wednesday, July 6 to 9.

Weekend retreats are on the books for 2025 include University Congregational UCC, United Churches of Olympia, St. Paul's UCC, First Congregational UCC Bellevue, Fauntleroy UCC Seattle, Fox Island UCC, Spirit of Peace and Suquamish UCC.

Zac said that others on staff with him are Michael Staser, facilities manager, and cooks Ashley Harrington and Andrea Austin, plus other part

time camp staff.

"Aside from our PNC church events, Pilgrim Firs continues to be dedicated to advancing a just world for all," said Zac. "We actively prioritize hosting outside groups that work to alleviate poverty and homelessness, that advance racial equity, disability rights and LGBTQ+ inclusion and cultural preservation, and that seek personal enlightenment.

"We work to put the faith values of the PNC into action to create meaningful change

For information, call 360-876-2031 or email zac@pilgrim-firs.org.

Mike Bass and Pullman UCC begin ministry together

As the pastor of Community Congregational UCC (CCUCC) in Pullman since June, Mike Bass, entering ministry after a career testing air quality, has found a ministry for his passion to promote justice and the wellbeing of all.

The church has a UCC designation as a just peace church and an open and affirming church. It recently declared a commitment to environmental justice and is seeking the UCC designation for Accessible to All.

It designates the loose offerings it collects each week to partners in the community and the Palouse as a tangible way to have worshipers aware of the various ways of serving people.

CCUCC also offers events not just for its members but also to draw people from the community into its life.

In April 2023, the church declared its values in artistic panels showing the Palouse countryside and incorporating words of its five values: faith, justice, progressive, inclusive and caring.

Mike shared his journey into this ministry as he begins.

Growing up on the outskirts of Tyler, Texas, he appreciated the outdoors, playing in the forest behind his house and in nearby pastures.

When he was 12, his 16-year-old sister was in a coma after a car accident. As she recovered, the family felt it was a gift, but six years later she was in another car accident, thrown out and crushed.

“That was eventually the impetus for me to enter ministry to help people better understand and process God in such circumstances. The Southern Baptist Church I grew up in did not give me the tools to cope with the loss and grief,” said Mike.

At Texas A&M University he studied geography and environmental management and



Mike Bass settles into active community ministry in Pullman.

Photo courtesy of Mike Bass

policy, graduating in 1998 and finding a job in Dallas testing outdoor air quality and levels of pollutants for refineries and other polluters for 11 years.

Mike was driven by the capitalistic, American dream of working hard and earning money to have more things as he moved with work to Houston, to New Jersey to be near his wife’s family and then to Phoenix.

Along the way, he switched from the value of making money, acquiring possessions and working 70 hours.

He wanted to be authentically present with people at work, home, friends and himself. That’s his goal now.

While in New Jersey, he and his wife spent weekends in the Pocono Mountains and at-

tended St Vladimir Russian Orthodox Church, a community focused church that stirred in him the desire to find and love a community.

Unable to find work and with his marriage broken in Phoenix, he moved to Fort Worth, where his uncle was senior minister of a large Pentecostal, spirit-filled Church of God in Christ. Mike helped create PowerPoints to project the words to hymns and scriptures.

“Sitting behind my computer, I could see how the congregation was affected by the music and worship for Sunday morning and evening, and Wednesday evening services,” he said.

Through that, self-study of Scripture, helping in the church and volunteering with social clubs and community

services, Mike discerned a call to parish ministry. He went from working 60 hours a week consulting on air quality with hospitals, universities and for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, and going to church, to working 50 hours a week and volunteering 10 hours at the church and then to working 40 hours and serving 20 to 30 hours at the church.

In 2015 he took a leap of faith, put his house up for sale and began studies at Brite Divinity School, an ecumenical seminary on the campus of Texas Christian University, a Disciples of Christ school in Fort Worth.

While at Brite, he found First Congregational UCC in Fort Worth, which called him in 2021 after he earned a master of divinity degree in 2020 to be pastor of church administration.

After three years, he entered the search process Dec. 29, 2023, a day after Community Congregational UCC in Pullman published their profile. His stepfather died in January 2023 and his father was diagnosed with cancer in February.

In a few months, Mike and the church found each other. He was called in May 2024 and started in June with what he describes as a “loving, caring group of justice-oriented” people.

“Brite helped me connect the dots that the UCC put words to about the call of the church being about justice for all, covenant, hospitality and welcoming everyone,” said Mike, pleased to serve Pullman Congregational UCC which shares his concern for justice and wellbeing for all.

The church is organized with teams responsible for justice and witness, congregational life, congregational care and shared ministries, functioning so they work as a whole

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Art panels beside windows proclaim church's values

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through the council.

The church has also hired Megan Guido, a member who worked at the local hospital, as marketing coordinator to help spread word in the community what our church is doing.

One of the efforts in the past two years has been to collect loose offerings for different groups in the community and the Palouse area, realizing that most members gave to support the church with pledges.

Nonprofits that are designated for a month have a representative come the first Sunday to share about what they do, bringing to awareness that the church offers an opportunity to directly support the work. Usually, the offerings amount to \$500 to \$800, enough to make a difference for the group.

