

The First Press

First Presbyterian Church, Gastonia

August 2026 • Volume 31 • Issue 8



Growing More Than Vegetables!

Pastor's Note: What a summer it's been! When we celebrated the 4th of July last month, I was both recovering from my trip to General Assembly (on which I will provide a report later this fall) and also celebrating 15 years of marriage to Rachel on July 3rd. In the midst of all that, our nation celebrated its 250th birthday, and I wanted to reflect on this achievement through the lens of our faith in Christ. The following is adapted from the Invitation to the Lord's Supper I delivered at our Sunday worship service on July 5th. If you are interested in hearing this reflection as originally delivered or my initial reflections on the 227th General Assembly, I encourage you to watch the livestream of that worship service on our YouTube page. I offer this reflection in the hopes that late is better than never.

Reflections on our Nation's 250th Anniversary

Written by Rev. Daniel J. Commerford

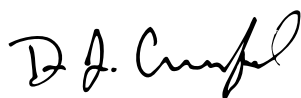
Brothers and sisters, two hundred and fifty years ago, the founding fathers of our nation signed a document that declared a daring dream: The formation of a nation where all are created equal, and every person has an honest and equitable opportunity to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. They dreamed of a nation where power flows not from a monarchy, oligarchy, meritocracy, or a theocracy, but from the diverse people who inhabit this land. Our pursuit of that dream has been a grand experiment, one that reminds us of both the promise and the fragility of democracy.

We know that the dream of democracy requires constant work and vigilance. That threats to this dream arise from both abroad and within, and that our progress has not been linear. We have created a way of life that has inspired nations around the world as we have provided a freedom that no one in history has ever experienced. We have met, persevered, and overcome challenges no one expected us to survive. We have also been slow to extend equity to all. We have enacted laws that have harmed those without privilege, and destroyed communities that lived here long before we arrived.

Therefore, we are people who can simultaneously give thanks to God for the blessings we have received while humbly asking for God's forgiveness for the ways that we have failed to live up not only to our own ideals, but the ways we have fallen short of God's glory. In that sense, the Declaration of Independence remains an aspirational document. We have grown towards that aspiration to be the nation we feel we are called to be, but we still have work to do. Furthermore, we have not seen the dream our founding fathers wrote on that document realized yet, and I don't believe that we will ever get there through our own power, intellect, or our determination alone.

Thanks be to God that another kingdom has been revealed to us. This is a kingdom greater than any nation, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, nor slave nor free, where all are one in Jesus Christ. This is the Kingdom Christ has revealed in his life, death, and resurrection. It is the Kingdom into which we are invited every time we gather around the Lord's Table. Our ultimate hope is not found in our partisan, our political, or even our national identity. It is found solely in our identity in Christ, who invites all to his table to be fed, nourished, and reminded of his grace that flows as freely as it does abundantly.

Thanks be to God!



A Gift That Will Grow for Years to Come

Written by David Pacetti



Left to Right: David Pacetti, Janet Ruffino, Holly Howell, Frances Henry, Charlie Grissom, Barbara Yarbrough, Courtney Williams, and Jill Kimbirl.



Current greenhouse at Webb Street School



Interior of current greenhouse

On Tuesday, July 21, members of First Presbyterian Church's Missions Committee visited Webb Street School to present Principal Courtney Williams with a \$20,000 donation toward the construction of a new, ADA-compliant greenhouse. During the visit, the committee toured the campus and learned about the school's remarkable programs that serve both its students and the broader Gaston County community.

The new greenhouse will feature both hydroponic and aquaponic growing systems, allowing students to learn modern, sustainable agriculture techniques while developing valuable workplace skills. Hydroponics is a method of growing plants without soil, using nutrient-rich water to produce crops more efficiently and year-round. Aquaponics combines hydroponics with fish farming, creating a natural ecosystem where fish, in this case tilapia, provide nutrients for the plants, while the plants help filter and clean the water for the fish. Together, these innovative systems conserve water, maximize growing space, and provide students with hands-on experience in science, technology, agriculture, and business.

As Principal Williams explained, maintaining the greenhouse year-round is far more efficient than replanting each school year. Fresh lettuce grown in the hydroponic system is harvested and sold to local restaurants, including Webb Street Grill, while vegetables from the gardens are donated to local nonprofit organizations and families experiencing food insecurity.

The greenhouse is just one part of Webb Street School's outstanding sustainability program. The campus also includes a sensory garden, a student-run coffee shop, a community pantry, and a specially designed saltwater therapy pool. These programs provide meaningful educational experiences while helping students develop practical job skills that prepare them for greater independence after graduation.

Located in West Gastonia, Webb Street School serves students with severe and multiple disabilities. Every program is intentionally designed to create opportunities for learning, personal growth, and community engagement. The new ADA-compliant greenhouse will ensure that students of all physical abilities can fully participate in these hands-on learning experiences.

First Presbyterian's contribution represents a significant step toward Webb Street School's fundraising goal and reflects our commitment to investing in organizations that transform lives.

“United in Christ. Bonded to Each Other.”

You are cordially invited to our
Presbyterian Women's
Kick-Off Dinner

Wednesday, August 26, 2026

5:30 p.m.

