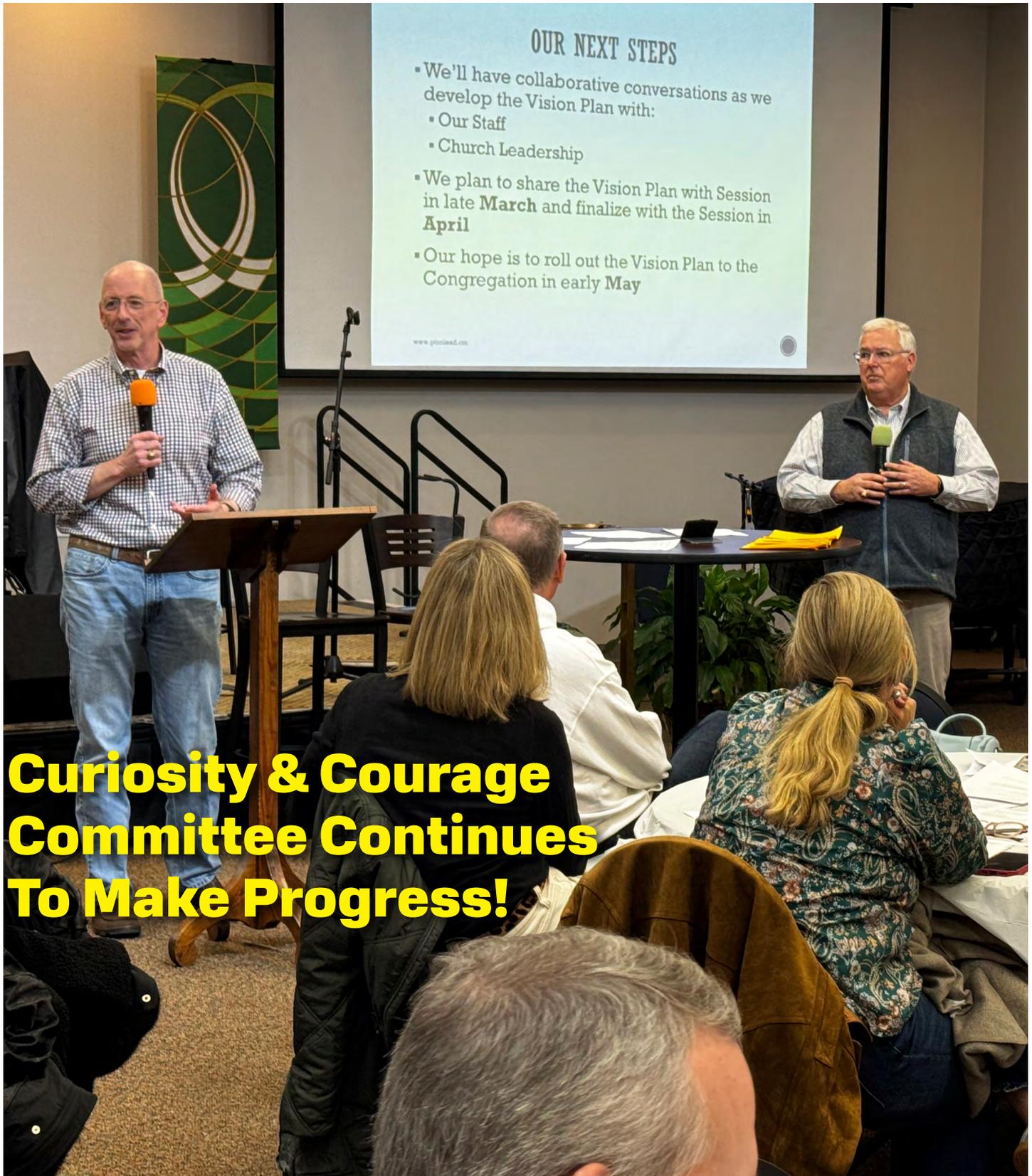


# The First Press

First Presbyterian Church, Gastonia

March 2026 • Volume 31 • Issue 3



**Curiosity & Courage  
Committee Continues  
To Make Progress!**

OUR NEXT STEPS

- We'll have collaborative conversations as we develop the Vision Plan with:
  - Our Staff
  - Church Leadership
- We plan to share the Vision Plan with Session in late **March** and finalize with the Session in **April**
- Our hope is to roll out the Vision Plan to the Congregation in early **May**

