

The First Press

First Presbyterian Church Gastonia

April 2025 • Volume 30 • Issue 4



Lent Always Leads to Easter

Written by Rev. Daniel J. Commerford

As I write this, I reflect on where I was a year ago today, which would have been Wednesday, March 27, 2024. That would have been the Wednesday of Holy Week, the days that lead up to Easter Sunday. Surely, I would have been coming off the celebration of Palm Sunday, sorting through the pictures we took of our Annual Easter Egg Hunt while simultaneously preparing for the solemn worship services we have for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Easter was right around the corner.

This year, Easter is a bit later. For those who don't know, Easter always falls on the first Sunday after the Paschal Full Moon, the first full moon after the vernal equinox. It can be as early as March 22 and as late as April 25. No matter when it falls, we all navigate 40 days of Lent before celebrating Easter. In many ways, this journey embodies our life and faith. While we acknowledge that we are broken and fall short of God's glory, we also proclaim that God's grace found in Jesus Christ is sufficient to stand upon when pursuing our faith. Wherever you are in your Lenten journey, I pray you continue to find Christ walking beside you, and remember that Lent always leads to Easter.

Lenten and Eastertide Blessings,


Pastor Dan

Missions: Faith In Action

Written by Rev. Brad Simpson

"The world tells us to seek success, power, and money. God tells us to seek humility, service, and love."

– Pope Francis

On behalf of the Missions Committee of FPC and our Diaconate, I invite you to use this season of Lent to prayerfully consider God's call to serve others with love humbly and embrace this call personally. When we collect food for the Crisis Assistance Ministry (CAM), gifts for the Black Mountain Home for Children, and school supplies for Sherwood or Grier Schools, these are not merely activities to make us feel good about helping others. We are following the example of Christ who washes the feet of His disciples – these are "holy moments" along our faith journeys. When we support our mission partnerships in Guatemala and Malawi or pack bags of food for people of the world at "Rise Against Hunger," these are not simply dates on the calendar to do work with the church. These activities provide us with "faith in action" opportunities as a unified faith community. When we help foster children through "Least of These" or feed the children of the Boys and Girls Club, we do more than provide love for these younger ones – we are fulfilling a mandate from Christ to "LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR."

Along my journey of faith, some of the most meaningful and memorable moments have been when I stood with my brothers and sisters serving with love, hope, and faith. This journey has taken me to a clothing closet in an abandoned 1950s bomb shelter, the World Mission Conference at Montreat, mission trips to Reyosa (Mexico) on three occasions, youth mission trips to locations in VA/NC/GA/WV/MS/KY, and the Children's Home of the Highlands in Wytheville, VA. With you, I recommit myself to serving others in our home of Gaston County!

May the blessing of Easter be with all of you.



APPLY NOW

For a FPC Scholarship

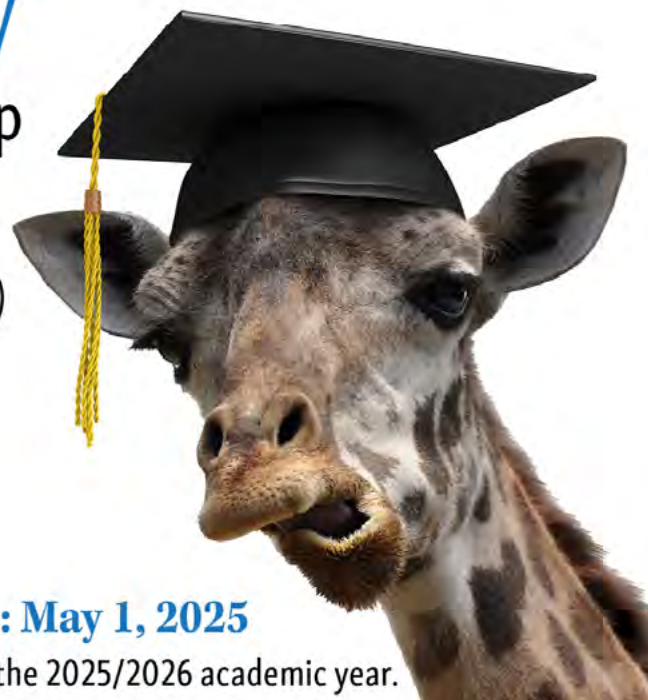
New Scholarships (*first-time applicants*)

Renewal Scholarships (*returning applicants*)



Deadline: May 1, 2025

The FPC Scholarship Fund is accepting applications for the 2025/2026 academic year.



