



# New Faith Communities

North Carolina Conference

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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NEW ROOM SOCIETY

Newsletter / December 2023

# Innovating Together LIGHTHOUSE CONGREGATIONS



by Rev. Dr. Tim Catlett,  
Executive Director,  
Office of New Faith  
Communities

Ed Stetzer made an observation which many of us have found to be a little too true for our local church communities. We are really good at being church for some time period in our past. For your church, it might not be the 1950s, it could be the 1980s, or early 2000s. For some, you may even feel it wasn't that long ago, and you point to 2019 (pre-pandemic and pre-disaffiliation). If we could simply rewind a few years or a few decades, we would be a thriving church, again.

Institutional scholars observe that mature organizations and institutions, including the church, are actually designed to resist change and

this was an opportunity to publicly acknowledge a church's commitment to following Jesus and loving God through continuing in the ways of hospitality, worship, discipleship, mission, sacrament, and pastoral care as practiced in the ways of the United Methodist connection. As committed United Methodist churches, Lighthouse Congregations serve as a beacon of hope to their neighbors, especially those who feel disconnected or displaced due to disaffiliation.

More recently, Lighthouse Congregational leaders have been gathering to share their experiences

**"If the 1950s came back, today, our church would be ready"**  
— Ed Stetzer (2013)

preserve the institution. Innovation and change threaten to disrupt the very things institutional systems are designed to maintain.

For many institutions, it is only when a systemic shock is large enough that they become ready for change which they may have resisted for years or even decades.

It is not hard to see where this is going. We have all experienced recent shocks to our systems. Our institutions and churches are being challenged to innovate in otherwise challenging times. Over the past year, some of the churches in the NC Conference have chosen to be Lighthouse Congregations. At first,

and innovate together. Since August, pastors and lay leaders have been joining together virtually every month to support one another, dream together, and share best practices of how their local congregations are embracing change to co-create new places for new people to gather in communion with Jesus Christ.

This newsletter will share stories of how two of our Lighthouse Congregations are embracing change and experiencing new life in our changing times.

Thank you for your ongoing support and the ways your prayers, financial gifts, and other support make this connection and creativity possible. ✚

## PLEASE SUPPORT OUR PLANTERS with your prayers for communion to be celebrated in new ways in their lives and in their communities.

Dorrell Briscoe  
Six:Eight Church, Durham

Daniel Childs  
Kindred Church, Durham

Randy Evans  
The Feast Gathering, Wilmington

Kelly Finch  
Wilmington NFC, Wilmington

Jason Gaskin  
Storied Church, Mebane

Elaine Heath  
The Church at Spring Forest,  
Hillsborough

Meg McBride  
Hope Recovery Church, Wilmington

Gayle Tabor  
St Paul UMC, Carolina Beach

Jamie Thompson  
The Anchor, Wilmington

Edgar Vergara Millan  
La Semilla, Durham

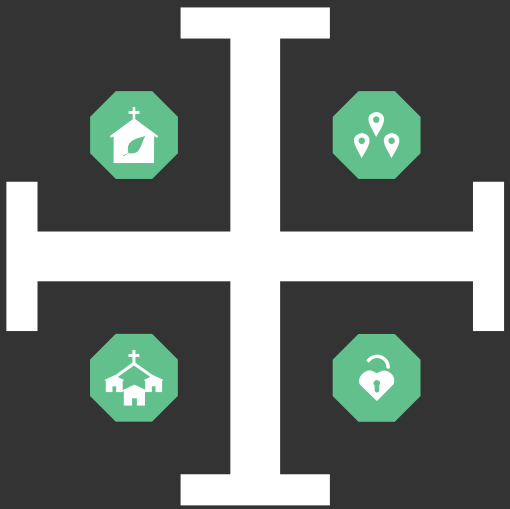
Laura Wittman and  
Renee Edwards  
The Mills Church, Rocky Mount

