



A New Song

FIRST METHODIST
UNITED & OPEN

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE FEBRUARY 2024



Lord, what do you want to
do *through me* to fulfill
your vision for First
Methodist?

First Methodist
Bloomington,
Indiana



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTORS

Dear Friends,

A New Song is the theme of our upcoming campaign to eliminate our debt and complete a major organ renovation. We are excited about the campaign and the difference it will make for generations to come!

As we enter this important time in the life of our congregation, this Devotion Guide has been prepared as a tool for us to use for prayer and discernment. We invite you to use it each day. We know that you will be blessed by the stories of faith contained in these pages. We thank God for those who have shared a part of their lives and written these inspiring devotionals. We also appreciate all the hard work our Devotion Guide team did putting this together. Thank you all so much!

As the members and friends of First United Methodist Church, we are being asked during the campaign to pray a simple, yet profound prayer: "Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?" May God prepare all our hearts to celebrate God's presence in our lives with an outpouring of our generosity and faithfulness.

Blessings,

Three handwritten signatures in black ink. From left to right: Chuck Cooksey, E.G. White, and Maika Arthur.

Chuck Cooksey, E.G. White, and Maika Arthur
Campaign Directors



A NEW SONG QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

What is A New Song? It is the theme of our capital campaign to eliminate the building debt and to raise the funds to pay for the restoration of our pipe organ.

Will First Methodist incur any long-term debt? A short-term loan was necessary to begin the repairs and restoration of our organ before it had a catastrophic failure. Our goal is through your gifts to A New Song campaign to not only pay for our organ restoration but also to pay off our decades-old building debt.

How will giving to A New Song affect my tithe or offering? A New Song is not our annual stewardship campaign. Your regular tithe or offering should not be impacted. Our tithe or offering should always be our first priority. The biblical standard of the tithe (10%) is our foundational giving. A New Song is an opportunity to give sacrificially above our regular tithes or offerings.

When and where will I make my commitment? During our worship services on February 25, we will offer our estimate of giving cards.

What is sacrificial giving? To sacrifice is to give something of importance so that something of greater significance may occur. At its heart, sacrificial giving begins with prayerful discernment as to what God is asking us to give.

How will the commitments be paid? It is up to you. Commitments may be paid from now through December 31, 2027. Gifts may be given weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly, or in any way that is most convenient for you. Assets that can be converted to cash such as real estate, stocks, bonds, life insurance, and other securities are excellent ways to give. Gifts of appreciated assets may have additional tax benefits to the donor. Many people are also using retirement assets for their charitable gifts because of the tax benefits possible. One option for giving retirement assets, if you are 70 1/2 or older, may be an IRA charitable rollover gift. Please consult your tax adviser to see what opportunities apply to you.

How much am I expected to give? The only expectation is that each person pray and ask the question, "Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?" and go where God leads. While the amounts will obviously be different for everyone, our hope is that each person will be led by God to give generously and sacrificially.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 1

BY RACHEL GERBER

God called to him from the bush, “Moses, Moses!” “Here I am!” Moses replied. Then God said, “Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground.”—Exodus 3:4-5

“Get in the car!”

Sunday morning, with three boys, is often like herding cats to get out the door. And on time.

One Sunday a few years ago it was pouring rain. My husband pulled up to the front door of the church to unload. The van sliding door opened. Boy number one popped out and ran in. Boy number two popped out and ran in. Boy number three popped out . . . and had no shoes on.

I guess, “Get in the car!” was taken in the most literal sense.

We ran up the steep concrete stairs, entering the church to the sound of the opening hymn. In an instant I realized that this was not a parenting fail, but a completely appropriate gesture. For this was holy ground.

As we found our seats, I found myself flooded with gratitude as I considered the various ways faith formation is being tended to here. My thoughts turned to the relationships we have been graced with: teachers, youth leaders, and mentors who give time and energy creating space for our children to grow and develop, nurturing the soil and planting seeds that will grow in God’s time, not ours. We tend to want to see instant results—to empirically measure our work and effort by counting the number we see, but we don’t ever really know the impact of what we do. I pray that you will not lose heart. I pray that you will be reminded of the holy work you are doing to shape the container of faith that these young ones will carry.

As the choir sang, my youngest, cognizant of his folly, wondered if it was okay to not have on shoes. I whispered back, “Oh, baby, just like we take off our shoes in our home, this is God’s house. I’ll take mine off too.” And together we sang bare-footed, standing on holy ground.

Thank you, God, for the many people who were instrumental in shaping my own faith, and may I pass this on to others. Amen.

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Rachel

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2

BY FRAN KLINGER

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . . If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.—1 Corinthians 12: 12 and 26

Years ago, when I was away from church, I enjoyed attending the concerts at the National Women's Music Festival. I did that for a couple of years and then decided to volunteer to help put it on. It changed from being something I enjoyed to being something that was mine. It made all the difference.

I've repeated things at First Methodist. At first, I simply attended Open Door, then I joined the drama team, read Scripture, and helped decorate the Communion Table. Then I took a huge step and joined Wesley Choir. That group changed my life; I never felt more loved. I felt that I was helping to spread that love to others.

Just attending service was never again enough. Being part of what our church does has made my life infinitely better. My hope is that what we do at First Methodist makes life better for people in Bloomington and around the world.

Dear God, we thank you for the privilege of being a part of the body of Christ. Help us to grow beyond just being church attenders, so that we indeed become doers of the word also. We ask you to bless the efforts of your holy church as we work to share your love with all the world. Amen.

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Fran

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 3

BY LELAND AND HELEN BUTLER

Clap your hands, all ye peoples. Shout to God with loud songs of joy!—Psalm 47:1

Our faith journey together began in the city of El Paso when Leland was a young Army officer, and Helen was a first-year elementary music teacher in 1965. We met in a Sunday school class for single young adults. In the beginning of our relationship, we were both involved in the Asbury Methodist Church Choir. My interest was also in sports, having been involved in sports my whole life. We were married in Asbury Methodist by Helen's father, Dr. Ray B McGrew, on August 20, 1966.

After our time in El Paso, we moved to Bloomington and joined First Methodist Church. One of the main reasons for choosing FUMC was the musical program of the church. Our time in the choir has allowed us to present major works to the congregation and use our musical talents to worship the glory of God. We have been members of the FUMC choir for 55 years and hope to continue for a few more.

The church has been our support for our family for years. Our children were baptized, confirmed, and blessed to be a part of the church family in their formative years. We continue to sing in the Chancel Choir and receive blessings each Sunday. Many lifelong relationships have come from our friends at FUMC.

