

Pastor's Notes

June 2024 through June 2026

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Spanish Fort United Methodist Church

Last summer, our program staff held one of our quarterly offsite meetings. Usually, during these days apart, we strategize about the coming season and work through calendar details. However, this retreat was different. We spent time reflecting on ourselves as individuals and our staff dynamic. A retired United Methodist clergyperson from Florida led the two days. Whereas there was much I appreciated from the offsite, the part I've been revisiting was an assignment to help us share our personal stories.

After reading the George Ella Lyon poem, "Where I'm From," our facilitator tasked us with writing something similar to shed some light on our origins.

Mine went like this.

I'm from peanuts and wiregrass.

A Sand Pine timber farm, claypits, and bass fishing.

Getting lost in Kudzu forests and tasting sweet honeysuckle.

I'm from thin, crispy cornbread private and public schools.

Jam sessions, worship services, and failed family attempts of six-part harmonies every Happy Birthday.

I'm from a jewelry store babysitter, Disney with Russians, An everyday youth group, and sad stories.

I'm in the middle of a long line of Methodists — Wayne Ellis Bradshaw and John Woods Lisenby Ronny and Tonjia Lawson Bryan, Lee Ann Boykin, and Gillian Walters,

August Rose, Bradshaw Woods, and Wyatt Buen (I have since added Wyatt Buen, as our youngest son was not yet part of the story.)

I share this reflection because it was such a helpful practice. I encourage you to try it. It made me think about what it was like growing up in Dothan and how those experiences shaped me into who I am today.

It caused me to imagine how the things of my past laid the path for my children and will one day be a part of their stories.

We are all a collection of experiences and decisions. More than we are an embodiment of beliefs, our lives are witnesses to the things we've done and the places we're from. And as we

begin this new year in the life of Dauphin Way, I have been thinking a lot about how we got to where we are. I think about how our ever-expanding missions and outreach ministries are products of a church with a long history of caring for others. I think about how our worship services are the legacy of a congregation that believes worship should be beautiful in its execution and the sacred spaces where it takes place.

Most acutely, as it relates to my role, I think also about how our church's long-standing desire to do great things brought us to a place where we have incredible facilities, a staff full of high-capacity individuals, impactful ministries, and the challenge of covering all the costs associated with these things.

Our past experiences have a direct impact on our current blessings. We are the grateful inheritors of beautiful buildings, sprawling ministry offerings, and great expectations. And I believe everyone who works, and has worked, here does their best to exceed those expectations. Yet, the means to do so are unfortunately as unchanged as the expectations themselves, despite a very different climate in which we operate.

Someone once told the Finance Committee, "Our budget is pretty much always the same, somewhere between \$1,900,000 and \$2,100,000." And it turns out they were right. I went back and read some of our year-end reports from auditors, and our budget has remained roughly the same for the better part of two decades. In 2010, we received \$2,010,443 from pledged and non-pledged contributions. In 2012 it was \$2,074,320, and in 2014 it was \$2,080,198. Our operating revenue in 2022 was \$2,047,413, and in 2023 it was \$2,097,519.

In 2001, twenty-three years ago, we received \$1,310,207 in pledged giving. In 2023, we received \$1,369,208 in pledged giving. And our pledged giving for almost every year in between has been roughly the same.

All this is to say we decided years ago to fund ministries, staff, and building maintenance based on what it cost at that time. We still desire for those same ministries to thrive. However, the costs to accomplish our goals have risen, and our contributions have not increased to match the pace. The amount of ministry we spent \$1,310,207 to accomplish in 2001 would cost us \$2,295,264 today. Yet, we are still allocating the same amount of funding with unchanged expectations.

We have a great legacy. Dauphin Way UMC is an amazing church with a rich tradition of kingdom- building work. I take great pride when I reflect on where this church came from and how I get to be a small part of the story.

As we finish out the first month of this new year, I hope you will pray with me for God to reveal something new. I pray God will help us see the next phase of our journey. I do not yet know exactly what that means. If I did, I wouldn't be asking for your prayer, and it wouldn't be a journey of faith. But I do know that God has great things in store for our future, just as God has done great things in our past.

Michael is beginning work with the Finance Committee to cultivate a culture of year-round generosity. If that interests you, I encourage you to reach out and let us know.

Mostly, I hope you will join us in praying that 2024 will be a year of radical new vision. A year when we dream about the limitless possibilities God is laying before us, and we develop plans to step into those realities.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Church Council Feb 24 The popularization of the 80/20 principle has almost reached the point of cliché. But as I have learned about parenting, all the clichés turn out to be true. The 80/20 rule, also known as the Pareto Principle, essentially states that eighty percent of output comes from twenty percent of energy. In a business, it might be that eighty percent of your sales come from twenty percent of your products. In exercise, it might be that eighty percent of your gains come from twenty percent of your time or reps. In the church world, it is said that eighty percent of the activities are made possible because of twenty percent of the people. Thankfully, Dauphin Way is not an 80/20 church, but we are far from a 100/100 church.

If you are reading this, you have probably experienced the 80/20 principle in action at some time during your time here. In fact, if you read the Dauphin Way Journal and if you have made it all the way to my report, I would reckon to guess you are in the 20% right now. The Journal seems to be one of the things that reaches more than 20% of our active members, but not by much. And the term active covers a pretty broad category with a specific meaning. To be considered “active” according to our Shelby database system means that a member has attended worship given, participated in a discipleship group, service opportunity, given to the operating expenses or any combination of those things at least once in the past year. Just one touchpoint in a year is the threshold to not be removed from the roles. Obviously, we believe there is a lot more to being a faithful member and follower of Jesus Christ. But for database management purposes, we consider any person “active” if they have done any of those things in a way we can record at least once in the past twelve months. As I said, active has a very specific meaning, but I consider it a very generous use of the term.

Currently, we have 2275 individuals listed as members in our Shelby database. Of those, there are 821 active adults and around 1150 total active people when you add their children. 821 people took at least one step in their faith journey at Dauphin Way over the past twelve months. If you are reading this, you are likely among those who did so. Those who have not been active in any fashion are on our Charge Conference “to-be-removed” report unless we know of a reason to keep them as members (such as those who are homebound, in college, etc.)

At the end of 2023, we averaged 346 people on average for in-person weekly worship and 452 persons on average when our online attendance is included. That means the average Dauphin Way member attends worship 8.4 times per year. That is roughly once out of every six weeks.

Our active members attended around twenty times a year. However, that is the average; it includes those in our 1150 who come on Christmas and Easter and those here every week.

Most people in weekly worship attendance attend more regularly than once every six weeks.

Our most active worshipers, around 400-450 adults attend between 2.5-3.5 weeks per month.

It is no coincidence that our most financially generous households are among our most active. I am grateful Dauphin Way does not rely on one or two households for a significant portion of our budget. We are a church that rallies together to support the ministries here. No one household makes up more than 2% of our budget. However, of the 545 households that contributed to the operating expenses in 2023, over eighty percent of contributions came from 138 households. That's better than 80/20, but 80/25 is still far from where we want to be.

I almost decided not to write this for my February report since my January report was somewhat gloomy. But I thought it was the right thing to offer for two reasons. The first is to say thank you. Thank you for taking the time to read this. I am assuming if you are still reading, you are also likely part of the twenty percent in many other areas, like worship, financial generosity, and discipleship. Thank you as well to all those not in the twenty percent of most active members because you are just as valuable a person to Dauphin Way and in God's eyes.

Thank you for being with us when you can, giving what you are able, and remaining a part of our church family. I pray you will experience the joy that the twenty percent has found from doing all the things you are doing but with slightly more regularity.

The second is because it does our church no good for me to know and not share these things.

I recognize that guilt-tripping people to be more present or to give more doesn't work. And I also recognize that these appeals, in this format, are often received by the ones who are already the most active. Asking people to do more from the people who read the Dauphin Way Journal is like preaching to the choir.

But I also believe the most active people are also the best people to help someone who is semi-active or inactive find the joy you have from your life in the church. The preachers and the staff can only do so much when it comes to helping people find their life in Christ here at Dauphin Way. We are gonna do our best with all our programming; we are going to craft beautiful worship and try to preach the best sermons we can. However, study after study shows that the thing that gets people involved in the life of a church is an invitation from a friend or family member.

So we can lament that we are a Our most recent sermon was among my favorites that we've written. I don't feel I preached it particularly well, but I did very much enjoy preparing it. It was titled "Creator God," and it was a part of worship on Sunday, February 25. If you missed it, you can find it, or any of our previous sermons, on our DWUMC podcast feed anywhere you download podcasts. In the first movement of the sermon, I mentioned the various aspects of science that fascinate me, particularly the vastness of space and the strangeness of the sub-atomic realm. One of the things I considered for that movement, but left on the cutting room floor, is the belief that the universe is still expanding. For a long time, scientists believed that the universe was static.

They assumed sometime after the universe began, everything expanded and then slowed, eventually reaching an equilibrium. However, scientists later discovered that galaxies are actually moving away from us, and the farther away they are, the faster they move. This universal expansion is known as Hubble's Law. Essentially, it means that the universe is not yet in its final state and still requires change to become what it will ultimately be.

It is either ironic or cosmologically appropriate that the universe is still changing and growing, moving towards some unknown final form, because that sure seems to be the ever-present reality here on Earth. Static is not really in the vocabulary of our planet. Landscapes are changed by volcanic activity, shifting tectonic plates, and wildfires. Life on earth evolves over time. As much as my son would love to meet a dinosaur, they are a product of a bygone age, swept away by the sands of time. The only constant in a non-static world is change. Yet, despite change's grip on our reality, it is often the most feared part of our lives.

But it doesn't have to be.

A lot has changed at Dauphin Way. Just over the past few years, stalwarts of our congregation have gone on to glory. People like Steve Dill, Jim Bell, Grace Lincks, Bob Williams, and Fran Easley entered the gates of eternity, and other great leaders have stepped up to lead in their absence. We have offered three different iterations of the Contemporary Worship service, the most recent now going on over ten years. We've owned and sold property, had flooded basements and leaky roofs repaired, and offered mission trips to Jamaica, Honduras, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, and many other places. Dauphin Way is not static, nor should it be. We move and change in concert with the leading of the Holy Spirit. And throughout each of those changes, even the ones that were hard and scary, God has been with our church through it all, and God has done great things.

We are beginning another one of those seasons of change. Over the past two years, we have added 148 new members. Anytime one person joins our church, we become a new church.

Our church has changed 148 times over the past twenty-four months. We've seen a 16.5% increase in average weekly worship since 2021. And twenty-eight new households pledged \$90,180 in 2024. However, amidst the increase and addition, there has also been personal and financial loss due to death and departure. Based on the expected decrease in revenue from these things, our finance committee believes there could be as much as a \$204,902 reduction in the 2025 budget.

If that reduction does occur, it will require significant changes for Dauphin Way. Our District Superintendent is coming to meet with our SPRC on March 7 to discuss how this will impact the clergy appointed to Dauphin Way. How many clergy are appointed here will impact what this church can do regarding worship services and discipleship on Sunday mornings. If we move to one preacher, it would be impossible to offer concurrent services. Also, our Church Council will begin discussing how to restructure our programs and staff around the ministries most aligned with our congregation's priorities.

This possible change may sound intimidating, even fearful, but it doesn't have to be. Just as God has been with our church during transitions in the past, God will be with us now and always. God will not leave, fail, or forsake us. And God is the one who can make good, even great things, come from anything. There is nothing too big for God!

So, I hope you will join me in believing that God is with us and pray for His guidance. Pray that God will lead our paths and we follow them. Pray God helps us discern the best structure for our pastoral team and staff. Pray that God helps us use every dollar we receive for good work and kingdom-building.

In addition to praying about these possible changes, you can also be a part of the conversation. There are two opportunities for you to join us. The first is on Wednesday evening, March 20. After our Lenten worship service at 5:30 and during dinner at 6:00, the Executive Team (Ann-Brooks Morrisette, Wilson Brand, Anna Moore, Kevin West, Chris Phillips, Michael Precht, and myself) will host a panel discussion and Q&A for any that want to attend. Also, the conversation about identifying our church's priorities will be a large part of the discussion at the Church Council on March 25. Both gatherings are open to everyone, and I hope you will consider joining us.

Jesus tells us, “Take heart, do not be afraid.” In times of change, we need to be reminded of those words and believe them to be true. I hope you will join me in trying to do just that. To hear and believe that Christ is with us — now and always — and we need not be afraid!

Close to the beginning of his 6,188-word farewell address, George Washington offers a seemingly innocuous but very important caveat.

He writes, “A solicitude for your welfare...urges me on an occasion like the present, to offer to your solemn contemplation, and to recommend to your frequent review, some sentiments which are the result of much reflection, of no inconsiderable observation, and which appear to me all important to the permanency of your felicity as a people. These will be offered to you with the more freedom as you can only see in them the disinterested warnings of a parting friend, who can possibly have no personal motive to bias his counsel.”

That was his way of saying, I am leaving, I am proud of the work we have done, and I have a few thoughts to offer as I go.

This is my last Dauphin Way Church Council report. I don’t have 6,000 words. I don’t have reflections on European treaties. I was not a part of founding a new form of government, nor did we fight a war together. However, after seven years of serving as your pastor, like G.W., I know I have been a part of something great. And unsurprisingly, I have a few thoughts as I go.

This is a great church with a lot to offer. Too often, we fail to recognize just how great it is. That is both a compliment to the general humility in this congregation and a recognition of ill-placed lament. This church has so much to give. Yet, I regularly find myself in conversations about what we lack.

And recent circumstances notwithstanding, they are rarely financial related. We get in the comparison trap of asking why we’re not like “that church,” or how do we become more like “them.” I hope in the days, weeks, and months to come, you will see the abundance of God’s gifts and give thanks for all you already have. God has richly blessed this church, and though we are beginning a transition we are not losing God’s goodness. Restructuring and retooling are not bad things.

Sure, change can be hard. But Dauphin Way has been given so much and has so much to give. My prayer is that this transition will allow you to see all God is doing in and through this congregation and raise up even more people to do the Gospel work.

You are only limited by the strength of your unity. The Holy Spirit desires to unite and to hold together that which humanity cannot. A church of young and old, contemporary and traditional, rich and poor, should not work — but by God's grace, it does. This church is great because of the grace God gives and your ability to accept and offer the same. Don't stop accepting God's grace. Don't stop offering God's grace.

Offer grace to the person you've seen at the donut table for years but have been too embarrassed to ask their name. It is grace when you say, "I am sorry, I should know your name, but I don't." Or even simpler, "So how long have you and your family been at Dauphin Way?" If you go to the traditional service, offer grace to those in the contemporary service by worshipping with them once in a while. If you go to the contemporary service, offer grace to those in the sanctuary by doing the same. This is one church that has two worship styles, in three services. It is not three churches that worship in one building!

Likewise, if you drive for Meals on Wheels, ask our children's ministry how you can pray for them. If you are a youth volunteer, offer grace to the ushers by covering on a Sunday they can't make it. Did you know over 3/4 of our average weekly worship attendance serves in some capacity at least once a month? There are hundreds of people serving together in this congregation across many areas of ministry.

I've heard multiple people say that it feels like they are serving on an island and that only a few people are doing all the work. But, unlike many congregations, at Dauphin Way, that's actually not true. But I understand if it feels that way because there are so many places to serve, and we don't get to see all the good things God is up to in this church. It's rare for a Society of Saint Stephen's volunteer to interact with our Youth Parent Council. Not many choir members also serve in the contemporary worship band. The tech people in the sanctuary are not the same tech people in Moore Hall. Those who lead adult Sunday school typically don't go upstairs and see who's teaching the children's lesson. It is sad that the people who go on mission trips don't also get to witness the mission work of our Prayer Shawl ministry. And board of trustees members do not often cross paths with the members of the SPRC.

I could come up with 6,000 words worth of examples. But suffice it to say Dauphin Way does a lot of amazing things, and the thing I have been afforded as a pastor is the 30,000-foot view to see it all. I hope you, too, will be able to see and celebrate all the incredible ministry that happens here and realize that it takes the entire church to do this work. And, before lamenting something the church is lacking, look at all the things already happening! Before you offer judgment, offer grace. Be united by, in, and through God's grace. Do not let the divisions of

this world and the in-breaking of evil tear this great church apart. And make no mistake, it will try. Evil often has a way of sneaking into the good things. Guard the heart of this congregation, and do not let the unity of the Spirit be broken by the sins of humanity. Show the world a different way of being. Be a beacon on a hill. “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Offer grace any chance you get. And when you do, don’t forget to give thanks for the grace you have received. As many good things as there are to celebrate, I’ve had twice as many reasons to give thanks over these last seven years.

Like, the way you welcomed us into your family. Thank you for being our family. Thank you for journeying with me and my wife through four pregnancies. Thank you for being the church that helped us move into and make our house a home. Thank you for trusting during pastoral transitions.

Thank you for keeping our children during countless committee meetings and church programming. Thank you for walking my kids to and picking them up from school. Thank you for being our general practitioners, pediatricians, and oncologists. Thank you for inviting us into your homes and visiting us in ours. Thank you for befriending us, traveling with us, training with us, and podcasting with us. Thank you for letting us serve alongside you and celebrate with you.

Thank you for showing us kindness, offering us grace, and practicing mercy.

President Washington concluded his address by saying, “Though in reviewing the incidents of my administration I am unconscious of intentional error, I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be, I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend.”

If our country's founding father can admit that, even if unintentional, he made many errors, then who would I be to assume any less? I am certain I have committed many errors over these past seven years. If one of those errors was committed against you, I am sorry. I have three goals in life: to love God, to love my family, and to love the Church. I pray everything I do will be in service of those goals. However, I know all too well that I am a sinner in need of grace. So, for those times I failed to be an obedient member of Christ’s church, I ask your forgiveness. And I pray that you and I can all offer that same forgiveness to everyone else as well. I pray that we can all be reconciled to God and reconciled to one another. I pray the Holy Spirit will continue uniting and holding together what we cannot. And, I pray that on the day when Christ

comes in final victory, and we feast at His heavenly banquet, we will look at one another and smile and tell all the stories from the times when we were together at Dauphin Way United Methodist Church.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Happy Friday, Church!

One of my favorite childhood traditions was our annual school-year shoe shopping.

Like every kid, my feet would size out of the previous year's tennis shoes, and after all the wear and tear, it was time for a new pair. I grew up in Dothan, and we usually bought tennis shoes from Hibbett Sports in Wiregrass Commons Mall. However, I remember the summer before the sixth grade, we were on a trip to Montgomery and stopped by the Foot Locker on Eastern Boulevard. It was right next to the old Macaroni Grill, where I would eat a whole loaf of bread dipped in olive oil! Don't get me wrong, I loved the Hibbett store in Dothan, but there was something magical about the experience of going into that new Foot Locker. It was like there was power in the conglomeration of new things. It was a new school year, I was getting new shoes, we were in a new city, shopping at a new store. For the record, I picked some black and red Nikes. Mainly because, even though they weren't Air Jordans, they reminded me of something Michael would have worn - and I have always been a huge Michael Jordan fan.

I am reminded of that year's shoe selection because, once again, I am inundated with newness. I am struck by the feeling of possibility! Brianna and I are in a new appointment, and we have a new baby. I am meeting so many new people and trying new restaurants. We are entering a church that is moving into a new season. And we are new members of the minivan club. New things are exciting and filled with hope. Yet, they can also produce unease, fear, and anxiety.

As exciting as change may be for some, it can also be challenging. Most of us are creatures of habit; we have familiar places and routines. Deep emotions tie us to strong memories. Spanish Fort United Methodist Church is a great church that has accomplished incredible ministry. It is an amazing congregation because God is great, and its people follow God. This church is built on the work of the Holy Spirit through people who have given their blood, sweat, and tears to make this congregation what it is. I give thanks for the ministry of Pastor Bill, all the pastors who came before me, and the countless lay people who have sacrificed and served in this church.

As always, I am drawn to the Bible. The stories of Scripture honor tradition and seek God's movement in the present. The people of God give thanks for what He has done while looking toward what God will do. And that is where I find myself today. I am humbled by the tradition of faithfulness I inherit and reminded to trust in the promise of the new creation. I am drawn to the instances in Scripture where God does new things.

-In Genesis, God makes the new Earth from the formless void.

-In Joshua, the Israelites enter a new land.

-Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, "Behold, I am doing a new thing."

-At the Last Supper, Jesus tells the disciples that the cup is his "blood of the new covenant."

-Paul tells the Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come."

-In Revelation, John sees Christ bringing a new heaven and a new earth.

I am filled with hope by this thread throughout the Bible, where God makes and does new things. God doesn't stand still. The Holy Spirit is always moving. Jesus is in the business of creating new things.

This is likely why my heart has been "filled to overflowing" the past six days. This week, I have encountered so many incredible God sightings. So many new experiences that caused me to fall even deeper in love with God. Worship with you this past Sunday was amazing. We held our first meetings of the newly formed Board of Trustees and Finance Committees. These committees are filled with people who have graciously stepped up to serve until the nominations committee can meet next week and offer the Church Council a permanent slate of committee members. The Trustees were able to identify pressing needs they will attend to, and the Finance Committee took time to help me gain a better understanding of our present financial reality. Likewise, I am grateful to the SPRC, who hired a new business director. I give thanks that longtime church member Elisha Dozier has agreed to come work for the church and help us be faithful stewards of the resources God has given Spanish Fort UMC.

Ultimately, this week has reminded me that new things can be incredible. I have been overwhelmed by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. I have been encouraged by our church's eagerness to step up and volunteer. And I have been challenged to be the best pastor I can be as I witness you all be the best servants of God you can be.

As we begin this new season, I hope you will join me in praying for our church. I invite you to pray that we will see God in mighty ways. That each week, more new people will come to know Christ because of God's work through Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. And I invite you to pray with me the words of theologian Edwin Hatch, who wrote, "Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew that I may love the way you love, and do what you would

do..”

Good Morning,

As I am sure you are aware, our church is in the midst of a transitional season. While transitions present new challenges, they also produce a host of new blessings. I have been thrilled to witness the work of the Holy Spirit these past two weeks in the life of Spanish Fort UMC!

Seeing over eighty young people participate in Youth Week has been fantastic. Likewise, roughly thirty children came to our Puppets, Pizza, and Praise night. Our transitional administrative teams are pouring out their time to serve the church. And yesterday we had a full day of onboarding sessions. This was a chance for our staff and church leaders to ask me any question they wanted and for me to learn a lot about this great church.

With all this excitement comes new opportunities to step out in faith. Our interim nominations committee met this past Monday evening. During our time together, we prayed that the Holy Spirit would help us discern who will be the leaders for this next season in the life of Spanish Fort UMC. I am writing to inform you that you have been nominated for a position on one of our committees or to continue in a position you currently hold. We are asking that anyone who is in the class of 2024 and scheduled to roll off at the end of the year consider staying on one more year and becoming the class of 2025 to help us through this transition.

I am giving you a heads-up before I call you so that you have time to pray about this nomination. I understand if you are apprehensive about taking a leadership role at this time.

This has been a unique season in the life of the church. But please know for every name discussed, there was enthusiasm and joy at the prospect of your service. This group believes in you, in the gifts God has given you, and that this church needs great people like you to serve the Lord.

Also, if it helps, I want to give you a sense of my leadership style. I believe transparency and communication are essential for organizational health. As such, I have attached a newly formatted version of our budget. The Book of Discipline states, “The committee on finance shall compile annually a complete budget for the local church and submit it to the church council for review and adoption.” Like the meetings of the finance committee and the board of trustees, the church council is an open meeting for anyone who wishes to attend, and the minutes are available to the congregation. Therefore, the budget review is a public process

because, as part of the church council procedure, the congregation members are entitled to review the church's budget at any time. In order to maintain the confidentiality of staff salaries, the total personnel cost has been consolidated in the budget, and the Staff-Parish Relations Committee will maintain an itemized payroll spreadsheet.

Over the next two weeks, I will call every person that was nominated to serve. I am happy to talk as long as you want and answer any questions you have. I aim to have our slate of nominees ready by our July 29th church council meeting. I am excited that Lee Walters has agreed to serve as our new Church Council Chairman, and Asher Carmichael has agreed to serve as the new Lay Leader. I know these are two people of high character and integrity that God will use to help shape the next season of our congregation.

Please be in prayer about whether or not this is a season in which you can serve. And please know there will be no hard feelings if this is not the right time for you.

I look forward to talking with each of you. Feel free to email or call with any questions or if you already know your answer.

Grace and Peace,

Woods

Hello Church, My family will tell you I have never been one to follow “the rules.” I don’t read instruction manuals, and I skip the setup menus on technology. Cooking is more by feel than by recipe. I can play the guitar, piano, and harmonica, but I don’t know how to read music. Feeling things out is kind of my way of life.

That was until I served as an Executive Pastor. My whole life, I knew I wanted to be a pastor.

For the longest time, I thought my primary gifts were preaching, teaching, and worship leading.

However, when I was asked to serve in an executive capacity, I discovered a new love for ministry and a way of leading I hadn’t realized could be so life-giving. The most important thing I’ve discovered about church administration is that “the rules” can actually be freeing — which sounds ironic, I know. Typically, when we think of institutions and bureaucracy, we think of red tape and slow-moving structures. That may be true for some aspects of our denominational polity, but I don’t believe it’s true of how we organize the local church.

The local church is the missional outpost for the Gospel work. The local church is a congregation of people who have joined together to live out and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And organizing congregational life has increased in complexity over time. It began with a few peers gathering in catacombs to break bread. And now, there are some Christian churches that are larger than a small town. As local churches grow, it is important to offer a way of organizing that fosters healthy communities.

That is why I enjoy administering how we order our Gospel work. I love the local church, and I desperately desire to lead in such a way that we create healthy congregations. As much as I like to fly by the seat of my pants, sound structure goes a long way to fostering healthy communities.

This is why I am grateful for the church tradition to which we belong. I am grateful that our structure requires us to have things like rotating committee members to ensure there will always be fresh eyes coming in to review the previous year's work. I am glad that anyone who wants to attend finance, trustees, and church council meetings can do so. Our operating protocols have public accountability written into the system. Though only nominated members can vote on those committees, we believe all are welcome to observe and offer insight. Even those committees that handle sensitive matters like salaries, behavior, and character assessment still produce reports from their meetings so we know the result of their work.

Likewise, I am grateful that we are required to have annual audits, written financial controls, and policies against nepotism on the finance committee. These help free the church from vulnerabilities to financial improprieties. And the fact that pastors can't vote on all the committees means that checks and balances for the lay-clergy relationship are baked into the rules.

I am also grateful that every new pastor begins an appointment without having to recreate all the policies and procedures. That is the joy of being a United Methodist. Not only is the polity preserved in the tradition, but the rules that govern how we operate in the local church offer the foundation for creating a healthy church culture.

To that end, below is a link to our 2024 church budget. I still have much to learn about Spanish Fort UMC, but the faithful people of this church are helping me get there. Even still, here is a list of things we do know that I want to share with you.

- We know how much money we have in our bank accounts, who has access to those accounts, and who is authorized to sign checks.