Fellowship Hall

RSVP by August 21, 2026

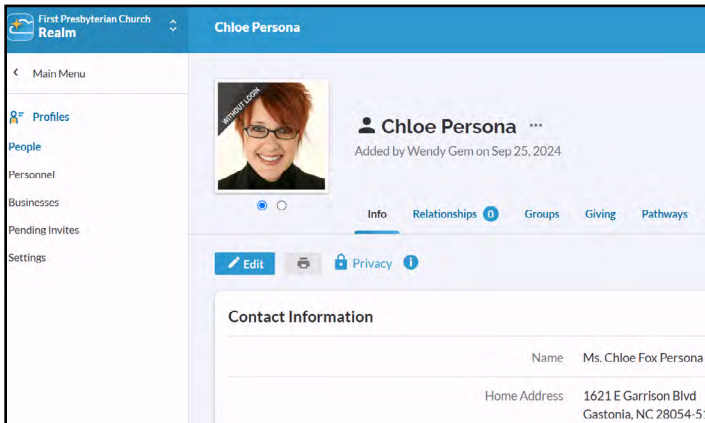
704-864-2651 or

aadams@fpcgastonia.org



Stronger Connections Begin with You

Written by Wendy Gem, Director of Communications



One of the simplest ways you can help First Presbyterian Church communicate more effectively is by keeping your contact information up to date in Realm, our church database.

Accurate information helps us make sure you receive important church emails, event updates, schedule changes, ministry news, and other timely communications. It also helps church staff and ministry leaders connect with you when needed and ensures that your family information, address, phone numbers, and email addresses are current.

If you've recently moved, changed your phone number or email address, or have new family information, please take a few minutes to update your profile in Realm. **If you need assistance, Alex Adams or Jill Kimbirl at the Church office will be happy to help.**

Women's Recharge and Renew Retreat

Nov 20-Nov 22

RSVP by Sept 21st



Download Retreat Agenda

Contact:

Mary Taneti

mtaneti@fpcgastonia.org

704-864-2651

GUATEMALA PARTNERSHIP



NOVEMBER 2026 TRIP

6-DAY OR 9-DAY TRAVEL OPTIONS

Day 1 Wednesday, November 4
Casa San Benito. Dinner together.

Day 2 Thursday, November 5
Leadership team: Meetings with partners
Delegates: CEDEPCA

Day 3 Friday, November 6
Leadership Team: Meetings with partners
Delegates: Museum Casa de La Memoria and the National Palace

Day 4 Saturday, November 7
Sister church visits

Day 5 Sunday, November 8
Worship with sister churches and have lunch.
Head to the lake. Stay at Posada de Santiago.
For those departing early, spend the night in Guatemala City.

Day 6 Monday, November 9
Visit Puerta Abierta. Afternoon open for visiting friends in San Pedro, touring Santiago, or staying at Posada de Santiago to rest and relax.
Optional departure day

Day 7 Tuesday, November 10
Travel to Antigua, visit Corazon de Mujer on the way. Stay in Antigua.

Day 8 Wednesday, November 11
Full day in Antigua. Possible tour or short hike to lookout point above the city.

Day 9 Thursday, November 12
Departure day



REGISTER NOW

For more information contact:

Sarah Robinson Bryan

PWNC Guatemala Partnership Coordinator

WhatsApp +1-803-528-6747 or pwncguatemala@gmail.com



A Vision for the Next Three Years

Written by Mike Wallace

Save the Date! Join us on **Sunday, September 20, at 5:00 pm** for a special Congregational Dinner as we unveil the new **Three-Year Strategic Plan** for First Presbyterian Church. After nearly a year of prayer, listening, conversation, and discernment, we are excited to share the vision that will help guide our church into the future. **This will be an evening for our entire church family, and we encourage members of all ages to attend. Childcare will be provided so that families with young children can fully participate in this important event.**

Nearly a year ago, our congregation began this journey by reading The Sailboat Church together and participating in 40 Days of Prayer. Those experiences launched the work of the Curiosity & Courage Committee with one purpose—to seek God's direction as we developed a Strategic Plan that reflects who we are, where God is leading us, and how we can faithfully serve Christ together.

Since then, hundreds of members have contributed through listening groups, the Holy Cow! Congregational Assessment, leadership gatherings, conversations with the Session and Diaconate, and, most importantly, continued prayer. Every voice, every conversation, and every prayer has helped shape this plan, and we are deeply grateful for the congregation's participation throughout the process.

Throughout the summer, the Curiosity & Courage Committee has been bringing together the many pieces of this work into one unified plan for the future. The completed Strategic Plan will serve as a three-year roadmap for our ministry and mission. It includes our new Mission, Vision, and Values, strategic initiatives that will help focus our priorities, and a refreshed committee structure designed to better equip our church for ministry in the years ahead.

We look forward to sharing not only the Strategic Plan itself, but also the journey that brought us to this moment. During the evening, members of the Curiosity & Courage Committee will present the plan, explain the process that guided its development, and outline the exciting opportunities that lie ahead as we seek to live out our calling together.



SAVE THE DATE:
Congregational Dinner

September 20, 2026
5:00 pm, Fellowship Hall

More Details Coming Soon!

2026 Vacation Bible School

Photography courtesy of Rachel Commerford



USPS IDENTIFICATION STATEMENT

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Service Views and Attendance

COMBINED SERVICE

Date	Service	Livestream
July 5	104	100
July 12	115	87
July 19	93	77
July 26	102	59



Thank you to everyone who donated books, gave financially, and volunteered your time to support our Reading Soulmates and Christmas in July book drive.