Through the refurbishing of the church organ, First United Methodist Church will continue its great tradition of worship music for generations yet to be born. Share with us as we go on a journey to firm the foundation of our church.

Our Father, continue to bless our church and congregation as we seek to serve you. Amen.

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Leland and Helen

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4

BY BEN U.

KICK-OFF
SUNDAY!

**Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”
—Matthew 14:16**

I am glad to be a member of First United Methodist Church in Bloomington. There are many reasons why I think that FUMCB is a welcoming and friendly community. It is open and listens to everyone’s ideas, including mine! I feel comfortable sharing my personal life and I am happy worshipping here.

The following is an example of how FUMCB listens to everyone’s ideas—even mine as a kid! When I had an idea to improve Vacation Bible School, the church took my idea into consideration. Moments like this make me thankful to be at First Methodist.

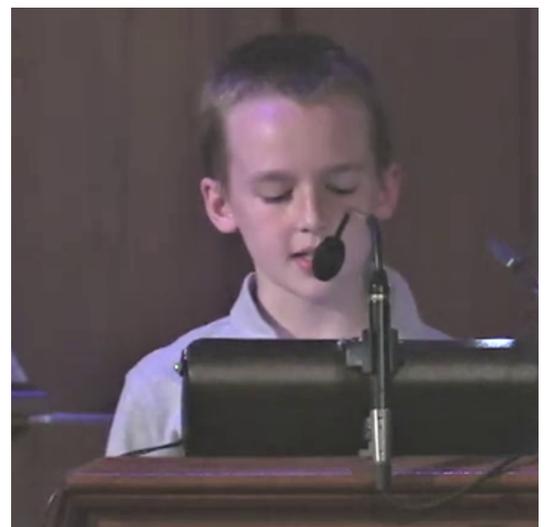
I feel comfortable sharing my personal life here. One time in Sunday School, we were asked to talk and pray about what we were thankful for. I talked about my pets, parents, sibling, and school and felt at ease doing so. I am glad I can share my whole self with this church.

FUMCB is an easy place for me to worship. When my family moved back to Bloomington, we tried a few other churches, but the music was too loud or the liturgies were flat and boring. When I came to FUMCB, the music and readings were excellent and really kept me engaged and helped me connect to God.

FUMCB is an open and affirming community where I feel comfortable worshipping every single week.

Dear God, help us to keep loving our neighbor and to keep supporting our church. Amen.

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Ben

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5

BY MAKYAMBE TABU (MAMA TABU)

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.—Galatians 6:9

God indeed works in mysterious ways. My father was a pastor in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Methodist church, and I grew up in church. We later sought refuge in Tanzania when there was trouble in DRC, and we continued to go to that church. When I was told we would be brought to the USA, I prayed to God that I and my children, Ndume and Jafeti, would find our church here. I also prayed to God that we would find people who would love each other.

Our dreams have been exceeded. FUMCB welcomed us as they would their people, and they have become our family. They have shown great care and concern physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We are glad to be included in the service sometimes as readers. We were so pleased that Jafeti was baptized here, and we were all received in the church. The pastors have used their knowledge of languages so that we can worship here. My scriptural advice to the entire church is Galatians 6:9: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Since we have been here I have seen the community of East Africans grow from the three of us to nearly 40. Every Sunday members of this congregation come to pick up all of us for church, and they also do so when we need wheels to various appointments during the week. Your generosity of time and resources is a blessing. We can indeed say—and we tell those we left behind—that we have friends here in Bloomington. May God's name be praised.

Dear God, we thank you for your grace and love that have brought us to Bloomington where we have become part of the church family of First Methodist. Amen.



Mama Tabu

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 6

BY SARA BAYSINGER

So reach out and welcome one another to God's glory. Jesus did it; now you do it!

—Romans 15:7

"Live as though you liked yourself, and it may happen: reach out, keep reaching out."

—Marge Piercy

My phrase for 2023 was reach out. I spent most of my teen years and early twenties in a state of low self-esteem, severe social anxiety, and major depression. I existed in a pit of loneliness so deep that it required someone to reach out persistently for me to even look up from my agony to get a glimpse of their open hand. Eventually, in my late twenties, I accepted the fact that I would never fully emerge from the pit. And with that realization, I stopped acknowledging the hands reaching out to me.

Once COVID hit, however, I finally got to a point where I knew things had to change. Now, after years of being regulated on medication and going to therapy, I no longer struggle with mental health issues. Medicine brought me out of the pit, and therapy directed me down the path that led me far away from that lonely abyss. On this new path, I see the hands reaching out to me, and I take them with enthusiasm.

It was during an Ash Wednesday service here at First when—after having spent most of my life begging God, "Please help me,"—I finally felt mentally stable enough to ask God, "How can I help others?"

This line by Marge Piercy carved a path through my mind like a life-giving stream in the desert: "reach out, keep reaching out." I realized, I'm no longer the one in the pit waiting for a hand to pull me out. I'm finally mentally healthy enough to help others out of their own pits. I'm in a place where I can fully experience God's glory enough to share it with those around me.

Divine Parent, don't let us hesitate to grasp onto the hands reaching out to us to pull us out of the pit. And once we're on our feet facing that glorious sunrise for the first time, remind us to also reach out our hands and pull others out of their own pits. Amen.



Sara

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 7

BY JANE GOUKER

I am with you always, even to the end of this age.—Matthew 28:20

My Dad died unexpectedly of an aortic aneurysm on the operating table at age 64. I was mad at everyone; I was mad at the circumstances; but I was mostly mad at God. I needed my dad—our family needed him. Dad was a hard worker; so loyal, honest; persevered through anything; served in WWII in the European campaign; full of love and happiness; a musician, athlete, indestructible; he was my hero. Why, God? Even though I was raised in the United Methodist faith, I found no solace in that learning when he passed.

Mom was 62, and now alone. She was already a “woman before her time.” Unlike most women in the fifties and sixties, she had a full-time job outside the home, but still had dinner on the table at 6:00 every night. This was not the future envisioned of travel and time with Dad. Even though I was 33 at the time and on my own, I watched her. She was a woman of deep faith and a pillar of strength as she navigated this new normal. She would have moments, of course, but she never wavered. She would say to me, “I am with you always.” That’s nice—thanks, Mom!

I stayed mad for 20 years. Then, a friend asked me to go with her to First United Methodist one Sunday. I loved the architecture, the music; and, oddly, I immediately felt at home and warm. I kept going long after my friend stopped. Ultimately, I realized those words of “I am with you always” were not mom’s, but Scripture. They resonated within me even more. The passage would crop up in the strangest places—usually when I needed it most. Mom was trying to tell me all those years before that we were going to be okay; we were not alone. That Scripture provided comfort, and acceptance for her—and now, for me. I stopped being mad.

