

The First Press

First Presbyterian Church Gastonia

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The Magic of Montreat Strikes Again

Written by Rev. Daniel J. Commerford

Ahhhhh Montreat. Often, I preach and write about the magic I feel when going to Montreat. For the first time, I was able to share that magic with members of First Presbyterian Church when a group of us gathered for a congregational retreat in November. We were blessed to have Rev. Dr. Roger Gench lead us in several sessions that explored the cosmic power baptism holds over every facet of our faith. Beyond digging into the depth of our baptismal waters, we worshiped, shared meals, and square danced the night away together. Even though we acknowledged that our entire congregation could not attend, I firmly believe we came down that mountain a stronger congregation than when we first arrived. Montreat is often the setting for magic like this to occur.



The biggest gift Montreat gave us was the opportunity to get away from the business and busyness that often distracts us from what is most important. For roughly 36 hours, we had nothing but one another to find relationship and belonging. In finding both, we were reminded of the fruits of God's community. Whenever two or more are gathered, God's Spirit is among us and promises to tend to our deepest needs. Our world tries to make our lives complicated and busy. After our congregational retreat, I wonder if the solution to the challenges we face are found in the simplest of places: Members of God's family gathering to seek Christ and one another together.

Currently, we are in a liminal season at First Presbyterian Church as we continue our Curiosity and Courage initiative. We have imagined sailing with God's Spirit, devoted to prayer, and faithfully engaged in meaningful conversation together. Over the next few months, our leadership will gather to hear the synthesized results of these conversations and will begin to form new language that defines our sense of identity, purpose, and direction. I look forward to seeing how God has spoken through us and sharing that with the congregation sometime in the Spring of 2026.

Until then, I pray that God will be in our midst as we retreat from the busyness of the holiday season to gather, worship, and celebrate the birth of our Savior together. In doing so, we may find small ways to capture the magic so many of us experienced in Montreat.

Advent Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "D. J. Commerford". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Pastor Dan





Traditions

Written by Josie Conner

Do you have family traditions at Christmas time? Perhaps it is cooking favorite family recipes, reading holiday stories, matching pajamas, special ornaments and decorations, or singing favorite carols? The dictionary defines the word, traditions, as the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way. Traditions define and carry us into the future, while remembering the past.

Presbyterian Women's Council is rich in history and traditions. These traditions began in 1884 with the formation of the Ladies' Aid Society by Sarah Lewis Smyre as president, who was the wife of one of the founding elders, Alfred Monroe Smyre. Throughout the years at FPC, the name of this organization underwent several name changes:

- 1887-Ladies' Home and Foreign Mission Society, led by Susan Rhyne Love
- 1905-Ladies Missionary Society, led by Lela Shuford Reid
- 1920-Circle plan was adopted and became the Women's Auxiliary of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.
- 1948-The name was changed to Women of the Church (WOC)
- 1983-The name was changed to Presbyterian Women

Over the last one-hundred-forty-one years, the women of FPC have started and continue to carry on the traditions of providing meals for the bereaved, celebrating new babies, contributing towards mission projects with time and money, and recognizing a member each year with the Honorary Life Membership. Presbyterian Women (PW) also honors college students with scholarships, raises money through the annual bake sale, and hosts the annual birthday luncheon. Providing food and hospitality is a long, rich tradition for the PW. In *A Christian-Witness History Of The First Presbyterian Church* by Marion A. Ellis, the following recipe is included in the Women of the Church section. The author says that this recipe was "used on several occasions to fete new members and those serving as interim pastors."

Crab Shrimp Casserole

Served to welcome minister's family at Sunday lunch given by WOC

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1 cup chopped celery | Salt and pepper to taste |
| 1 green pepper, chopped | Dash of Worcestershire sauce |
| 1 medium onion, chopped | ½ pound boiled, fresh shrimp |
| 6 Tbsp. butter (divided) | 1 (8 oz) package frozen white crab, thawed and rinsed |
| 2 Tbsp. all-purpose flour | 1 cup cooked wild rice |
| 1 cup milk | 1 cup cooked white rice |
| 1 can cream of mushroom soup | 1 cup grated sharp cheddar cheese |

Sauté celery, onion, and pepper in 4 tablespoons of the butter. In a saucepan, melt the rest of the butter; add flour gradually and stir until smooth, adding milk a little at a time, and heat until thickened. Stir constantly. Add soup, cheese, salt, pepper, and Worcestershire sauce. Mix with sautéed vegetables. Combine this mixture with crab, shrimp, and rice. Pour into a greased round 2-quart casserole dish. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes.