- We know what giving has been like up to the present day. And although we may need to reduce some expenses moving forward to adjust for decreased revenue, this church is still being faithfully generous — in fact, we made a \$33,000 deposit from this week's giving alone!

- We know that the nominations committee has identified forty-eight high-capacity, faithful members of our congregation to step up and serve on our administrative committees.

- And we know the first two calls I made on behalf of our nominations team were accepted! I am thrilled that Lee Walters has agreed to be our new Church Council Chairman, and Asher Carmichael will be the Lay Leader for Spanish Fort UMC!

This has been an exciting two weeks. Thank you to everyone who participated in my onboarding, especially those who cooked dinner and provided the meals. I have been overwhelmed by this congregation's kindness and faithfulness! These first two weeks have made me thrilled for all God has before us. And I can't wait to see what's in store! 2024 Budget - <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/0n6s0ykou269locsfvt1/2024-Budget.pdf?rlkey=mk8gxe8p4jewjxwdzsmztm2mu&dl=0> Grace and Peace, Woods

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work...12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 14 Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 12-14)

One of the joys of pastoral ministry is getting a thirty-thousand-foot view of our collective Gospel work. From my vantage point, I get a chance to see all the areas of ministry and how they work together to accomplish our congregation's goals. It is not uncommon for an individual serving faithfully in one area to be unaware of the good work being done in another, which is why I love the Church Council. The Church Council is the place that brings together all the God-sightings, the faithful efforts, the congregational concerns, and anything else pertinent to the life of the church.

The Church Council reminds me of this passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It is where the different gifts and ministries come together as the representative picture of Christ's body. It's where we are reminded that we do not labor alone and that individual departments in the church are not siloed. At Church Council, we celebrate all God is doing in and through the life of our church and strategize about how to best continue in the directions that the Holy Spirit leads.

At the bottom of this email is a link to the Brochure of Reports for the Church Council meeting.

It is chalked full of information related to vital signs and happenings in the congregation. It will be sent out the Friday before the Church Council meetings. Our monthly meeting is this coming Monday, July 30. All are welcome to attend and can ask questions or voice their opinions. We will review the nominating committee's work, and current members will vote to approve the individuals put forward to serve on our committees. Likewise, we will discuss the updates from SPRC, Trustees, and Finance. If you have questions or concerns about the state of the church, I encourage you to join us.

In addition to our administrative committee and program reports, part of our evening will be spent sharing priorities and plans for this new season. I will review some of the work we have done and things I hope to accomplish. Further, we will discuss a proposal from our staff about

the fall discipleship schedule. I hope you will share your enthusiasm or concerns over this plan, the bulk of which is included in the linked brochure.

This is a new season in the life of Spanish Fort UMC. There is so much goodness in store for us. And though some things will look different, the Holy Spirit will be with us every step of the way. As we grow into the fullness of God's kingdom, we trust that every step will help us move deeper into His will. I pray you will join me in internalizing the hope that comes from this new season. I pray you will champion our future to everyone and invite them to consider checking out our church. And I pray that in all things, we will seek after God's will for Spanish Fort United Methodist Church!

Brochure of Reports - <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/5vdscjmsgb14loi4lrnd9/CC-Brochure-7-24.pdf?rlkey=emgzadw32llys4a2iivdy9w0h&dl=0> Grace and Peace, Woods

I've often received the parenting advice, "Enjoy it while it lasts because though the days go slow, the years go fast." And whereas that may be true for parenting, it definitely doesn't apply to my first month of ministry at Spanish Fort UMC. Over the past four weeks, everything has been fast! The days have been fast, the weeks have been fast, and even the seconds felt fast!

It's hard to believe it's already been four Sundays, four staff meetings, six committee meetings, and seventy-plus phone calls. And though it's been fast, it has also been fantastic!

My time here has been a blessing, as I've had the opportunity to get to know and work with the dedicated staff and lay leaders. As a pastor, I am profoundly grateful for our incredible people and the resources at Spanish Fort UMC. Your support, enthusiasm, and shared vision for the future have been a source of great joy and inspiration.

If you've heard me speak at any of our committee meetings, onboarding, or other public forums, you've likely heard me say that the two pillars of my organizational leadership style are transparency and communication. If anything, at some point, you may think we are over-communicating. But like my mom always said, "It's better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it." I'd always rather tell you something and you not need it than you need something and we have failed to share it.

So with that, I hope you have been getting our recent communications. We have been sending out emails on Fridays with weekly reflections about church events. Also, we sent out the 2024 budget and this month's Church Council brochure. If you didn't receive them, contact Jennifer Stewart at jennifer@spanishfortumc.org to be added to the email list. Also, if we haven't seen each other in worship, I hope we get to soon. Our worship services have been a real treat to me and my family. I am grateful for Pastor Mike and Andy's leadership of our worship services.

Pastor Bill and all those who have led this church over the years have built a legacy of fruitful ministry for us to carry forward. I am grateful for all those who have stepped up during this season of transition. I appreciate Pastor Kitsy's faithful service to this church. I am excited to have Elisha Dozier join our staff as the new Director of Finance and Operations. And I am happy to announce the hiring of Erin Tucker as our new Preschool Director. However, it's not only our staff that has been working hard; so too have countless members of this congregation. We've had church members at the offices daily, helping to answer phones, tend to the building, and cook meals. I usually think of July as a pretty quiet time in the local church's life, but that certainly hasn't been the case here! This place has been buzzing with activity, and it has been so much fun to witness and join.

Ultimately, I thank God for this new appointment and for the chance to be your pastor. I appreciate the hospitality my family and I have received, the well wishes, the gift cards, and the encouraging texts. We are thrilled to be a part of the Spanish Fort Community, and I am so excited to see how God will continue using this wonderful congregation now and into the future!

Grace and Peace, Woods

I thought I'd take a week off from organizational-related updates and offer another thought this Friday. My son turns four next week. We are having his birthday party this weekend at Pump It Up, and it's all he's talked about for weeks. If you had asked me on his third birthday what our lives would be like on his fourth, I wouldn't have come close to getting the answer right. A year ago, I didn't expect to be the Senior Pastor of Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. I also didn't expect to have a third child. I was four weeks removed from surgery, our air conditioner just went out, my wife had the flu, and my daughter was about to start kindergarten. Moving churches, expanding our family, and living less than a mile from my sister and her family weren't on the radar.

But isn't that just the way life goes?

Life is full of unexpected twists and turns. God has plans for our lives that can be unpredictable. Also, circumstances sometimes dictate that things happen that are beyond our control.

As Wesleyans, we do not believe everything happens for a reason. It never says that in the Bible. However, we do believe God can make good come from all things. That's what Paul tells us in Romans 8. I don't think God made me crash my bike last year and crack my helmet so that I would have to get a CT scan and then discover nodules on my thyroid. But I did crash my bike and break my helmet, and then Spanish Fort UMC's own Dr. Will Bolton was able to make the proper diagnosis. Something good came out of something bad, and I was able to make a new friend.

We are in the middle of a series about what we believe. And as we talk about God, I think it important to say that we believe God has ultimate control of the universe and that God is not the author of every bad thing. This may sound strange, I know. But let me give you another example: I don't think God causes natural disasters, and I especially don't think God uses them as forms of punishment. However, I have seen new relationships form when a community comes together to rebuild, which is something good God brought out of something bad. God can reconcile and restore in ways that we cannot. God can hold together things that, on their own, stay separated. God gave us the freedom to choose, and in so doing, humanity inherited the ability to bring about all the good and the bad possibilities. However, this free will does not negate or alleviate the presence of things beyond our control, like natural disasters.

As tough as life can be, at times, I pray you know that God does not desire to bring calamity but comfort. God isn't using your family, work, relationships, or even your church as

punishment for mistakes. Sometimes, because of our own faults or events outside of our control, bad things happen. Heartbreak is not a made-up emotion. The question of theodicy (how can a good God let bad things happen) is as old as time. People have been trying to reconcile misfortune as long as we have been capable of abstract thought.

And, if you are there right now, trying to find hope in the midst of darkness, I pray you will know this Good News — because of Jesus Christ, the worst things will never be the last things. God has the final Word, and God can make good come from all things. God's desire is to bring peace, not pain.

I pray that as you read this, you will incline your mind to Christ, and I hope you find comfort in the midst of whatever turmoil has entered your life. I pray you will find the ways God is making goodness come from even the darkest places. And I pray that in all these discoveries, we will become more united with each other as we seek to become one in Christ.

Good Afternoon Church!

I am grateful to all who attended our Church Council meeting last night. Below is a summary of the gathering and the final version of the Church Council Brochure.

All are welcome to join us for our next Church Council on August 26th.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Summary:

The Spanish Fort United Methodist Church Council meeting covered various topics, including adopting a slate of nominations, updates on safety plans, staffing, finances, membership, programming, scheduling for the upcoming fall season, and pastoral reflections on different titles within church organizations. The participants emphasized the importance of accountability and transparency within the church council. The Finance Committee is addressing financial questions, including a projected deficit in the budget passed in 2023, and is working on maximizing assets and cutting expenses to address the situation.

The church highlighted a strategic shift from Wednesday nights to Sunday nights for children's and youth activities, as well as plans for seasonal events like Lenten dinners and quarterly offerings. Those present expressed enthusiasm for the changes and emphasized the goal of creating a vibrant environment for all congregation members. The senior pastor delved into the various titles used within the church, emphasizing the flexibility in how individuals can address him based on their comfort, and provided a detailed explanation of the distinctions between clergy, ministers, and non-ministerial roles.

He then reflected on a paradigm for ministry, emphasizing the interconnectedness of evangelism, relational ministry, worship, prayer, discipleship, and service within the church's mission. Pastor Woods stressed the importance of intentional programming that aligns with the church's values and mission, highlighting the need for all activities to fit within this paradigm.

Additionally, he emphasized the significance of not engaging in activities without intention and ensuring that all efforts align with the church's calling.

He shared his priorities, emphasizing the importance of family and his commitment to being present for them while also fulfilling his role as a pastor. The meeting concluded with a closing prayer for strength and blessings for the church and its members.

Chapters & Topics:

Church Council Meeting Introduction and Devotional The senior pastor led the Church Council meeting in the absence of the new chairman (Lee Walters), with the main agenda item being the vote on adopting a slate of nominations. The meeting started with a devotional where the pastor expressed his appreciation for the administrative aspects of church work and discussed the practical and impractical aspects of the church's administrative directives. The pastor also highlighted the need for organization in the church's administrative processes.

Church Operations and Accountability The section centered on the church's operations and accountability, emphasizing the need to celebrate the work of different committees and ministries. The speaker stressed the importance of details in maintaining accountability and transparency within the church council, and highlighted the significance of following the established rules and orders for creating a sustainable and healthy church culture.

Safety and Administrative Updates Michelle, updated the group on safety plans, including tornado and hurricane plans, and the need for a bomb threat plan. She also mentioned depositing safety resources on a thumb drive for office access. The speaker sought approval for an active shooter response presentation and expressed gratitude for the work done to keep the church safe.

Nominations Committee Report and Church Council Structure Recommendations The Nominations Committee report detailed the process for committee nominations and the structure of the church council, with recommendations for changes to provide more flexibility in committee membership and voting rights. The report also highlighted the pending positions and the acceptance of nominations for various committees, emphasizing the need for consistency in committee terms and the willingness of individuals to serve in leadership roles.

Updates on Staffing, Finances, and Membership The church has made new hires for key positions and is navigating the complexities of exempt and non-exempt status for employees, as well as the upcoming minimum salary requirement.

There are concerns about the impact of decreased membership on apportionments and discussions about financial priorities.

Financial Update and Congregational Feedback The pastor discussed the church's financial situation, acknowledging the projected deficit and the uncertainty surrounding revenue. However, the Finance Committee believes the congregation that there are sufficient savings to cover expenses for the rest of the year. The Finance Committee will focus on maximizing assets and cutting expenses to address the financial challenges.

Programming and Scheduling Updates for Fall The Spanish Fort United Methodist Church outlined significant changes to its programming and scheduling for the fall, including a transition from Wednesday nights to Sunday nights for children's and youth activities. They also discussed plans for seasonal events such as Lenten dinners and quarterly offerings, and expressed optimism about the potential for increased participation and engagement from the congregation and community.

- * Children's and youth programming

New Business and Church Council Expectations The meeting started with a brief discussion on the expected duration of the church council meeting. The approval of the committee on nominations report was then carried out, followed by a welcome and orientation for new members. The concept of charge teams was introduced, but it was clarified that new members were not required to participate in them at present.

- * Church Council Meeting Length

- * Orientation Packet Updates

Clarifying Titles, Roles, and Responsibilities The speaker addresses the different titles used within the church, highlighting the flexibility in how individuals can address them. They also explain the distinctions between clergy, ministers, and lay people, and how these roles are defined within the church. Additionally, the speaker discusses the staffing structure, including the responsibilities and supervisory roles of the staff members.

- * Church Organization Titles and Roles

Paradigm for Ministry The speaker presents a paradigm for ministry, using the analogy of a church as a spiritual house with different rooms representing various aspects of ministry. They highlight the importance of intentional programming that aligns with the church's mission and values, emphasizing evangelism, relational ministry, worship, prayer, discipleship, and service as integral components. The speaker also stresses the need for all church activities to fit within this paradigm and serve the overall mission.

Goals and Priorities The individual from Spanish Fort United Methodist Church shared their achievements in the first week and first month of their role, which included tasks like understanding immediate care needs, nominating new leaders, and analyzing the financial situation. They also mentioned their ongoing tasks for the month, such as planning listening sessions and visiting homebound individuals, as well as evaluating the need for a maintenance person.

Pastoral Priorities and Gratitude The pastor shares his personal priorities, highlighting the significance of family and his role as a father. He also expresses gratitude towards a church member for their valuable contributions and assures them of the church's support in their future endeavors. The section concludes with a closing prayer for strength and blessings for the church and its members.

* Pastor's Priorities and Responsibilities

Action Items:

- * Spanish Fort United Methodist Church will put together a digital file of all safety stuff and additional resources on a blank thumb drive and deposit it at the office for uploading on the shared drive.
- * Nominations Committee will review and reorient the structure of the church council to accommodate changes in positions and voting members.
- * Trustees will address immediate building maintenance needs, such as HVAC repairs and water damage in the preschool building.
- * Finance Committee will review and adjust the budget to address the financial deficit and prioritize expenses.
- * Children's Ministry Team will develop and implement a plan for children's programming on Sunday nights, including nursery care and activities for preschoolers.
- * Spanish Fort United Methodist Church will remove charge teams from the orientation packet.
- * Pastor will develop and implement a plan for new member classes and adult discipleship, potentially during Sunday school time.
- * Spanish Fort United Methodist Church will know all staff and family names.
- * Spanish Fort United Methodist Church will visit all homebound members.
- * Spanish Fort United Methodist Church will figure out what to do for confirmation.

Key Questions:

- * How will the church ensure safety and security through Safe Sanctuaries training and other measures?
- * How will the church address the financial deficit and prioritize expenses?

- * What new offerings will be available for children and youth on Sunday nights?
- * Who is in charge of the church program?
- * What plans are in place for new member classes and adult discipleship?
- * What are the pastor's priorities and responsibilities?

Well, we have officially hit the one-month mark! On the one hand, it's hard to believe a month has passed because it feels like I started yesterday. On the other hand, it's hard to believe that only a month has passed because it feels like so much has happened! Brianna and I are overwhelmed by your kindness and the gracious welcome we've received. Thank you for reaching out to our family and including us in yours.

I had certain ideas and hopes for the first month of ministry at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, but this congregation has far exceeded even my wildest expectations. It has been a fun five weeks filled with joy, optimism, and hope for the future. And I want to recap just a few of the God sightings I have witnessed this first month.

We've had nine wonderful worship services, culminating this past Sunday with more than 240 people in our two services, where we got to bless the backpacks of forty-six students! We had a full day of onboarding, during which I got to join the staff and lay leadership in jumpstarting our relationship. We've had seven committee meetings, nominated people for thirty-eight open positions, and have seen almost all of them accepted and affirmed by the nominees and the Church Council. We officially filled three staff positions and are now searching for the fourth and final opening. We planned the fall discipleship schedule for children, youth, and adults. We glanced forward at all Sunday worship services for the remainder of 2024 and began utilizing Planning Center to aid our work. We decided to host a trunk-or-treat/cook-off event in October (with the cook-off winner representing our church at the Wesley Foundation Cook-off). Almost fifty people came to our Safe Sanctuary training. Puppets, Pizza, and Praise was a blast. Zack led an incredible Youth Week. We worked hard to create the new Church Council brochure, started the Friday "Words from Woods," and the Spanish Fort Spotlight that goes out each Tuesday. Five new families joined the church. I was blessed to spend time at Westminster Village, and Kitsy and I visited many of our homebound members. I participated in my first Kidz Eats pack last Wednesday and got to stop by and see the crew as they finished up on Monday, but they were so fast that I missed the work! Also, we received \$82,257 in financial generosity for our operating expenses in July (which doesn't include rental income or other receipts) and processed \$53,827 in expenses. That revenue is partly regular gifts from our

congregation and also one-time annual contributions. I am grateful for the trust our church has in the ministry God is doing here to contribute so faithfully to this work.

It's been a fun month, to say the least, and I have to remind myself that it's just the first month — we have so many more ahead of us. I can't imagine the goodness God has in store for us if this is how we kick things off! I am thrilled to be your pastor and humbled by the trust you have given me. I've always known God can do more than we can ask or imagine, but it is jaw-dropping when we see it in person. This first month has been nothing short of incredible!

Lastly, this week, we celebrated all the great work God has done in and through Christi Wood as a staff member here at SFUMC over the past three and a half years. From organizing meals, managing the office, supporting the program ministries, and much more, Christi has been a valuable part of God's work. I have enjoyed working with her this first month and am grateful for all she did to aid in this transition. Christi is off to work for our local courthouses and sees her role there as a new form of ministry. I hope you will join me in wishing her well and offering prayers on her behalf.

With Christi's departure and the vacancy in the Pastoral Executive Assistant, the SPRC and I have decided to combine those roles rather than hiring two new staff members. As we continue to assess the future revenue for our church, we believe it is prudent to ensure we have the means to cover our expenses before making too many additional commitments.

Though the role will largely entail the traditional responsibilities of an Executive Assistant, we removed a few of the responsibilities in order to make sure some of the items from the Administrative Assistant are covered as well. If you, or anyone you know, is good with database management, check out the job posting at [this link](#).

As I reflect on this first month, I am grateful for all I have experienced and am excited for the thrilling ride we have before us. I hope you will jump in and experience the joy of worship. I hope you discover the transformational discipleship opportunities. And I pray you will find the deepest relationships possible, both with Jesus Christ and the wonderful people here at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church!

P .S. If you aren't a subscriber to our mailing list, be sure to sign up in order to receive these Friday messages, our Spanish Fort Spotlight (on Tuesdays), the monthly Church Council brochure, and any other news from the church! Click [here](#) to sign up, or send this link to a friend!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Hello Parents, My name is Woods, and I am the new pastor at Spanish Fort UMC. Thank you for trusting your children to our preschool. As a parent of three children six and under, I understand just how important it is to extend that trust. We do not take it for granted and hope to honor God and your family with the work done in the SFUM Preschool.

Meeting your children yesterday and walking them to their classrooms was a joy. I know the first day can be filled with all sorts of emotions, but it sure seemed to me that the chief among them was excitement. The teachers and the children were excited, and I was definitely excited to see my first glimpse of God's great work in and through this preschool.

I wanted to say thank you to Mandy Reeves, who was very helpful to me as I transitioned into this new role. I know you join me in expressing gratitude for her years of leadership. Likewise, I am thrilled that Erin Tucker has accepted the director position and Jennifer Robers as our assistant director. After our search committee interviews it was clear that she has the skills, expereince, and heart to do an excellent job in this role. Many of you know Erin as she has served faithfully for years in our preschool, and as our new director, she is already taking the center in fruitful new directions.

I was excited when she said she was implementing Brightwheel, as I went through that implementation about 18 months ago at my previous appointment, Dauphin Way UMC. I served as the Executive Pastor there for seven years, and part of my responsibilities included supervising the Dauphin Way Child Development Center and director. We discovered just how useful a product Brightwheel can be while admitting there was a learning curve. As you use the program, feel free to contact Erin or Jennifer to help answer any questions as we go through this transition.

Ultimately, I hope you know how much Erin, Jennifer, and all our teachers love your children and love the Lord. This is a wonderful preschool with so much to offer! I can't wait to see how God works in your children's lives this year. If you have any questions or want to know more about Spanish Fort UMC, I would love to meet with you. If you're looking for a church home, I can attest that this is a great one.

I hope you and your children have a great year at SFUMP!!

Grace and Peace, Woods

I have decided that the most challenging part of my job is figuring out what to write in my Friday emails. It's not because of a shortage of topics but a plethora. I have so much I want to share; there is so much I could celebrate. Each week, I discover new things about Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. Each week, I meet another exciting person or experience another live-giving ministry. Suffice it to say that the August Church Council Brochure of Reports will have plenty of updates this month and will go out next Friday. Today, though, I'd like to share some thoughts on headwinds and tailwinds.

On March 15, 2017, Stephen Dubner posted an episode of his podcast Freakonomics entitled, "Why Is My Life So Hard?" The episode considers a paper published by Tom Gilovich, a professor of psychology at Cornell University, and Shai Davidai, an assistant professor of psychology at the New School for Social Research, called The Headwinds-Tailwinds Asymmetry.

The paper explores the phenomenon that people tend to focus more on the obstacles they face (headwinds) than the advantages they have (tailwinds). This bias results in a skewed perception of one's own life and experiences, which can lead to feelings of being disadvantaged compared to others.

We've all been there. Ever notice how we're convinced our favorite sports teams are cursed to lose while everyone else's teams seem to catch all the breaks? It's the same with politics—Democrats think the deck is stacked against them, and Republicans feel exactly the same way.

And who hasn't heard (or told) the classic "back in my day, I walked to school uphill both ways, in the snow" story? It's funny because it's so relatable. At some point, we all turn into that old man, convinced that life's hardships have hit us harder than anyone else.

The thesis of their paper is essentially that tailwinds are noticed for a moment and then never remembered, but headwinds can't be forgotten. We all dwell on the hard things in life, or more accurately, the perception of hard things.

My three favorite points from the paper and the podcast deal with the fact that much of our negative outlooks come not from reality but from perception.

1. We often compare ourselves to others and focus on areas where we feel we're lacking or struggling more than others.
2. We tend to notice and remember challenges and obstacles in our own lives more than those

in the lives of others, leading to a skewed perception of difficulty.

3. When resources (like time, money, or energy) feel scarce, we are more likely to feel like our lives are harder.

Hearing this podcast reminded me a lot of the book “Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World—and Why Things Are Better Than You Think” by Hans Rosling. It’s a book that challenges common misconceptions about the state of the world. It argues that despite the often negative portrayal of global issues, the world is actually improving in many key areas.

The book presents evidence showing that global poverty, health, and education have significantly improved over the years, contrary to what many people believe, leading to increased life expectancy and health span.

Essentially, in every statistical category, there has never been a better time in human history to be alive. Yet, we still walk out the door and talk about how the world has gone to pits and our lives are so much worse than everyone else's.

We fixate on the headwinds and rarely offer a passing glance at a tailwind.

But the best part of the podcast is when the authors offer the same solution that ancient Scripture writers discovered thousands of years ago. For millennia, the Bible has given us a model for breaking the cycle of negativity, blame, and despondence, and now we have scientific evidence to support these claims.

It’s gratitude.

According to Gilovich and Davidai, things like keeping a gratitude diary, saying thank you directly to someone’s face, and asking, “What are my tailwinds?” can actually have mental and physical benefits to an individual’s life. Research showed that people who intentionally practiced gratitude experienced improved sleep, decreased doctor visits, lowered depression symptoms, and many other benefits.

As convincing as the paper is, for me, it is just a reaffirmation of what the Bible has been trying to tell us all along.

-“O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast loves endures forever.” Psalm 106, 107, 118, 136, etc.

-“I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.” Psalm 118

-“I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart.” - Psalm 138

-Paul often began his letters by thanking God for the people who received them, and in

Hebrews, he wrote, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe." - 12:28

-Even Jesus, on the night he gave himself up for us, thanked God during the last supper.

Thanksgiving and gratitude are essential expressions of the Judeo-Christian faith. Giving thanks is as much a part of our DNA as singing and church potlucks. I would contend that our lives often seem so crumbly because we have forgotten to give thanks regularly. I don't mean to minimize genuine hardship, distress, and trauma. There are difficult things in life — lament is also an appropriate response in the Bible to life's sorrows. However, for most people, the profound grief that keeps us from giving thanks is confined to short seasons.

Which brings me to the last thing I want to point out from Gilovich and Davidai's paper. It turns out that gratitude's impact on our lives isn't confined to the grand and opulent expressions of thanks. And it doesn't have to be thanks for the most life-changing moments. Instead, the small thoughts and acts of thanks for even ordinary gifts can lead to a changed perspective.

For example, opportunities for education, clean air, drinking water, and having a device to read this message are all reasons to give thanks.

It may sound trite, but it's true — gratitude can change your life. It can make you happier and healthier. The ancient Biblical writers knew it, and now science is catching up. So, let me end by saying thank you. Thank you to our staff, who are working hard to get everything prepared for fall programming and beyond. Thank you to our committees for ensuring the continued operations of our church. Thank you to everyone who has come to worship and shared your time to praise God. Thank you to our volunteers serving in all our areas of ministry. And most importantly, thank you, God, for all of it and so much more!

I pray you will discover the life-giving energy that comes from giving thanks!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Like any organization, hobby, or field of study, church leadership has its own particular vernacular. There are churchy words like narthex, baptismal, and pulpit. There are academic words like eschatological, hermeneutics, and ecclesiology. And during my first two months here, most of my jargon consisted of words from church leadership and organizational management. I've talked a lot about ministry philosophies, program strategies, communication practices, and paradigms for church structure. Whereas I like that work, I feel comfortable in the world of church leadership; I am excited to spend more time with you studying the Bible.

As I have said many times, I love the Bible. I love reading the Bible. I love preaching about the Bible. And I love teaching about the Bible. I began a Disciple One class for our annual conference this week, and though it was just an orientation session, it got me fired up to do one of my favorite things in the world — talk about these God-breathed words that we let govern our lives. Between this Disciple One class and the Bible Basics class that begins September 8th, I can't wait for this season to revisit stories and verses that are new every time we read them. We believe this is the “living Word” of God. That means it is alive, constantly speaking a new word, and always relevant. I hope you will join us on Sunday nights or consider joining Dr. Kitsy Dixon on Wednesday nights as she leads a group through a study of The Beatitudes. Few things are as worthwhile and life-giving as studying scripture in community, and I hope you consider joining us.

In addition to new Bible studies, I am excited to announce that we've also added a new person to our staff! Robin Ross has accepted the SPRC's offer to become our Executive Assistant.