Thank you, God, for your presence in my life. And for ALWAYS being with me!

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Jane

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 8

BY FRANCIE HILL

[Martha] had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. [Martha] came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."—Luke 10:38-41

This Scripture brought to mind the paraphrased wisdom of Stephen Covey, "Seek first to understand others, and only then to be understood." We live in divisive times in which so many shout out their own opinions, views, or versions of the facts, before listening to understand the other. Although the Mary/Martha Scripture reminds us to listen to God and not to get bogged down in our own needs, the concept applies equally well to listening to those around us. Listen first, and after you truly understand, you can speak.

Thank you, God, for giving us ears to listen. Remind us to use those ears to hear your voice and the voice of others. Give us patience to zip our lips while we seek to understand your plan for us. Give us kindness to hear and truly understand the experiences, the reasons, and the needs of others. Give us humility. Amen.

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Francie

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 9

BY HAROLD POPP

Do not be afraid, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.—Isaiah 40:10-11

While serving as an assistant dean at a university in Massachusetts, I was informed that the assistant dean level was being eliminated at the end of the first semester, owing to fiscal exigency. Suddenly, I was unemployed, regardless of several degrees and extensive experience. Seeking university positions midyear appeared insurmountable. Somehow, I knew God was my rock and guide. I focused my efforts and time searching for open positions and writing application letters. Prayer from family and friends was critically important, and I felt surrounded by those who prayed on my behalf. My wife was a constant source of strength. Maintaining a positive mental attitude was not always easy. I had never been in an unemployment line. This was a time of testing, but I realized my trust had to be found in my Heavenly Father.

Late in the second semester, as positions seemed to be closing without hint of success, I received a call from the provost at Florida State University. His first words were: "Harold, do you have a job?" My response was: "No." He immediately said: "Good. I want you to become the acting associate dean of the School of Music here." I know there was more conversation, but somehow, I knew that I had been blessed. Patience? I hadn't done well with that, although the promise of hope never left me.

Remembering that experience, I could see the Hand of God at work, although I certainly did not know what he was doing. That lesson has been a foundation for the rest of my life. God promised he would never leave us or forsake us. That promise appears in both the Old and New Testaments. That truth will never fail us.

Heavenly Father, help us to never forget your love and care for each of us. Help us to always depend on your promises. Amen.

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Harold

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 10

BY EVELYN LAFOLLETTE

May you live to see your children's children.—Psalm 128:6

Many gifts have blessed my life, but the greatest has been my family, beginning with my dear husband, Jim LaFollette, known as "Doc." Then soon the two of us became the five of us, when "Jamie," "Muffie," and "Chris" arrived, becoming my passion through their emerging adulthood.

This included Mom's Day Out for Chris, Sunday School with tender memories of Kenda Webb sending Bible verses home weekly, Vacation Church School, Cherub and Carol Choirs directed by Helen Butler, the Christmas Pageant with angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph and a live Baby Jesus, Sunday evening youth group, mission trips, and the basis of their faith foundation, infant baptism, and youth confirmation.

But then the hard part began, letting go and trusting they would fly, which they did, as a coach, a preschool teacher, and a family physician. Then, to my joy, five additional gifts were added: Diana, Clara Beth, Cate, Anna Wade, and Elaina Grace. Little did I realize how each would touch my heart and still does!

When Jamie called (not texted) May 4, 1999, with the message, "Mom, It's a girl!" I failed to realize again how each precious granddaughter would be learning to flap her wings as her parents did with lessons of faith and values her parents learned growing up at First Church.

Now, my flying is complete, and I'm learning to sit back, listen and pray. When composing this reflection, the words of Psalm 89:1 in the United Women in Faith Prayer Guide spoke to me: "I will sing of the Lord's loyal love forever. I will proclaim Your faithfulness with my own mouth from one generation to the next."

Finally, looking forward, I will sing the Lord's song as a 50-year member of this faith community, continuing to connect with our ever-growing church family who is still teaching me new songs.

Dear God, I carry my "family" family and my church family in my heart as that is all I can do as that part of me will never die. Amen.



EV

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11

BY CHUCK PRESTINARI

Lead me, O Lord, in thy righteousness . . . make thy way plain before my face.—Psalm 5:8

My first Sunday attending FUMC was at the beginning of my freshman year at the IU School of Music in August 1994. Throughout my high school years, I had been extremely active in the music programs of three small churches in my hometown—one Presbyterian (my home church, where I played bells and sang in the choir); one Methodist (where I led a small choir); and one Catholic (where I played organ and piano for Saturday evening and Sunday noon Mass). After years of running from church to church each weekend, I came to Bloomington seeking a large church, with the specific intent that I planned to worship “anonymously” from the back pews. The lighted cross at the top of FUMC’s steeple pointed me to where I needed to go.

But after nearly two weeks of severe homesickness, and not yet having made friends at school, I arrived at FUMC as a person broken and in need of a faith community. I remember the glorious organ music, the majestic hymns, and above all, the Chancel Choir singing “Thanks Be to God” from Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*. I was transported, lifted in a way I had never experienced church or sacred music before, and at the same time, I was crestfallen. A deceptive voice inside me was saying, “This church doesn’t need you or your meager musical skills.” But then, Dr. Amerson started to preach a sermon on courage; on having faith to take risks in the face of fear; on trusting in God to guide us, no matter how unprepared we may feel. At the end of the service, inspired by Dr. Amerson’s message, I made my way to the choir loft, and asked the organist, “Who do I need to speak to about joining the choir?” Charles Webb smiled broadly, and said “Well, that would be me!” and offered to drive me to rehearsal the next Thursday evening.

God opened a door for me that Sunday morning, and I will always be grateful that I took the opportunity to walk through. From that first rehearsal, I immediately found myself embraced by the members of the Chancel Choir as family. FUMC quickly became my home away from home. While other college students looked forward to Friday and Saturday evening parties, I couldn’t wait for Thursday night choir practices and Sunday morning services. As has been true for countless others who have been part of FUMC, the magnificent music, the powerful sermons, the fellowship and hospitality of the choir and congregation nurtured me, challenged me, educated me, fed me, inspired me. My church family soon expanded beyond the choir loft; my faith and understanding grew; opportunities to help serve others presented themselves; and my life was forever changed.