Submitted by Mary Ann Aycock

Whether you bake the recipe above this holiday season, or another family favorite, take the time to reflect on the traditions that enrich our lives throughout the year and from generation to generation.

*Information for this article was found in *A Christian-Witness History Of The First Presbyterian Church, Gastonia NC 1882-2005* by Marion A. Ellis.

Update on Curiosity and Courage

Written by Mike Wallace

We've come a long way together in our Curiosity and Courage visioning journey. On September 7, our church family gathered for the *Kickoff Dinner*, which launched both our *40 Days of Prayer* and our study of the book *The Sailboat Church*. On October 19, the Session and Diaconate participated in a *Leadership Summit* that prepared the way for our church-wide online survey. Throughout November, more than 20 small-group listening sessions were held with the help of our consultant, Mark Tidsworth. We are deeply grateful to everyone who took part in any of these Curiosity and Courage offerings.

We are also pleased to share that we have added two additional members—Cindy Clark and Craig Whitley to the Curiosity and Courage Committee. We warmly welcome their thoughtful insight, fresh perspective, and enthusiastic participation as we continue this important work.

So, you may ask, "What's next"?

Over the next two months, the Curiosity and Courage Committee (CCC) will be diving into the feedback and insights gathered so far. Mark Tidsworth will present the themes emerging from the Listening Groups, and we will also receive a detailed report from Holy Cow Consulting, the firm that conducted our online survey. Their analysis will include both overall findings and demographic insights specific to our congregation.

On **January 24, 2026**, the CCC will join members of the Session and the Diaconate for a Leadership Retreat where we will review, discern, and synthesize all data collected to date along with Mark's reflections and guidance. Following that retreat, the CCC will begin drafting our church's Mission, Vision, Values, and a Strategic Plan. These will first be shared with Session members for review, and later presented to the whole congregation.

Thank you for your continued participation, prayers, and encouragement. Stay tuned as we listen together for where the Holy Spirit is leading us next.

