

The First Press

First Presbyterian Church Gastonia

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February 2, 2025

What is our Third Place (Revisited)?

Written by Rev. Daniel J. Commerford

For the May 2022 edition of the First Press, I wrote an article sharing my experience as a barista at Starbucks while attending college. In that article, I recounted Starbucks' "Third Place" strategy to attract and retain customers. The coffee chain's goal was to make every store a place where people would gather after leaving their homes and workplaces. I concluded by sharing Starbucks' change in strategy over the last ten years, which was to shift its priorities from creating a "Third Place" environment to a store that provides more coffee-on-the-go, fewer couches, and more mobile and drive-thru orders. The new goal was to provide a product that people could acquire simply and consume quickly.

Interestingly, this new strategy ultimately failed to achieve the success it hoped for. A recent Slate article reported that Starbucks has suffered from lagging sales, low customer satisfaction, and high employee turnover. In response, a new CEO has been hired to pursue a "Back to Starbucks" strategy that embodies the "Third Place" concept while accounting for changes in our current society's gathering practices. Among other adjustments is a renewed focus on barista-to-customer connections that go beyond simple transactions. Creating a business model centered on coffee, it appears, is less successful when the coffee is treated only as a product to consume rather than a conduit for relationships and community.

As I write this article and sip my Starbucks drink, which I cannot do without, I can't help but reflect on some of the parallels I see between Starbucks' journey and ours at First Presbyterian Church. Like Starbucks, we are a community that strives to create a space where we find meaning, belonging, and purpose, which is rooted in our shared faith in Jesus Christ. Like Starbucks, we wrestle with the challenges to realize that goal as our world rapidly changes around us. I hope we find one more parallel with Starbucks' journey, which is to discover that our community is at its worst when we look to our church to provide a product to consume rather than a space to strengthen our relationships with God, one another, and our community.

As we learn the results of the Curiosity and Courage initiative and pursue the strategic priorities that emerge from it, my prayer is that it will lead us to rediscover our "Third Place" at FPC. When we make our church the place we can find hope in Christ, meet with our closest friends in every season of life, and work together to make our community look like the Kingdom Christ revealed, I have no doubt we will experience the growth in spirit and numbers we collectively desire.

New Year's Blessings,



Pastor Dan



Looking Back at 2025



Q & A With the Day School Task Force

Written by Jim Ratchford

Why start a full-day school?

Conversations about a full-day school began shortly after COVID, when the Finance Committee formed a task force to explore alternative revenue sources for the church. At that time, the timing was not right to move forward. As the church prepared for a significant budget deficit entering 2025, the Finance Committee asked the Session to revisit the idea of a full-day program. While financial sustainability prompted renewed exploration, the Day School is also rooted in mission, integrating education into the life of the church, providing a high-quality option for working families, and creating opportunities for children and parents to engage more fully in church life beyond the school day.



What happens to Presbyterian Weekday School and Mothers Morning Out?

Mothers Morning Out will still offer infant and toddler classes, and Presbyterian Weekday School will continue to provide six half-day classes for two-, three-, and four-year-olds. While the physical footprint of the programs will change, families seeking half-day options can expect the same high-quality, Christian-centered programming.

How will the Day School affect building use?

Plans call for up to 15 full-day classes serving infants through five-year-olds. The total capacity for both programs will be approximately 300 children, 200 (full day) and 100 (half-day). This will require the use of the entire downstairs level of the church. As a result, the choir room and several Sunday School classrooms will be relocated. The Task Force is already meeting with affected groups. Final relocation decisions will be made in the first quarter of 2026. During the week, the Fellowship Hall will serve as a lunch and indoor activity space when weather requires. When the Fellowship Hall is needed for non-school functions, children will eat lunch in their classrooms.

What building changes are needed?

The Task Force has consulted with daycare experts, the City Fire Marshal, and the County Building Inspector. Their assessment affirmed that the church's facilities are in excellent condition. Planned updates include subdividing three large classrooms in the current choir hallway to create six classrooms, adding boys' and girls' restrooms in that hallway, and making minor playground improvements such as an additional gate, new sidewalks, and small concrete repairs for accessibility. Updates will also be made to fire and safety systems, signage, and security cameras. The Fellowship Hall flooring will be replaced with a hard surface, with careful attention to sound-proofing.