Nearly 30 years have passed since I first walked through the Washington Street doors of FUMC. Week after week, from my seat in the choir loft, I have looked across our beautiful sanctuary, singing and/or playing with joyful abandon, as we raise our hymns of praise and prayer to God. And I see across the room not just faces, but dear friends and family who have blessed me with so many gifts—inspiring my love of sacred music; providing me with opportunities to

serve, lead, and help build community; supporting my education; celebrating my personal accomplishments; and comforting and supporting me through the darkest days of despair. Outside of my own family, nothing has been more influential in my life. I am so grateful to be a part of a congregation so deeply committed to serving our community, our nation, and our world—a congregation that inspires me each and every day to better love one another in the example of Jesus Christ.

Lord God, our Heavenly Father, we give praise and thanks for your gracious gifts which you provide so faithfully. Help us enjoy these blessings with gratitude and reverence, that we may be strengthened to praise you and serve our neighbors; through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

**Source: Wilhelm Löhe, 1808–1872*



Chuck

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 12

BY SAVANNA LILY WEBBER AND MÍTIA GANADE D'ACOL

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.—Colossians 3:16

We have been choir singers since a very young age, and we are blessed to have found in the First United Methodist Church's Chancel Choir a community where we can share our love of music-making. Every week, we look forward to being together with our fellow choristers and bringing the blessing of our voices to such a devoted community. While in service, we enjoy the experience of communal singing both with the choir and the whole congregation, and we can feel in our bodies the faith that each one of us offers up to God.

Creator God, we humbly pray that our praises in this church reach heaven and unite our hearts with the eternal sound. May our voices and instruments, guided by your Holy Spirit, bring light to darkness, restore hope to the oppressed, and bring healing to the suffering. With gratitude, we offer our worship as a platform for you to touch our lives and strengthen your church. Amen.



Mítia and Savanna



A GUIDE TO DISCERNMENT

Behold, God is my salvation. I will trust and not be afraid.—Isaiah 12:2

Each of us is being asked during *A New Song* to prayerfully discern what God is leading us to give. As you begin praying about your commitment, keep in mind that God asks us for “equal sacrifice not equal gifts.” Obviously, God has not given everyone the ability to commit the same dollar amount. However, God does call us to make the same quality of commitment.

There are two ways to decide what to give. The easiest is to give based on reason. This means looking at what one has, calculating what is a “reasonable” amount, and committing that amount. Reason simply asks, “What can I comfortably afford?” The second avenue is giving based on revelation, praying, “Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?” When one makes giving a matter of discernment, through prayer, our decision becomes an act of worship. It is giving that asks, “How much do I trust God?”

Some Possible Steps for Discernment

Pray daily and seek God’s will. Pray our centering prayer, “Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?” Give God time to speak. You may find that God will reveal creative ways for you to give more than the first amount that popped into your head. Here are some questions that could help:

- Are there assets such as stocks, bonds, land, etc., that could be given?
- Are there ways expenses could be decreased to make a larger gift?
- Are there ways to increase income in order to make a larger gift?

Go where God leads!

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13

BY SANDRA MOBERLY

Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?—Matthew 6:25

In the 1980s, I left Wisconsin a single mother with two children and moved back to Indiana. I considered moving back to my hometown, New Albany, but opted instead for Zionsville, as I felt my job prospects were better in the Indianapolis area. At that time the community was small with schools I felt were comfortable for the children. One summer Friday evening, I was sitting in the backyard of the small house I rented, drinking a glass of wine and overwhelmed by the prospect of how I was going to pay my next month's rent. I was between jobs teaching one year at Carmel-Clay Junior High for a teacher on pregnancy leave, and I would soon start a job as an administrative assistant at the IU School of Medicine. A friend and neighbor saw me and came over to join me. We visited, and I commiserated that I was in this dilemma. The next day, unexpectedly, she came over with the \$400 that I needed. In my life, there have been many times that I felt like I depended on "the kindness of strangers," but really these moments are "the kindness of angels." In due time, I was able to pay back the gift.

As my son was looking forward to his college experience, someone I knew told me she had visited recently with my good friend at Indiana University, Steve Moberly. He remembered me. At Christmas that year, I sent Steve a Christmas card. Shortly after that, when he was in Indianapolis for the Legislative session, he invited me to go to lunch. As they say, "the rest is history." And as I say, this was providential because of "the kindness of an angel." Steve and I were blessed to marry. I was raised in the Disciples of Christ Christian Church in New Albany. To me, it is important to learn about God and Jesus in Sunday School as you are growing up.

I later attended a most enlightening Bible study living in Zionsville. I was already attending the Methodist church. Greg McGarvey was the pastor and the person who married me and Steve at IU's Beck Chapel. Steve was a 50-year member of his church in Shelbyville, where we settled before retiring to our favorite place, Bloomington. First United Methodist Church in Bloomington is our home church now. Here, we have been blessed by God in so many ways.

Our Father, thank you for all the blessings you send our way, in small ways and large ways, and sometimes letting us know, "not now, not today." Lord, guide us, show us the way, forgive our sins. In all may we please thee. Amen.



Sandra

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14

BY (RUTH) ANN ALLEN

"Urah, hanevel, v'chinor! A-irah shahar!"—Psalm 108:2, in Hebrew

Translation: "O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn!"

(Leonard Bernstein used this verse at the beginning of his composition Chichester Psalms.)

For me the church has been my rock since I was a child, and music has been my joy. No matter where we lived, the local church was our connection to the community along with the Navy community. We arrived in Bloomington in August of 1977, and the second Sunday that we were here we attended church at FUMC. The following Thursday we were at choir practice, and this has been our home since then. Most of our choir music and hymns are founded in the Scriptures. One piece of music that speaks to me is the Brahms Requiem, especially the second movement:

"Behold all flesh is as the grass and all the goodliness of men is as the flower of grass; for lo, the grass withreth and the flower thereof decayeth. Now therefore, be patient, O my brethren, unto the coming of Christ. See how the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth and hath long patience, till he receive the early rain and the later rain. So be ye patient. But yet the Lord's word endureth, endureth for evermore. The redeemed of the Lord shall return again, and come rejoicing, unto Zion; gladness, joy everlasting, joy upon their heads shall be; joy and gladness, these shall be their portion, and tears and sighing shall flee from them, gladness, joy upon their heads shall be, joy everlasting."*

I would summarize this movement this way: People are as the grass, they wither and die, but the glory of the Lord endures forever with love and joy everlasting.

Peace.

**Lyrics based on Scripture from 1 Peter 1:24-25,
James 5:7-8, and Isaiah 35:10*

*Lord, what do you want to do through me
to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?*



Ann

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

BY JULIE PHILLIPS

He has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.—Micah 6:8

I was raised to pursue a godly life but struggled with what that meant. In the sixties and seventies I was encouraged to be hard working and positive. I had difficulty, though, tamping down my love of being loud and in charge. Encouraged to focus on homemaking and discouraged from being competitive, I looked to my faith studies for help and was thoroughly frustrated by the 1990s and the popularity of WWJD (what would Jesus do?). If Jesus is perfection, I felt like a failure.