Robin moved to Fairhope a little over a year ago. She has extensive experience in this line of work and brings a wealth of knowledge to help serve our congregation. She begins work on September 9th and will hold regular office hours. Be sure to stop by the office and introduce yourself once she starts!

Lastly, I am sure you noticed a video posted above this message. I hope videos like this will become regular features in our Friday emails. Sometimes, they will pertain to the write-up; other times, it may be completely different! In this video, I talk briefly about the Campaign Companion. This booklet shares some information about our church. In it, you will find ministry summaries, explanations of our membership vows, and much more. I will refer to this booklet many times over the coming weeks, so be sure to check it out and send it to your friends. The number one way people find a new church or find new ways to engage is by invitation and word of mouth. So, forward this email to anyone you think of and share all the exciting things happening at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church!

Grace and Peace, Woods

In April of 2001, I, along with other classmates from Dothan, went to New York City to join a mixed choir and perform in Carnegie Hall. It was an amazing experience, and I have so many memories from that trip, like going to the top of the World Trade Center and watching the sunset, taking a cruise around the Statue of Liberty, and dancing on the piano at FAO Swartz like I was Tom Hanks. But my favorite memory from the trip is the night I and a whole bunch of sixth graders played hide and seek in our hotel. We were running down the hallway like wild elephants, and a gentleman stuck his head out his door to see what the commotion was about.

My friend Tyler stops, looks at the man, and says, “You look just like Rafael Furcal.” To which the gentleman responded, “That’s because I am Rafael Furcal.”

It turned out the Atlanta Braves were in New York for a series with the Mets, and they were staying in the same hotel! Over the next few days, we would wait in the lobby to try to get their autographs. We met Greg Maddux, Javy López, Andruw Jones, Chipper Jones, John Smoltz, John Rocker, Julio Franco, B. J. Surhoff, and Brian Jordan. I even got to sit down and talk with Tom Glavine, who was kind enough to give a couple of sixth-grade boys all the time in the world. The funniest and most lamentable part of the experience is that I didn’t bring any Braves paraphernalia for them to sign. So I had them sign the back of my shirt, which was the most south-Alabama middle school boy shirt ever. It had a giant fishing lure on it, and underneath the lure, it said, “Bite me.” That shirt with all the Braves’ signatures around the lure is still in the closet at my childhood home.

It’s crazy to think back on those early 2000s Braves teams and remember just how good they were. The names I mentioned are enough to fill a wing in Cooperstown. It’s a shame they couldn’t ever get over the hump, but I don’t blame the front office. They assembled an incredible group of players for that run. Much like our SPRC has done for Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. I am excited to say that we have filled out our roster, Spring Training is over, and it’s Opening Day. Summerlyn Middleton accepted our offer to become the new Communications Assistant, and with her hiring, we have no more open positions! Summerlyn is a Spanish Fort native who graduated from Spanish Fort High School and is a product of the Remedy Youth Group. She is also a recent graduate of the University of Alabama, where she studied communications and marketing. We are excited for her to join the team and help our church continue finding new ways to share the Good News!

To recap, here are all of the staff serving Spanish Fort UMC.

Spanish Fort UMC Staff Sr. Pastor - Woods Lisenby Associate Pastor - Kitsy Dixon Associate Pastor - Mike Owenby Director of Finance and Operations - Elisha Dozier Contemporary Worship Minister - Andy Cloninger Children's Minister(s) - Elizabeth DeRocher, Beth Allen Youth Minister - Zack McCraw Asst. Youth Minister - Maddi Walker Executive Assistant - Robin Ross Communications Assistant - Summerlyn Middleton Minister of Spanish Fort Preschool - Erin Tucker Accompanist - Wanda Cooper The reason I say that Spring Training is over is because this Sunday really does represent the beginning of our season. Since July, we've been restructuring committees, organizing meeting times, analyzing finances, planning programs, and implementing systems to prepare us for the Sunday after Labor Day. We've had it circled on the calendar for months as "Opening Day."

This weekend, we begin our Commitment Campaign (if you haven't read the Campaign Companion, click the link below to find out more). This is also the Sunday we launch our new fall schedule. Youth, children's, and adult discipleship programming will all overlap, so there is something for everyone at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. We are entering a wonderful season in American life where school, football, and church events are all in full swing. And I believe we have assembled the best possible team to help us execute all our programming at a high level. We have the right people in place to help make God's kingdom known on Earth as it is in heaven. I hope you are excited to take this journey with us!

Lastly, as we begin the Commitment Campaign on Sunday, we have created a Devotional Guide to aid our prayer life this next month. You can find it by clicking the button below. I hope you will join us in praying for this exciting season in the life of our church!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Things to Remember:

Sign up for Churchwide Emails (Spotlight and Words from Woods)

Sign-up for Prayer Chain Email Read the Campaign Companion Read the August Church Council Brochure

I mentioned that most of my Friday notes will be highlights and celebrations of things around the church. And whereas there is so much to celebrate, like Robin and Summerlyn's first week, our programming kicking off last Sunday and having over 150 people on campus, and the beginning of the Commitment Campaign, every now and then, I will take a break from updates to share something that has been swimming around in my brain. This is one of those notes.

On my first Sunday at Spanish Fort UMC, I preached about the presumption of grace. It is the phrase by which I try to live my life. It is the lens through which I believe we can see the world as Christ does. You can catch the podcast here at this link if you missed the sermon. But this idea is again at the forefront of my mind as I continue to encounter its antithesis. The opposite of a presumption of grace is a presumption of suspicion. Our suspicious nature rears its ugly head in all sorts of ways. Conspiracy theories are a product of suspicion. Mistrust is a product of suspicion. Premature accusations are a product of suspicion. Suspicion is the primary force that erodes and destroys society's ability to form a deep and authentic community.

I was at Publix the other day checking out, and a woman was in a fit of rage over at the customer service desk. Her arms were flailing, she was shouting, and everyone stopped to watch what was happening. I asked the cashier what was going on, and he said that the woman's husband had lost his wallet, and she was convinced someone had stolen it. She demanded the manager stop every person leaving Publix and check their ID. The manager said he wasn't going to do that, and she couldn't understand why he was being so obtuse. Soon, her husband came walking in and said he found it; the wallet was just in his jacket pocket rather than his pants pocket. The woman didn't offer an apology or contrition; she just said loudly, "Well, it's a good thing it wasn't stolen!" And then immediately, a panicked look set in on her face as she had a startling realization. She looked at her husband and yelled, "Where's the baby, where's the baby?!?" It turned out they were grandparents watching their infant grandchild; the grandfather left the baby unattended in the carrier out by the road in the parking lot while he came in to report that he had found his wallet.

Luckily, the baby was fine, but isn't that where living a life with a presumption of suspicion gets us? We get wrapped up in self-assured justification. We are convinced of our

righteousness.

We become obsessed with how everyone else is wrong and out to get us, and we lose sight of the most important things. Not everything that someone does that bothers you was done with malintent. I bet that none, or at least almost none, of the less-than-ideal things that happen in life were done to make your life harder intentionally. Typically, people think about you much less than you assume they are thinking about you. Contrary to popular belief, the world is not out to ruin your day.

But we walk through life living as if all that is true. If someone cuts us off on the road, they did it purposefully. If the waiter accidentally overcharges us, they are scamming us. If your kid strikes out, the other team pays the umpire. We love to play the victim, and everyone is the hero in their story.

But I have to tell you, that kind of life sounds exhausting.

It takes too much effort to be mad all the time. Anger and resentment are heavy. The cloud of suspicion creates a very dark ethos in life. And none of that sounds like the life Jesus wants us to live.

A presumption of grace is such a good thing because it frees us from the burden of being the judge. It allows us to focus on God's goodness and the blessings in life. Suddenly, we are free to love our neighbor because it is not our responsibility to repay any evil for evil. So even if they did do something to harm us intentionally, we do as Paul says and leave room for God to carry out justice.

The next time someone says or does something that rubs you the wrong way, even if it's just a minor slight, ask yourself what good will come from holding resentment. Bitterness is a poison that destroys from the inside. Likewise, when you feel the internal tension of someone saying or doing something that seems out of sorts, ask yourself, "Am I sure I understand what they are saying?" We often get bent out of shape simply because of miscommunication. Remember, we have more things in common with our sisters and brothers than we have that divide us, and it's best to lean into those rather than dwell on our differences. The best advice I can give is something my grandfather used to tell me, "Life's too short, so eat your dessert first." Which was his way of saying enjoy life because it goes by too quickly.

P .S A Few Organizational Notes

-Just a reminder: a few weeks ago, I wrote that we are trying to limit church-wide emails. If

you have anything you want to be announced to the whole church, we will try to include it in the Spanish Fort Spotlight that goes out on Tuesdays or in the Words from Woods email that goes out on Fridays. Other than that, church-wide emails will be limited to time-sensitive and out-of-the-ordinary scenarios (like scams and hurricanes).

-Summerlyn is incredibly talented and eager to help you create graphics and content for your ministry area! Please allow us to assist you in making any graphics or announcements that will be used to promote our congregation to the public digitally or in print.

-If you are looking for information or want to communicate with the congregation, our regular communications are as follows.

-Spanish Fort Spotlight - An email that goes out every Tuesday with the upcoming events and special announcements.

-Words from Woods - An email that goes out every Friday with a note from the Senior Pastor and various announcements and links.

-The Church Council Brochure - A monthly brochure containing all happenings of our program ministries, administrative committees, and other information.

-The Connect - Our monthly newsletter (a consolidated version of the information in the Church Council Brochure).

-Facebook and Instagram - Daily posts highlighting the ministries of Spanish Fort UMC.

-Sunday Announcements—Three pressing things the church needs to know, and they are decided upon during our Monday worship planning meeting.

-Slides - Information graphics produced by our Communications Assistant that scroll in various places throughout the church.

If you have any questions about our communications/publications, please let me know. We want to do all we can to get the word out about the good things happening at SFUMC!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Religion, Politics, and Money...the big three taboos. At least, as a pastor, I don't get in trouble talking about religion. And one day, we will have a conversation about the intersection of faith and politics. However, today, we are going to talk a bit about money. In this email and on Sunday, we will consider the promise we make when we commit our gifts to God.

You know, I used to be really apprehensive to talk about money. I never wanted someone to show up for the first time and say, "All churches are the same. All they do is talk about money."

So I used to disguise our financial conversations in more appealing language like "time and talents," where "talents" serves as a double entendre for skills and coins.

As I got older, it became apparent that everyone was smart enough to know we were discussing financial generosity, so why not just come out and say it? It's no secret that it takes the generosity of our congregation to do the work God has called us to. There are no bones about it: our church can't function without our gifts. And do you know when I finally got over being squeamish to talk about money? It was when I and my family began giving faithfully. There was a time when we didn't give consistently. I used to feel that conviction of needing to do more than drop whatever petty cash was in our pockets into the plate on Sundays. We've all been there; becoming a faithful giver doesn't come naturally for most, and it is rarely an immediate thing.

But after we began giving regularly, it became evident that the people who don't like to talk about financial generosity are those who do not give faithfully. It was definitely true for me.

Whether guilt or the fear of accountability, I find that most of the time, when we lament financial conversations in the church, it's because we know we aren't doing our part. And I am not talking about the size of our gifts compared to others' gifts, but the amount we give compared to our capacity to be generous. Jesus' parable about the widow's mite makes it clear that God doesn't compare us to others. But instead, God is concerned with our hearts. Those giving faithfully don't feel shame around the conversation; therefore, they don't tend to rebuke the church for bringing it up. If anything, they want others to step up and do their part too.

So, let's talk about Spanish Fort UMC's current financial reality. On Sunday morning, we will examine what the Bible says about generosity and what it doesn't say. However, for this note, I want to be a bit more specific about where we are as a congregation.

Last year, we took in \$1,706,857 in revenue. Our sources of revenue are pledged offerings, non-pledged offerings, payment from tenets, school tuition, and prepaid pledges. We budgeted to take in \$1,766,988, which means we took in (\$60,131) less than we expected. Additionally, our 2023 expenses were \$1,981,691, which caused us to finish the year with a deficit of (\$274,834). Going into 2024, so much was in flux that it made it hard to predict the expected revenue for this calendar year, but based on a limited pledge campaign and giving records, the previous Finance Committee projected a yearly revenue of \$1,284,144 and expenses of \$1,770,347 with a projected deficit of (\$486,203). The good news is that we are on pace to have a reduction in the expected 2024 deficit. However, we can't be sure how much until the end of the year.

I encourage you to check out your Campaign Companion for more information on this next part.

We spend \$475,685 on Children's and Youth Ministry, \$429,471 on Worship and Prayer Ministries, \$358,808 on Membership Care and Adult Discipleship, and \$276,807 on Service and Missions. The only reason Service and Missions is lower than the other three is that we have amazing volunteers who help lead many of those efforts, so we have massive savings in staff and facility costs. Bang for its buck, Service and Missions has the highest return on investment for each dollar spent.

Obviously, we cannot continue budgeting for deficits. I plan on helping the Finance Committee get as close as possible to generating a balanced budget for 2025. This is not only sound organizational management, but it is prudent stewardship of the resources God has given us.

There are two ways to make this happen; the first is to cut expenses. We cannot cut certain fixed costs, like liability insurance, electricity, water, etc. We can try to reduce the use of some of these things and search for new quotes on specific contracts to save on costs. However, ultimately, there is not a lot of waste in those areas, and there is only so much we can save. If we need to cut expenses, we will have to reduce spending on program ministries, benevolent giving to missions, staff salaries, and other budget items.

The second way to balance our budget is to increase revenue. This will be challenging, but I believe it is possible. The collective 2023 giving of families we know, or at least believe, have transferred their church membership might be as much as \$510,966. If that seems like a lot, it's because it is. That is roughly 30% of our budget. However, the collective 2023 giving of those

who remain active members of SFUMC was \$720,646. And I praise God for that level of faithfulness and commitment.

Looking at the stair-step graphic at the top of this email, you will see a breakdown of our congregation's generosity. I encourage you to click on the image and find where you are on the stairs. One beautiful thing about our congregation is that we do not have one or two families that make up the majority of our budget. This is a shared effort for our church! However, I believe each of us can pray about taking the next step to increase our generosity.

I will never ask you to do something my family and I are unwilling to do. As a pastor of a United Methodist Church, my salary is public, and as your pastor, I think it is important to be transparent. Until June of this year, my wife and I gave \$680 a month to Dauphin Way United Methodist Church from our collective salaries. We had tuition for our children's preschool deducted from my salary. So when I was appointed to Spanish Fort UMC, and we elected to send our children to a full-day program outside of the church, I received an increase in base salary. As such, we increased our giving to \$800 a month. That is a tithe (10%) of our collective take-home pay. People always ask me if they should give on net or gross, if they should subtract other charitable contributions from their gift to the church, or if it is right or wrong to claim what they give to the church on their taxes. I have opinions about what is best for my family, but ultimately, I believe the details of your gifts are between you, your family, and God.

I am not in the business of legislating your giving. And I will never make you feel guilty for what you do or do not give. That's not how we work around here. Our church has no rules about the manner, frequency, or amount you should give. People often use the tithe as a standard for giving. The concept of a tithe is based on a law from the Old Testament, but we are bound to the laws of the O.T. If we were, you would have to stop eating bacon! However, I do think a tithe is a good goal. And I mean it when I say goal. In our first year of marriage, Brianna and I made \$18,000 as a couple. A tithe back then would have made paying rent and groceries pretty tough, and we were not yet in the spiritual maturity to appreciate the joy of sacrificial giving. Now, we are proud to give a tithe because we trust the Holy Spirit leads in and through the church — so much so that we dedicated our lives to it! That is why we give 10% to the church, and then any other generosity we offer is considered “over and above giving.” When we give to Huntingdon College, the Wesley Foundation, or a youth fundraiser, we do that as “over and above giving,” not by subtracting it from what we offer the church. But that's us; you need to ask what works for you and your family.

On Sunday, I'll talk more about the Bible's take on these things. For now, know your giving doesn't have to be legalized and restrictive and is always appreciated. Giving is not about comparing yourself to others. It's not a thing for which you should boast like the wealthy in the widow's story. However, it is something in which you can take pride and be honest. When you give to the church, there is joy in being a part of God's work and putting your money where your mouth is. Or, more accurately, where your heart is. Because where your treasure is your heart will be also.

The last thing I will say is giving financially to the church is a privilege of membership, not a requirement, and it is not an expectation of non-members. We give away all that we offer as a church free of charge. But when you become a member, you promise to give financially to this congregation. You do it so that you can be a part of making this good work happen. And when you do, you experience the joy of living out of God's abundance rather than the world's scarcity.

Grace and Peace, Woods

It sure has been a lot of fun having more people in the office these past few weeks! With the addition of Summerlyn and Robin, we have filled all our program and office staff positions. As Rev. Mike said, we are searching for a new accompanist as we bless Wanda on her retirement.

Stay tuned for details about ways we will honor her ministry in the coming weeks.

Our team is clicking on all cylinders in the office, and I have been impressed with everyone's work ethic and aptitude. It has been a joy to experience this new camaraderie and jovial banter. I love all the people I work with, and I can't wait to see all God is going to do in and through this team. We have our first staff offsite retreat on October 11th. We are going to close the offices that Friday, and the whole staff, both full and part-time employees, will go to the Walters' house on Fish River for a time of team building and 2025 calendar planning. I look forward to sharing with the church the fruits of those efforts!

Our SPRC has done an incredible job finding and hiring the right people as well as supporting us. As you can see in the SPRC report, they passed two new policies. The first is regarding our PTO policy. Since churches often cannot compete with the market regarding salary, we try to make some of that up in flexibility and work-life balance. As such, the SPRC approved a policy that I hope will set trends in our community. The more our small and local businesses can find similar ways to honor their employees, the better quality of life those who live in our area will have. I encourage you to read the new PTO policy they approved, which is attached in the Appendix.

The second policy they approved delineates a clear structure to protect our staff and church when there is internal staff conflict. Many dysfunctional organizations run into a lack of clarity regarding reporting structures and supervision. This policy ensures the staff has multiple avenues to report concerning behavior or experiences. It also mitigates the chance of an SPRC member being put into a situation in which they may not be equipped. Ultimately, we are constantly trying to create safety, accountability, and transparent structures. This policy does just that and helps prevent things like triangulation and underreporting issues.

I am proud to work in a church with such a great staff and such a great SPRC. I am grateful for how this committee supports our work as we try to provide opportunities for the congregation to grow in love and knowledge of Jesus Christ. If you ever have any questions about job responsibilities or staff organization, please don't hesitate to reach out!

At our Church Council meeting Monday night, Tim Dozier led an exercise to help us identify some truths about our congregation. I really enjoyed the experience, and it seemed like the

whole group appreciated the process. Some of his questions included things like, why are you a member of Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, what are some of our strengths and weaknesses, where do we hope to see the church in five years, and if our congregation were a car, what kind of car would we be (I found that one particularly fun).

The whole process was enlightening for me since I still have much to learn about our congregation. I appreciated hearing that people joined our congregation because it was welcoming, energetic, and intensely focused on helping our community. I loved hearing people hope we will be even more involved in local and international missions, offer more programming for our multi-generational congregation, and double our membership. I like it when we dream big!

However, the evening reinforced something I've discovered these past few months. I keep realizing that as a new person in this congregation, I did not experience the previous season of struggle. Since my appointment began, I have encountered nothing but goodness, grace, and kindness from everyone I have met. So much so that some of the weaknesses and hurdles shared by the group came up against my perception of who our church actually is. That's not to say there weren't legitimate concerns, and we do have areas to improve. But when I heard many of the suggested weaknesses and hurdles, I found myself excited to work harder at sharing the good things I see each week in the life of our church. Driving home, I was reminded that one of my main jobs in this new season of leadership is to help raise awareness of who we are at this moment.

For example, when someone voiced they hope we improve at following up with visitors, I thought, "I wish they knew that we now have a great process in place for identifying visitors, following up with them, and intentionally trying to get them plugged in." Also, when someone mentioned that they want to see us expand our programs, I wanted to share about the effort the staff put in to ensure something is being offered for each age group in our church this fall.

However, the only point I feel inclined to speak to in detail was when the group agreed that 20% of the people do 80% of the work.

The eighty-twenty rule, as it is commonly referred to, is formally known as the Pareto Principle.

It states that roughly 80% of effects come from 20% of the causes. This principle isn't new; it was named after Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian economist, who in 1896 observed that approximately 80% of Italy's land was owned by 20% of the population. Since then, it has been widely

applied in business, non-profits, and other areas of life. In the church, we often believe that 80% of the efforts for ministry, 80% of the funding, or 80% of the control/influence/power resides with 20% of the people. Whereas that can be true of some churches, and it may even have been true of our church in a different season, I can definitively say it is not true now. And since we are in the season of trying to reconcile who we are with where we have been, I brought along some data to support my claim!

We average between 200-240 people in worship on a typical Sunday between our two services (usually around 105-115 per service). Since July 7, we have had 392 unique individuals register their attendance during worship (they or their parents signed the pew pad). Typically, churches assume roughly 35%-40% of people don't sign in, which seems to ring true here as well when we compare the number of people the ushers count in worship to those who sign in. So, it's safe to say that there have likely been closer to 530 unique individuals who attended worship in the past three months.

However, for the sake of this analysis, we'll stick with the 392 individuals for whom we have hard data.

- Of the 392, 289 were adults, and 103 were children under eighteen (which is excellent).

- Of the 289 adults, 192 were members, and ninety-seven were non-members

- Of the ninety-seven non-members, thirty-one were "non-local visitors" (like family in town) or

members of another congregation, and sixty-six were regular attendees who have not yet decided to join the church.

- Of the 192 adult members, eighteen were college-aged and have mostly returned to school.

- This leaves us with a representative sample for our congregation of 174 active adult members who have attended worship since July 7th.

Now let me tell you the exciting part. Out of the 174 active adult members who attend our church, ninety eight are involved in at least one area of service in our church. These include children and youth volunteers, committee members, missions ministry, Sunday school teachers, administrative support, and many others. So, 56% of the people accomplish most of our ministry. There are even fourteen more people who are not members serving in the church.

If you go by the raw data that we have 392 people in worship and that 111 are offering the ministry, the Pareto Principal would be close to accurate (but we'd still be at 28%). However, that would also blame children and visitors for not doing a share of work for which they are not responsible. The work and ministries offered by the church are the responsibility of its members. This is why we are working so hard during this campaign and after to encourage everyone to turn in a commitment card and reaffirm your commitment to Spanish Fort UMC. It helps us know how many people we have to do the work we are called to and if we have enough people to offer all the ministries we want to provide.

When it comes down to it, AT LEAST 174 individuals are responsible for providing the ministries of our congregation, and as of now, AT LEAST 111 people are serving. That might not be the ultimate goal of 100 percent participation, but we are far from twenty percent of people doing eighty percent of the work. We have a fantastic church!

Ultimately, I think we often feel like we are among the few who serve while everyone else reaps the benefits because we miss all the good work happening in areas outside our sphere of influence. If you serve on the Finance Committee, have you recently attended a youth gathering? If you are a children's ministry volunteer, when was the last time you helped the trustees dig a trench? How many people, after they finish ushering, run up and jump in the choir or worship team? As Paul said, we are all given unique gifts to build up the body of Christ. Just because everyone is not serving in your area of ministry does not mean that no one else is serving. It just means my job as your pastor is to help us be more aware of all the good work happening here.

To that end, I want to thank Rev. Kitsy, Gay Desotell, and all our Missions Committee for setting up the ministry fair this Sunday. Join us and see all the incredible work happening at our church. It is from 10:00-11:00 in the Fellowship Hall. If you come to the early service, stay late.

If you come to the late service, get here early. Come see how much life and energy exists at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, and let's see together if we can get 100% of the people who worship here serving here as well!

Grace and Peace, Woods

If you're unfamiliar with the world of vocational ministry, this Sunday might not seem like a big deal to you. But it is one of my favorite worship services of the year. And it has nothing to do with turning in cards or gathering information (although those things are very helpful for the work we do).

I love this Sunday because I believe commitment matters.

You may know I'm a person who tends to fly by the seat of my pants, I'm prone to uncontrollable bouts of spontaneity, and I talk faster than an auctioneer, my natural inclination is to avoid things that tie me down. In college, I drove a Honda Element, my father-in-law called it my clown car, but I loved that car! All the seats laid down to make a bed, and it was entirely waterproof on the inside. That car made me feel free from restrictions because I had a place to sleep whenever I wanted to just get up and go somewhere.

You see, I used to view any long-term commitment as an unwelcome restriction that limited future options. But, I have since discovered that the most profound joys in my life have come from my deepest commitments. Like how marrying Brianna transformed my understanding of life's potential when rooted in commitment. It taught me the value of deep, intentional bonds.

This knowledge only grew when I was ordained about a decade ago. My commitment to the church limited some personal freedoms, like where I would live, but it also opened doors to witnessing lives transformed by faith. These moments of seeing people's lives changed far outweigh any sacrifices.

I made another life-changing commitment at my children's baptisms. Brianna and I promised to "nurture them in Christ's holy church so that by our teaching and example, they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, profess their faith openly, and lead a Christian life." I cannot imagine a better way to live life than one in Christian community. The church has helped us raise our children. They were there when August was in the NICU. They stayed with Brianna when she had a miscarriage, and I had to preach on a Sunday morning. They brought us food and took our kids on play dates when we were sick or had surgery. Like my ordination vows, the promise to raise our children in the church has given us much more than we have offered in return.

But, before any of those, my first and ongoing commitment was to Jesus Christ and His church. Like you, I reaffirm this commitment every time we welcome a new member into our church. And it reminds us that what we give up in control, we gain in community.

I will say, though, it has taken me a while to fully appreciate that part. I, like most people, try to hold on to all the control I can so that I feel like I am determining my own fate. But the truth is that the right commitments in life, those acts of surrender, actually give us more than they cost.

That can be hard to internalize because giving up things can be scary. It can feel unsettling to sacrifice some of your control to a group of people. But that's essentially what it means to join a church. It is a sacrifice of ultimate control. Essentially, we say to a congregation, "I am going to trust that the body of Christ knows what is best for my life, better than I do on my own."

Joining a church is more than a routine participation; it is an active decision to trust in a collective wisdom over our individual preferences. This decision isn't about personal gain; it's about nurturing our shared faith and strengthening our communal bonds.

We often believe that individual autonomy is the ultimate expression of existence. As if like what you think about the world is what is most true. But that is not the way of Christ or the Bible. If you want to be in control of everything, if you want to have ultimate authority over your life, if you don't want to sacrifice anything for the sake of others and be a part of something bigger than yourself, that's fine. I just wouldn't call you Christian.

You can say you believe in Jesus all you want. But, the definition of a Christian is one who follows Christ. And following Christ means a lot more than believing He exists. As James said, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder."

As a pastor, I don't prioritize the beliefs of any one individual. I don't doubt their salvation, for as Jesus said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." I just don't put much stock in the right of any one single person to speak with any authority for my faith. Particularly if they don't belong to a local church. At Spanish Fort United Methodist Church our congregation is guided by the Holy Spirit and the will of God is discerned and affirmed by all who commit themselves to this church in membership.