www.pfirsted.com

# Politics and Faith Revisited

Written by Rev. Daniel J. Commerford

Friends,

One of the biggest joys and challenges as Senior Pastor is discerning what God's Spirit is saying to our congregation so that I can deliver that message in my preaching. This is most challenging when the Spirit leads me to preach about areas where faith and politics intersect. Over the past couple of months, events in our nation have forced this delicate intersection to the surface, and my sermons have reflected that. It's clear you are listening! I've received more feedback from these sermons than from any other sermon I've preached at FPC. Many have responded with gratitude for providing clarity on a difficult-to-articulate subject or for creating a space to have one's lament or confusion acknowledged. Others have requested that I refrain from preaching about politics because it is uncomfortable or do not believe that faith and politics mix. To both sides of our Sanctuary aisle, know that I am listening, and I thank you for your feedback. You are heard!

Journalist Finley Peter Dunne wrote in 1902 that newspapers are meant to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." This maxim applies to preaching as well. Proclaiming God's Word often requires us to speak hope when the world seems hopeless. Other times, it reminds us of who we are and whose we are. Sometimes, proclaiming God's Word requires us to confront areas of our lives, relationships, or community that are more aligned with the Gospel. For those latter occasions, please know that those sermons are just as uncomfortable to preach as they must be to receive. But to be faithful to Christ, we must never leave anything off limits when it comes to engaging and proclaiming God's Word. To do so would make that thing an idol. One promise I make is that every sermon is an exercise in faith to listen to God's Spirit in order to convey that message to the congregation. It's not about me, my opinions, or my agenda. It's about glorifying Christ and encouraging us to follow him as best as we can, both as individuals and as a congregation. We give thanks for moments when we pull that off and rely on God's grace when we miss the mark. In all circumstances, we navigate that journey together.

If anyone wants to dive deeper into the waters of faith and politics, I humbly resubmit the article I wrote for the [November 2024 edition of the First Press](#). As always, I am available to be a listening and conversation partner. If you'd like to engage with this more, let's get coffee!

Blessings in Christ,



Pastor Dan

## A Case for Faith and Politics

Written by Rev. Daniel J. Commerford

*"Faith and politics don't mix."  
"That sermon was too political."  
"I don't like it when pastors talk about politics."  
"You can't be a Christian and believe in [insert partisan ideal here]."*

If you have ever heard anyone make a statement like the examples above, or even made a statement like this yourself, you are not alone. In the last 20 years of my experience in church ministry, I have witnessed countless Christians struggle to find a healthy relationship with faith and politics. Some churches intertwine their sense of identity and purpose with the agenda of a particular partisan party, while others do what they can to ignore any political reality its ministry inevitably impacts. Both extremes of this spectrum have only managed to create division in Christ's church. Furthermore, they have alienated those who watch our infighting, hypocrisy, and perceived apathy towards those who suffer.



So, what is a Christian to do when it comes to faithfully engaging with politics? In their book, "Jesus and the Powers," theologians N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird explore the last 2,000 years of church history through the lens of scripture in an attempt to theologically frame a faithful way for Christians to approach politics. The primary challenge for Christians is that Jesus proclaimed dominion over a Kingdom that knows no earthly boundaries. Ultimately, the church's function is to continue the ministry of Christ to build the Kingdom of God that will be fully realized when Christ returns.

But doing the work to build the Kingdom of God is impossible without becoming involved with earthly politics. Wright and Bird broadly define the word politics as a human-made system of governing a population in an effort to provide peace, order, and paths to prosperity. Throughout its history, the church has always interacted with human governments. It's always been political! The church flourished as a grassroots movement in opposition to a Roman government that persecuted Christians...until Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 312 A.D. and became institutionalized. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the church provided a sense of stability throughout the Middle Ages and played a major role in the rise of nation-states, where alliances between Kings and Bishops were common. Since then, the church has been involved, whether explicitly or implicitly, in the rise and fall of many nations and civilizations. Looking back, the church has seemed to be at its strongest when it seeks first the Kingdom of God and encourages (or keeps accountable) governments to structure itself and function in a way that provides the peace, security, and opportunities for selfless love that

# Curiosity & Courage Committee Progress Update

*Written by Mike Wallace*



The Curiosity and Courage Committee (CCC) continues to work diligently in developing new Mission, Vision, and Core Values statements, along with a comprehensive Strategic Plan for our church. The Committee meets weekly to prayerfully review and discern the insights gathered from the Holy Cow! Congregational Survey, the Listening Groups, and the Leadership Retreat held with Elders and Deacons in January. We ask the congregation to keep the Committee in prayer as it spends these sacred hours together.