In the 2000s after experiencing some difficulties, I shifted my approach to faith studies. It wasn't a decision. It was a necessity born in feeling "beat up by life." Rather than leaning in, trying harder, I sat back and widened my eyes, engaging my senses. What I found in that space was the Holy Spirit—an example I identified with and fell head over heels in love with.

The Holy Spirit, that is as near to me as breathing in and breathing out, led me to realize that what the Lord requires from us is "to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God." While I love God and continue to study and learn from the perfect example of Jesus Christ, my life partner, the Holy Spirit, helps me daily to use my competitiveness to pursue justice hard, to lead by example in loving faithfully (which sometimes looks like the messy love from a Labrador puppy), and to walk humbly like the Holy Spirit, being present, not necessarily the focus. In the Holy Spirit is freedom, love, discipline, and the easy sanding of my rough edges. Praise God!

**Thank you, God, for all you are and all you do to find and love all people.
Amen.**

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Julie, center

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16

BY COOPER SYKES

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.—John 15:5

Perspective. The ways in which we move throughout the world and interact with others constantly revert back to the notion of perspective. What are the thought patterns that shape our daily realities? My faith journey has been defined by a miniscule shift in perspective that's made a gargantuan difference in how I go about my day-to-day life.

I am a joy enthusiast, savoring any opportunity to bring smiles to my community. My perspective shift stems from thinking about joy as a communal act for the Kingdom of God rather than an individual act. For me, to embody the love of God means to share the spiritual experience that is joyfully partaking in the world God has made. It is a visceral and sublime thing to exist, and I try to cherish that each and every day.

John 15:5 exemplifies the concept of joy as a communal action in God's Kingdom, as one cannot bear fruit without the love and support of Jesus. When I've engaged in actions that bring me joy, such as playing my saxophone, I've tried to think about how they bring glory to the majesty of God. For example, when I played David Maslanka's Symphony No. 4, the Doxology was heavily present, and as I played the Old Hundredth tune, I constantly was thinking about how creating this gorgeous music was sharing the joy and love of God with those both performing and in the audience. My saxophone was the vine, and the music was the branches of Jesus.

Here at First Methodist, I've been so thankful to experience communal joy via Jubilee, Common Ground, and so many other fantastic spiritual avenues. Whether by doing a silly introduction to announcements on Wednesday nights at Jubilee or greeting at the atrium for Common Ground, I try to bear the fruit of God by shifting the joys of daily life from one to many.

First Methodist has provided a spiritual home for me amidst the turbulent world around us, and I hope to continue sharing communal joy and the fruit of the Kingdom with all of you!

Dear God, thank you for helping us to share in your bountiful life and communal joy every day. Please help us to remember that with you as the vine and us as the branches, we can, together, create a beautiful tree of joyful life in this life and beyond. Amen.



Cooper, center

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17

BY SAM KIZER

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.—Romans 8:1

I spent the better part of a decade trying to reconcile being Christian with being gay. I was taught that God does not extend salvation to people like me, so I was left with two options: choose to be straight and deny my true self in order to be saved, or live authentically as an irredeemable abomination with the knowledge that I am eternally damned.

The tension between those two paths became so overwhelming that I chose a third route: if I was bound for hell regardless, then why delay the inevitable? Thankfully, God called upon my friends to intervene before I made the irreversible decision. They quite literally saved me from death. Was it possible, then, that God's love transcends sexual orientation? That God loves me? And are there churches out there who genuinely embody such love?

When I initially visited First Methodist, I walked towards the sanctuary with a great deal of anxiety and skepticism. "Open to all" is rarely without caveat, so I was prepared to feel welcome so long as I downplayed my sexuality. I barely made it up the steps before being welcomed inside. People in nearby pews invited me to other church activities before the service even concluded. Members of the Chancel Choir and Jubilee responded to my Connection Card within a day.

It became apparent almost immediately that I belong here, that I can worship and serve here, that I don't have to hide myself here. Through this faith community, I realized that I am whole—beautifully and wonderfully and brilliantly created—and am loved because of my queerness, not in spite of it. No longer do I question the extent of God's love and grace.

More often than not, God works in mysterious ways. But there is no mystery at First Methodist. His love is bold, urgent, and all-encompassing. And it is found here.

Gracious God, make us instruments of your love overflowing so that all who know us may also know you. Amen.



Sam

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18

BY MARKUS DICKINSON

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.—Matthew 5:3

We once went to church with a guy who liked to say, "There are no problems, only challenges and opportunities." It's something Jesus might say. I'm not sure I totally buy it . . . but I really want to hang out with someone who believes it, and who lives that way.

That was 15 to 20 years ago. Last year, I kicked off my summer with a collarbone fracture and subsequent surgery. After a busy school year, my main summer goals, pre-fracture, were to rest more and to do less, maybe even take a week or two off from my usual jogging—if I could get my stubborn self to do that.

Somewhere, somebody was laughing at the way that "rest" had come about.

In the Gospels, I see a Jesus who sees opportunities where others see problems. In John, chapter 2, when his mom tells him the wine's run out at a wedding, he first says, "My hour has not yet come" and then, almost immediately, he turns the water into wine. I guess his hour had come, after all.

This may be relevant to where I found myself last summer.

I want to hang out with a Jesus who sees opportunities where I see bicycle accidents ruining my summer and physical therapy sessions that break up my neat schedule. I want to hang out with a Jesus who pushes me, through my shoulder pain, to be more empathetic to the elderly, to the disabled, to those who need motivation to get out of bed. I want to hang out with a Jesus who doesn't see me in the limited ways I sometimes see myself, as if jogging were a critical aspect of my identity, and who encourages me to be present in the moment.

I don't know how much I always believe what Jesus says, but I want to live that way.

Lord, help us to see opportunities where we normally see problems and barriers; help us to know that, with you, all things are possible and all things are renewed. Amen.



Markus

CHILDREN'S PAGE

BY ELEMENTARY-AGE CHILDREN AT FIRST METHODIST SUNDAY SCHOOL

Desiree Ippolito, assistant for Children and Family Ministries at First, asked our elementary-age children in Sunday School to share some of their favorite memories about church and what church means to them. Their answers express the love and joy they experience growing up at First Methodist.

What is your favorite part about church?

The food Eva, 8

What does church mean to you?

It is a place that I can worship God and have a good time with others. Ben, 11

What does church mean to you?