Road Runners Day Trip

Destination: Mount Airy & Andy Griffith Museum

Date: Thursday, May 8

Depart: 8:30 AM | Tour: 11:00 AM | Return: 4–5 PM

Cost: \$14.95 (includes museum and guided tour)

Lunch at Barney's Café (bring lunch money)

Join us for a day of fun, fellowship, and
a little Mayberry charm!

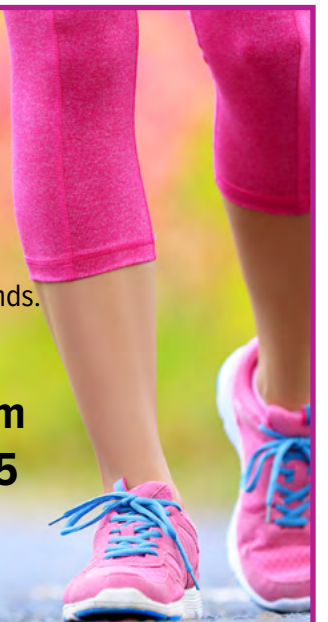
Pace & Pray

Kick-off your week with a
moment of prayer followed by
a walk around the church grounds.

Monday's at 9:30 am

Starts: May 12, 2025

Contact Mary Taneti for details.



Presbyterian Women Birthday Luncheon

By: Josie Conner and Susanne Current

“For the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings and you shall surely celebrate.”
-Deuteronomy 16:15

On **Monday, May 5, 2025**, the women of First Presbyterian Church will gather at noon in the Fellowship Hall to celebrate a year of productive undertakings. This is a time for women of all ages to gather for fellowship and to remember those who have joined the church in the past year.

The speaker for this year’s luncheon will be **Loretta Shelton, Vice President of Development and Community Relations at Black Mountain Home for Children**. She will be sharing with us “Children in Care, Navigating Life’s Storms.” Loretta will be joined at the luncheon by **Stephanie Carter, Development and Community Relations Officer at Black Mountain Home for Children**.

The offering from this year’s luncheon will benefit two organizations: *Windward Volunteer Housing Facility in Leland, Mississippi, and Lakota Thiyuha Dome Home Project in Pine Ridge, South Dakota*. Windward Volunteer Housing offers accommodations for members of the community who need a temporary, safe place to stay and volunteer groups in the area assisting with disaster relief.



Lakota Thiyuha Dome Home Project aims to increase housing availability by constructing innovative dome homes that are energy efficient, economical, simple in design, and easily teachable through the training of the local workforce in construction apprenticeship.

During the luncheon, a woman who has served our church faithfully and well will be recognized with the Honorary Lifetime Membership Award. The cost of the luncheon is \$8.00. RSVP by scanning the QR code above. You can also register by contacting and paying at the church office, or you may pay at the door. This event is an excellent time to celebrate one another and all that the church’s women have accomplished this year, while also being the hands and feet of Christ with our offering to those in need.

Masterpiece Moments: Tending God’s Garden

May 18, 2025 | Noon - 2:00 PM

Rotary Community Garden

You are invited to the next Masterpiece Moments as we gather for good food and meaningful fellowship. Davidson Hobson will smoke BBQ, and we ask everyone to bring a side dish to share. After lunch, we will work together to tend the garden and enjoy the beauty of God’s creation.

RSVP by scanning the QR code or contact the Church Office to save your spot!