On February 22, the Committee hosted an informational session to provide members with deeper insight into the Holy Cow! Survey, offering additional context and answering questions. **A second opportunity to learn more about**

**the Holy Cow! Survey will be held on Tuesday, March 10 at 6:30 pm in the Parlor.** A copy of the full Holy Cow! Survey results and a synopsis of the Listening Groups are available for review in the library.

The Committee anticipates completing the Strategic Plan later this spring. It will first be presented to the Session for prayerful review and approval, and, following that step, will be shared with the congregation. As we move forward together, we invite you to continue praying for wisdom, unity, and discernment, trusting that Christ is faithfully guiding our church into its next chapter.

## Save the Date!

**Join the CCC for Dinner on Sunday April 19 at 5:30 pm in the Fellowship Hall!**

Members of the Curiosity and Courage Committee invite you to a Dinner on Sunday, April 19, in the Fellowship Hall. Dinner will be served at 5:30 pm, followed by fellowship and conversation. During this gathering, committee members will share progress to date on the Strategic Plan and provide an opportunity for members to offer feedback as the plan continues to be refined.

# Where Faith and Learning Meet

*Written by Wendy Gem*

Stephanie Blevins, our new Day School Director, will share how faith, learning, and community come together in this growing ministry at **Wednesday Night Alive on March 11.** This conversation is not just about classrooms or enrollment. It is about mission. It is about formation. It is about the ways our church can invest in families and live out our commitment to the next generation.

As we continue discerning our vision for growth, engagement, and faithful courage, the Day School expansion offers a tangible example of how those commitments take shape in real life. When children are nurtured in curiosity and confidence, when families find belonging on our campus, when learning and faith are woven together, the entire church is strengthened.



Join us on March 11 as we explore how this ministry connects to who we are and who we are becoming. Whether you are a parent, grandparent, teacher, or simply someone who cares about the future of FPC, this conversation is for you. Through faith, hope, and love, let's step into this new chapter together.

# Planting Seeds for Tomorrow's Harvest

*Written by David Ratchford, Planned Giving Committee Chair*



As a faith community, we are the beneficiaries of the foresight and generosity of those who came before us. Their commitment established the church in 1882 and later led to the construction of the church where we worship and conduct our ministries today. Now, we have the opportunity to plant seeds for future generations.

Christ told multiple parables on the magnitude of planting seeds. His teachings instruct us to sow broadly, trust the process of growth, and then to expect a

massive harvest. Our role is to plant the seed. God is the one who brings the increase.

The seed of a planned gift is a powerful way to ensure the mission and ministries of First Presbyterian Church of Gastonia thrive long after our lifetime. A planned gift creates a lasting legacy, providing the “harvest” and divine growth that comes from the church’s future ministries, initiatives, capital improvements, services, and outreach.

It is an intentional act of stewardship stemming from our thoughtfulness today that secures our church’s tomorrow. By confirming your intent, you help us plan with confidence and hope. Contact any member of the Planned Giving Committee or David McFadden, Business Administrator, at 704-864-2651, for more information.

## Update From the APNC

*Written by Lee DuBois and Craig Whitley*

On December 7, the Congregation appointed an Associate Pastor Nominating Committee (“APNC”) to seek our next Associate Pastor. The Committee is comprised of Lee DuBois, Craig Whitley, Lenise Melton, Barbara Winkles, Tim Efir, Kelly Pacetti, and Kathy Gallman. Lee and Craig are co-chairing the Committee; Lenise is our secretary; and Barbara Winkles is our communications/technology liaison.

Despite it being the Christmas season, we got out of the gate quickly. On December 27, we met with Byron Wade from the Presbytery to learn the call process and to review past church Mission Information Forms (MIF), the congregational information form used to advertise the position, which has been renamed the Minister Discernment Profile (MDP). We have met twice since then to prepare our MDP, which is currently before the Presbytery for approval. Once that approval is received, the Presbytery will hold an additional training session for the Committee. With that, our MDP will be posted (advertised), and we will begin the selection process.