To me church means being close to God and being close to friends. Evie U., 7

What does church mean to you?

a Place to worship God and make friends Cal, 11

What does church mean to you?

singing! Rosie, 6



What is one memory from church?

sitting and listening to my mommy singing.

Corinne, 7 (adult handwriting)



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19

BY VICKI POPP

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all you do acknowledge Him and He will make your path straight.—Proverbs 3:5

My doctors were frustrated because they could not get a complete diagnosis of my lung tumor. They had sent a biopsy to the Mayo Clinic, and they, too, could not identify the malignant tumor. All agreed radiation and chemotherapy would not lead to cure. With my previous surgeries and health problems, to remove the tumor seemed the best decision for a positive outcome. However, a fifty percent survival chance was all they could predict.

I and my family went to prayer. I decided God was leading me to take the chance and have the surgery. I felt at peace with the decision. The doctors and nurses agreed that they felt a quiet peace and guidance during the surgery and my recovery in the hospital. The removal of part of my lung and a rib was needed to get the tumor removed. They called me their miracle patient.

God is good! God promises to always be with us and bear our burdens. We don't know what challenges lie ahead, but with God on our side we live with hope. I know I cannot solve problems alone with my knowledge and understanding. I have been cancer free for three years, and I thank God for his mercy and blessings!

Thank you, God, for using our many challenges in life to strengthen us. Your love and encouragement as we face each obstacle are assuring and uplifting. We give you thanks and praise. Amen

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Vicki

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20

BY LINDA STEPHENSON

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to act kindly, and to walk humbly with your God?—Micah 6:8

I grew up a Southern Baptist, converted to Catholicism at age 17, and then married a Methodist. Ed went to Mass with me for four years before we moved to Berkeley, California, and I said, "You've gone to church with me for a while, and I'm pretty ecumenical. Why don't I try going with you to the Methodist Church?" One Sunday our minister at Epworth Church in Berkeley preached a sermon on a John Wesley principle, "To think and let think." This message spoke to my heart. It fit with my ever-broadening horizons that took a sheltered young woman from South Carolina to graduate school in Madison, Wisconsin, at the height of the student unrest in 1969 and then to Berkeley from 1975-77. Those were heady days as I was exposed to all kinds of mind-expanding ideas from being in a Women's Consciousness-Raising Group in Madison, where we attended a liberal Catholic church on the UW campus, to attending a progressive Methodist Church in North Berkeley.

For me it was both an intellectual journey and a spiritual journey. When we came to Bloomington and joined First Methodist, I found the perfect place to continue my pilgrimage toward a broad, all-encompassing faith that accepts us all as God's children. First Methodist has always provided safe harbor for people with a wide range of social, theological, and political ideas. I have valued that diversity of opinions and loved the fact that we could worship together. I've experienced challenging sermons from the pulpit for 44 years and in-depth spiritual discussions in the Wesley Conventicle for 34 years, in addition to wonderful small groups and the love and ministry of individual saints within the congregation. I've come to feel blessed with the joy of Christ's love for all. I love our church.

Dear God, we thank you for the blessing of First United Methodist Church, where we find room to learn, to question, and to grow closer to you. We ask you to open our hearts to love and accept all your children into our fellowship. Amen.

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Linda

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21

BY MARILYN HARTMAN

O come, let us sing unto the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.—Psalm 95:1-3

There are so many Scriptures that remind us of the glory of God and why we praise God for his goodness and mercy. Felix Mendelsohn's Psalm 95, Opus 46, is one of my favorites. "O, Come Let Us Sing!" What I hear, feel, and experience though singing and hearing sacred music I cannot adequately convey in words. More than any other form of human expression, music captures my faith in God's grace, God's mercy, and God's wondrous love. Music has testified to the faith of Christians throughout the ages, whether it was the hymn sung by the Apostles on Good Friday, Gregorian chants, Tenebrae hymns, Bach's choral and organ works, the oratorios of Handel and Mendelsohn, African American spirituals, or the contemporary works of John Rutter, Charles Stanford, Craig Courtney, Dan Forrest, and others.

Through music we can feel the presence of God in our midst. It's one of the ways in which we as children of God maintain our divine connection, draw inspiration, sustain hope during dark times of despair, and maintain the vision and promise of the coming of God's kingdom on earth. This is why I feel so passionate about supporting our music program, and now especially the organ renovation project.

Methodist poet and hymn writer Fred Pratt Green wrote the following text to the tune ENGELBERG, composed in 1904 by British composer Charles Villiers Stanford. It's one the Chancel Choir has sung over the years and expresses my faith and hope: "When in our music God is glorified, and adoration leaves no room for pride, it is as though the whole creation cried, Alleluia!"

"Come thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace; streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise. Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above. Raise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, mount of thy redeeming love."* Amen.

**"Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," The United Methodist Hymnal (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989) p. 400.*



Marilyn

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22

BY RILEY ROBERTS

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind . . . —Romans 12:2

The world we live in today can seemingly be full of hate and negative events caused by people or natural disasters. It can be extremely difficult to not give in to a lot of the hopelessness that can feel like it is surrounding us. After all, I am just one person. But that right there is the problem. We all tend to tell ourselves “I’m just one person” when we see negative happenings. The outcome of this is a mass conformity of giving up and not standing up for others in this world or even not standing up for ourselves.

But there is hope. If everybody thought “I’m only one person,” we wouldn’t have the millions of organizations around the world that seek to change the negative in our world such as the Humane Society, homeless shelters, Black Lives Matter, the women’s rights movement, and queer organizations like the Trevor Project or Indiana Youth Group. All these organizations started with one person believing they could renew the way things are. They were alone at first and fighting against a world that can be hopeless, but slowly as they renewed their minds, others joined in. Now we have so many organizations fighting homophobia, world hunger, homelessness, animal safety issues, etc.

We cannot give in to a world that wants us to conform to hopelessness. Jesus faced many situations that felt hopeless, and he may have felt like the whole world was against him. Every time someone who was looked down upon in society was presented to Jesus, he saw a new way for life to be for each individual he helped. Jesus never conformed to society’s ways of leaving people behind and deeming them as worthless. He always saw everyone’s value and importance. Jesus was constantly renewing his mind to be a better advocate for everyone around him, rather than following the grain. In renewing his mind and helping others around him, he renewed the minds of his followers and other people.

We must remember that just because the mass majority of people think one way, that does not mean it is the only way to think or be. Conformity is the enemy of beautiful change. We should always seek to be in constant renewal of our minds so that we may be able to make room for others in this world.