How will start-up costs be funded, and will the Day School be profitable?

Building improvements are currently estimated at \$250,000, with contractor bids to be gathered in early 2026. Classroom furnishings and equipment are estimated at \$150,000–\$175,000, based on state guidelines. An additional \$75,000 is projected for staffing and other pre-opening costs, bringing total start-up expenses to approximately \$500,000. Session has approved using church reserves to fund the project, and the Task Force is grateful to share that two anonymous gifts totaling \$250,000 have already been received.

While it may take a few years to reach full enrollment, the Day School is expected to generate revenue beyond expenses from the beginning by carefully managing enrollment. At full capacity, the program is projected to contribute more than \$400,000 annually to support other ministries of First Presbyterian Church.

WHY WEDNESDAY NIGHT ALIVE?

To Pause

An evening to slow your pace and breathe again.

To Learn

Where questions are welcomed and faith is deepened.

To Connect

Shared meals. Shared stories. Shared faith.

To Grow

Becoming who God is calling us to be.

Wednesday Night Alive (WNA) is a midweek gathering centered on connection, learning, and spiritual growth. Each week offers a shared meal followed by thoughtful conversation designed to help us pause, reflect, and engage faith in meaningful ways.

Whether you're new to church or have been part of the community for years, WNA creates space to build relationships, ask questions, and grow together in faith, right in the middle of everyday life.

This is Wednesday Night Alive!

Wednesdays | 5:30 pm | Fellowship Hall

Starts January 21st

A Shared Commitment to Literacy

Written by Wendy Gem



Photo courtesy of Gaston County Schools

First Presbyterian Church of Gastonia is thankful to deepen its partnership with Sherwood Elementary School through a recent contribution focused on strengthening literacy and student learning. This support grows out of the church's ongoing reading partnership with Sherwood, made possible through the work of the Missions Committee.

The contribution provides classroom children's books along with take-home reading resources designed to build strong early reading skills. These materials help extend learning beyond the school day and give students continued opportunities to practice reading at home.

During a special moment of recognition, representatives from Sherwood Elementary School and First Presbyterian Church gathered to celebrate the positive impact this partnership has on students and their families. The take-home reading packs shared with third-grade students play a key role in reinforcing literacy skills outside the classroom.

Rooted in the science of reading, the packs include decodable texts tailored to each student's reading level based on assessment data. This individualized approach allows teachers to focus on specific phonics skills while supporting learning in both classroom and home settings. The resources also include research-based activities, writing pages, and multilingual video phonics lessons that help families stay engaged in their child's reading progress.

Teachers value these tools for their flexibility and ease of use, while families benefit from resources that strengthen connections between school and home. Sherwood Elementary shared heartfelt appreciation for First Presbyterian Church's continued investment in literacy and in the future of its students.

Through partnerships like this, First Presbyterian Church of Gastonia continues to live out its commitment to serving the community, nurturing learning, and supporting children and families wherever learning takes place.

Curiosity and Courage: Preparing for the January 24 Leadership Retreat



In the coming weeks, the Curiosity and Courage Committee (CCC) will be diving deeply into the feedback and insights gathered from our congregation so far.

At the heart of this work, Mark Tidsworth will present the key themes emerging from the Listening Groups, highlighting what we are hearing, noticing, and discerning together. In addition, we will give a high level overview of the congregational survey conducted by Holy Cow Consulting. Their analysis will include overall findings as well as demographic insights that help us better understand the voices within our church family.

All of this work will come together on **Saturday, January 24, 2026**, when the CCC joins members of the Session and the Diaconate for a Leadership Retreat. During this time, leaders will prayerfully review, discern, and synthesize the data collected to date, alongside Mark's reflections and guidance.

Following the retreat, the CCC will begin drafting our church's Mission, Vision, and Values, along with a Strategic Plan to guide our shared future. These drafts will first be shared with the Session for review and refinement, and then presented to the congregation in the months ahead.

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Service Views and Attendance

Date	TRADITIONAL SERVICE		THRIVE SERVICE	
	Service	Livestream	Service	Livestream
December 7	130	51	116	18
December 14	133	69	83	19
December 21	176	120	—	—
December 28	—	—	71	57

Play the "Not So Newlywed Game at the Valentine's Banquet.