"It's a justice moment in the worship service," said Mike, "rather than having it be part of the budget and not seen."

The website lists regular partners through which church volunteers put their faith into action and to which they designate offerings.

Those include food and housing action through Community Action Center, meals for homebound seniors through Meals on Wheels, crisis housing support through the Community Relief Fund, housing homeless families through Family Promise of the Palouse, supporting the LGBTQ+ community through Inland Oasis, housing until recently Cooper's Legacy Thrift Shop, supporting statewide advocacy through Faith Action Network, maintaining equity through the Palouse Council on Racial Equity, empowering volunteers to send letters to encourage voters to vote through Vote Forward, promoting self-esteem through Pullman Child Welfare, FaVs news, and improving lives of people in Nicaragua through



Art panels depict Palouse scenes and the faith values of Pullman UCC church.

Photo courtesy of Community Congregational UCC

ASLA Foundation.

Several of those programs are at the church.

The church has long had a thrift store, which it sold to another group to run in the church, but Coopers Thrift Store recently sold its inventory to the church, which will sell the inventory and close the thrift store, because it does not have the volunteers to keep it open.

With Family Promise, CCUCC houses two to four families for one week four times a year, giving them a room, an evening meal and spending time with the families.

Mike is also working with Megan to update the website to have a connection page that presents ways people in the community can connect with the church, such as the choir, coffee and conversation, movie nights, queer quest Dungeons & Dragons, family game night, environmental book club, game day parking, highway pickup, LGBTQ library, social events, church retreat at N-Sid-Sen and justice and witness events.

Another way CCUCC communicates with neighbors is through its windows and wall

panels outside the church. The panels are a mural with paintings of the Palouse, displaying the church's values with the words Faith, Justice, Progressive, Inclusive and Caring, telling what the church is about.

Megan proposed the idea when she was outreach coordinator as a way to display the church's values and support the arts.

The panels were designed by a local artist, Sarah Barnett, with the Palouse Arts Foundation. She is an instructor with the WSU fine arts department.

"The panels run the length of the sanctuary alternating with clear windows so people can see inside from the outside and look outside from the sanctuary, connecting people worshiping God inside with their call to worship God by acting in the community," Mike said.

The Art for the Spirit mural project began in 2021 and was installed in 2023.

At the dedication, then interim pastor Gary Jewell spoke of churches presenting art and beauty in paintings, frescos, stained glass and statues, which typically "inspire as one stands

within the structure."

He made the point that these panels are outward, not inward focused.

"These panels are one way this church can share and celebrate beauty and wonder with everyone who passes by," Gary continued, celebrating the beauty and wonder of the Palouse with everyone who passes by.

"This is art for the public. It's outward. It is witness. It is our way of saying that God's beauty is something for everyone to celebrate, whether they do or do not attend a church," Gary concluded.

"Anyone pulling in our parking lot can see this statement of what we are about and can see through the windows," Mike said. "We care about faith, and we care about the community."

Mike is still meeting people and learning about outreach to students on campus and work with the Interfaith Network.

"I am taking time to be present and listen to learn the concerns of the community," he said.

For information, call 509-

Midwinter Retreat theme is 'Coming Full Circle'

The annual Midwinter Retreat for youth in grades 6-12 is scheduled for 7 p.m., Friday, Feb 7 to 1 p.m., Sunday, Feb 9. Young people and volunteer leaders from across the conference will gather at Pilgrim Firs for a weekend of connection and growth.

The theme for the weekend is "Coming Full Circle... Another Way."

The leadership team includes Bruce Wilson as chaplain, and Aislyn Crane and Kristen Miller as event directors, Kaila Russell as basket weaver extraordinaire.

"We all live busy lives that are constantly changing and moving at a fast pace," said Bruce. "Taking a break here at camp can help us reconnect to ourselves, each other and our

faith.

"The annual Midwinter Retreat is designed to help us gather 'around the fire' and check-in with how we have been, how we want to be and what we need to live out our faith...Another Way," he commented.

Registration opens Friday, Dec. 20

The subsidized rate is \$165 per youth. The gratitude rate is

\$215 per youth. The rate selected is up to the family. The gratitude rate more accurately reflects the true cost of the event.

Check-in: 7 p.m. on Friday (Participants eat before they arrive.)

Check-out: 1 p.m. on Sunday (Lunch is served on Sunday.)

For information, email kristen.almgren@gmail.com.



JOIN US FOR MIDWINTER AT PILGRIM FIRS!

Coming Full Circle... Another Way

February 7-9, 2025

Check-In: 7:00pm, Friday

Check-Out: 1:00pm, Sunday

Age: 6th-12th grade

Cost: \$165 (\$215 gratitude rate for those who are able*)

*The gratitude rate is an option for those who are willing and able to pay a higher rate. It more accurately reflects the true cost of the event, including meals & lodging for the volunteer leaders.

Cost should never be a reason someone doesn't attend a youth event. Please reach out to Pilgrim Firs or your church for assistance.

<http://pilgrim-firs.org>