Dear God, help me to renew my mind. Let society not lead me to think the same as everyone else, but rather ignite the beautiful mind you have given me to think independent and new thoughts. Let my mind explode with renewal everyday so that I may be like Jesus, seeing the light in people where others do not. Amen.



Riley, left

HOW DO I DECIDE WHAT TO GIVE?

A *New Song* campaign is an exciting opportunity to take a step in faith and trust God as perhaps never before. It will challenge our priorities, our values, our commitment, and our trust in God's bigger plan for us. How can we give in a way that helps us to grow in our faith?

Prayerfully ask these questions and see if God doesn't impress on your mind a specific amount to give. The amount will almost always be larger than the first number that popped into your mind, since it will be a step of faith. *Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?*

Is my gift based on what I think I can afford or is it what God wants to give through me?

"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."—2 Corinthians 9:6

Does this amount stretch my faith? "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."—2 Corinthians 9:8

What does my gift show I value? "They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."—1 Timothy 6:18-19

Does my gift demonstrate how much I love God? "Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am, by mentioning the eagerness of others, testing the genuineness of your love."—2 Corinthians 8:7-8

Does this amount represent a genuine sacrifice? "I will not sacrifice to my God a burnt offering that costs me nothing."—2 Samuel 24:24

Does it express my gratefulness for how God has blessed my life and family? "With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good."—Psalm 54:6

Prayer: Loving God, I want to give an amount that shows how grateful I am for the many ways that you have blessed me. Help me to grow in faith by trusting you with my needs. Please impress on my heart the amount that you desire to give through me. And show me how I can give sacrificially to you. *Lord, What do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist? Amen.*

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23

BY JESSY ZACHARIAH

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.—Genesis 3:19

Recently my oldest brother passed away due to cancer, and I was filled with a sense of deep sadness that could not be explained away or shoved under the rug. Every little thing reminded me of my dear brother who lived a godly life. Through it all, I was made aware of what I am and where I am. I recalled what God said to the rich man who died before he could begin to use what was stored up in his big barns. God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” (Luke 12:20) Yes, it is disastrous to neglect life after death and amass wealth with no concern for helping the poor and those who need help. The patriarch Job recognized the brevity of life and the sovereignty of God, when he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.” (Job 1:21)

Let us hold loosely and lightly the things we have and see ourselves as we really are—we are dust. Let us constantly remind ourselves that we are limited and dependent. We desperately need other people, and we desperately need God! Christ promises us blessedness through his death and resurrection and calls us to repent and accept the salvation he has provided for us at the cross on Calvary. By his cross and resurrection, though we are only dust, we will be made a new creation. The hope of Jesus’ resurrection in combination with his command to help people in need and spread the good news of salvation have always been the vision of FUMC Bloomington. May our Lord speak to each of us to open our hearts to spread hope—not only in heaven but also here on earth.

Thank you, God, for reminding us that we are dust, and we pray that you look upon us with tender love. Help us to depend on you and experience how wonderful you are! Grant us grace to repent, accept your salvation, and spread your love to people around us through the mission of our church. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.



Jessy

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24

BY CHUCK MACKLIN

So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.—1 Corinthians 14:15

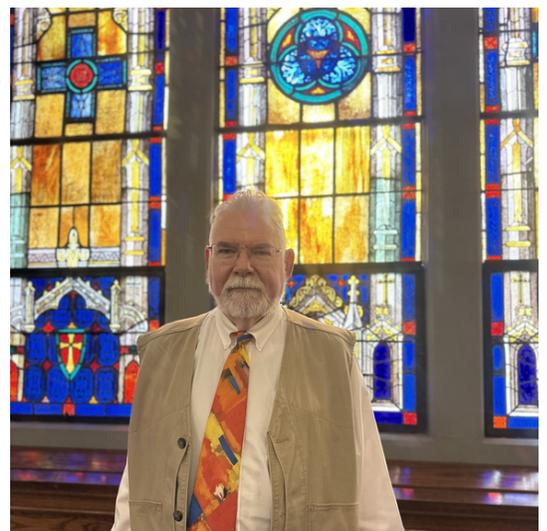
Day to day I find myself deep in daily events—so covered up with the ordinary that I don't think of where my heart is, where my life is, where my attention should be.

Not long ago I discovered Gregory Porter's recording of "Take Me to the Alley." I'd steep in it if I could; it takes me out of myself and into God's presence for the time it takes to listen to it or sing it; I'm finding that the more I hear it, the more I want to sing it. Does it make me a better person? I can't answer that, but the song puts me at a different focus point—doing, perhaps, some other things than I might have thought of. This isn't a song we sing in church—it's a song that perhaps sings itself in me.

"Well, they gild their houses
In preparation for the King
And they line the sidewalks
With every sort of shiny thing
They will be surprised
When they hear him say
Take me to the alley
Take me to the afflicted ones
Take me to the lonely ones
That somehow lost their way
Let them hear me say: I am your friend
Come to my table,
Rest here in my garden,
You will have a pardon. . . "*"

**From Take Me to the Alley, album released in 2016 by Blue Note Records*

Dear Lord, thank you—for you open our eyes as you open our lips, our hearts, our minds, our lives to you, for all. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.



Chuck

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25

BY JARED DIXON

CELEBRATION
SUNDAY!

Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him, singing with joy.—Psalm 100:2

I'm no stranger to suffering, shame, and hardship. Being openly gay while growing up in a small southern Indiana town and struggling with addiction throughout most of my adult years, I've experienced suffering; I've been called names, cursed, and looked down upon as a "second-rate" citizen. I've experienced shame, internalizing the negative messages society and others portray about addiction, crime, and LGBTQ individuals.

In adulthood, I stopped attending church and retreated from a spiritual life. Through shame and struggles with addiction, I lost sight of Jesus' love for me. I felt, perhaps, as Cleopas and Jesus' disciple walking alongside Christ on the road to Emmaus felt. I'd lost sight and faith in him and was scared and anxious about the future. Like these apostles, I thought, "Now that Jesus is gone, how can I find hope; how will I ever be free from sorrow?"

The church, a steadfast home, has helped open my eyes to Christ. Through worship at First United Methodist, I find hope in Jesus' name and a path toward redemption. Through its welcoming congregation and my service in the church's Chancel Choir, I find belonging and unconditional love. Certainly, there is great power in music. With a song and a glad heart, I am able to "worship the Lord with gladness [and] come before him, singing with joy." (Psalm 100:2) By attending FUMC services and singing in the choir, I am freely given the blessings of serving, in faith, Jesus Christ and hallowing God's name.

Sometimes I wonder why I've suffered—with shame, addiction, and other hardships—throughout my life. It's in these times I find comfort in a passage from 2 Corinthians, verse 10, which reminds me that, "the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation." What comfort and joy in realizing my sorrows can lead to freedom and result in salvation!