Seyun Hwang  
Genesis, Cary

Saul Gastelum  
Jonesboro, Sanford and  
Fiesta Cristiana, Apex

Amanda Rigby  
Edenton St UMC, Raleigh

Schylar Ferguson  
Asbury UMC, Durham



*An order of laity and clergy dedicated to embodying  
apostolic hospitality for new people to be gathered  
into communion with Jesus Christ.*

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By Rev. Kevin Baker



## FAITH & MISSIONAL *innovation*

In recent years, the greater Swansboro area has coped with multiple events, including Hurricane Florence, the Coronavirus Pandemic, and denominational conflict. Through a season of prayer and discernment we decided to recommit to our shared Wesleyan heritage and lean forward in faith and missional innovation. unanimously voting to become a

church's leadership is invited into a "discovery phase" to explore the unique congregational gifts they have as a church. The discovery phase continues as each church discerns the pressing needs of the local community around them and develops a plan for how to match their giftedness with the needs of the community. Even people who have lived in a community their

Some of the highlights of the past few months have included: 1) A four-week, shared learning event between churches with meals, worship, and missional dreaming; 2) Strengthened connectional friendships that have led to sharing guest music between churches; 3) Two shared service projects at the local Jacksonville shelter, Onslow Community Outreach,

**"In fact, if you don't speak up at this very important time, relief and rescue will appear from another place ... But who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be." – Esther 4:14**

Lighthouse Congregation in the fall of 2022. In early 2023, we began to dream about how to better build relationships within our church, our community, and our larger United Methodist Connection. Since then, we have established the Crystal Coast Area UMC Connection, aimed at connecting more intentionally with other UM congregations that have been wounded by disaffiliation. What we have already been learning is that we are #bettertogether!

This new effort seeks to share best practices and identify both church and community resources. Each

entire lives can learn and discover a multitude of new and often surprising things.

Good fruit has already resulted. As part of this new collaboration, SUMC is now sharing a staff person with one of our sister churches in Jacksonville – Pine Valley United Methodist Church. We have begun to partner with two additional churches and hope to invite more ministries into partnership over the next year with a goal of reaching ten. We have put together a five-year-plan and are pursuing grant funds to help strengthen and expand this missional effort.

that bring people together to address human need in our larger community; 4) One-on-one matches to Stephen Ministers across churches and community; 5) Expanded efforts at caring ministries – starting a new "Caring Connexion Ministry" with coordination around prayer, cards, visitation, and phone calls; 6) Collaborative youth activities; and more.

We are excited about the future and continue to be surprised at how God works when we just decide to take some risks and step forward in faith. +

## Intentional Hospitality

By Rev. Mitzi Johnson



In a recent worship service, I invited anyone who had begun attending Soapstone UMC since the beginning of the pandemic to stand. A gasp was heard throughout the sanctuary when about 50% of the congregation rose from their seats. The church is situated in an area affected by rapid urban growth and job transitions. A nearby church disaffiliation has also brought new people through our doors. The task before us became clear. We needed every member, committee, and staff person to become even more intentional about hospitality and welcome.

Our Church Council adopted a year-long ministry focus: Soapstone UMC will live fully into our identity as a United Methodist Christian community that practices habits of hospitality and encircles all who we encounter

with Christ's love. In a sermon series, "Life Together" based on Acts 2:42, we explored what it means to be a distinctly Christian community. Who are we now? Who is God calling us to be? At our annual leadership lunch meeting, we asked, "What are habits of hospitality? How can we practice them?" Every committee brainstormed ways to make our focus actionable. Our staff set concrete goals related to hospitality, and funds were budgeted to support them. The focus is reinforced in our bulletin and on our website. Our Church Council is supporting and equipping our leaders and checking on our progress.

This year, we will go out of our way to express love for Christ and our neighbor through unceasing, intentional acts of invitation and service. We intend to WELCOME ALL through Attentiveness, +



Left: Trustees brainstorm ways to make church facilities more hospitable to all people.



Middle: A carnival for children with special needs extends intentional welcome to a sometimes overlooked group.



Right: A monthly lunch at a local restaurant gives newcomers a way to make friends and ask questions.

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