True commitment is fundamentally about recognizing that God is God and we are not. It's about setting aside our need for control and our personal agendas. And all of this requires faith. Did you know that the word faith is better described as trust rather than belief. Which is why I don't love it when someone describes their struggles with believing things as a lack of faith. We believe a lot of things that don't make sense. So to actually lack faith is to say we lack trust in something we can't fully control.

Faith has nothing to do with control or comprehension or understanding—if it did, it wouldn't be faith. Embracing faith means accepting that we do not always have the steering wheel. By its nature, faith requires us to trust in things that might not be predictable. As the book of Hebrews says, "Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." If you could see and understand it perfectly, if you could explain it fully, you would not need faith.

But in the unknown, mysterious realities of existence lives a God who can do more than we can ask or imagine. And He invites us to join in the work of faith. God created the Church to be the place where we can come together and be a part of something bigger than ourselves. To do so, requires sacrifice, it requires us to give up some aspects of control over our whole lives — to trust others and commit. And I promise if you can do that, you will end up getting so much more than you have ever given in your life.

So as we come together this Commitment Sunday, let's challenge ourselves to commit deeply, trusting that the sacrifices we make in faith for God and one another will lead to a fuller, more enriching life than one lived within the confines of our individual desires and plans. Let's step into this commitment with open hearts, ready to support, share, and grow together, embodying the true spirit of our community in Christ.

Can't wait to see you Sunday!

Let me begin by saying thank you! Thank you to everyone who decided to take your next steps on the journey of faith. Thank you for turning in a commitment card and making promises to God, this congregation, and one another. The initial response from the commitment campaign has been very encouraging. We still have a way to go before we generate a report on the outcomes. We will continue collecting cards until the end of October and then provide a complete summary of the results to the Church Council. So, if you haven't filled it out yet, please consider doing so. You can find the online version at the link below.

As we move into November, the Finance Committee will begin calling any member of our church not marked as inactive to inquire about their family's relationship with our congregation.

In the meantime, continue to pray for the future of our congregation and all God is going to do in and through the life of our church.

On a completely separate note, our offices are closed this morning. The staff is participating in our first offsite retreat. This is a chance to get to know one another better, worship together, and plan the 2025 program calendar. It really has been a joy to work with our new team. Everyone has something unique to offer, and I can already tell we have good chemistry and rapport. The office has lively banter, good camaraderie, and an all-around feeling of love and support. I pray that our day away will only deepen those realities.

There are still plenty of ways you can help with relief from the past two hurricanes that struck the Southeast. Check the link below for all the ways you can offer aid. I want to highlight that we are hosting an Emergency Response Team (ERT) training on October 19 from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m.

“The cost of the training is \$30 and will include the training manual and lunch. Participants who successfully complete this training will receive the proper credentials required to join teams responding in the first few days after a disaster, including an ERT badge. Please click the following to register as soon as possible so food and other meeting preparations can be made. <https://awf-reg.brtaapp.com/ERTTrainingSpanishFort> Also, pass along this email to the people you have talked to that may have an interest, or those you believe have the gifts and skills to participate. To learn more about the training and what it means to be a part of an ERT, click this link: <https://www.awfumc.org/ERTTraining>. “ With that, I will not belabor my note this week so I can focus on writing my Charge Conference report and preparing for our retreat. If you need more things to read, there is plenty of information from recent publications. Check out the Church Council Brochure from this past meeting. Go read about and sign up for Trunk-or-Treat and/or the Cook-Off taking place at our Fall Festival on October 20th. Be sure to invite your friends. The Primetimers have some exciting events coming up.

I hope you have a great weekend, see you Sunday!

Grace and Peace, Woods

It has been a wonderful and unique beginning to my pastoral tenure at Spanish Fort UMC. Each week has brought new blessings and challenges. I continue to refer to 2024 as the year of discovery. We are discovering who we are in this new season. Over the past year, much has changed in this congregation and our denomination writ large. So, our efforts have mainly focused on healing and discovering our new identity. We are discerning who is still a member of this congregation, what ministries we are equipped and called to offer, what is the financial reality, who will lead us during this time, and how we can turn the page to the next chapter for SFUMC.

I am grateful for all that has happened over these last few months. There is so much goodwill and energy here. A train of people has stepped up to serve, and God is up to miraculous work in Spanish Fort. Committees have reformed, ministries have launched or relaunched, new staff have joined the team, worship has been magnificent, and fourteen families representing thirty-four people have joined the church with more ready to do the same! Below are a few snippets from my weekly pastor's email that paint a picture of how incredible the last twelve weeks were!

Week 1: During the first week in the office, we hired Elisha Dozier, oriented volunteer Finance Committee and Trustees, and began meeting members of the church.

"This week, I have encountered so many incredible God sightings. So many new experiences that caused me to fall even deeper in love with God. Worship with you this past Sunday was amazing. We held our first meetings of the newly formed Board of Trustees and Finance Committees. These committees are filled with people who have graciously stepped up to serve until the nominations committee can meet next week and offer the Church Council a permanent slate of committee members. The Trustees were able to identify pressing needs they will attend to, and the Finance Committee took time to help me gain a better understanding of our present financial reality. Likewise, I am grateful to the SPRC, who hired a new business director. I give thanks that longtime church member Elisha Dozier has agreed to come work for the church and help us be faithful stewards of the resources God has given Spanish Fort UMC."

Week 2: We hosted an onboarding with staff and laity and the Nominations Committee put forward forty-eight potential members of committees.

"To that end, below is a link to our 2024 church budget. I still have much to learn about Spanish Fort UMC, but the faithful people of this church are helping me get there. Even still,

here is a list of things we do know that I want to share with you.

- We know how much money we have in our bank accounts, who has access to those accounts, and who is authorized to sign checks.
- We know what giving has been like up to the present day. And although we may need to reduce some expenses moving forward to adjust for decreased revenue, this church is still being faithfully generous — in fact, we made a \$33,000 deposit from this week's giving alone!
- We know that the nominations committee has identified forty-eight high-capacity, faithful members of our congregation to step up and serve on our administrative committees.
- And we know the first two calls I made on behalf of our nominations team were accepted! I am thrilled that Lee Walters has agreed to be our new Church Council Chairman, and Asher Carmichael will be the Lay Leader for Spanish Fort UMC!

This has been an exciting two weeks. Thank you to everyone who participated in my onboarding, especially those who cooked dinner and provided the meals. I have been overwhelmed by this congregation's kindness and faithfulness! These first two weeks have made me thrilled for all God has before us. And I can't wait to see what's in store!"

Week 3: First Church Council Brochure of Reports and a lot of phone calls "The Brochure of Reports for the Church Council meeting... is full of information related to vital signs and happenings in the congregation. It will be sent out the Friday before the Church Council meetings. Our monthly meeting is this coming Monday, July 30. All are welcome to attend and can ask questions or voice their opinions. We will review the nominating committee's work, and current members will vote to approve the individuals put forward to serve on our committees. Likewise, we will discuss the updates from SPRC, Trustees, and Finance. If you have questions or concerns about the state of the church, I encourage you to join us."

Week 4: First month celebrations "We've had nine wonderful worship services, culminating this past Sunday with more than 240 people in our two services, where we got to bless the backpacks of forty-six students! We had a full day of onboarding, during which I got to join the staff and lay leadership in jumpstarting our relationship. We've had seven committee meetings, nominated people for thirty-eight open positions, and have seen almost all of them accepted and affirmed by the nominees and the Church Council. We officially filled three staff

positions and are now searching for the fourth and final opening. We planned the fall discipleship schedule for children, youth, and adults. We glanced forward at all Sunday worship services for the remainder of 2024 and began utilizing Planning Center to aid our work. We decided to host a trunk-or-treat/cook-off event in October (with the cook-off winner representing our church at the Wesley Foundation Cook-off). Almost fifty people came to our Safe Sanctuary training. Puppets, Pizza, and Praise was a blast. Zack led an incredible Youth Week. We worked hard to create the new Church Council brochure, started the Friday “Words from Woods,” and the Spanish Fort Spotlight that goes out each Tuesday. Five new families joined the church. I was blessed to spend time at Westminster Village, and Kitsy and I visited many of our homebound members. I participated in my first Kidz Eats pack last Wednesday and got to stop by and see the crew as they finished up on Monday, but they were so fast that I missed the work! Also, we received \$82,257 in financial generosity for our operating expenses in July (which doesn’t include rental income or other receipts). I am grateful for the trust our church has in the ministry God is doing here to contribute so faithfully to this work.”

Week 5: First Westminster worship service, Children’s leadership team meeting, creating new weekly meeting schedule for staff, confirming new program times for discipleship ministries

Week 6: Launched the Spanish Fort Spotlight, Church Council Brochure #2 - with more graphics and detail, the launch of the prayer chain “Part of our new communication strategy is to send out as few churchwide emails as necessary.

The two regular emails you receive are the Spanish Fort Spotlight each Tuesday, and Words from Woods on Friday. Outside of that, we hope churchwide emails will be limited and infrequent.

That being said, Dr. Kitsy Dixon is creating a new Prayer Chain. If you want to join us in praying for our community and congregation, I encourage you to sign up for it. It will be a regular email and go out more frequently, as such you will need to opt-in to receive it. To be added to the Prayer Chain email list click [this link](#) and follow the directions.”

Week 7: We hired Robin Ross, began staff interview videos, and produced Commitment Campaign information “In addition to new Bible studies, I am excited to announce that we’ve also added a new person to our staff! Robin Ross has accepted the SPRC’s offer to become our Executive Assistant. Robin moved to Fairhope a little over a year ago. She has extensive experience in this line of work and brings a wealth of knowledge to help serve our congregation. She begins work on September 9th and will hold regular office hours. Be sure to stop by the office and introduce yourself once she starts!

Lastly, I am sure you noticed a video posted above this message. I hope videos like this will become regular features in our Friday emails. Sometimes, they will pertain to the write-up; other times, it may be completely different! In this video, I talk briefly about the Campaign Companion. This booklet shares some information about our church. In it, you will find ministry summaries, explanations of our membership vows, and much more. I will refer to this booklet many times over the coming weeks, so be sure to check it out and send it to your friends. The number one way people find a new church or find new ways to engage is by invitation and word of mouth. So, forward this email to anyone you think of and share all the exciting things happening at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church!"

Week 8: We hired Summerlyn Middleton, kicked off fall programming, began teaching Disciple One for the annual conference, and kicked off the Commitment Campaign with/ videos, commitment cards, and a devotional guide "We've circled it on the calendar for months as "Opening Day." This weekend, we begin our Commitment Campaign (if you haven't read the Campaign Companion, click the link below to learn more). This is also the Sunday we launch our new fall schedule. Youth, children's, and adult discipleship programming will all overlap, so there is something for everyone at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. And I believe we have assembled the best possible team to help us execute all our programming at a high level. I know we have the right people in place to help make God's kingdom known on Earth as it is in heaven, and I hope you are excited to take this journey with us!

Lastly, as we begin the Commitment Campaign on Sunday, we have created a Devotional Guide to aid our prayer life this next month. You can find it by clicking the button below. I hope you will join us in praying for this exciting season in the life of our church!"

Week 9: Focused our communication strategy, began IT analysis and bids with contractors for IT support, fell into new weekly rhythm with Wednesday Disciple One class, Sunday Bible class, Friday email, Sunday sermon, film and edit staff video, film and edit worship testimony video etc.

A Few Organizational Notes

- Just a reminder: a few weeks ago, I wrote that we are trying to limit church-wide emails.

If you have anything you want to be announced to the whole church, we will try to include it in the Spanish Fort Spotlight that goes out on Tuesdays or in the Words from Woods email that goes out on Fridays. Other than that, church-wide emails will be limited to time-sensitive and

out-of-the-ordinary scenarios (like scams and hurricanes).

- Summerlyn is incredibly talented and eager to help you create graphics and content for your ministry area! Please allow us to assist you in making any graphics or announcements that will be used to promote our congregation to the public digitally or in print.

- If you are looking for information or want to communicate with the congregation, our regular communications are as follows.

- Spanish Fort Spotlight - An email that goes out every Tuesday with the upcoming events and special announcements. ■ Words from Woods - An email that goes out every Friday with a note from the Senior Pastor and various announcements and links. ■ The Church Council Brochure - A monthly brochure containing all happenings of our program ministries, administrative committees, and other information. ■ The Connect - Our monthly newsletter (a consolidated version of the information in the Church Council Brochure). ■ Facebook and Instagram - Daily posts highlighting the ministries of Spanish Fort UMC. ■ Sunday Announcements—Three pressing things the church needs to know, and they are decided upon during our Monday worship planning meeting. ■ Slides - Information graphics produced by our Communications Assistant that scroll in various places throughout the church.

Week 10: Created a complete picture of our financial reality.

Last year, we took in \$1,706,857 in revenue. Our sources of revenue are pledged offerings, non-pledged offerings, payment from tenets, school tuition, and prepaid pledges. We budgeted to take in \$1,766,988, which means we took in (\$60,131) less than we expected. Additionally, our 2023 expenses were \$1,981,691, roughly \$274,834 were expenses covered by designated funds. Going into 2024, so much was in flux that it made it hard to predict the expected revenue for this calendar year, but based on a limited pledge campaign and giving records, the previous Finance Committee projected a yearly revenue of \$1,284,144 and expenses of \$1,770,347 with a projected deficit of (\$486,203). The good news is that we are on pace to have a reduction in the expected 2024 deficit. However, we can't be sure how much until the end of the year.

We spend \$475,685 on Children's and Youth Ministry, \$429,471 on Worship and Prayer Ministries, \$358,808 on Membership Care and Adult Discipleship, and \$276,807 on Service and Missions. The only reason Service and Missions is lower than the other three is because

we have amazing volunteers who help lead many of those efforts, so we have massive savings in staff and facility costs. Bang for its buck, Service and Missions has the highest return on investment for each dollar spent.

Week 11: Ministry Fair, Church Council #3, meeting with Eric Soard about Tanzania partnership, sent out flood buckets and health kits for hurricane relief, and supplies to Baldwin Family Village At our Church Council meeting Monday night, Tim Dozier led an exercise to help us identify some truths about our congregation. I really enjoyed the experience, and it seemed like the whole group appreciated the process. Some of his questions included things like, why are you a member of Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, what are some of our strengths and weaknesses, where do we hope to see the church in five years, and if our congregation were a car, what kind of car would we be (I found that one particularly fun).

The whole process was enlightening for me since I still have much to learn about our congregation. I appreciated hearing that people joined our congregation because it was welcoming, energetic, and intensely focused on helping our community. I loved hearing people hope we will be even more involved in local and international missions, offer more programming for our multi-generational congregation, and double our membership. I like it when we dream big!... To that end, I want to thank Rev. Kitsy, Gay Desotell, and all our Missions Committee for setting up the ministry fair this Sunday. Join us and see all the incredible work happening at our church.

It is from 10:00-11:00 in the Fellowship Hall. If you come to the early service, stay late. If you come to the late service, get here early. Come see how much life and energy exists at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, and let's see together if we can get 100% of the people who worship here serving here as well!

Week 12: Commitment Sunday, analysis of pledges, staff offsite.

On a completely separate note, our offices are closed this morning. Our staff is off to participate in our first offsite retreat. This is a chance for us to get to know one another better, to worship together, and to plan the 2025 program calendar. It really has been a joy to work with our new team. Everyone has something unique to offer, and I can already tell we have good chemistry and rapport. The office has lively banter, good comradery, and an all-around feeling of love and support. I pray that our day away will only deepen those realities.

All in all it has been a fun, crazy, exciting, Spirit-filled couple of months. There is nowhere else I'd rather serve, and no one I'd rather serve alongside. Thank you for welcoming me and

my family and letting us share in this ministry with you!

Grace and Peace, Woods

At our Church Council meeting Monday night, Tim Dozier led an exercise to help us identify some truths about our congregation. I really enjoyed the experience, and it seemed like the whole group appreciated the process. Some of his questions included things like, why are you a member of Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, what are some of our strengths and weaknesses, where do we hope to see the church in five years, and if our congregation were a car, what kind of car would we be (I found that one particularly fun).

The whole process was enlightening for me since I still have much to learn about our congregation. I appreciated hearing that people joined our congregation because it was welcoming, energetic, and intensely focused on helping our community. I loved hearing people hope we will be even more involved in local and international missions, offer more programming for our multi-generational congregation, and double our membership. I like it when we dream big!

However, the evening reinforced something I've discovered these past few months. I keep realizing that as a new person in this congregation, I did not experience the previous season of struggle. Since my appointment began, I have encountered nothing but goodness, grace, and kindness from everyone I have met. So much so that some of the weaknesses and hurdles shared by the group came up against my perception of who our church actually is. That's not to say there weren't legitimate concerns, and we do have areas to improve. But when I heard many of the suggested weaknesses and hurdles, I found myself excited to work harder at sharing the good things I see each week in the life of our church. Driving home, I was reminded that one of my main jobs in this new season of leadership is to help raise awareness of who we are at this moment.

For example, when someone voiced they hope we improve at following up with visitors, I thought, "I wish they knew that we now have a great process in place for identifying visitors, following up with them, and intentionally trying to get them plugged in." Also, when someone mentioned that they want to see us expand our programs, I wanted to share about the effort the staff put in to ensure something is being offered for each age group in our church this fall.

However, the only point I feel inclined to speak to in detail was when the group agreed that 20% of the people do 80% of the work.

The eighty-twenty rule, as it is commonly referred to, is formally known as the Pareto Principle. It states that roughly 80% of effects come from 20% of the causes. This principle isn't new; it was named after Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian economist, who 1896 observed that

approximately 80% of Italy's land was owned by 20% of the population. Since then, it has been widely applied in business, non-profits, and other areas of life. In the church, we often believe that 80% of the efforts for ministry, 80% of the funding, or 80% of the control/influence/power resides with 20% of the people. Whereas that can be true of some churches, and it may even have been true of our church in a different season, I can definitively say it is not true now. And since we are in the season of trying to reconcile who we are with where we have been, I brought along some data to support my claim!

We average between 200-240 people in worship on a typical Sunday between our two services (usually around 105-115 per service). Since July 7, we have had 392 unique individuals register their attendance during worship (they or their parents signed the pew pad). Typically, churches assume roughly 35%-40% of people don't sign in, which seems to ring true here as well when we compare the number of people the ushers count in worship to those who sign in. So, it's safe to say that there have likely been closer to 530 unique individuals who attended worship in the past three months.

However, for the sake of this analysis, we'll stick with the 392 individuals for whom we have hard data.

- Of the 392, 289 were adults, and 103 were children under eighteen (which is excellent).
- Of the 289 adults, 192 were members, and ninety-seven were non-members
- Of the ninety-seven non-members, thirty-one were "non-local visitors" (like family in town) or members of another congregation, and sixty-six were regular attendees who have not yet decided to join the church.
- Of the 192 adult members, eighteen were college-aged and have mostly returned to school.
- This leaves us with a representative sample for our congregation of 174 active adult members who have attended worship since July 7th.

Now let me tell you the exciting part. Out of the 174 active adult members who attended worship since July 7th, ninety-eight are involved in at least one area of service in our church. These include children and youth volunteers, committee members, missions ministry, Sunday school teachers, administrative support, and many other areas. So, 56% of the people accomplish most of our ministry.

There are even fourteen more people who are not members serving in the church.

If you go by the raw data that we have 392 people in worship and that 111 are offering the ministry, the Pareto Principal would be close to accurate (but we'd still be at 28%). However, that would also blame children and visitors for not doing a share of work for which they are not responsible. The work and ministries offered by the church are the responsibility of its members. This is why we are working so hard during this campaign, and after, to encourage everyone to turn in a commitment card and reaffirm your commitment to Spanish Fort UMC. It helps us know how many people we have to do the work we are called to and if we have enough people to offer all the ministries we want to provide.

When it comes down to it, AT LEAST 174 individuals are responsible for providing the ministries of our congregation, and as of now, AT LEAST 111 people are serving. That might not be the ultimate goal of 100 percent participation, but we are far from twenty percent of people doing eighty percent of the work. We have a fantastic church!

Ultimately, I think we often feel like we are among the few who serve while everyone else reaps the benefits because we miss all the good work happening in areas outside our sphere of influence. If you serve on the Finance Committee, have you recently attended a youth gathering? If you are a children's ministry volunteer, when was the last time you helped the trustees dig a trench? How many people, after they finish ushering, run up and jump in the choir or worship team? As Paul said, we are all given unique gifts to build up the body of Christ.

Just because everyone is not serving in your area of ministry does not mean that no one else is serving. It just means my job as your pastor is to help us be more aware of all the good work happening here.

To that end, I want to thank Rev. Kitsy, Gay Desotell, and all our Missions Committee for setting up the ministry fair this Sunday. Join us and see all the incredible work happening at our church. It is from 10:00-11:00 in the Fellowship Hall. If you come to the early service, stay late. If you come to the late service, get here early. Come see how much life and energy exists

at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, and let's see together if we can get 100% of the people who worship here serving here as well!

Grace and Peace, Woods

UPDATE ON THE STATE OF SPANISH FORT UNITED METHODIST CHURCH As we near the end of the calendar year, we are beginning to wind down our first season of ministry together, and it has been a spectacular season! This has been a time to learn everything we can about the current state of our congregation. Below, you will find a few of the things we have discovered and some plans we've made as a result.

Also, leaving one season means we will be moving into another. I have briefly touched on some of our future plans, but now that we know more about who we are, it's time to elaborate on what comes next. The second half of this month's report outlines a season of discernment. And before you stop reading, please know that I am fully aware of the connotations around the word discernment. So much so that I considered not using it. But I refuse to let a time of tribulation mar the most Spirit-filled practice of the Church. We can't just abandon the practice of trying to discern God's will. We must practice discernment to understand the spiritual realities that exist beyond basic human knowledge.

Those who are wise understand these things; those who are discerning know them.

For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them. - Hosea 14:9 Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" - 1 Kings 3:9.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. - Phillipians 1:9-11.

So, let's talk a little bit about what we have discovered over the past few months and then consider how we will move into a new season of discerning God's vision for Spanish Fort United Methodist Church.

First Season: Discover - "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." - Isaiah 43:18-19 Some things we've learned.

Leadership: At our upcoming Charge Conference, we will reaffirm the slate of leaders the nominations committee put forward during our July Church Council meeting. These grace-filled people have stepped up to serve in leadership positions during this transitional

season and reestablish the three-year class structure. You can find the list of all our leaders [here](#).

Staff: The SPRC has discovered a great team to serve our church. We recently held our first offsite retreat, where we spent the whole day deepening our relationships, laughing, crying, and planning events for the coming year. Five staff members have been on our team for less than four months. Turnover is a natural part of employment in any congregation. I have no idea how long our whole team will stay together, but based on my recent experiences, I hope it will be a long time, and I will grieve the day we say goodbye to anyone who currently works on our staff.

Schedule: On the retreat, we developed a preliminary schedule for all 2025 programming. This is a tentative schedule, and it's not all set in stone yet, so don't take this calendar as finalized.

However, it will show you the framework for how we imagine 2025 playing out. A date, event, or program is only finalized once it is on the actual church calendar, not just the planning Excel sheet. You can find the 2025 programming calendar [here](#).

Infrastructure: We have spent no small amount of time recreating our internal infrastructure related to communications and information technology. We are in the final stages of preparing to migrate our church management software from Realm to Shelby for around half the annual fees.

You will hear a lot about this during the first three months of 2025, as it will significantly impact our giving system, event coordination, and membership database. Likewise, we have contracted with a new IT company to provide us with cost-effective and efficient support. Our internet speed and networking have improved in recent weeks while saving money on expenses.

Membership: We have analyzed our current membership in every way we know how to ensure they are the most accurate representation of our congregation.

- Anyone who has voluntarily and officially withdrawn from membership has been removed.

- Anyone who has not engaged with the church in at least six months (and is not homebound, in college, or otherwise unavailable) has been added to an "inactive" list. That list will be presented at the Charge Conference for removal and will be read at the following three Charge Conference meetings.

-Anyone who has not turned in a commitment card, but has attended worship, given financially, or engaged with the congregation in any way over the last six months will be receiving a call from a member of the Finance Committee to inquire about their relationship to the church.

-Anyone who turned in a commitment card will be migrated into Shelby (our new church database). The same is true if a person tells a member of the Finance Committee that they intend to remain connected to the church but haven't yet turned in a commitment card.

Finances: Thanks to the faithful response from everyone during the commitment campaign, we were able to go ahead and assemble a first draft of our 2025 budget. I am so proud of the way this church stepped up. Based on the commitment cards we have received so far, the average financial commitment is \$7,280/household, a massive increase from the average 2023 gift of \$5,423. Whereas we had 248 households give to the church operations in 2023, we are projecting at least 136 households will participate in 2025. And we continue to see new members join the church each month!

Our 2025 expenses will likely decrease from \$1,750,321 in 2023 to roughly \$1,200,000. One benefit of recent staff transitions and decisions by the SPRC is that we have already experienced a \$191,461 decrease in personnel costs. I couldn't be more proud of the work our team is doing despite not filling all of our vacant roles.

The Finance Committee will finalize the rest of the spending at its November and December meetings. If you want more information on the church's finances, you are welcome to attend their meetings.

Second Season: Discern - "Without vision, the people perish." Proverbs 29:18 So, we almost have a complete picture of what we need to know about our congregation logistically. Now, it's time to spend time discerning where we are going. Beginning in 2025, a Vision Team of eight to twelve people will meet regularly to pray and discern the next steps for our congregation. The Nominations Committee will select this team and will ensure the whole church is represented in its creation. Through group reading, congregational surveys, research into the needs of our community, and other means, the group will come up with a proposal to give the Church Council regarding what it feels are the best next steps for our congregation.

There are many methods for discerning vision. Below is the basic framework the group will follow to do our work. It will begin by reflecting on what we learned about SFUMC during

this most recent season. Then, it will look at our community's greatest needs and ask how we are equipped to address any of them. Finally, it will produce a vision statement articulating where we believe God is calling us in 2026 and beyond.

If you feel called or interested in being a part of this work, please let me know. I will ensure that the Nominations Committee knows of your desire when they select the team.

Discerning God's Vision I. Who We Are A. What do we know about our congregation?

B. What is our church passionate about?

C. What skills/resources/talents does SFUMC have to offer the city of Spanish Fort?

D. What are some of SFUMC's stated values? Are they still our values? Does anyone outside our church know we value these things? 1. Worship 2. Study 3. Serve E. What is the mission of SFUMC? Is it still our mission? Are we living it out? 1. Our mission is to be deeply committed to Christ, His Church, and our Community, In response to God's love, as shown through the grace of Jesus Christ, we are called to:

- Proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- Provide opportunities for meaningful worship
- Gather as a faith-based family
- Grow in our faith through Bible Study
- Share significant life events

II. What Is Vision A. Where do we see vision being given or cast in scripture?

B. As we exist today, what is the weakest aspect of SFUMC ministry in the community?

1. What is the strongest aspect of SFUMC ministry in the community?

C. What are the greatest needs in the city right now? 1. What do you think the city's greatest needs will be in the coming years?