Sleep in Heavenly Peace: Give a Child Comfort. Rest. Hope.

Imagine the joy on a child’s face when he/she lies down in his/ her very own bed for the first time. Picture the warmth of knowing that a child who once slept on the floor will now have a safe, comfortable place to rest each night—because of you.

First Presbyterian Church of Gastonia and Belmont are partnering with Sleep in Heavenly Peace, a national organization committed to ensuring that no child sleeps on the floor in our community. Together, we will build and assemble beds for local children in need, providing not only a tangible gift but a foundation for security, dignity, and rest.

Why Does This Matter?

Right here in our own city, families struggle to afford basic furniture, forcing children to sleep on couches, piles of blankets, or even the floor. A bed may seem simple, but it represents so much more—it’s a place of comfort, a symbol of care, and a reminder that they are not forgotten.

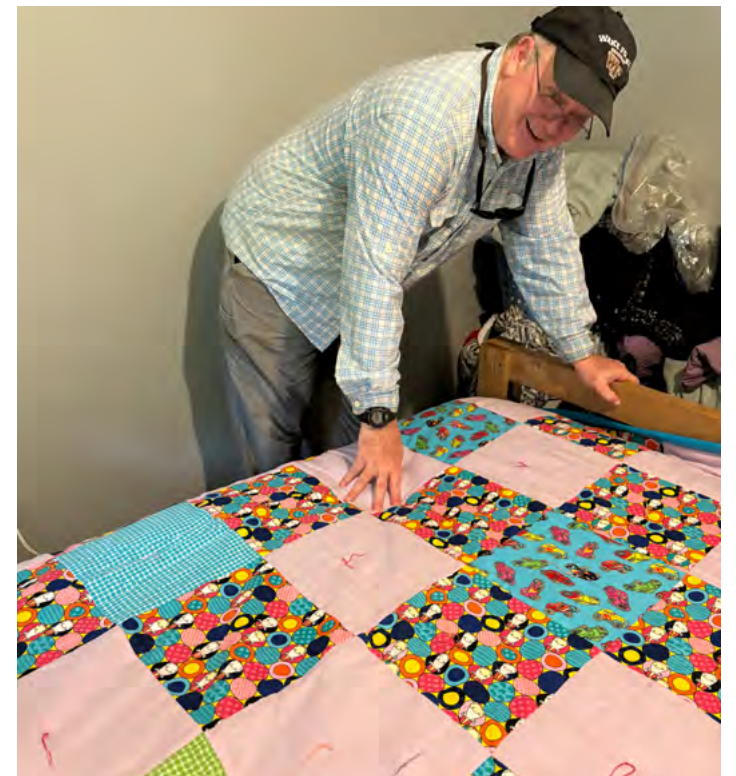
As a congregation called to love our neighbors, this is a hands-on opportunity to live out our faith in action. With each piece of sanded wood, each bolt tightened, and each mattress placed, we will be answering God’s call to care for the least among us.

Who Can Help?

This is a no-experience-needed, all-hands-on-deck event! Whether you are skilled with tools or have never picked up a hammer, there is a role for you. Volunteers of all abilities and experience levels are welcome, and there are tasks for everyone—from assembling bed frames to organizing supplies to writing notes of encouragement for the children receiving the beds.

Sign up today by scanning the QR code

Dates: **May 3 and May 10**
Location: Gastonia or Belmont
Time: All Day



Who Can Volunteer?

Anyone ages 12+ (No prior carpentry skills required!)

This is more than a service project—it’s a chance to make a direct, lasting impact in a child’s life. You will leave with the joy of knowing that your time and effort helped a child sleep soundly in a bed they can call their own.

Ready to Make a Difference?

If you have questions, please reach out to Jim Ratchford at jratchford79@gmail.com

We invite you to step forward in faith and generosity. Let’s come together as a church family, roll up our sleeves, and build something beautiful—one bed, one child, one act of love at a time.