When society and others view me as something bad and unacceptable, I find peace in knowing God views me as good. God loves me unconditionally and created me—in his image—as good, loveable, and worthy.

Heavenly Father, thank you for believing in me and for your redeeming salvation. Allow me to hallow your name. Help me to not lose sight of you and to always have faith in your amazing grace. Amen



Jared

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26

BY ADAM STICHTER

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.—Genesis 1:1-2

Genesis 1 is probably my favorite passage of the first five books of the Old Testament. And my relationship to it has changed significantly over my lifetime. Growing up fairly evangelical, my brain was caught up in the creation/evolution debate, and I felt it was my duty to defend my Christian culture's marriage of how it understood the truth of Scripture. This of course brought me at odds with teachers, and it wasn't until college while at a Christian university that I met Christians who understood the stories in Genesis differently. Also, at this time I began to study myth and the very real impact that stories have on humans, even stories that aren't "true" in a factual/historical sense. And it's when I finally sat down in seminary and studied this set of verses that I finally came to my current understanding of this passage, one that consistently reminds me that God is in control and feeds my interest in sustainably caring for the planet.

So, in the beginning was chaos. Compared to other mythic creation stories of the cultures around Israel, this was normal. Creation starts in chaos and frankly continues in chaos, especially as people relate to their gods, who mirror and treat people with chaos. But the story in Genesis turns the narrative, and God, who is peace and order, tames the chaos and births life in the division of sky and sea, night and day, fish and birds. So now, when I read these passages, I don't see a historical telling of the account but an account born out of a necessity to express the Hebrew people's understanding of their creator God, a God who brings life out of chaos.

God, may we remember your spirit hovering over the chaos of the earth at the beginning of creation as we seek to find rest in the chaos that is our lives. May your spirit hover over us and birth in us your life. Amen.

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Adam, left

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27

BY QUIL ESPIRITU

I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”—Romans 7:18b-19

I was raised in the church my whole life, and I often found myself wondering how, if I was always surrounded by such goodness and such godly people, I was not as good and godly as they were. In all aspects of my life, but especially in my journey of faith, I often felt that I ought to be perfect, infallible, somehow better. This verse used to be such a point of shame in that journey, something I returned to over and over again in frustration and condemnation of myself, every time I fell short of what I wanted to be.

But with time and growth in the spirit, and with ongoing care from my faith community, I have come to see these verses differently. The Apostle Paul wrote this himself, not to condemn others but rather to admit his own struggles to his community. We know that no one is perfect, not even the people we look up to and want to emulate, not even the founders of the church. To err is human.

And Jesus, who was human, already understands, has already sacrificed, has already forgiven us. And if our mistakes are already forgiven, that means we can keep trying to be good without fear of failure.

So often we are held captive by ourselves, some part of our own being that we can't stand. But we are not our failures. Maybe we mess up, and our actions don't always reflect our intentions, but we have to keep intending to do good, or else we won't try at all. And this passage is not despairing, but hopeful. It says it's okay to fail and to keep going anyway—to keep working toward the ability to carry out all our best goals. And as Paul assures us at the beginning of the very next chapter, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)

Lord, thank you for your love and support that stays with me, even in my failures and low moments. Your love gives me the hope I need to try again. Amen.

Lord, what do you want to do through me to fulfill your vision for First Methodist?



Quil

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

BY PATTY ANDREWS

I was hungry, and you fed me, thirsty, and you gave me drink, a stranger, and you welcomed me. . . . In as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.—Matthew 25: 35 and 40

In the winter of 2009, Trinity Episcopal Church opened their doors to the homeless men and women they often found sleeping outside their church. After running the shelter every night for five months, they needed help, and so turned to their brothers and sisters of faith. Representing First Methodist, I attended the meeting where the Interfaith Winter Shelter was born. Several churches became involved that fall, each volunteering to offer shelter one night a week. Because of other commitments, our facilities were not available that year. But in “the Jukebox” building, loaned to us by the city, our church took total responsibility for running the shelter on Sunday nights. The response from our congregation was overwhelming: volunteers provided food, did set up, monitored all night long, and cleaned up in the morning.

The following year, the Church Council decided to open the doors of First Methodist. With more space and more volunteers, the number of homeless guests served grew significantly. (On one especially frigid night we welcomed more than 70 homeless guests!) Once during a sanctuary worship service all those who were involved in the shelter in any way were asked to stand. More than half of the congregation stood! As a member of the shelter leadership team, I was deeply moved. First Methodist had provided this sacred space—our church—for our homeless neighbors to rest their weary heads. And so they came—the ragged, the weak, those addicted to drugs or alcohol, those living with mental illnesses. Together we offered them a safe place to sleep and a full meal. And so it continued for nearly 10 years until Wheeler Mission arrived in Bloomington and provided a permanent, year-around shelter.

This loving service to our community shown by the people of First Methodist has taken many forms over the years. For me, the Interfaith Winter Shelter was a life-changing experience. Through the shelter, we lived out our commitment to serving as the hands and feet of Jesus as together we enacted First Methodist’s then-motto, “A Church in the Heart of the Community with the Community in its Heart.”

Dear Lord, we are so thankful to have had the opportunity to serve our vulnerable neighbors through the Winter Shelter. In the years to come, may we continue to seek out other opportunities to serve the “least of these.” In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.



Patty, left

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29

BY MARSHALL AND ANNE GOSS

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your heart.—Colossians 3:16

Over the years, people looking for a church or just curious have asked why we attend First United Methodist Church in Bloomington. Depending on the season of our life, our answers have varied, but here are a few we've given:

When we moved to Bloomington in 1964, we looked for a church that would serve our needs and our growing family's needs. We already had one little one and another one would soon arrive. The children's program at First Methodist was very good, and many of the coaching community belonged to First Methodist, so we decided this would be our church. We transferred our membership from Paris, Illinois Methodist Church and here we are still members, still active.

The church community has always been an important part of why we've continued to be a part of First Methodist. Of course, over nearly 60 years, as with any group, there have been some ups and downs. All downs were quickly eliminated and the ups were real high points in our journey.

This church was making a difference in the lives of its members and the community when we joined, and it continues to do so decades later. The Goss family is thankful to continue to be a part of First Methodist Bloomington.

Dear God, we thank you for the blessing of our church community as we seek to love and care for one another. Amen.



Marshall and Anne

Thanks again to all of our devotion writers. They were beautiful! We pray this guide has been a blessing to everyone.

**First United Methodist Church
219 E. 4th St.
Bloomington, IN 47408**