D. Vision is the intersection of these three things. 1. The needs of the community. 2. The passion of the leadership. 3. The skill/abilities of those involved in the ministry.

III. Where Is God Leading Us A. Based on our mission, community needs, strengths, and passions, what is God calling us to do this next season?

Third Season: Deploy - “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8 Lastly, once we have the vision for where God is leading us and the Church Council and the congregation writ large have had a chance to buy into the plan, we will begin rolling out whatever strategies we need to deploy our resources and members to help further make God’s kingdom known on Earth as it is in heaven.

Stay tuned for the details!

TLDR (Summary): We are migrating our data to a new church management software called Shelby, which offers more functionality and is cost-effective. The Charge Conference reviewed membership, identifying inactive members and transfers to Five Rivers Church. The church will re-engage inactive members over the coming year and pray for those transferring to other congregations.

Happy Friday, Church, it’s migration season!

No, I am not referring to the annual trip the birds take south. Rather, we are migrating our data from our current church membership software (ChMS) Realm to a product called Shelby. Not only is our new ChMS more cost-effective, but it is also tailored to how we want to do ministry moving forward. It will offer a more friendly user interface for the staff and the congregation. It includes giving functions, a church directory, the option to edit your information, event sign-ups, and many more helpful functions. The best part is that when this migration is finished, our ChMS will be as up-to-date as any church I have ever worked in. That is mainly due to the actions of our Charge Conference.

Last night was our first Charge Conference together and my first as a Senior Pastor. I have been to many Charge Conferences and have done the work to prepare for them every year.

However, last night’s was particularly meaningful. It felt like the next step on a long path of faithful obedience for our church and the first major one I got to take with you. Not only did we do the regular business of approving lay leaders, pastor’s compensation, and the holy work of remembering our recently deceased friends and family, but we also celebrated those who have committed to this church and blessed those who have decided to worship elsewhere.

The United Methodist Church has multiple membership categories and a whole process for undergoing a membership audit. The primary category of church membership is “Professing Member.” This is someone who is a Christian, has undergone baptism, has publicly professed their faith, and has joined the congregation. This is the experience our young people go

through at confirmation. Before being a professing member, a young person (or anyone who never went through confirmation and hasn't made a public profession) is a "Baptized Member."

These individuals have been baptized but haven't yet made that public profession. Most of the children in our church are "Baptized Members."

There are two other categories of membership in a United Methodist Church: "Associate Members" and "Affiliate Members." Associate Members retain their denominational affiliation with a tradition outside the UMC but make a public profession that they are living out their Christian journey as a part of this congregation. Similarly, Affiliate Members are members of the UMC but retain their membership at a home church somewhere else while affiliating with this local congregation. Affiliate Members are often military personnel, college students, or individuals who want to be buried/interred at their birth church and must remain on their membership rolls.

All this is to say, every year, we do a membership audit wherein we go through our membership rolls and identify anyone whose relationship with our church has changed via withdrawal, relocation, church transfer, or inactivity. Anyone whose relationship status is changed by a means other than the last is removed from our rolls, and we bless them as they go to their new congregation. Anyone who has not been active in our church either through attendance, giving, serving, or any other method of connection, and is not otherwise homebound, deployed for military service, in college, or unable to connect for any other legitimate reason, is added to the "inactive" list.

Every year at the Charge Conference, we submit the names of inactive members for review. An individual cannot be removed from membership due to inactivity until their name is submitted at three consecutive charge conferences over two years. This is because no one, clergy or lay, can remove church members without oversight and review. Last night, we submitted quite an extensive list of inactive members.

Some notes about the active and inactive list. 1. As happens in most churches, many people on the inactive list have been there for years.

Churches nationwide, particularly congregations over twenty years old, will often have over-inflated rolls. Led by Robin Ross, our team has put painstaking effort into getting these lists as accurate as possible. Yet, there may have been someone marked inactive that ought not to have been, and someone may have been omitted that should have been included. We believe it to be

the most accurate list we can generate, but we are aware that mistakes may need amending. Please forgive any error made in ignorance. If your name is on there by mistake, no worries; your membership still resides at SFUMC. Just let us know, and we will remove you from the inactive list.

This is why I am grateful for the three Charge Conference review period, which allows anyone to self-identify and ask to remain a church member. Also, the congregation can give feedback to ensure no one was listed as inactive that is active. 2. The active list is mainly made up of committed members. It includes some, but not all, of the over one hundred constituents, long-time visitors, and other people who belong to our church, are faithfully attending and serving but have not joined. I give thanks for all those who are part of our church, whether you have joined yet or not. 3. On the inactive list is a notation of individuals transferring their membership to Five Rivers Church. Pastor Bill and his team sent over a list of all the people attending there who will join their new congregation when they become a chartered church on November 17th. He and I worked together on Monday to ensure the list reflected their congregation to the best of his knowledge. Once they are a chartered church and have their congregation join, individuals who were previously members here will come off our inactive list and officially be removed as having transferred to another congregation.

I have said this probably more than you want to hear it: a core tenet of my leadership is to provide an overabundance of information for the sake of transparency. This is the Lord's church; I am a shepherd called to lead the congregation as it makes decisions about ministry, operations, and future directions. Therefore, one of my roles is to give you as much clarity and insight as possible. I offer you the lists of our active, inactive, and church transfers for no other reason than to provide the most up-to-date accounting of the members of our church.

If you were included on the inactive list by mistake or are listed as active but no longer want to be a member, please let us know. Also, if you are an active member and someone on the inactive list surprises you, contact them. We will try various ways of reaching out over the coming year to everyone on our inactive list and try to re-engage them. It is difficult for many of the names because contact information has changed, but we will do our best. Likewise, if anyone is transferring out of our congregation, give thanks for the time you had together, and pray God's blessings on them in their new congregation.

We all belong to the one true Church. I do not believe there will be denominations in heaven.

However, I think here on Earth, they help us articulate what we believe is true about Jesus Christ. I have not found a better way to live my life than to look through the lens of grace articulated by Wesleyan theology in the United Methodist Church. It's why I vowed to be a leader in this tradition and haven't felt compelled to break that promise. But that is how I understand the Holy Spirit's movements, and I cannot, and will not, speak for my sisters and brothers who have sought other paths. This has been quite an unusual season, to say the least.

However, I believe we see all the good things God has for us now and in the future. I pray we will see more healing. I pray we will believe that God can heal strained relationships, broken hearts, and communities and families that have navigated troubled waters.

Who knows, maybe we can even show the world how multiple churches from multiple traditions can work together to help make the Kingdom of God known on Earth as it is in heaven. At least, that is my prayer. I hope you will join me in it.

Grace and Peace, Woods

I was shuffling through country music in preparation for this week's sermon, and perhaps for the first time in my life, I found myself having something in common with David Allen Coe. I can't say much of my life is reflected in Coe's music, but I did realize that no one ever calls me by my name, either! It's partly because it feels like I gave up my first name when I was ordained, but also because, most of the time, I think people are unsure what they should call me! The truth is, I like my name - in fact, I like all three of them (Woods Bradshaw Lisenby). I don't mind people using any or all of them. However, I recognize that my vocation, office, and title all carry varying degrees of significance. And the level of importance for each varies person to person.

Since beginning my ministry, people have used all sorts of names to refer to my role. I have found that the ecclesial term a person uses to identify my profession typically says more about them and their religious experience than it does about how I see myself. When referring to spiritual leaders, some people gravitate toward formal titles, some toward the colloquial nomenclature of the office, and some toward the names of our vocation. I know that for many, the titles and the vocabulary matter a lot. I don't deny anyone's right or desire to call me what they feel is important. However, I also recognize the disconnect that too much formality can create for those who find the vernacular intimidating or problematic because of personal experience.

Which is why I thought it might be helpful to break down all the ways people refer to us church workers. With a particular emphasis on how we speak in the United Methodist Church.

1. First is our vocation. "A vocation is a calling to a particular way of life or form of ministry, often one of personal commitment and devotion, regardless of formal title or office."

Minister - At the most foundational level of ministry, we believe in a priesthood of all believers.

As one of our former bishops used to say, "Baptism is the ordination of the laity." John Wesley once said, "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on Earth."

We are all called to ministry. However, some are called to vocational ministry, which drives us to jobs in and outside the local church. At SFUMC, everyone leading programs, offering spiritual education, leading worship, or discipleship is a minister. We have a Youth Minister,

Children's Minister, Worship Ministers, etc.

Clergy - A person who wants to be licensed as a pastor or ordained applies to become a member of the clergy. This process is overseen by our annual conference's Board of Ordained Ministry. In the UMC, anyone who serves by appointment in vocational ministry is considered clergy. This means licensed local pastors, deacons, elders, district superintendents, and bishops are all clergy members.

Preacher - Whereas it is a common colloquialism, particularly in the American Southeast, the term preacher is a limited reflection of our vocation. While many of us preach, not all clergy are called to that role. And those of us who are, also do many other things.

2. Next, in our vocation, we occupy an office — and I don't just mean the room where I sit at my desk. "An office typically refers to a defined position within the church's organizational structure, often with specific roles, responsibilities, and authority."

Elder/Deacon (UMC) - There are two ordained offices for clergy in the UMC — elders and deacons. Whereas in other traditions, lay persons (non-clergy) can occupy these offices, in our denomination, these are the offices of persons ordained by a bishop.

There are differences between elders and deacons. However, both offices are clergy, ordained to vocational ministry. At SFUMC, Kitsy Dixon and I are elders. Kitsy is currently commissioned as a provisional member of the Order of Elders and has applied to be ordained as an elder in full connection at our next Annual Conference. Mike is an ordained deacon and a member of the Order of Deacons. [And yes, I know Order of Elders and Order of Deacons sounds very Harry Potteresque. But we came up with it first!] Pastor - This is the one that gets used the most in our church, and there are discrepancies from church to church about who is/isn't a pastor. Most churches don't apply the term as it is defined by the Book of Discipline. Technically, according to the BOD, "A pastor is an ordained elder, probationary member...associate member, provisional elder, or local pastor approved by a vote of the clergy session and may be appointed by the bishop to be in charge of a station, circuit, cooperative parish, extension ministry, ecumenical shared ministry, or to a church of another denomination, or on the staff of one such appointment."

The primary differences between elders and deacons are that elders itinerate (we go where the bishop appoints us), elders are called to Word, Order, Table, and Service, and we can serve as the person in charge of a church. Whereas deacons do not itinerate, they are called to Word,

Service, Compassion, and Justice, and they serve as a bridge between the Church and the world. However, in practice, some deacons serve in ordering capacities, and at the most recent General Conference, deacons were given sacramental authority. Also, although they find their own employment, like an elder, they are appointed by a bishop.

The mild nebulousness surrounding the differentiation between elders and deacons to a non-ordained person has led many churches to refer to all clergy as “pastors” rather than just the elders. Here, Mike is known as Pastor Mike, and his office is listed as Associate Pastor, just like Pastor Kitsy. Likewise, at Dauphin Way, Kathy Jorgensen is a deacon serving in congregational care and compassion ministries whose office is also Associate Pastor. At FUMC Pensacola, my friend Emily Kincaid is a deacon whose office is Executive Pastor. Currently, due to out-of-the- norm circumstances, another wonderful deacon, Pam Barnhart, is serving as Interim Pastor at Monroeville FUMC.

My offices are pastor and elder. However, I, along with other elders, deacons, and churches, see both elders and deacons as pastors, even though that doesn’t perfectly align with the definition of the Book of Discipline.

-Senior (or, as the cool kids say, Lead) Pastor - The specific office of the pastor in charge of a local church.

-Executive Pastor - The specific office of a pastor whose primary responsibilities involve ordering the church's life.

-Associate Pastor (of) - A pastor appointed to a local church who is not intended to be in charge. Associate pastors can be generalists, fulfilling various pastoral duties, or specialists and oversee specific ministries. For example, Kitsy is an Associate Pastor responsible for missions and membership care. Mike is an Associate Pastor responsible for Traditional Worship.

3. All clergy have a title as a product of our vocation and office. “A title is typically an honorific

or designation used to show respect or denote a particular level of training or achievement.

Titles do not necessarily imply specific duties.”

Reverend - The most formal and technical title for a clergy person is reverend (Rev. for short).

In ordering titles of a clergyperson, the title “reverend” comes first—for example, The Rev. Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr. The title reverend is “an honorific title given to members of the clergy as a sign of respect. It is not a role in itself but rather a formal prefix used before a person's name.”

Doctor - In addition to a master's degree, many clergypersons will seek additional continuing education to receive a doctorate. There are various kinds of doctoral degrees, which are not all created equally. My friend, The Rev. Dr. Jason Borders, is a professor at Huntingdon College.

He has a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) in New Testament Studies. When I went for my doctorate, he jokingly asked me if I would get a “real doctorate?” The majority of people teaching in higher education have PhDs. They take longer to earn, are more academically rigorous, and are typically geared for those who want to teach. Other types of doctorates include an MD (Doctor of Medicine), a JD (Juris Doctor), which is a lawyer’s degree, and an EdD (Doctor of Education), typically for educational administrators. I have a DMin (Doctor of Ministry), a practical doctoral degree designed to help recipients better execute the office of pastor.

I know that is a lot of jargon for one job, but people always ask me, “What do we call you?”

Technically, I am a minister who is clergy and preaches. My office is senior pastor and elder in full connection (as a member of the Order of Elders), and my title is The Reverend Doctor Woods Bradshaw Lisenby.

But I subscribe to the same rule my grandmother often tells me, “I don’t care what you call me, as long as you call me!” I guess what I am saying is, “I’ll hang around as long as you will let me, I never minded standing in the rain, You don't have to call me darlin', darlin’.”

When all else fails, my name is Woods. And I like that just fine.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Finding Our Flow Have you ever heard of a flow state? While it might evoke the idea of “going with the flow,” it’s not about passive movement. Instead, being in a flow state means achieving an optimized, focused effort that seems to happen with ease. The concept was introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, but I first encountered it in Daniel Pink’s *Drive*. Pink explains that flow arises when autonomy, mastery, and purpose come together. Reflecting on his ideas, I’m reminded of where we are as a church. It feels as though Spanish Fort UMC is on the verge of entering a flow state. Momentum is building, and the sense of purpose is palpable. Let me explain what I mean.

Autonomy Autonomy isn’t about rugged individualism or self-centeredness. As Daniel Pink describes it, autonomy is the freedom to engage in meaningful work without being constrained by external pressures. For us as a church, autonomy means focusing not only on our internal health but also on how we share the Gospel with the world. However, in looking beyond ourselves we resist letting external forces dictate our direction.

I’m proud of how this church has stayed true to its calling, refusing to let outside pressures control our efforts. Whether it’s challenges in the world, the denomination, or the culture at large, we respond thoughtfully but remain guided by Christ and the Holy Spirit. As the old saying goes, “You can’t control everything that happens, but you can control how you respond.” Spanish Fort UMC is choosing to respond with faithfulness and intentionality.

Mastery We’re not at our peak yet, but we’re on the way. Over the past five months, our staff have settled into their roles, becoming more efficient and effective in their work. New systems, processes, and resources have been implemented, saving time and energy. Our committees are functioning as intended, ensuring that the administrative side of church runs smoothly.

For those who worried that recent challenges might leave our church in disarray, let me assure you: Spanish Fort UMC is far from chaos. We are moving closer to a state of flow, where everything aligns toward fulfilling our mission. This progress is a testament to the faithfulness of our congregation and the efforts of those who stepped up to serve. As we approach the start of the new Christian year, I couldn’t be more excited for what lies ahead.

Purpose Our purpose has always been clear: “To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” But even with clarity, there are times when distractions pull our focus away. Now, we’re entering a season of visioning to discern how we, as a congregation, live out this mission.

Through this process, we'll refine our strategies and develop language that keeps the main thing the main thing.

We already have a strong sense of who we are as a church—both in our logistics and in our identity. We're working out the final details of how we operate and maximizing our efficiency.

Our purpose is firmly rooted in our calling, and now it's time to align everyone toward a unified vision.

Signs of Life Although we look forward to our Vision Team commencing their work—we don't have to wait until next year to recognize that God is already moving among us in powerful ways.

God's presence is evident in so many ways at Spanish Fort UMC. Over the past few months, we've celebrated three adult baptisms and welcomed nearly 40 new members into our church family. Our children's and youth ministries are thriving. Our choir is preparing for the Service of Lessons and Carols, and the Contemporary Worship Team continues to inspire with incredible music. Our mission work remains strong, including hosting ERT training to support hurricane relief efforts. Discipleship opportunities like Bible studies, Sunday School classes, United Methodist Men, and other activities are flourishing.

This church is alive with the Spirit, and it is good! As we journey together in both personal and communal sanctification, I'm excited to see how God will continue to work among us.

This Sunday is Christ the King Sunday, marking the end of the Christian calendar. We conclude the liturgical year and make way for the season of Advent. December is full of joy, and food, and parties. But I don't want to rush past the significance of this Sunday in haste to make it Christmas carols and holiday pageants. So, as we prepare for this week's worship, I want to take a moment to reflect on why this Sunday matters and the nature of kingship.

Last year was unique—it was the first Christ the King Sunday in my lifetime when there was also a famous king in the Western Hemisphere. Monarchies are rare these days, and the British monarchy is the most prominent, at least in the Western world. Here in America, we seem to have a fascination with British royalty. From the drama of Harry and Meghan to the enduring sorrow over Princess Diana to *The Crown* being a Netflix sensation, it's clear we're captivated by the royals.

The death of Queen Elizabeth II and the coronation of King Charles III dominated headlines last year. Who didn't see pictures of King Charles holding the ceremonial scepter or orb (or, as

I like to call them, the holy hand grenade and fancy stick)? I've met people who couldn't name their congressional representatives but could list the entire British royal family, including the youngest children.

But why do we care so much?

Maybe it's in our DNA. For most of human history, kings and queens were the norm.

Monarchies dominated civilizations, and the Bible reflects this reality. Initially, Israel was a theocracy, with God as their King. But the people looked at their neighbors and said, "Hey, they've got kings, and they look like they're doing great. We want one too!"

Despite Samuel's warnings—"A king will take your sons, your daughters, your money, and probably ruin things"—the people insisted. And so, God gave them kings like Saul, David, and Solomon, setting off a complicated history chronicled in the books of Samuel and Kings.

Kings and kingdoms are a big deal in the Bible.

And while I love the Bible, I also love living in a democracy. I appreciate voting for leaders and not being subject to a king I'll never meet. After all, we celebrate Thanksgiving in a few days—a reminder of pilgrims fleeing a king's tyranny. And every Fourth of July, we commemorate a nation declaring independence from monarchy.

But even with our democratic values, our cultural fascination with monarchy persists. Why?

Perhaps it's something deeper—an innate sense that one ruler could be ideal. Maybe democracy is a placeholder for an ultimate reality: a perfect King.

For Christians, this isn't a foreign idea. One of the core tenets of our faith is that having a King isn't just a good thing — it's the best thing. We believe there is one King who knows what's best, whose will surpasses our opinions, and whose righteousness exceeds any earthly leader.

And that King is Jesus.

The New Testament redefines kingship. Prophets foretold a King who would make things right, but Jesus introduced a radically different kind of kingdom. His kingdom isn't about territory or politics. It's about a mustard seed growing into a massive bush, a father welcoming his wayward son, and treasure hidden in a field worth everything you own. It's countercultural, upside down, and a little strange—but beautiful.

In God's kingdom, Jesus isn't just a king; He's the King—the King of kings and Lord of lords.

His reign transcends borders, politics, and ideologies.

And God's kingdom is one of abundance, not scarcity.

Earthly kingdoms often operate from a place of scarcity, fueling conflicts over land, power, and resources. But God's kingdom is different. As Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 9, "God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." God doesn't run out of blessings. His generosity never ends and it fuels our own.

On Christ the King Sunday, we celebrate a King whose gifts are immeasurable and eternal. These blessings surpass any earthly wealth. In the kingdom of heaven, we discover that God is more than enough.

And to be honest, I've spent a lot of time lately thinking about what I don't have—what we don't have. We've spent a lot of time talking about how budgets are tight and focused on what we lack.

It's easy to get stuck in that mindset of scarcity, focusing on what's missing. But when we focus on what's lacking, we forget something essential: as Christians, we live in God's kingdom, not the world's. We forget that God provides more than enough. God's blessings are abundant—life, breath, love, grace, community. These are the things that matter, and what matters most is never scarce. They are gifts from the King who gives freely and abundantly.

This Christ the King Sunday, remember that God's kingdom is bigger, better, and more lasting than anything this world offers. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and in Him, we have all we need.

And that's enough.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Every summer between 1998-2007, I went with my church on our annual trip to Noah's Ark — a United Methodist ministry in Panama City Beach, Florida. The day after I graduated high school, I moved there to join the summer staff. In addition to working with youth groups and mission projects, we were the janitors, lawn care crew, plumbers, and general "do whatever needs doing" team. But the real draw for me was getting to play music. The summer staff doubled as the band "2x2" (Get it? Because it's Noah's Ark).

In the early days, 2x2 was mainly made up of Huntingdon College students. Fun fact: our very own Pastor Mike was also a 2x2 member when he was in college! He and my youth director, Lee Ann Boykin, sang in the band together. Over time, 2x2 drew people from all over the Southeast to live in a boat-shaped building on Front Beach Road, unclog toilets, and play music every night for two shows at 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.

While it was a Christian ministry, the music wasn't strictly from the Christian genre. We'd start with fun beach songs like Brown Eyed Girl or Johnny B. Goode, transition to more reflective pieces—some Christian, some not—and finish with a brief message from the resident pastor.

Afterward, we'd hang out with the audience and do it all again the next day.

One of the joys of 2x2 was when former band members would visit with their families or church groups and jump on stage to sing one of their signature songs (every band member had one or two songs they were known for). One summer, a former 2x2 member named Kyle Domangue visited with his family. Kyle joined us for practice one day, but instead of singing one of his old Ark favorites, he played an original song.

Let me pause here to say that 2x2 is like a family. Even though we don't see each other often, we keep up in small ways—usually through social media. Though Noah's Ark has since transitioned into a new ministry, now known simply as The Ark, its work remains vital. The Ark now serves as transitional and temporary housing, offering refuge to international workers and individuals transitioning from homelessness. It's a different ministry than it was, but it's still doing incredible, God-honoring work. And for those of us who lived and served there, 2x2 will always be like a second family.

Kyle and I don't know each other well. But we are connected through this strange surrogate family. And his visit that summer is etched in my memory because of the song he wrote. A little more than a decade before that summer, Kyle's wife passed away from cancer. Not long into his marriage, he became a widower with a young daughter. During his visit, he showed us

pictures of his wife's last visit to Noah's Ark, and we shared a deeply tender moment of love and support for his family.

As a result of his loss, Kyle could have written a song about grief, pain, or sorrow—all understandable themes for someone in his situation.

But instead, he wrote a song about thankfulness.

He wrote a song about the things he had been given and about God's blessings in his life. Kyle's song reminds me of the psalmists, who—even when overwhelmed by lament—still paused to thank God. His song was inspiring then, and it still inspires me today. And I share this with you in hopes that it can be an inspiration to you as well.

Because as we wrap up this Thanksgiving week, I hope you will give thanks. You've likely listened to countless sermons or read inspirational posts about the importance of gratitude, and I fully affirm the Christian call to thanksgiving.

But today, I especially want to acknowledge those who are giving thanks in the midst of grief or hardship. As a church, we support those for whom this holiday season is a mix of emotions. To those navigating brokenness and sorrow, I want to say that your witness of thanksgiving is powerful. You remind us that even in life's hardest seasons—when tragedy strikes and grief feels overwhelming—we can still find God and reasons to be grateful.

And if you are not there yet, if you find it hard to generate gratitude because of whatever difficulty you are experiencing, I hope you know that is okay, too. We all grieve and process life at different speeds and in various ways. It might take a while for you to see, or even believe, there is light at the end of the tunnel. But the Good News of Jesus Christ is that we know there is.

And that no matter what, God will never leave or forsake you.

So to those holding both grief and gratitude this season: we see you, we love you, and we are deeply grateful for your witness. Thank you for teaching us how to find God's light, even in the shadows. Thank you for allowing me to be your pastor and for this to be your church.

It's easy to give thanks when everything is going well. But the most profound expressions of thanksgiving come from those who find gratitude in the middle of life's storms. And so, for showing us what that looks like, thank you.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Below are the lyrics to Kyle's song "Thankful."

Thankful By Kyle Domangue (Verse 1)

When I look around and I see All the bad that can happen to me I'm just thankful for the good things in my life.

Many broken hearts, many shattered dreams Things aren't what they seem to be I'm just thankful that I had someplace to turn (Pre-Chorus 1)

Well, I can be a prisoner who was chained for doing wrong But I lived the good life with the chance to live long I only wanna say that I'm thankful for today Because when the time has come to meet you, Lord I want you to know I believe your word (Chorus)

I'm just thankful (thankful)

For my life and the people I Love I'm just thankful (thankful)

I look forward to heaven above I'm just thankful (thankful)

For my life that was meant to be Lord, I thank you for the chance to be me. (Verse 2)

As I walk the streets people getting beat And the bleeding of one another's feet I'm just thankful for the chance to know what's right As I watch the news, I receive the blues People living in boxes and they have no food Why does pain exist in our lives (Pre-Chorus 2)

Well, I can be a victim of some wrong and beaten war But I lived the freedom playing music on the shore I only wanna say that I'm thankful for today Because when the time has come to meet you, Lord I want you to know I believe your word (Chorus)

I'm sure most of you already know that Pastor Kitsy does a fantastic job organizing our congregational care ministries! Many of you have experienced her pastoral care firsthand. In addition to supervising our missional efforts, Pastor Kitsy coordinates our on-call and hospital visitation calendars, meets with families to offer support and encouragement, and helps persons in the community connect to places that can provide aid. Recently, Kitsy had the idea to create a series of videos that outline all the ways we offer pastoral care to our church and community.

In addition to the pastors on staff, she asked Tammy and Robert McMillan to serve on our congregational care team. Both Tammy and Robert have served in pastoral ministry and, a few years ago, made Spanish Fort UMC their church home. We are grateful for their willingness to

serve our congregation with their gifts.

Over the next few weeks, we will share four videos in addition to the one linked above that explain how we try to serve the congregation. Today's video provides a little more context to the overall ministry, and the ones that follow detail how we walk alongside those in difficult seasons. Below are a few highlights from what you will hear in each video.

Video One: Pastor Mike speaks about the specifics of hospital visitation. One major thing I hope you hear is that we want to pray for you and visit when you are hospitalized — if you would like a visit. However, we will only know about any medical issues if you or a family member informs us. Gone are the days of hospitals calling churches to tell us a member has been admitted. We can't even call to ask if any members are there. The privacy laws around medical care limit the amount of information healthcare providers are allowed to share. So, please let us know if you are ever going through a procedure or health-related issues. We would love to support you and walk alongside you during that journey.