**NO KID SLEEPS
ON THE FLOOR
IN OUR TOWN!**

Planned Giving Spotlight: Geof and Judy Planer

Written by Liz Sumner

In 1964, high schooler Judy Aldrich joined her father, Doug Aldrich senior pastor of First Baptist Church, on a hospital visit to see ailing parishioners. Among them was Geof Planer, suffering from a ruptured appendix. Moved by Judy’s kindness (and smitten by her charm), Geof sent her a Christmas card to say thank you. The rest is history! Their journey together has since included two sons, four grandchildren, and a shared life of Christian service.

In 1991, drawn by First Presbyterian’s commitment to mission and benevolence, Geof and Judy became members. Thanks to a welcoming congregation and pastors John DeBevoise and Gary Fulton, they quickly felt at home. Invitations to serve in the church soon followed, and over the years, they’ve faithfully contributed their time and talents to numerous committees, including the Diaconate and Session.

Their deep connection to FPC inspired them to include the church in their estate plans—a lasting testament to their faith and generosity. When asked about this decision, they shared their heartfelt reasons, hoping to encourage others to do the same.

Why Planned Giving?

(Judy) As a pastor’s daughter, I am acutely aware that if we don’t support the church financially, it cannot survive. We have a beautiful building that we have used to do God’s work on this earth for more than 60 years, but it is starting to show its age and will need expensive maintenance now and in the future. A planned gift helps ensure the funds will be available to preserve the facility and continue our mission there.



Why the church?

(Geof) Our church is a hub for Christian service, and the people who gather in it are at the center of the community, devoting substantial resources to missions that benefit so many. Our congregation has been blessed with people like Gwin Hilton with his passion for building Habitat for Humanity houses, and Dorothy McKenzie with her devotion to giving a Christian education to children both here and abroad in Malawi. Our church brings together people with different interests who share Jesus Christ’s vision that we love one another as He has first loved us.

What planned giving tool did you use and why?

We found that the easiest method or planned giving tool was to allocate a portion of our Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) from our IRAs to the church each year. The IRA custodian must pay the amount we allocate directly to the church instead of us. This reduces the amount of income taxes that we owe on the RMD. We get a nice income tax savings and it lets us support the church now and in the future.

For more information about this technique, please scan the QR code or visit our website, fpcgastonia.org/planned-giving.



For more information, contact:
Liz Sumner
704-616-0389 or lsunner@mhc-law.com

Welcome New Staff

Cody Howell A/V Coordinator



Cody Howell is joining the team as the new part-time A/V coordinator. He works as a civil engineer specializing in aviation at Talbert Bright and Ellington in Charlotte, NC. Cody is married to Holly, a choral scholar and Thrive Band member. Holly has been sharing her voice in the choir for several years, and it was during those performances that Cody first came to the church, eager to hear her sing, when they began dating. With a background in A/V from his years of service at church during his upbringing, he brings valuable experience to his new role. Cody and Holly share their lives with a dog named Dino, who frequently finds his way into their conversations with his sweet but goofy nature, bringing a touch of joy to their everyday moments.

Noah Williams Thrive Music Leader

Noah Williams is the band and chorus director at Highland School of Technology. He graduated from Western Carolina University with a bachelor’s degree in Commercial Music and Audio Production, where he focused on percussion, and the University of Tennessee with a Master’s in Percussion Performance. He frequently performs solo and band gigs playing drum set, guitar, and singing. He will be getting married in May of 2026 to his fiancée, Diana Bodie. In his free time, he enjoys taking his dog, Moby, on walks and adventures.



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**The Imposition of Ashes with
Rev. Brad Simpson and Esther Nelson**

Service Views and Attendance

Date	TRADITIONAL SERVICE		THRIVE SERVICE	
	Service	Livestream	Service	Livestream
March 2	117	95	93	74
March 9	137	84	72	38
March 16	84	61	56	30
March 23	115	66	68	29

Please note service views do not include those watching via closed circuit stream at Covenant Village.