The Committee’s work is necessarily confidential, but as we move forward, we will do our best to keep the Congregation informed about where we stand in the process. And even though we cannot discuss the candidates under consideration, we welcome your input, both as to the pastoral attributes you value, and if you know any worthy candidates that we should consider. After all, we are working for you.

# 2026 Foundation Strong Giving Report

A Stewardship pledge is a commitment, made after conscious, prayerful consideration, to contribute a specific amount of money over the course of the year to our church’s ministry service areas. We are grateful to the **186 Households** whose financial commitments during our Fall stewardship emphasis will ensure a 2026 budget to support the mission, ministries, and ongoing operation of our beloved church. Our annual stewardship pledges, offerings, and gifts are more than financial contributions; they emphasize our partnership in God’s work, spreading God’s love and hope to everyone around us. **491 Active Households** call First Presbyterian Church home. **Supporting the church and participating in annual giving happens all year long.** Every commitment of time, talent, treasure, and prayer is essential to what makes our church *Foundation Strong*.

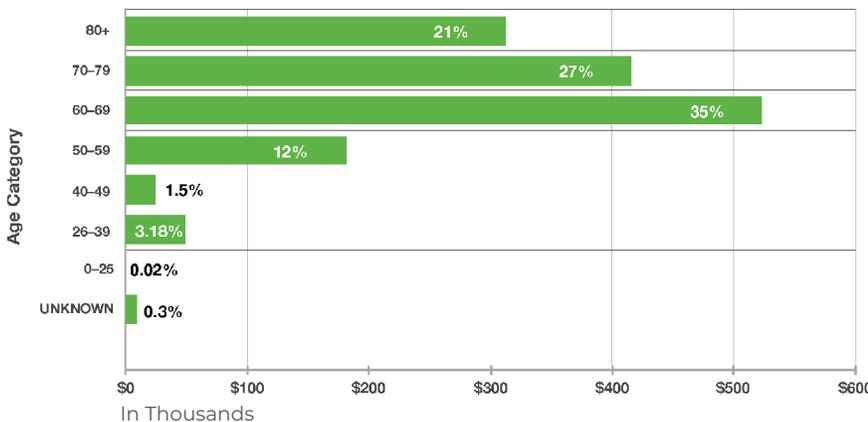


*Foundation Strong*

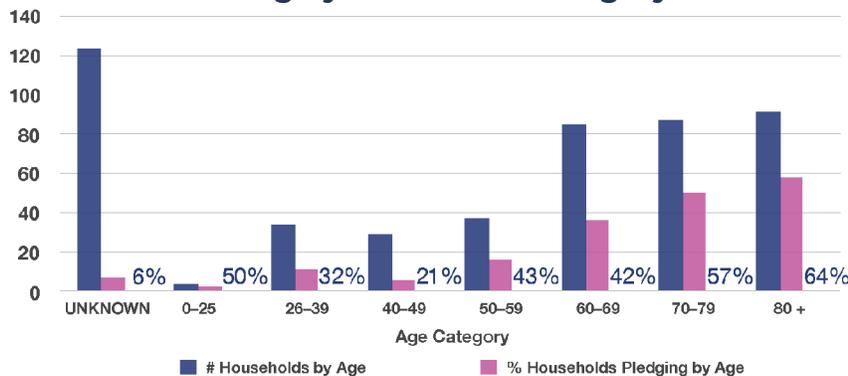
ANNUAL GIVING FOR OUR CHURCH'S MISSION AND OPERATIONS



**% of Giving by Age Category**



**Giving by Household Category**



**Ordinary people responding with extraordinary Love.**

As a community of believers our diverse life stages are unified into one body, one community, through which the love of Christ can be expressed, shared, and multiplied.

These charts illustrate giving participation by age group, identifying the percentage of the total budget pledged and the number of active households participating in 2026. The charts also help us imagine the possibilities for our church if every household in our church family committed to giving each year and incrementally growing in our giving in the same way we grow in our faith.

**Consider fulfilling your pledge through auto-draft. Contact the Church Administrator to set up your giving schedule.**

# Who Has Inspired You? Nominate Her Today

*Written by Cathy Parrott*



Each year, Presbyterian Women recognize an extraordinary woman in our church family with an Honorary Life Membership. This special honor celebrates faithful service, quiet leadership, generous spirit, and steadfast dedication to the work of the church and Presbyterian Women.