Video Two: The McMillans offer encouragement about what it's like to be in the midst of or recovering from a major illness. I am grateful for how they share a bit of their own story, and I am proud of how this church supported them during their journey. It is a blessing to all of us that they offer that same care in return.

Video Three: Pastor Kitsy shares some comforting wisdom on what it means to walk alongside those who are lonely, particularly during this holiday season. Amid all the joy and fun of Thanksgiving and Christmas, it is easy to forget that many people feel more isolated and lonely this time of year. As your church, we want you to know that you have a congregation that loves you and a pastoral care team that is here for you.

Video Four: I share a bit about how we journey with those who are mourning. Jesus said blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Until the kingdom of God is fully known on Earth as it is in Heaven, the Church is to provide the comfort Jesus intended for those who mourn. We know loss and tragedy can be devastating. And we want you to know that you are not alone.

I appreciate Pastor Kitsy coming up with this initiative and helping us better articulate how we want to be the church and represent Christ to all who need comfort and companionship during this season. If that is you, I pray these videos will bless you. I also hope you will forward this email and the videos to anyone you know who is going through a difficult season. Reach out to those in your life who you know could use a gentle reminder that they are loved and that we

are here for them.

Thank you for being the Church and sharing the comfort of the Holy Spirit with all those in need!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Hey everybody, I just wanted to give you an update on the work of our administrative committees and where we are ending the year from a budget standpoint. Let me begin by saying just how proud I am to be a pastor of this church. The way our congregation has stepped up to serve in so many areas over the past six months has been incredible. I can honestly say there is no pastor in our conference who is luckier to serve a congregation than I am to be a pastor here. You have been so welcoming to me and my family, and serving alongside you has been a joy.

I have been so impressed with the work of all our committees. In July, our ad hoc Nominations Committee reconstituted the makeup of all five administrative teams. All in all, we filled thirty- eight of the roughly fifty positions with new members. Our SPRC has put together a great staff.

I am happy to say that we were even able to forgo our November meeting because there were no positions to fill, no conflicts to resolve, and no issues of any kind to discuss. They have stayed on top of all important matters and helped guide our team to create a healthy work environment.

Likewise, our Trustees are rockstars. I have actually never worked in a church that didn't have any maintenance or custodial personnel. That means when something breaks around here, it's not up to a staff person to make repairs; the committee looks around the room and says, "Okay, who wants to tackle that project." Most often, this work is done by Brian Desotell and Terri McCracken, but the whole team is serving in various ways.

Our Church Council has been a place of celebration and praise. Every month, we are able to review all the great work going on and discuss large topics together.

Which brings me to the Finance Committee. This group has done incredible work to evaluate the financial generosity we receive and move us toward sustainable spending in 2025 and beyond. I was blown away by our church's response and how many people took their next step in financial generosity. The average household annual pledge increased from \$5,300 a year to \$7,200 a year, and I can't explain just how amazing that is.

All in all, our church is in a great place. Our staff and committees are all operating effectively, and the general ethos of the congregation is optimistic. We have had more than fifty people join the church since July, even performing three adult baptisms. Every week, another new family inquires about joining the Church, and I can't wait to welcome them into membership.

All of this excitement and energy is capped off by the Finance Committee presenting our first balanced budget in three years. It has been a very unique season in the life of our church and denomination. Due to the events of our recent past, many churches, like ours, have had to restructure the ways they do ministry and staff their personnel. We bless all those who are worshiping in new church homes, and as a result of our new total membership, we have made adjustments to our 2025 budget.

Next year, we expect to receive roughly one million one-hundred and ninety thousand dollars in revenue from your generosity, rent from our property tenets, and interest from investments.

This is compared to the roughly one million seven hundred and sixty thousand dollars we received in 2023. After many months of conversations by all our staff and committees, the Finance Committee projects it will cost us one million three hundred and forty thousand dollars to do the best versions of the ministries we can offer in our current capacity as a congregation.

This is a savings of six hundred and forty-one thousand dollars compared to our total expenses last year. So, for more than thirty percent less, we are going to continue offering incredible children's ministries, youth ministries, worship ministries, missions ministries, discipleship ministries, and more. We are still going to be the amazing congregation you call your church home.

To reach these savings, all our committees had to look hard at our spending and ask how we could continue doing wonderful ministry in a way that costs less. They and our staff all came up with various solutions. For starters, the SPRC reduced our total personnel budget by more than one hundred and eighty thousand dollars. This means our staff are working hard while being a leaner team. The Trustees have found cost-saving measures for maintaining our buildings and grounds. In addition to reduced operating costs, we will no longer have a lawn service, and we will rely on volunteers to care for our landscaping. The Finance Committee went through each department to ask how they can best utilize program budgets and provide the same high-level ministries we've had this fall. And we plan on paying our fair share of conference apportionments. All churches are asked to contribute to the conference apportionments based on a standard formula. The data for that formula comes from the expenses of the previous year, so 2023, and the current makeup of the church membership.

Most of the apportioned amount comes from previous years' expenses, and we expect to spend roughly six hundred thousand dollars less next year than last year. Likewise, we've given

much attention to analyzing our membership rolls. In addition to those who have moved away in prior years but remained on our membership rolls, we transferred out roughly one hundred and sixty people to other congregations. This brings our active membership to a little more than six hundred people. So, we calculated our apportionments to the annual conference based on the most accurate representation of who our church is right now and plan to pay 100% of that amount.

Ultimately, we project that our expenses will exceed our revenue by about one hundred and forty-seven thousand dollars. The finance committee believes they have cut and saved as much as we can while still providing the ministries we are called to offer. Thankfully, our congregation is blessed to have enough savings to cover excess spending in 2025. The exact amount we expect to spend over our income is listed in the budget as designated revenue. We believe this excess spending is an investment. It's not a strategy we employ lightly or that we will that we hope to use again. We believe God is up to some great things at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. We are praying that our growth will be such that next year, we will find new ways to put God's money to work in kingdom-building ministries. We are also prepared with other potential restructuring options if that growth takes more time.

Either way, we believe in God, and we believe in the future of this church. We hope you will join us for this journey, and that you will tell your friends and family about all the incredible things happening here. We hope to see you at our Christmas Eve candlelight services. Pastor Mike just bought a whole fresh new batch of real candles. I can't wait to light them with you, raise them up, sing Silent Night, and experience the joy of knowing Emmanuel, Christ with us just as He has always been and will always be. Thank you for being such an incredible church and allowing me to be one of your pastors.

In the whirlwind of pageants, parties, and all the holiday chaos, a group of men from our church — in roughly the same phase of life—got together this past Wednesday for some Christian fellowship and encouragement. It was our second gathering, with the first hosted by Michael Maxwell last month.

So far, these meetups have been simple: we share a meal, enjoy some conversation, and build connections. If you're in the phase of life of a young(ish) professional and didn't know about this group, let me know so we can loop you in next time! At our recent meeting, everyone brought a wrapped book that held personal meaning. When someone unwrapped a book, they got to keep it, and the person who brought it shared why it mattered to them. We each left with a new book and a dozen fresh ideas for things that have impacted others' lives. It was a really

fun evening.

This group isn't a new "official" ministry. It's more of an experiment, exploring what a more robust Men's Ministry might look like at Spanish Fort UMC. This group is in addition to the United Methodist Men's gathering on the second Saturday of every month, as each serves a different purpose.

Which brings me to the main thing I want to discuss: the purpose of various discipleship models.

I'm not going to dwell on why discipleship is essential—we covered that during our recent commitment series and will dive into it again soon. Suffice it to say that discipleship is vital for a thriving Christian life. Instead, I want to touch on the different models of discipleship and why they matter.

A discipleship model is essentially a blueprint for how we structure ministries that help us grow closer to God and one another. Every church, whether it realizes it or not, has one. Here are the four most common discipleship models.

1. Sunday School

A classic! Sunday School happens weekly—before, after, or between services. One teacher usually leads it, or leadership is shared among a few. While there's fellowship involved, the main goal is education.

Historically, Sunday School was the way to form discipleship in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in areas with limited clergy. While still popular, it doesn't carry the same momentum it once did. However, there are still plenty of churches with vibrant Sunday School ministries.

2. Small Groups

These come in all shapes and sizes: weekly or biweekly, at homes, the church, or coffee shops.

Some share meals; others focus purely on study or accountability. Small groups might center around a shared interest (knitting, sports fandoms) or life stage.

The main goal is to build relationships while growing in faith, whether through study, discussion, or soul-checks with one another.

3. Classes

Short-term and topic-driven classes are led by someone knowledgeable, like clergy or a well-prepared layperson. They can be lecture-style or discussion-based, focusing on things like a book of the Bible or theological concepts.

The beauty of classes is their defined beginning and end—they're perfect for diving deep into specific subjects without long-term commitment.

4. Supper Clubs

These are all about connection, not education. Meeting monthly in someone's home, Supper Clubs are casual gatherings for fellowship. They're an excellent way for newcomers to ease into church life and for everyone to build deeper, long-lasting relationships.

While these four models dominate, they're not the only options. Right now, at Spanish Fort UMC, we've got four strong Sunday Schools, and Pastor Kitsy and I have offered a few classes.

I hope that by next year, we'll determine the best discipleship model—or models—for our congregation.

This will be one of the main tasks for our newly formed Vision Team. I'm thrilled to announce that the Nominations Committee has selected Christy Inabinett, Aaron Immel, Ashley Howard, Brandon Bias, Elizabeth Pierce, Kay McHenry, Philip Poole, Will Clarke, Haley Few, Caleb Maxwell, Darby Smith, and Harper Walters as the members of our Vision Team, and they have graciously accepted.

This team will embark on a six-month journey of prayer, planning, and discernment to uncover God's vision for our church. By July, we hope to have clear, Spirit-led direction for the future, including the best discipleship framework for our church.

I don't know if we go all-in on one model, a hybrid of a few, or come up with something else entirely, and honestly, I don't have a preference. I think all four are wonderful models, and I have experienced the goodness of each. I just want every person in our congregation to have a place to grow in their walk with Jesus. Discipleship is how that happens — it's essential.

Be on the lookout for surveys and listening sessions early next year as the Vision Team dives into this and other big questions for our church. I look forward to seeing you Sunday—and at one of our Christmas Eve candlelight services!

Grace and Peace, Woods

At Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, we are embarking on a transformative journey to discern God's vision for our congregation and community. This visioning process, running from January through July 2025, is designed to provide clear and Spirit-led direction for our future ministry. Through prayer, strategic planning, and congregational involvement, we aim to articulate a vision that inspires and empowers us to make a greater impact for God's kingdom.

The process is organized into six key phases, beginning with preparation and foundation setting.

In this phase, a diverse visioning team of adults and youth has been formed, bringing together a variety of perspectives and experiences. The team will attend an orientation retreat to establish goals, foster unity, and lay a strong spiritual and strategic foundation for the months ahead.

Next, we will move into a phase of listening and data gathering, engaging both our congregation and the wider community. Through surveys, interviews, and demographic research, we will seek to understand the needs, hopes, and dreams of those we serve. This feedback will help us discern how Spanish Fort UMC can uniquely fulfill its mission in a rapidly changing world.

As the process continues, the visioning team will synthesize these insights during a series of workshops to develop core vision themes. These themes will form the backbone of a draft vision statement, which will be shared with the congregation for feedback. The team will then refine the vision, ensuring it aligns with our shared values and aspirations.

Once the vision is finalized, we will enter the strategy and action planning phase. Here, the team will define specific goals, prioritize initiatives, and map out a roadmap for implementation.

Leadership roles will be assigned to ensure accountability and momentum as we bring this vision to life.

The culmination of this process will be a celebratory vision launch in worship. This special service will include the presentation of the vision, prayers of commissioning, and an invitation for the congregation to commit to this shared journey. In the months and years following, we will maintain ongoing communication, provide updates, and review our progress to keep the vision alive and impactful.

At the heart of this process is a commitment to faithful discernment, community focus, and strategic clarity. Drawing on resources like Advanced Strategic Planning, Simple Church, and God Dreams, we are blending prayerful listening with practical tools to create a vision that is actionable and inspiring. We invite the entire congregation to join us in prayer as we seek God's guidance for the next chapter of ministry at Spanish Fort UMC.

Stay tuned for updates throughout this process and opportunities to share your thoughts and feedback. Together, we can discover and live out God's future for our church!

Christy Inabinett, Aaron Immel, Ashley Howard, Brandon Bias, Elizabeth Pierce, Kay McHenry, Philip Poole, Will Clarke, Asher Carmichael (Lay Leader), Haley Few (Youth), Caleb Maxwell (Youth), Darby Smith (Youth), Harper Walters (Youth)

It's a new year and the beginning of a new season in the life of our church! The first six months together were incredible. I was amazed by all the ways God blessed our congregation and the faithful witness of our members. I am especially excited that, since July, fifty-six people decided to join our congregation and make Spanish Fort UMC their church home! And I can't wait to see what will happen as we move forward together.

As we look ahead, I wanted to highlight a few things on the horizon.

1. Sunday is always coming!

In church world, this is our ever-present mantra. Whereas we have seasonal events, occasional trips, and programming that starts and stops, every week has a Sunday. This means that every week, we gather together in worship. I am excited about the creative ways our worship leaders are helping us encounter the Holy Spirit in corporate worship. Below is a link to the sermon series, titles, and scriptures for each service over the coming year. While there is always a chance something could change along the way, I am excited about what we have planned.

https://sfunitedmethodist-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/srpastor_spanishfortumc_org/EawmJVhW0tIDpl6xlSbfm6AB5ca74hcVvwcTLafaIwUzZw?e=OlhDkz

2. Administrative teams round two.

We will host our first joint administrative team orientation on January 26th. Last year was such a whirlwind we never got the chance to really acclimate to our new roles and structure. I hope this orientation will provide a solid foundation for all who serve on these teams. The meeting will begin with everyone discussing how the committees function together as a whole and reviewing items that affect all groups. We will then split up for committee-specific work and

priority setting.

For more information on how our committees operate and some administrative resources, click the link below.

https://sfunitedmethodist-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/srpastor_spanishfortumc_org/ERKVxDGJ3-BCieD7MjgMMgUBeI5j43l-KqYBc2qK_H27hg?e=Y1MdVo

3. Shelby is here!

We have officially launched our new church membership management, giving, and bookkeeping database — Shelby. Very soon, you will begin to receive information about how you can update your profile and how this software will improve the operations of our congregation. If you are interested in helping organize and implement this new system, please let me know!

4. The Vision Team begins its work.

This process is organized into six key phases: preparation and foundation, listening and data gathering, synthesizing insights, developing core vision themes, strategy and action planning, and ultimately, a celebration and vision launch in worship.

This process is committed to faithful discernment, community focus, and strategic clarity. We are blending prayerful listening with practical tools to create a vision that is actionable and inspiring. We invite the entire congregation to join us in prayer as we seek God's guidance for the next chapter of ministry at Spanish Fort UMC.

5. Winter/Spring Programming

We found a lot of success overlapping many of our discipleship programs on Sunday nights, so we are going to run it back at the end of this month. Little Lights, Shine Kids, Connect, Remedy, and Adult Ministries will all be in full swing again starting January 26th! Stay on the lookout for details about the upcoming Adult Discipleship offerings, and be sure to invite friends with you as we grow closer to the Lord together!

All in all, we have a lot of exciting things ahead of us! I can't wait to spend our first full calendar year together and witness all God is going to do in and through the life of our church!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Being Changed into His Likeness Eugene Peterson We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. —2 Corinthians 3:18 Do you have people in your life who, when they meet you, say, "My, how you've changed. Why, I can remember when you were just a little baby throwing food on the kitchen floor and tantrums in the supermarket"? They usually have a couple of stories they insist on telling. Everyone is greatly amused-except you, to whom it is a great embarrassment to be linked to that messy, dirty creature of thirty or forty years ago.

Embarrassing as it is, though, it is better than its opposite. Suppose you are sitting at dinner with one of these old friends and accidentally knock over the water glass, sending a torrent across the table and making a pool in your hostess's lap. And he says, "Why, you haven't changed a bit. Remember that time we were at dinner at the Odegards' when you were six years old and you spilled the chocolate milk over her best linen and spoiled her best dress? Same old fumbling butterfingers. Ha ha!"

St. Paul had some interesting things to say about change. I don't think you will find what he has to say embarrassing — quite the opposite. His style was not to drag out some old story to humiliate us; rather, he had some insights to give us hope. You will be especially interested in his remarks if, at this point in your life, you are quite sure that nothing can change or that if change does occur, it will certainly be for the worse.

Here is Paul's sentence, taken from a long letter of counsel he wrote to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth: "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The first thing that strikes me about this text is the confident air of freedom-change is possible. Nobody must remain as she is. Yet many of us feel like we are stuck, as though no growth or change is possible. This feeling of stuckness, enslavement, or imprisonment takes many different forms, but it has a remarkable continu-ity.

A friend recently went to the Baltimore city jail and was taken into a visiting room to see a prisoner. As the warden left the room, he locked the door. After an hour, my friend was ready to leave, but the warden didn't return. The warden was visible through a glass barrier, so my friend motioned to him, waved his hand, and gestured that he wanted out.

But the warden was preoccupied, talking with someone, and didn't notice him. My friend simply couldn't get his attention. When this had gone on for some time, the prisoner remarked,

"It feels different when you can't get out, doesn't it?"

I don't know in what forms you experience your imprisonment.

Perhaps it is a job you can't get out of, a family that you feel has you locked in, emotions and moods that dictate their will to you, or a body that traps you in weakness and pain.

You feel lifeless. Existence is stagnant. You are dead inside, and nothing is moving.

Or you feel that you are up against a stone wall—progress is blocked, and there is nowhere to advance. Paul wrote to such persons, saying, "You don't have to be stuck with what you are; you can change." If you don't like what you are today, that is a cause for hope, not for discouragement. If you do not love as you would like to love, that is evidence not of failure but of immaturity, and growth is possible. If you do not hope consistently and faithfully, that is not evidence of fickleness but of incompleteness, and completion is possible. If you do not believe unwaveringly and boldly in the face of every contradiction, that is not evidence that you are unworthy disciples but simply a signpost to eventual maturity, and Christ will be your companion as you make the journey.

Change is part of the gospel. The Christian life is not something we are handed already complete. It begins as a seed, and the seed is the word. The seed grows as Jesus described it in the parable—"first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear" (Mark 4:28). Or the gospel is inserted into our lives like leaven in a loaf of bread dough and initiates a slow but inevitable process of expansion and rising.

Those who believe in Christ, who have accepted his salvation and lordship, already have the power of change working within them. No matter what you feel, no matter how you assess your condition, no matter how stuck you feel—the feelings are wrong, the assessment is wrong, and God's word is right. For, as St. Paul said, "The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). This means that we are free to become what he wills us to be: changed "into his likeness."

None of us is yet whole in Christ. All of us are in the process of becoming. We are not finished products. He has pruning and shaping to do in us. And he has promised that he will continue what he has begun.

The second thing I notice in this text is that the Spirit of Christ brings to us the change of growth, not the change of magic. We are "being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another." This is not the kind of quick change that takes place in the telephone booth

as Clark Kent morphs into Superman. It is the slow, gradual change of the infant into the adult. For this kind of change, you can't be in a hurry. We are involved in something that stretches into eternity. You can't see it happen; you can see only that it does happen—just as you can't see children grow but only that they do grow.

Many people quit the Christian church because they are impatient. They quit worshipping, the Christian fellowship, and discipleship. They came to church because they wanted something different and thought they would give God a try. They had tried everything else, so why not religion? They joined the church and enthusiastically entered the life of the congregation. But after six months they couldn't see that anything had changed. They still woke up depressed on Monday. They still had spats with their spouses. Their kids had been in Sunday school every week but still weren't behaving as they were told. These folks had been as good as they could be, and God still hadn't answered their prayers for job promotions. So, they quit the church. They had supposed that the new life would come quickly, suddenly, like a rabbit appearing miraculously out of a magician's hat. But rarely in Scripture do we find illustrations of magical change.

The biblical models are mostly analogical to the growth of plants and people: slow, intricate, complex, and sure.

If you are in a hurry, unwilling to immerse yourself in the process of what God is doing—letting grace develop from the inside, letting your spirit age in the Spirit of Christ—you will, I'm afraid, never find out what it means to go from one degree of glory to another.

The third important thing in the text is that this change results from a relationship with Jesus Christ: "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another."

Change into the likeness of our Lord is not automatic. It is not something inherent in us.

It has a cause: beholding the glory of the Lord.

Change is rooted in a relationship with Jesus Christ. God becomes open, personal, and accessible to us in Jesus. For centuries people had to guess about and grope after God, but they need do so no longer. St. John wrote that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory" (John 1:14). Glory is what you can see of God in Christ: It is that which is visible, tangible. We have, in Jesus, evidence that can be examined in history by our senses.

Now, the word "beholding" that Paul used is based on the word for "mirror." The person of Jesus is a mirror in which we see God. When we are with Christ, we are in touch with all that we can apprehend of God. In that environment, we are changed by what we see, transforming into his likeness. If we are in an exposed relationship with the sun, our skin changes to a darker hue. If we are in an exposed relationship with Christ, our lives change. The transformation results from our relationship with Jesus Christ. By opening ourselves to him, we come under his influence and are shaped into maturity-changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another or from one level of maturity or stage of development to another.

In that relationship, our present condition is never an occasion for blame or condemnation. The phrase is not "from a degree of infamy to a degree of glory" ; it is "from glory to glory." The bottom step in a staircase is neither better nor worse than the top step: It is good in its own right and a way of getting upstairs. What you are this morning is no occasion for despair, no basis for discouragement. It is the very place God will begin to change you to his likeness, step by step, degree by degree. Or, as Paul said in another place, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:1-2).

Some, I fear, avoid Christ because they feel they have lived sinfully and are afraid of rejection. Others, I fear, avoid Christ because they feel they have lived selfishly and are afraid he will take away what is dear to them, impoverishing them. Both fears are groundless: Our sin and our selfishness are our prisons, and as long as we cling to them, we will be stuck. But association with Christ will initiate a process of growth that will accept us where we are, define that starting point as the first degree of glory, and then develop largeness, stature, wholeness, and maturity in us: "We all .. beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory into another."

A friend who is about fifty-five years old went to his physician the other day for an annual checkup. Among other things, he was weighed and measured. When he noticed the doctor writing his height down as five feet, ten inches, he said, "I think you have my height wrong. I'm six feet tall." The doctor smiled and said, "Stand up here again." The standard indicated five feet, ten inches. My friend was faced with the undeniable evidence that he had shrunk two inches.

All of us are either on the way up or on the way down. We are growing up into Christ, or we are diminishing toward death. Our bodies are subject to certain laws of growth and decay. Being with Christ will not keep us from shrinking as we age, but it will set us on a growth road

that stretches into eternity.

One goal of the Christian life is to remove the distractions and barriers that keep you from looking directly at Jesus Christ in faith, to convince you that you no longer have to be stuck in a life that is inadequate, and to persuade you to permanently associate yourself with our Lord, entering a growth process that will, in the end, bring to maturity the likeness for which you were originally created (Genesis 1:28).

Charles Wesley wrote a hymn that shares Paul's theme in 2 Corinthians 3:18. I don't know of a better prayer than the final stanza:

Finish, then, Thy new creation; Pure and spotless let us be:

Let us see Thy great salvation Perfectly restored in Thee; Changed from glory into glory, Till in heaven we take our place, Till we cast our crowns before Thee, Lost in wonder, love, and praise.* Today was a big day in the Lisenby house. For the first time in two weeks, no one was recovering from surgery or battling a flu-induced fever! After Wyatt came down with the flu last weekend, he generously shared it with everyone in the family—except me. Needless to say, we've had a lot of quality time stuck inside together these past two weeks.

So today...I went fishing. Hence the late email.

Fishing is my favorite hobby and my go-to mental release. One of my proudest accomplishments is taking first place in the flounder division of the 2021 Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo. If I were to rank my top ten personal achievements, it would look something like this: 1.Becoming a Christian 2.Marrying Brianna 3.Fathering my children 4.Finishing two Ironman races 5.My ordination 6.Winning 1st Place in the Flounder Division 7.Earning my bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees 8.Winning a cruise ship karaoke contest with "I Want It That Way" by the Backstreet Boys 9.Catching a game-winning ball in eighth grade 10.And something different, depending on the day... But there's something about being outdoors, on the water, completely unplugged from phones and the busyness of life that feels so freeing. I haven't done much fishing over the past seven months. With a new baby and a new appointment, my attention has been focused elsewhere. As I mentioned during my onboarding, my priorities are simple: God, family, church, and self—in that order. Different seasons require different levels of attention to each priority, and lately, self-care (like fishing) hasn't been at the top of the list. Welcoming a new child into our family and starting at Spanish Fort UMC have been worth every bit of that shift in focus.

Still, it was wonderful to be back on the water today with my friend Dr. Sean Powers—for the first time since July! It's only my third fishing trip since starting at SFUMC. I used to fish almost every Friday, usually from my kayak, and Sean and I would go together about once a month or so. Sean is the Director of the Stokes School of Marine Sciences at the University of South Alabama. I've learned so much from him about our local fisheries, both inshore and offshore.

He's also been kind enough to take me along on a few research trips with USA and introduce me to many of our area's charter captains. Sean and his family live in our neighborhood and have been incredibly thoughtful—bringing us food when we were sick, checking in on the kids, and just being all-around great neighbors.

After a day of fishing together, I think about my friendship with Sean and I'm reminded of how many wonderful relationships I've been blessed with because of The Church. I only know Sean because I was his pastor. But you don't have to be a pastor to make meaningful connections through life in a congregation. The Church is a place where people from all walks of life can come together in deep, meaningful relationships. A scientist and a pastor became fishing buddies.

And in churches all over the world, people who might seem to have nothing in common—different ages, backgrounds, education levels, or socio-economic statuses—form bonds strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

Brianna and I have already begun to experience that here at Spanish Fort UMC. We've made new friends and are so grateful for the kindness you've shown us. We've felt your prayers these past two weeks and appreciate everyone who reached out to check on my recovery and how our family was faring with the flu.

I pray that everyone in our city and throughout Baldwin County looking for a church home will find what we've found here. I pray that anyone feeling disconnected will experience the same warm welcome we have and know they are valued by both God and this congregation. This is a special church, full of love and grace, and I'm so thankful to serve alongside you—and to get to know you. Thank you for being you and letting us get to join the fun!

P.S. I caught more trout than Sean today!

Grace and peace, Woods

Audrey Assad and Chris Tomlin wrote a wonderful Christmas song that is beautiful but hard to appreciate as someone who has lived in South Alabama my whole life. I've spent more winter days in shorts and flip-flops than boots and heavy coats. But that definitely wasn't the case this week.

I mean, I have been in snow before. I've gone skiing a bunch and spent vacations in places where it snowed. But I have never looked out my own window and seen a blanket of white powder. I've never watched my children marvel at a winter wonderland in our backyard. I have never walked out my front door, decked in my ski gear, built a snowman, and laughed as my children sled down the neighbor's hill. After this week, I found myself loving their song even more.