Masterpiece Moments Painting with Lee Ann

Sunday,
December 21

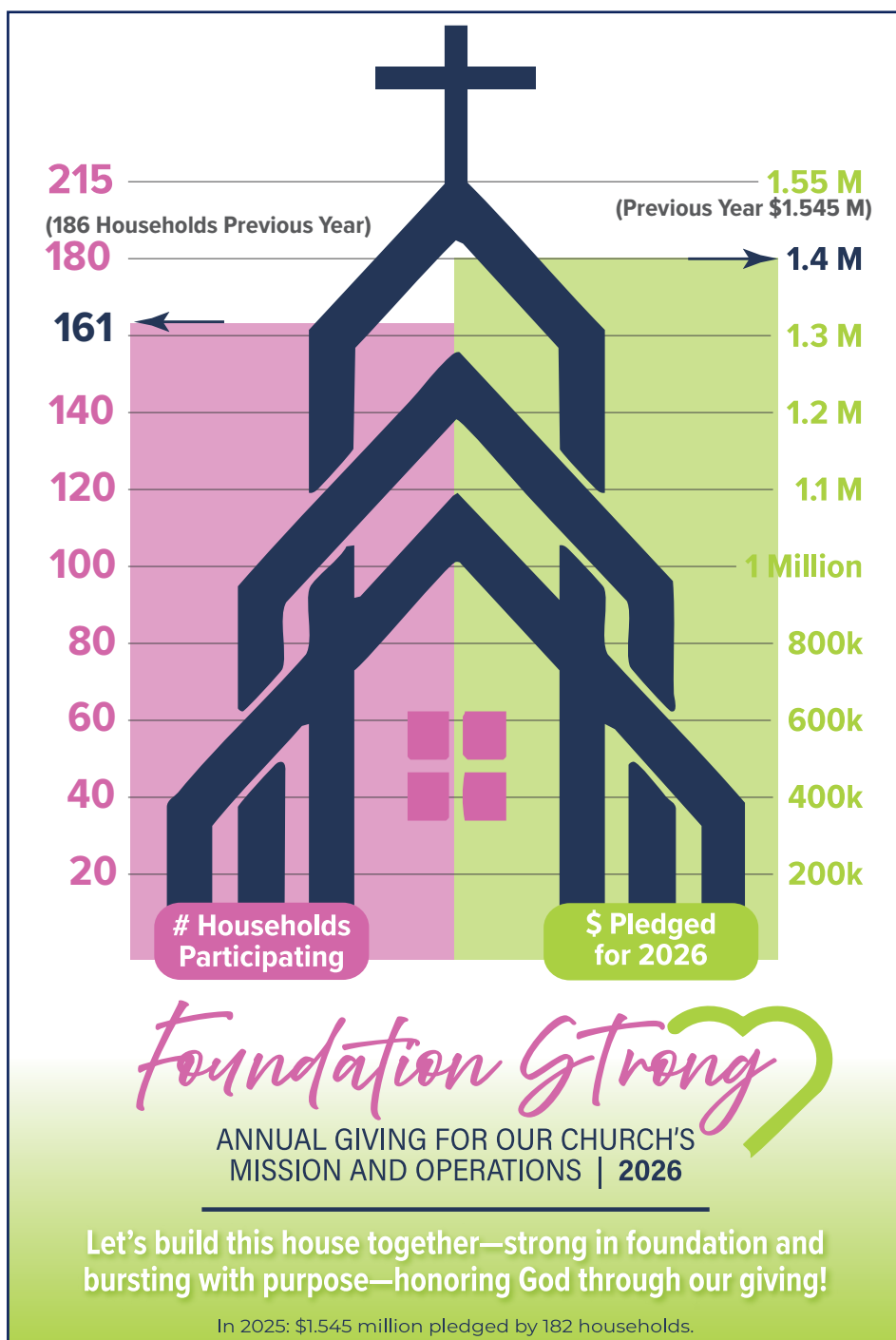
4:00 pm, Fellowship Hall

RSVP is Required!

Scan Me

Celebrating What God Is Building Through Us

Thank you to every household who pledged to this year's stewardship campaign. Your commitment strengthens the foundation of our ministry and makes it possible for our church to worship boldly, serve generously, and nurture faith across all generations. Because of your generosity, we step into the coming year with confidence and gratitude, ready to support families, deepen discipleship, and continue sharing God's love within our congregation and throughout our community. Your pledge is more than a financial gift; it is a faithful investment in the mission God calls us to pursue together.



Events & Announcements

Advent

AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

DECEMBER 21

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Service of Lessons and Carols

11:00 am in the Sanctuary

We will gather for one combined worship service that will focus on scripture readings, singing hymns, and special Advent music.

DECEMBER 24

Christmas Eve Services

Nativity Service

11:00 am in the Fellowship Hall

Morning worship centered on the story of the birth of Christ, told by our children and youth.

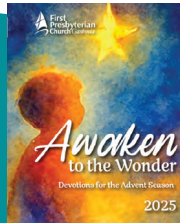
Candlelight Service

5:00 pm in the Sanctuary

A traditional candlelight Christmas Eve service.

Advent Devotional Book

Download the Advent Book at
fpcgastonia.org/resources



Mission Opportunities

Join us in giving back this season!

Contribute to the **Angel Tree for Black Mountain Home for Children** or leave your gifts under the Christmas tree outside of Room 220, the Associate Pastor's office.

More information at
fpcgastonia.org



Christmas Dinner and Music Extravaganza

Sunday,

December 14

5:30 to 7:00 pm, Fellowship Hall



RSVP Now



RSVP is Required!

\$10 per person or \$40 max for families

Play the new **"QUESTION QUEST"** trivia game each month for a chance to win a prize* by answering a question about FPC. Place your answer in the box at the Memorial Gallery or the Fellowship Hall.

DEADLINE: MONDAY, DECEMBER 15

QUESTION FOR DECEMBER

How many bells make up the Memorial Carillon?

ANSWER FOR NOVEMBER: 32

WINNER FOR NOVEMBER

Patti Scamardo

*When more than one person answers correctly, a drawing will determine the winner.

CONTACT:

Cynthia Anderson at canderson44@outlook.com for details

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**Kirkin' O' the Tartans Luncheon,
November 9, 2025.**

Service Views and Attendance

| Date | TRADITIONAL SERVICE | | THRIVE SERVICE | |
|-------------|---------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
| | Service | Livestream | Service | Livestream |
| November 2 | 118 | 79 | 98 | 35 |
| November 9 | 285 | 84 | — | — |
| November 16 | 73 | 50 | 37 | 17 |
| November 23 | 113 | 46 | 85 | 19 |