Is there someone whose commitment has inspired you? Someone who shows up, serves faithfully, encourages others, and reflects Christ's love through her actions? We invite you to consider submitting her name for this recognition.

The recipient is traditionally announced at our Birthday Luncheon in May. Proposal forms and nomination guidelines are available at the Reception Desk and on the church website.

If you submitted a nomination last year and your nominee was not selected, there is no need to complete a new form. Her name will remain under consideration.

Please return the completed forms by **March 15** to the Reception Desk or to Cathy Parrott. Contact Cathy Parrott (704-806-3735) or [ceaker@aol.com](mailto:ceaker@aol.com) with any questions.

## Holy Week & Easter Schedule

### MARCH 29

#### Palm Sunday

Thrive | 9:00 am, Fellowship Hall

Sunday School | 10:00 am

Traditional | 11:00 am, Sanctuary

#### Easter Egg Hunt

10:00 am, Fellowship Hall\*

*\*will move to the **indoors** for inclement weather*

### MARCH 30-APRIL 2

#### Stations of the Cross

Monday–Thursday,

10:00 am–4:00 pm, Sanctuary

Monday–Tuesday,

4:00 pm–7:00 pm, Sanctuary

### APRIL 2

#### Maundy Thursday

Dinner, Worship and Communion

6:00 pm, Fellowship Hall

### APRIL 3

#### Good Friday Tenebrae Service

7:00 pm, Sanctuary

### APRIL 5

#### Easter Services

Sunrise Service | 7:00 am, Columbarium

Thrive | 9:00 am, Fellowship Hall

Traditional | 11:00 am, Sanctuary

Chidcare will be provided for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday Services.



**Sunday,  
March 22  
11:00, Fellowship Hall**

**Everyone can help!**

No experience needed, and there's a role for every age:

- **Meal Assembly** (scoop, measure, and pack)
- **Runners** (deliver bags to sealers)
- **Sealers** (operate sealing machines)
- **Loaders** (box meals and load the truck)

Sign up today by scanning the QR code.

**Sign Up By March 13**  
and you will automatically  
be entered into a drawing for a  
**"Screen-Free Family Fun Game Basket."**



WEDNESDAY Night Alive  
**WEDNESDAY NIGHT ALIVE**  
"Antisemitism: Me, You, and Us"  
  
**MARCH 18**  
5:30 pm, Fellowship Hall  
Speaker: **Dr. Mark Epstein**  
Dinner will be served. Cost: \$8/person

WEDNESDAY Night Alive  
**WEDNESDAY NIGHT ALIVE**  
"Comments From Our Clerk"  
  
**MARCH 25**  
5:30 pm, Fellowship Hall  
Speaker: **Charles Gallman**  
Dinner will be served. Cost: \$8/person

**Join Us For Palm Sunday Services**  
9:00 am: Thrive, Fellowship Hall  
11:00 am: Traditional, Sanctuary  
**March 29th**  
Easter Egg Hunt for Children  
10:00 am: Fellowship Hall



----- Original message -----  
From: "Rev. Dan Commerford" <[pastoroffice2028@gmail.com](mailto:pastoroffice2028@gmail.com)>  
Date: 2/16/26 7:30 AM (GMT-05:00)  
To: jdough55@email.com  
Subject: Jane Dough

Above all, Father, I pray that you  
May they rely on your strength and

Hello. Do you have some time. I

Rev. Dan Commerford  
Senior Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Gastonia  
1621 E Garrison Blvd, Gastonia, NC 28054-5130

**WARNING!!!**

1- **ALWAYS** look at the email address

2- This is the **ONLY** email address Dan uses:  
[dcommerford@fpcgastonia.org](mailto:dcommerford@fpcgastonia.org)

3- Church staff emails **ALWAYS** contain:  
[staff-name@fpcgastonia.org](mailto:staff-name@fpcgastonia.org)

**USPS IDENTIFICATION STATEMENT**

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# THE FIRST PRESS

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Frances Henry, Barbara Yarbrough, and Alyson Schultz presenting a check to Least of These Carolinas.

### Service Views and Attendance

Date	TRADITIONAL SERVICE		THRIVE SERVICE	
	Service	Livestream	Service	Livestream
February 1	—	—	—	—
February 8	—	90	—	—
February 15	118	111	59	47
February 22	114	91	79	25