The song goes:

You could've come like a mighty storm With all the strength of a hurricane... But You came like a winter snow Quiet and soft and slow Falling from the sky in the night To the Earth below It was magical to see such fun and joy on my family's faces. And to watch my neighbors all outside soaking up such a rare opportunity. As I looked out the windows on Tuesday night after the kids had fallen asleep, I stared at the blanket of soft snow and marveled at how quiet the world was — even if for just a moment.

The stores were all closed; no planes were flying overhead or cars driving down the street.

There was nowhere to get to and no worry about unfinished work. It was quiet and soft and slow.

It was a reminder of how our God chose to come to Earth. Jesus could have come with fanfare and accolades. God could have descended from on high with chariots and trumpets. I mean, He deserves it. God deserves a heavenly angel band playing his walk-in music like a fighter entering the ring. He could have plummeted to the ground with all the power of rushing like a meteor.

But God didn't do that.

He came in the dead of night — quiet, and soft, and slow.

Only his family and a few shepherds knew what was happening. Some wisemen later figured it out, but they weren't even there when it first took place.

The truth is that God — the God — came to the place He created, just like all of us. In the most ordinary fashion, the most extraordinary thing happened. And we still celebrate it every year because every year it is just as miraculous.

I know we're past the Christmas season, but I can't help but continue to marvel at the wonder of Jesus' arrival and the circumstances that created it. As a person who loves the Bible, I am enamored that God tried to get things done in other ways, but none of them worked.

He made a covenant with a family and said they would be the conduit through which everyone would come to know the One True God. But Abraham and his descendants couldn't keep the covenant. Then he gave the rules to the Israelites who fled Egypt and said if you keep these rules, you will be in the right relationship. But they couldn't keep the rules. Then he raised up David, and through this king, peace was supposed to prevail, and his monarchy was supposed to usher in the world God intended. But David and his lineage got caught up in their own humanity and failed to produce what everyone hoped they would.

So God said, "Okay, I will have to do something no one expects." God decided to come to Earth as a human. Jesus was born as the manifestation of God in person. Jesus was and continues to be God. And Jesus was born just like every one of us.

Christmas, and the incarnation of the Divine, is not just some nice thing we remember once a year because it is fun and we get presents. It is the miracle of miracles. It is the most bizarre and wonderful thing. It never makes sense, and we often fail to appreciate it fully. It is the most important moment in human history. The moment when God became man, and as Eugene Peterson writes in "The Message," "Moved into the neighborhood."

God willingly chose to step out of eternity and enter history. And when He did, he experienced the entirety of humanity. He laughed and cried. He felt joy and sorrow. There is nothing we go through that Christ didn't also go through. There is no pain or triumph we know that God doesn't also know because God experienced it all in Jesus. The good, the bad, the fun, the fear, the hardships, and celebrations — God knows them all.

Because Jesus came to be one of us and to be with us, there is nothing we can't take to God.

God cares about all of it because God knows all of it. God cares about you because he became like you. And it all started with the most relatable thing about Him, the way He came to Earth. He came like a winter snow — quiet, and soft, and slow.

For every baby born, we are reminded, “Hey, God did that too.” For every helpless cry of an infant, we are reminded, “He God did that too.” Whereas it could have been different; God could have come with pomp and circumstance, with announcements to the world at metaphysical press conferences, or with a giant receiving line — He didn’t. God chose to come to Earth as a baby. As a non-descript, perfectly normal human child. Like looking out a window and seeing a blanket of fine white powder snow. It wasn’t loud, bombastic, or grandiose. It was quiet and soft and slow. Jesus was born as normal as any other child. But thank God it turned out to be the most abnormal birth that has ever been. Because it turns out, though He became like everyone, there is no one who is like Him. He is the one and only Alpha and Omega! And through Him, we have been redeemed, and in Him, we find our rest.

P .S. One of my other favorite experiences from this past week’s record snowfall was sharing the joy with our staff. We have a staff group text thread meant for two purposes: time-sensitive/ emergency-related messages and sharing our lives with each other. Getting everyone’s pictures and texts on Tuesday and Wednesday was so fun. You should see some of the pictures soon when Summerlyn posts them on Facebook. I am grateful for our team. Not only for their hard work and what they offer our church but also for the chance to do life alongside each of them!

Hey everybody, before I jump into today’s message, I want to give huge congratulations to Pastor Kitsy for being approved to become ordained as an Elder in the United Methodist Church. You all know how special she is and how great it is to serve alongside her. We are so proud of you, Kitsy, and can’t wait to celebrate you in the near future.

This is the first time I’ve filmed a video from my office. I wanted to do this one here so I could show you a few things. If you look around, you will see I have a lot of tchotchkes and keepsakes. They are all reminders of fond memories — they each have meaning. I don’t have any non-descript decor pieces from Hobby Lobby or Pier One imports. And every so often, if I can’t remember why an item is there or the memory attached to it, I’ll get rid of it - because it no longer has meaning. So everything in here matters to me, it has a story.

For example, this is a picture my dad took at our family farm in Ozark when he was working in a photo lab during college, a hobby I also picked up in college. This came from a trip to Cuba where I stepped on a stingray and had to go to the hospital. The pastor of the church where I worked bought this from a market the next day and presented it to me on stage during worship the Sunday we got back. This is from Brazil. These items are from Russia, where my grandfather went on many mission trips. The students in the campus ministry signed this as a

going-away present when I left Huntingdon. The students from the St. James youth group signed this guitar when I went to seminary. And this is from my wedding day. When the groomsmen walked down the aisle, they all gave me cards they had signed of baseball players from teams I hated, like the Mets and the Yankees. Then Bri came down, and in her bouquet was this Chipper Jones card that said I love you the most. Next to it is half of a two-dollar bill.

Bri has the other half, and her mother gave each of us one half at our wedding rehearsal to continue a tradition her father started and said, as long as you have each other, you'll never be broke.

I have a lot of other items in here, and I'd love to show them all to you, and hear some of your stories as well. If you ever want to come by and talk. My door is open, and there is nothing I'd rather do in my role as pastor than spend time with you.

But the reason I'm showing you all these things today is because lately I've been thinking a lot about meaning and how we all have different things that matter to us. We all have memories and relationships of significance. We have moments with our friends, our family, and our co-workers that we treasure. But the thing that most of us watching this video have in common is how much this church matters. There is something about Spanish Fort United Methodist Church that is special to every one of us.

However, we don't all have the same affinities. The things that make the Church matter to you are likely different from the person sitting next to you in worship. Some of us were baptized in this congregation, and it is a place of tradition and connection to our family. Some of us are enlivened by the music on Sunday mornings. Some of us are thankful that our kids have a children's ministry to go to or that our youth are a part of a group that accepts and loves them.

Still, others are drawn to the opportunity to serve through our missions and our outreach programs. I could go on and on about all the things that draw each of us to this particular congregation, but suffice it to say there is a reason you are here. There is something special that makes it your church home.

We are in a crucial moment in the life of Spanish Fort UMC. Building a Christian community takes effort, intention, grace, and forgiveness. And we are very much in the building phase. We made it through an initial season of rediscovery, we weathered a time filled with transition. It took a lot of effort to reconstitute our administrative teams, our staff, and the general operations of our congregation. And I have been so proud and impressed with how this congregation responded at each and every step.

And although things will continue to change and we will continue adapting, I believe we have exited the season of discovery and are creating a season of stability. And this is the moment where we have to be vigilant. As we talked about in worship on Sunday, we have to be sure not to give in to evil desires. If we are not careful, we will fall into the trap. We will start jockeying for position and arguing about which ministry is most important or criticizing what isn't happening yet - and we will fail to see the goodness all around us. If we are not careful, we will lose sight of all God is doing by focusing on the things that aren't perfect yet. It's like how a community comes together after a hurricane. In times of conflict and trial, we can put away the things that separate us and focus on bigger issues. But time and time again, after the initial wave of communal strength, there is a withering of those bonds, and we withdraw back to our respective corners.

I am not reflecting on any behavior I have seen at Spanish Fort - I still feel the momentum we have and am thrilled by the ways we support each other. But I am speaking about what can happen when we leave the season of just trying to survive and enter a season where we seek to thrive. Because I believe we have turned that corner. There is no doubt this congregation has and will continue to survive. But I want to do more than that. I want us to thrive. I want us to grow. I want us to be the very best we can be, so we can help make God's kingdom known on earth as it is in heaven.

So, to that end, and to wrap things up, I want to share with you a few things our staff has been working on. A few ideas that we've been tossing around that will materialize over the coming weeks and months. This isn't so you'll say, oh wow, look at how hard they're working. But rather to let you know that we are putting a lot of thought and effort into the area of ministry that matters most to you, and also that we are putting equal efforts into areas of ministry that matter to someone else. None of these ministries are more important than any other, they all matter to someone, or we wouldn't do them. And most importantly, they matter to God, and they help advance His kingdom.

But before we look ahead, here is a quick reminder of just a few things we put our efforts into over the last six months. Some accomplishments that our church should be proud of.

I am proud that sixty people joined the church. I am proud that we hired Elisha, Robin, Erin, and Summerlyn, that Elizabeth took on a bigger role, and Beth jumped back on the team. I am proud that Zack continued to lead a healthy youth ministry that just came back from Winter Retreat. I am proud that we were able to reorganize our Children's Ministry so that between Little Lights, Shine Kids, and Connect, we offer Biblically rooted programming to all aged

children every week. I am proud that 38 people accepted positions on leadership teams. We hosted a trunk or treat for more than 500 people and got second place in money raised out of all the churches in our district for the Wesley Foundation Cookoff. Thank you for donating almost \$5,000 to Embrace Alabama Kids. We sent dozens of flood buckets and hygiene kits to hurricane victims. We took up a huge collection of the basic living necessities for Baldwin Family Village, as well as blankets for the homeless and coats for our veterans. Our Christmas services were amazing, just like all our worship services are, and I love that more and more new people are finding out about our church each week.

All and all there is so much to celebrate about what has happened here recently! But we are not about to rest on our laurels, and I know there are still a lot of questions about what's next and how we will give attention to the things that matter to you.

Well, in addition to continuing many of the things I just named, we are gearing up for Lent.

During Lent, we will offer multiple opportunities to journey through the book "Entering the Passion of Jesus" by Amy Jill Levine. Pastor Mike is going to teach the book study on Wednesdays during the day. And I will teach the same study on Sunday nights, so you can go to the best time for you. Additionally, we will feature one chapter in each sermon during Lent so our Sunday Schools can discuss the topic even more deeply during their class. To kick off Lent, we will have a church-wide dinner on Ash Wednesday from 5:00 to 6:00, followed by our Ash Wednesday worship service. Then, to round out Lent, we are going to have a new version of our Easter Celebration, which you will hear more about in a few weeks, our traditional Maundy Thursday service, and a brand new Contemporary Good Friday service. This is one of my favorite services of the year, as it is a Tenebrae service that prepares us for Easter.

We are about to begin a campaign to launch our new data software called Shelby. It has connected all the areas of our church, and when you get the instructions, you can create a profile to sign up for events, see the church calendar, automate your giving, and access the church directory.

I just had a conversation about the next phase of our Family Life Ministries. My hope is that by next year, we will offer at least four fun events every year that draw more people to the church.

These events are where we will see generational overlap and have the chance to spend time with people from other worship services and Sunday schools. Some of these events might include a summer outdoor movie night, a family camp, a softball tournament, couples retreats,

and retreats focused on men's and women's ministries, as well as continuing to offer great trunk or treats and easter events.

Our missions ministry does amazing work already, and I am excited to see what comes next. I look forward to more fruitful work with our ministry partners, new expressions of local service, the revitalization of our Costa Rica mission trips, the chance to participate in the conference's Church-wide serve day, and anything else we decide to put our efforts towards.

Our children are heading to a winter retreat in a few weeks, and Elizabeth is hard at work preparing VBS. We are beginning a conversation about what confirmation looks like at our church and how we can continue integrating the youth into more aspects of our congregational life.

I hope by the fall, we will have a solid plan for our adult discipleship. I hope we will have decided on our model and begin implementing the next phase of that ministry. I don't know exactly what our adult programming will look like. I have a vision for a men's ministry, a women's ministry, and opportunities for singles and couples to all have places to dive in. But I know building that program will take time.

And, I am really looking forward to when all of these things are in full swing, I will get to spend more time in the community. I look forward to meeting with the mayors and city council people of Spanish Fort and Daphne, other pastors in the area, and getting to know the leaders of our schools and businesses.

All the ministry we offer is exciting. And all the things we are going to do fill me with anticipation. But something I have to remind myself is that none of this happens overnight, and it won't all be perfect right away. Sometimes, I have to slow down and say, "Hey, it's just been six months and a very short time since our church went through major changes. I mean, sometimes I feel like I am still learning where closets are on our campus!

This week in worship, we are talking about showing kindness; next week will be about offering grace, and the week after, we will talk about practicing mercy. My hope is that, as a congregation, we will show kindness to our staff by offering help before criticism. I hope we will offer grace to our fellow church members by sharing with them about the things that matter to you — and inviting them to participate. And I hope you will practice mercy following the many times I will fail. There will be countless occasions where I get it wrong or where I say the wrong thing. There will be times when I will not be there in the way you expected me to be. But I promise you that I will try to do my best every day. I will try to be

better tomorrow than I was the day before.

So, as we embark on this new building phase of our church, I look forward to all the things we are going to do together. I can't wait to keep seeing the miracles of God in our midst. I hope that we will not let any petty divisions or self-righteousness infect the incredible acts the Holy Spirit is sharing. I hope we will embody the words of James when he said, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."

My prayer for this season is that we will be one in Christ Jesus. That we will be united by our one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. We will be patient with each other, celebrate one another, support one another, and take pride in being a part of God's work at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church.

And I really hope you will invite everyone you meet to join us!

I know last week's video was long. So, I'll keep this a bit shorter. Just know it's hard to speak briefly when discussing all the good things God has done, is doing, and will do here at Spanish Fort UMC!

Let's think of last week's video as an overview for a series of emails hitting your inbox over the coming weeks and months. Starting next week, most of my Friday emails for the foreseeable future will focus on one particular area of ministry and give each department and staff member the attention they deserve. I'll take periodic breaks to write about pressing church news and other topics of note. However, since we do so much around here, giving each ministry area its due focus is really hard. And I think the Friday email might be a good place to offer more specificity regarding our ministry efforts.

I meant what I said last week: everything we do here matters. Some things matter more to one person than others, but they all matter to God. And we must remember that just because something doesn't seem as important to you, that doesn't mean it is not important to someone else.

As Paul said, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"... God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a

part of it.” — — — Since we are no longer in survival mode, it is natural to begin asking questions about the things we do. It is normal to look at our church programs, worship services, operations, and everything else and ask, “Are we fully living the life God has called us to?” It is right and good for us to evaluate our efforts and ask how we can continue improving. That is the only way we will fully align with God’s will. However, I appeal to you that we always ask those questions through the lens of support and encouragement rather than criticism and dissatisfaction.

The last seven months were jarring for many of you. We changed so much about how our congregation operates. It wasn’t because of a desire to change for change’s sake, but a necessity.

We consolidated our youth, children, and adult programming away from Wednesdays and now host them mainly on Sunday nights. The time of and access to committee meetings changed.

Half of our staff changed. I am pleased with all the changes; they have all already produced good fruit (hence the long video last week!). Yet, I recognize that so much change can feel like a shock to the system when you have been at the church for a long time.

That’s why I want to hone in on each of our ministry areas and explain how and why we do what we do. We will look at how we choose our mission ministries, why our committees operate the way they do, and the objectives of our children’s and youth programs and why they meet at their respective times. We will also look at some things we hope to see in the future. All while fully admitting we’re not perfect yet. Like all of our faith journeys, the programs and operations of our church are a work in progress, with the potential to adapt in each new season.

Ultimately, and I know I have shared this before, the Church is like a house. John Wesley used the analogy of a doorway to represent evangelism as the initial point of entry—it’s the means by which people are invited to enter into the Christian faith. Just as a doorway provides access to a house and its many rooms, evangelism allows individuals to explore the depths of Christianity.

It’s the beginning, not the end, of the journey.

The diagram above, along with the description below, makes the analogy a little more concrete.

We name each room in relation to its area of ministry. The experience of belonging to a church is like moving through the entire house and discovering the purpose of each room. One distinct

feature of this home is that although there is a front door designed for entrance, there are many ways a person can find their way inside, and every room has access to the living room (where worship takes place). Subsequent emails will provide full details about all the good work our ministries provide.

Please know that if you ever have any questions about why we do any of the things we do, if you want more context about a decision we make, or why something is the way it is, I would love to talk to you about it. Like any relationship in our life, good communication is essential for a thriving church. So please, never hesitate to reach out!

Grace and Peace, Woods

The Church House

The Church House Front Porch - Evangelism The front porch is where we meet first-time guests and regular visitors. It is the advertising we do in the community and online. It's the welcome desk. It's the way we invite people to church.

It's often the first thing people see when they encounter our church.

Sitting Room - Fellowship Unlike your grandmother's house, you are encouraged to recline on the couches and make yourself comfortable in this sitting room. Fellowship is an important part of the Christian community. It allows us to build friendships without programmatic expectations or discipleship pre-work. Supper clubs, affinity groups, and potlucks are all examples of fellowship ministries.

Living Room - Worship Almost every other room in this house has a doorway into and out of the living room. The living room is the center of the house, just as worship is the lifeblood and center of our Christian faith. Everything we do flows out of and back into worship.

Bedroom - Congregational Care/Prayer Jesus said when you pray, you should go into your room and close the door. The bedroom is the most personal and intimate space in the house. Just as prayer is the most intimate place we meet with God.

Kitchen - Missions "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'"

Missions ministries are the calling of the church. We do not exist for ourselves but for others.

The kitchen is where we prepare the physical and spiritual food that feeds the world. "The church is not a museum for the saints but a hospital for sinners."

Garage - Operations There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work that goes on at the church. Our operations volunteers and staff are essential. Like the garage that stores our tools is often an unappreciated space in the house, so too the operations of our church sometimes fail to receive the credit it deserves for helping the Church do our work.

Library/Study - Discipleship To know is to grow. Discipleship and education are necessary for Christian sanctification. We grow closer to Christ when we know more about Christ. Our library/study is the place where we can explore the nature of faith and grow deeper in our walk with Christ. These ministries include Bible Studies, youth groups, children's ministry, Sunday School, small groups, short-term classes, and more.

Backyard - Family Life Ministries We believe the Church should have fun! High-energy events like movie nights, dinner on the grounds, trunk or treat, retreats, and more are great ways to engage new people in the life of the church. Also, they provide an opportunity for people to gather who might not have other places to interact.

Home Office - Administration To maintain all the wonderful ministries, missions, and programs, the church requires order and management. The administration of a church is necessary to ensure we are good stewards of God's gifts and utilize all God has given in the best ways possible.

Worship — The Living Room Let's talk about worship. It is one of my all-time favorite topics. It was the focus of my project when I received my Doctorate of Ministry. The paper was almost 28,000 words — and I could have written another 50,000. I love talking about worship, but don't worry, this message is much shorter than my paper!

We all have thoughts and opinions about worship. It is the heartbeat of congregational life.

Some programs are seasonal, and others are annual, but worship is one of the few (and in some churches, the only) things we do weekly. As Christians, our lives become acts of worship the more we become like Christ.

As we kick off this series exploring our ministries at Spanish Fort UMC, I want to begin by looking at what we believe about worship and some practical considerations about how we organize our worship services.

Theology and Philosophy of Worship 1. Worship Is Not A Consumer Choice - Worship is not about you or me. Worship is about God. We gather to sing praises to God, to offer prayers, to hear from God, and to join with our church family while engaging the Holy Spirit. Too often, we treat worship as religious entertainment. We find the worship services that most meet our fancy and go get our Jesus bucket filled — if there isn't something else going on. If they play songs we don't like, or if the sermon was too short or too long, or if other aspects of the service don't meet our standards, then we are quick to criticize the whole experience. If we are

unimpressed too often, we might even look to find another church. But that is the mindset of a consumer, not a worshiper. If we are to worship in spirit and truth, as Jesus describes, then our inclinations have to shift away from “what am I getting out of worship,” and towards, “what am I bringing to worship.” Worship is at its best when we bring our wholeselves, and allow the worship to transform us — not just scratch an itch or check a box. Ultimately, we shouldn’t be church hopping to the coolest or newest worship services in town. We should be rooted in the community of our congregation and seek to help improve the services if/ when they need it.

2. But...Preference Is Not Bad - Though our first thought should be about what we offer God, it’s not evil to have personal preferences about worship. We all do; not only is it natural, but it’s okay. Some of us were raised traditional, others contemporary. Our preferences speak to how we best connect with God in worship. Some like using hymnals, and others like using screens. However, our personal preferences do not give us permission to denigrate the preferences of others when they are different from our own. This was the sad truth of the “worship wars” that took place in the 90s and early 2000s. For a while, everyone was asking, “Which one is better, contemporary or traditional?” Thankfully, we have moved past those questions and now celebrate the unique qualities of both, and at our church, we seek to offer high-quality experiences of each style.

3. Worship Should Have Order - Although there is a “Basic Pattern of Worship” in our tradition, there is also a great deal of variety throughout United Methodist churches worldwide. However, despite the diversity of worship forms, we still believe there should be an order rather than fully extemporaneous experiences. “The Basic Pattern of Worship expresses the biblical, historical, and theological integrity of Christian worship and is the basis of all the General Services of the Church.”

4. Worship Should Be Energetic - If we are true to our Wesleyan heritage, worship should have

an energetic environment. John Wesley was an Anglican. However, he had a strong sensibility for worship that possessed a deep invigoration of energy. “Anglican worship is not an enthusiastic worship; it is done as prayer. Wesley, however, introduced enthusiastic preaching and singing, which Methodism took over as its distinguishing mark. There has always been a liturgical Methodism that reflects John Wesley’s love of the Anglican liturgy, but for the most part, Methodism gravitated toward the more loose style of worship known as revival worship.”

5. Worship Should Trust the Holy Spirit - Our tradition has always emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit and the power of God’s work through more spirit-filled avenues. As it says in The United Methodist Book of Worship, “When the people of God gather, the Spirit is free to move

them to worship in diverse ways, according to their needs.”

6. Worship Should Be Theologically Sound, Liturgically Mindful, and Culturally Engaged

Practical Considerations Regarding Worship 1. The Style and Form of Worship - In most Methodist Churches, there are two overarching styles, each with various forms. Though these names are somewhat colloquial, most worship services are either in the style of Traditional or Contemporary.

Some forms of Traditional Worship include:

- Catholic Mass
- Aesthetic (or Protestant High Church)
- Revival/Camp Meeting
- Meditative (like Taizé)

Some forms of Contemporary Worship include:

- Blended
- Emergent
- Pentecostal
- Seeker-Sensitive
- Modern Contemporary

At Spanish Fort UMC we offer a Traditional Service in the Aesthetic form. However, on the liturgical scale, it is closer to the Revivalist/Camp Meeting form than to the Catholic Mass. We also offer a Contemporary Worship service in the Modern Contemporary form. We do our best to ensure our particular version of this form is executed through a Wesleyan theological lens.

2. The Time Worship Happens - Worship can happen at any time. However, it is standard to worship on Sunday mornings. The most popular hour for a worship service to begin in the United States is between 9:30 and 10:30. If we only had one service, I would advocate for it to be at 10:00. However, we are a multi-generational church with multiple styles of worship services. And if you think about it, not only is this a good thing, it is becoming rare. Most new churches (started in the last 20 years) solely offer Contemporary Worship. Most older congregations primarily offer Traditional Worship services. There are fewer and fewer

mainline churches (and by that, I mean denominations like Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, etc.) that offer multiple worship styles.

As such, we have to think about how to organize our worship services in such a way that we best utilize our buildings and staff to accommodate both services. By having one at 8:45 and the other at 11:00, we are able to reserve time in the middle for congregational fellowship and discipleship.

3. Music Selection - Our worship leaders put a lot of thought and attention into their music selections. They start by considering the Scripture selection for the sermon and try to identify songs that will draw upon the themes that will be preached. In addition to theological integrity, we also consider five other factors when making musical selections, such as, lyrical depth, singability, contextualization, direction, and energy. 4. Preaching - A 2016 Gallup poll found that the top two reasons people choose to go to church have to do with preaching. As Protestants continue to place more weight on the sermon, it is all the more important that preachers place a heavy emphasis on thoughtful exegesis and theological soundness. This doesn't negate the importance of good oratory skills. The preacher needs to be an effective communicator. However, effective communication alone doesn't make a good sermon. I have a lot I could say about some of my thoughts on preaching, the difference between preaching and teaching, the dangers of prescriptive preaching, and the basics of good communication. However, I will save that for another time. 5. Combined Services - At SFUMC, we have between 5-7 combined services every year. The beauty of a shared worship space is that when we have combined services, no one is displaced. I have served in churches where combined services disenfranchised one service due to location or perceived importance. Right now, our Contemporary Worship attendance is slightly higher than our Traditional Worship service — but not by much. Therefore we think it is important that both styles are represented in our combined services. Unless one of our Worship Ministers is out of town (as was the case with our most recent combined service), they both help plan and lead our combined services.

6. Volunteers - Worship doesn't just magically happen! Our pastors and staff spend time each week planning worship. However, it wouldn't happen at the level it does if it wasn't for a host of volunteers. In our services, individuals serve as ushers, greeters, audio/visual personnel, choir members, and contemporary band members. Our Worship Team sets up communion and the paraments, decorates the sanctuary, and so much more. I am so grateful for everyone who volunteers to help us offer incredible worship services!

If you ever have questions or concerns about worship, please reach out! I'd love to talk to you and answer your questions — as I know Mike and Andy would as well. I hope you will pray about whether God may be calling you to serve in worship. We always need more volunteers in each area I named. Ultimately, I hope you are proud of the worship this church offers and that you will invite someone else to come experience it with you!

Grace and Peace, Woods

The Garage – Church Operations Let's continue our metaphor of The Church House. Last week, we looked at the living room as representing Worship. Today, we'll focus on the garage, symbolizing the operational backbone of Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. While the home office embodies administration—overseeing committees, managing human resources, and handling financial planning—the garage is dedicated to the stewardship of our physical assets and technological infrastructure.

I've mentioned this before, but before my appointment here, I had never worked in a church that did not have one maintenance person or custodian. It is so impressive to see how our congregation steps up to serve and care for our facilities. Our trustees are all rockstars! The Board of Trustees is at the heart of our "garage." This team is entrusted with the supervision, oversight, and care of all church property, ensuring that our facilities effectively support our mission and ministries. Their responsibilities include:

Property Maintenance and Supervision: The trustees oversee, maintain, and supervise all local church property, ensuring that our buildings and grounds are safe, welcoming, and conducive to worship and community activities.

Receiving and Administering Gifts: They receive and manage all gifts, outside of normal operations giving, made to the congregation, ensuring that funds are invested properly and used in alignment with our church's mission.

Legal Compliance and Reporting: The trustees ensure that the church's Articles of Incorporation are up-to-date and report annually to the charge conference on the state of the church's property, including any new acquisitions or improvements.

Insurance and Risk Management: They annually review property, liability, and crime insurance coverage, ensuring that all church-owned property, buildings, and equipment are adequately protected.

Accessibility Audits: Conducting annual accessibility audits of buildings and grounds, the trustees work to eliminate barriers that might impede full participation in our church activities.

In our commitment to improving operational efficiency, we're excited to announce the implementation of ShelbyNext, a comprehensive church management software. This platform will revolutionize the way we handle various administrative and operational tasks:

- **Membership Management:** ShelbyNext allows for streamlined tracking of member

information, helping us stay connected and informed about our congregation.

- **Online Giving and Financial Management:** The software provides a secure and user-friendly platform for online donations, as well as robust financial tracking and reporting features.
- **Communication Tools:** ShelbyNext offers integrated communication channels, facilitating timely and effective interaction within our church community.

Integrating ShelbyNext is a significant step in our efforts to harness technology for better ministry outcomes. Below are videos and PDFs to help you set up your Shelby profile and download the new Spanish Fort UMC App. Ultimately, the three things I hope you initially get out of this software are the ability to sign up for events seamlessly, an easy interface for online giving, and (in a few weeks) access to the church directory.

If you have any trouble at all, you can call the church office, email robin@spanishfortumc.org, or simply come up to the church, and we will help you get set up. In a few weeks, we will go around to each of our Sunday School classes and be stationed at the narthex to assist. Please be patient as we get this system up and running. There will likely be a few things to work out as we go, but I know this will help our church and especially our staff streamline some of our operations.

A Call to Stewardship Maintaining our "garage" is a collective responsibility. We invite you to consider how you might contribute:

- **Volunteering:** Consider ways you can offer your time and skills to assist with things like property maintenance, technology implementation, or other operational tasks.
- **Recently, our UMM** took on the responsibility of groundskeeping rather than paying an outside group. We need volunteers to sign up to help in this effort.
- **Skillshare:** Consider adding your respective career and/or skills to your Shelby account so we will have an idea of who in our church can help with various needs.
- **Prayer:** Keep our trustees, administrative staff, and volunteers in your prayers as they steward our resources and facilities.

Together, we can ensure that our "garage" remains robust, enabling all other ministries to flourish and fulfill our calling to be deeply committed to Christ, His Church, and our community.

Grace and Peace, Woods

The Bedroom – Prayer and Congregational Care If you’ve been following along, we are continuing the journey through our Church House metaphor. We’ve explored the living room of worship and the garage of church operations.

Today, let’s consider the bedroom—perhaps the most private space in any home. In our church, this room represents our prayer and congregational care ministries.

Our scripture text for the Ash Wednesday service next week (join us for dinner at 5:30 and worship at 6:30) comes from Matthew 6, where Jesus teaches:

“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen.

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

The Power of Prayer in Community Prayer is both beautifully communal and also deeply personal. We pray together in worship, in small groups, and around the dinner table, but we also have those moments where we seek God alone. Our church’s prayer ministries provide opportunities for both:

- Prayer Chain & Prayer Requests – A network of people committed to lifting up prayer requests submitted by our church family. Whether you share a need publicly or prefer to keep it confidential, you are never alone in prayer.
- Prayer Groups & Intercessory Teams – Regular gatherings of people who intentionally pray for the needs of the congregation, community, and world.
- Upper Room and Seasonal Devotionals — Shared resources the church provides for corporate scripture reading and prayer.

Congregational Care Just as the bedroom is a place of refuge and healing in our homes, our congregational care ministries provide support and presence for those in need. Sometimes, this happens through a simple prayer and other times; it’s through an ongoing relationship of care and encouragement.

- Pastoral Care & Hospital Visitation – Our pastors and trained care team visit those in the hospital, offering prayer and companionship during difficult times.

- Homebound Ministry – For those who can no longer attend worship in person, we ensure they remain connected to the church through visits, phone calls, and home communion.
- Grief & Support Ministries – Life brings seasons of loss, and our church provides connections to resources and groups to help navigate grief, transition, and hardship.

In a world that often feels chaotic and overwhelming, the ministry of prayer and congregational care reminds us that we are never alone. Whether through whispered prayers in solitude or our presence at the bedside of someone in need, God meets us in the quiet places, offering peace, comfort, and renewal.

If you or someone you love needs prayer or pastoral care, please reach out. And if you feel called to be part of this sacred work—whether through joining a prayer team, making a hospital visit, or simply checking in on a fellow church member—know that there is always a place for you to serve.

Grace and Peace, Woods

The Kitchen – Missions Ministry And we're back! So far in our Church House metaphor, we've stepped into rooms of worship, care, discipleship, leadership, and administration. Today, we walk into the kitchen—the place where people are fed. It's no accident that the Bible often connects food with faith. Jesus broke bread with sinners, multiplied loaves for the crowds, made a new covenant at the last supper, and made breakfast on the beach after the resurrection.

At Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, the kitchen represents our Missions Ministry—the work we do to extend the love of Christ to our community and the world. It's where we get our hands messy for the sake of the Gospel. We believe missions should be more than occasional donations or service hours. Missions is a calling for every Christian.

To make our mission work more focused and effective, we organize our efforts into four key pillars.

1. Partners – Long-Term Relationships That Make a Difference

These are the ministries and organizations we support consistently and on an ongoing basis. They reflect our belief that mission is best lived out through committed, relational partnerships.

- Family Promise of Baldwin County: Helping families experiencing homelessness find shelter and sustainable housing.
- Kidz Eat: Providing weekend meals for local children who experience food insecurity when school is not in session.
- Baldwin Family Village: A supportive housing community that empowers women and children to transition out of homelessness.
- USA Wesley Foundation: Supporting college students at the University of South Alabama as they grow in their faith and prepare to serve in the world.
- Ronald McDonald House: Offering meals and comfort to families whose children are receiving medical care away from home.
- Prodissee Pantry: Providing food assistance to families in crisis throughout Baldwin

County—a ministry that has grown into a community-wide effort.

2. Collections – Tangible Generosity for Local and Global Needs

Some of our most impactful mission work comes through the simple act of collecting and giving—a way for people of all ages to participate in compassion. These efforts are often seasonal or event-based and provide direct support for very real and immediate needs.

- Flood Buckets: We gather and assemble cleaning kits for families impacted by hurricanes and other disasters.
- Support for People Experiencing Homelessness: Throughout the year, we collect clothing, blankets, toiletries, and financial assistance for individuals and families in crisis.
- Costa Rica Mission Trip Collections: We collect items, from materials to children's toys and hygiene kits, to support our international mission trips.
- Wesley College in Tanzania: A vital United Methodist educational ministry training future leaders, pastors, and healthcare workers—we support them through designated fundraising and awareness efforts.
- Embrace Alabama Kids: A United Methodist ministry that provides safe homes, compassionate care, and life-changing support for children and youth in foster care across our state. Our contributions help ensure that vulnerable children experience love and the hope of Christ during some of the most challenging times in their lives.

Recent Update: We have consolidated our collection schedule to create a new yearly pattern. To avoid asking our church to bring in something different each month, we will run multi-month campaigns designed to collect things for our specific ministry partners.

March-April (Lent)—Costa Rica: Next year's Lenten collection will support the ministry in Costa Rica. We will once again ask for financial donations, but we will also have some tangible requests.

May-July—Flood Buckets: Throughout the summer, we will collect supplies and financial donations to assemble flood buckets. At the end of the summer, we will host a church-wide fellowship event where, in addition to other activities, we will assemble the buckets in

preparation for hurricane season.

August-September - Homeless Families: During these months, we make special appeals for items needed at Baldwin Family Village and Family Promise.

October-November - Homeless Adults: With winter approaching, during these months, we make a special appeal for blankets, coats, and other items that adults experiencing homelessness need.

December - Embrace: Throughout December, we take up a collection for Embrace Alabama Kids.

3. International Missions – The Global Reach of the Gospel

Spanish Fort UMC believes in going to the ends of the earth with the good news of Christ. Our international missions are built on relationships, not just projects, and we are proud to support:

- Ray and Lidia Zirkel – Costa Rica: Serving with Mission Society, the Zirkels lead ministries of community development and spiritual growth.
- Monica Maxwell – South Asia: A long-time missionary, Monica serves in areas where Christianity is a minority faith.
- Costa Rica Mission Trips: We are beginning to send teams to Costa Rica again, where we engage in construction, children's ministry, and discipleship with local communities.

These trips strengthen our partnerships and remind us that mission is a two-way street— we receive just as much as we give.

- Campus Ministries: Although they are not international, we also support college ministers who are in their own kind of mission field.

4. Efforts – Mobilizing the Whole Church to Serve

This final pillar captures the ongoing and emerging mission work that involves the whole congregation. These efforts are about responding to immediate needs and dreaming together about what's next.

- Disaster Relief: When hurricanes strike or local families are impacted by tragedy, our

mission teams organize collections, send crews, and provide meals, cleaning supplies, and hope.

- **Serve Days:** Several times a year, we organize church-wide service events. Our next event is May 31st, where a group will go to the USA Wesley Foundation to assist in building maintenance.
- **Emerging Vision – What’s Next?** Our Vision Team is currently dreaming and discerning a new, church-wide mission effort—something bold, creative, and spirit-led. Just as Prodissee Pantry began in the heart of this church and the Uniform Closet once met a real need, we are praying and planning for what God wants to start next through us. When the time comes, we’ll need the whole church to say yes.

The Kitchen is not a quiet room. It’s full of motion and purpose, just like the mission life of our church.

Whether packing a flood bucket, flying to Costa Rica, praying for a college student, or buying snacks for a local child, you are part of this great kitchen of grace. If you want to get involved in missions, there’s a place for you. You don’t need special skills. You don’t have to go overseas.

You just have to care.

Grace and Peace, Woods

I love working here! Being a pastor at Spanish Fort UMC has been such a life-giving and joyful experience. I love the staff I work with, I love the congregation, and I love getting to try new things. The year has started strong, with our church executing plans we made last fall and bringing to life on a ton of new stuff for the rest of 2025. Our staff and volunteers are working hard to offer fruitful ministry for our congregation and community. Below are a few things that have had my attention the past few weeks.

First Vision Team Meeting I was encouraged by our first Vision Team meeting. The team is made up of Christy Inabinett, Aaron Immel, Ashley Howard, Brandon Bias, Elizabeth Pierce, Kay McHenry, Philip Poole, Will Clarke, Asher Carmichael (Lay Leader), Haley Few (Youth), Caleb Maxwell (Youth), Darby Smith (Youth), Harper Walters (Youth). The team elected to meet once a month for three to four hours. Although that sounds like a long time, our first meeting was awesome! There was never a lull in the conversation. We all got to share some bits about our life stories and discuss how we can best serve the church.

In our next meeting, we will review demographic data about Spanish Fort and Daphne as well as plan how we will conduct a churchwide survey and in-home listening sessions. Be on the look out for updates from the team!

New Worship Series I really enjoyed our series “The Simple Things.” I appreciate the feedback and the affirmation we received about those services. The affirmation is more meaningful knowing how much planning and effort our Worship Planning Team puts into making each and every service at SFUMC great. We have a series, title, scripture, and two-paragraph description for every service from now until January 2026. As such, our worship ministers have been able to put in a lot of thought and prayer about how to create the best services we can to help our congregation engage with the Holy Spirit as we worship together.

Lent We have put concerted effort into preparing for Lent. We will read *Entering the Passion of Jesus* by Amy Jill Levine. The study will guide the sermons each week. Pastor Mike and I will teach the lessons from the book on Wednesdays at 12:00 (Pastor Mike) and Sundays at 5:30 (me). You can buy the book online at [this link](#) if you want to join a study or follow along. We will also have a daily devotional produced by Huntingdon College and written by pastors and others connected to the school. We will have an Easter Celebration on April 6th, as well as Maundy Thursday and Good Friday worship services. Be sure to visit spanishfortumc.org/lent to learn about all the things going on over the next few months!

Young Adult Men's Group I am also excited about our new young (ish) adult men's group. We met twice towards the end of the year, and will meet regularly on the third Tuesday each month (except April will be the second Tuesday). If you are a young(ish) man and looking for a place to plug in we'd love for you to join us! Just shoot me an email or call up to the church.

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LENT 2025 I am interrupting our regularly scheduled programming (our "Church House" series) for an important announcement.

Lent began this past Wednesday.

If you happened to miss our Ash Wednesday dinner and worship service, don't worry, it's not too late to begin your Lenten disciplines. And if you have never participated in the season of Lent and have no idea what I am talking about, let me tell you a bit about it.

What is Lent?

"Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. Historically, Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by converts and then became a time for penance by all Christians."

(<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/introduction-to-the-season-of-lent>)

Beginning on Ash Wednesday, we enter this season of somber reflection and sacrifice to help us remember the realities of the cross. We are reminded that our lives are brief but because of the sacrifice of Christ, we will live forever. The forty days remind us of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, where he fasted to commune with God. We mark the beginning of the season by placing ashes on our heads as a sign of our penitence and the acceptance of our mortality.

How to observe a Holy Lent?

Over the next forty days (plus Sundays) there are a number of ways you can join us in observing a holy Lent. 1. Come to Worship Each week we will journey to the cross as we dive into the passion narratives. Guided by *Entering the Passion of Jesus* by Amy Jill-Levine, our worship services will focus on offering a greater appreciation of the events that led up to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

In Holy Week, we will have a traditional Maundy Thursday worship service, during which we will partake in communion and remember Jesus's last supper with the disciples. And on Friday we will have a contemporary Good Friday service. This will be a tenebre service where we walk through the final moments of Jesus' life as the room gradually darkens. Both of these are deeply meaningful services. I hope you will join us for each. 2. Join a Class Pastor Mike and I are teaching the accompanying study that goes along with *Entering the Passion of Jesus*. Pastor Mike is teaching his sessions on Wednesdays at 12:00 in Upper Reed and I will teach on Sunday nights at 5:30 in the conference room on our West Campus. Feel free to jump in any week with us, and if you will be out for one of your regular sessions, you can alternate to the other class to stay up to date. 3. Read the Daily Devotional One of the gifts of our denomination is the connection to resources like Huntingdon College.

Huntingdon is a United Methodist College in Montgomery, Alabama, and my alma mater. Many pastors and church workers in our annual conference are matriculates of the school. Even some of our Spanish Fort UMC staff are graduates, such as Beth Allen and Mike Owenby.

This year Huntingdon produced a Lenten Devotional guide for churches that follows the daily lectionary for Lent. Each reflection was written by a graduate, professor, or friend of Huntingdon. You can pick up a printed copy in the narthex of our sanctuary or sign up to have them emailed to you daily. You can also find the full digital copy and an audio version of the author reading their reflection here - <https://www.huntingdon.edu/about-huntingdon-college/church-relations/> 4. Fast and Give Once again we are using the season of Lent to collect a missional offering for Wesley College in Tanzania. For the past few years, we have joined other churches in our area to celebrate Harambe.

“Over the last three years, over 30 churches have partnered with Wesley College to provide \$41,000 in scholarships for students during Harambe. Right now, that generosity is educating a new generation of faith-driven servant leaders for Tanzania. In Swahili, Harambe means 'coming together.' It is also the name of a traditional fundraising event -- where people gather, celebrate, and joyfully contribute to a common cause. Harambe brings opportunity to see God's light shine around the world from home.”

In addition to your personal lenten sacrifice, we encourage you to fast from at least one lunch each week over the next six weeks. We will all bring the money we would have spent on the meals as a special offering on Palm Sunday that will go to support this ministry. 5. Serve at the Easter Celebration We had so much fun at our Fall Trunk or Treat, that we wanted to bring back the same concept for Easter! Please join us for our "Trunk Hop" where participants will bring their car trunk/truck bed decorated in an Easter/Spring Theme. Please bring candy or treats to share with the kids.

We encourage you to come up with kid-friendly games to make this an interactive event.

Trunk set-up is 3:00 pm - 3:45 pm Event time 4:00 pm - 5:30 pm Sign up to offer a station here. 6. Pray Lent is a season of self-examination and personal reflection. It wouldn't be Lent if you didn't spend a little more time in prayer. Find new time to set aside to meet with God. If you have given something up that usually takes up time, then spend that time with the Lord. On the day you give up lunch, dedicate that time to prayer. There is not one right time or way to add to your prayer life. However, I hope you will find some intentional way to spend more

time with Jesus.

One last note about common Lenten confusions This is an important word from our denomination's discipleship ministries. "Because Sundays are always little Easters, the penitential spirit of Lent should be tempered with joyful expectation of the Resurrection." (<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/introduction-to-the-season-of-lent>)

I can't tell you how often I have heard someone get called a "cheater" if they break their fast on Sundays during Lent. And I would like to set the record straight.

Lent is forty days. When you add in the Sundays, it is forty-six. Those six Sundays are reminders that we are Christians, and that God's good work was accomplished at the cross.

Like how God told Adam to rest on the seventh day, so are we supposed to rest and enjoy the sabbath. For centuries, the tradition of the Church has been to observe a holy Lent where everyone makes a personal sacrifice that they will get back when Lent is over. And they are allowed to enjoy that sacrifice on Sundays.

Saying that everyone should fast for forty-six days does not make you a better Christian. It may be what you personally feel called to do, and if so, that's fine. Just know you are making up your own rules for Lent, and those who break fast on Sundays are following the ancient practice of the Church. Personally, I choose to trust the Church.

Also, Lent is not a diet or a prescription to help you kick bad habits. You should take care of your body and try to remove problematic behavior from your life all the time. If you decide you are going to give up something bad for Lent, like yelling at your co-workers, then you will miss out on the celebration of Easter. Because the point is that on Easter we celebrate Jesus' return and the things we sacrificed return as well. You don't get to go back to yelling at your co-workers because Jesus was raised from the dead.

So, if you want to be a better person, that's great! You should do that. But you should always try to do that. For Lent, we are called to sacrifice something that gives us joy so that its absence helps turn our attention to Jesus. Because we are Christians, on Sundays each week, we get a small reminder that Easter is coming, and we celebrate the mini-Easters along the way.

However you choose to practice, I pray your Lenten journey is full of God's presence. I hope you will join us for our various activities throughout the season. And I look forward to journeying with you to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Shelby Update We are activating the Churchwide Directory. If you are a member of the church, you are automatically added to the directory. This is not a public directory, only members of the church have access to view. However, if you would like to opt out of being included, follow the steps in the video below.

The Library/Study – Discipleship Ministries As we continue our walk through The Church House metaphor, we've explored the living room of worship, the bedroom of prayer and care, and the garage of operations. Today, we step into the library/study—a room dedicated to learning, reflection, and growth. This space represents our discipleship ministries, where we deepen our understanding of God, strengthen our faith, and equip ourselves to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Just as a home library offers a variety of resources for different ages and learning styles, our discipleship ministries provide diverse opportunities for children, youth, and adults to encounter God, grow in their faith, and connect with others. Let's explore these ministry areas in more detail.

Children's Ministry – Laying a Firm Foundation Children's discipleship is where faith first takes root. In these early years, children begin to learn who God is, how much they are loved, and what it means to follow Jesus. At Spanish Fort UMC, we strive to create an environment where kids are excited to learn about God and feel safe, welcomed, and loved.

Our Children's Ministry includes:

- Sunday School: Each Sunday morning, children are grouped by age for engaging, age-appropriate lessons designed to teach foundational Bible stories and Christian values.

Through interactive storytelling, crafts, and games, children learn how God's Word applies to their everyday lives.

- Little Lights, Shine Kids, and Connect: Our Sunday night age-specific ministries create intentional opportunities for children to build friendships, participate in Bible-based activities, and grow in their understanding of faith. These groups focus on meeting children where they are, developmentally and spiritually.

- Vacation Bible School (VBS): One of the highlights of our year, VBS invites children

from our church and the wider community to spend time immersed in interactive lessons, crafts, music, and games. It's a vibrant, joyful environment where kids discover God's love in memorable ways.

- Seasonal Programs & Special Events: Events like Winter Retreat, Easter Celebration, Fall Festival, and Christmas Programs, and more provide additional opportunities for families to connect with the church while reinforcing the core truths of our faith.

Our goal is for children to experience God's love in tangible ways, laying a firm foundation for a lifetime of faith.

Youth Ministry – Navigating Faith in a Changing World As children enter their teenage years, their questions about life, identity, and faith often grow deeper. Our Youth Ministry exists to walk alongside students during this pivotal time, providing spaces where they feel safe to ask hard questions, express doubts, and build meaningful relationships.

Our Youth Ministry includes:

- Remedy Youth: Meeting weekly, Remedy offers middle and high school students a welcoming environment where they can gather with friends, worship God, and develop a faith that lasts. Remedy Youth combines fun activities with meaningful conversations about life and faith.

- Retreats and Mission Trips: Youth are invited to participate in special experiences designed to stretch their faith and encourage spiritual growth. From weekend retreats that offer space for reflection to hands-on mission trips that allow students to serve others, these events provide powerful opportunities to experience God in new ways.

- Youth are encouraged to actively participate in the life of the church by serving in worship, volunteering in children's ministry, and participating in mission projects. These opportunities allow students to live out their faith in practical ways and discover the joy of serving others.

- Seasonal Programs & Special Events: Like our Children's Ministry, our youth participate in events like Winter Retreat, Easter Celebration, Fall Festival, and Christmas Programs. However, there are additional opportunities such as off-campus meals, gatherings,

and Bible studies, and more provide additional opportunities to make connections and encounter Christ.

Our goal is for youth to develop a faith that is both personal and active, equipping them to navigate the challenges of adolescence with a deep sense of God's presence and purpose in their lives.

Adult Discipleship – Growing in Faith for a Lifetime Discipleship isn't just for children and youth—it's a lifelong journey. Whether you're new to the faith or have been following Jesus for decades, we believe there's always more to learn and experience in your walk with God. Our Adult Discipleship Ministry offers a wide range of opportunities to help you grow in faith, connect with others, and serve the world.

Our Adult Discipleship Ministry includes:

- Sunday School Classes: We offer a variety of Sunday morning classes designed to meet people where they are in their faith journey. Some classes focus on in-depth Bible study, while others explore practical topics like parenting, relationships, and Christian living.

No matter your background, there's a place for you to connect, learn, and grow.

- Bible Studies/Classes: Throughout the year, we offer short-term Bible studies designed to help participants dive deeper into Scripture and apply it to their daily lives. These studies provide opportunities for learning, reflection, and discussion in a supportive environment. Some current ones include Women of the Word that meets on Wednesday nights, and our Lenten classes offered on Wednesdays at noon and Sundays at 5:30.

- Spanish Fort 101: For those new to our church or seeking a deeper understanding of what it means to be a United Methodist, Pastor Woods offers a new member class every Sunday morning at 10:00 AM in the parlor (right inside the fellowship hall). No need to sign up, simply stop by if you are interested.

- Seasonal and Special Programs: From Advent and Lenten studies to spiritual retreats and guest speaker events, we provide additional opportunities throughout the year for adults to explore their faith in fresh ways.

Our goal is to equip adults with the knowledge, tools, and community they need to live out their faith confidently and intentionally.

Building a Church of Lifelong Learners Just as a library holds books for every age and interest, our discipleship ministries are designed to engage people at every stage of life. Whether you're a child learning about Jesus for the first time, a teenager wrestling with big questions, or an adult seeking deeper wisdom, we believe discipleship is a lifelong journey of growth, discovery, and grace.

If you haven't yet found your place in one of these ministries, I encourage you to take that next step. Whether through a Sunday School class, a Bible study, or volunteering with children or youth, there's room for you in the library of our church home.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. This sacrament is our initiation into the Body of Christ and a symbol of God's unmerited favor. Baptism is not simply a formality but a covenant with God, initiated by God's grace and calls us into a lifelong journey of faith and service. As a means of grace, God imparts prevenient grace that precedes any knowledge or decision on our part. This sacrament is foundational, affirming that God reaches out to humanity with love and grace, even before we are aware of it. It's an invitation to a transformed life, continually nurtured by God's grace, which sustains us on our Christian journey.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

The baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist is a pivotal event in the story of the Messiah. This moment in Jesus' life marks the beginning of his public ministry and serves as a model for our own baptism. We believe Jesus' baptism embodies his humanity. It's a profound demonstration of humility and obedience to God's will. When United Methodists partake in or witness a baptism, they are reminded of this connection to Jesus, seeing it as a call to live a life empowered by the Holy Spirit. This sacramental act is a public declaration of a private faith, a communal celebration of individual rebirth into the wider family of God's people.

A Survey and The Front Porch Vision Team Survey Below is a link to an anonymous survey the Vision Team is conducting over the next month to engage our congregation as we seek God's vision for our future. This survey consists of five open-ended questions designed to explore the personal experiences, creative ideas, and aspirations of our members. We hope to gather a wealth of qualitative data that reflects the diverse voices within our church community. This feedback will help us as we identify key themes and areas of opportunity that align with our spiritual mission and congregational goals.

The insights gained from this survey will not only inform our strategic planning process but also ensure that our future initiatives resonate with the hopes of our congregation and the needs of the community.

The Front Porch – Evangelism Continuing our exploration of The Church House, we've ventured through various rooms that symbolize different aspects of our faith community. Today, we step onto the front porch, a space that represents evangelism—the welcoming area

where we greet neighbors, engage in conversation, and extend invitations to join our communal life. Evangelism isn't about passing out tracts or standing on the corner of a rock and roll concert with a bullhorn. It's about sharing the Good News. After all, that is what the word evangelism means. The word comes from the Greek euangelion, which translates to Gospel or Good News. At Spanish Fort United Methodist Church, we've cultivated a vibrant and multifaceted evangelism ministry, ensuring that our message of faith reaches both our congregation and the broader community.

Cultivating an Invitational Culture The first and most important aspect of evangelism is to cultivate an invitational culture. By far, the number one way a person finds their way to a new church is through a personal invitation.

We hope everyone at SFUMC spreads the Good News of what Jesus is up to in and through the life of our congregation. Hosting events like community dinners, festivals, and service projects creates natural opportunities for members to invite others, demonstrating our church's commitment to fellowship and service.

Digital Outreach: Emails and Social Media In today's digital age, our front porch extends into the virtual realm, allowing us to connect with individuals beyond physical boundaries.

- **Tuesday Spanish Fort Spotlight Emails:** Every Tuesday, we send out the "Spanish Fort Spotlight," an email newsletter highlighting upcoming events, ministry opportunities, and stories of faith within our church community. This consistent communication keeps our congregation informed and encourages them to participate and invite others.
- **Friday Words from Woods:** On Fridays, Pastor Woods shares a message titled "Words from Woods," offering reflections on faith, insights into church life, and encouragement for the week ahead. These messages serve as touchpoints between the pastors/staff and the congregation.
- **Social Media Posts:** Our active presence on platforms like Facebook and Instagram allows us to share event announcements, inspirational content, and community highlights.

Engaging visuals, videos, and interactive posts foster a sense of community and make it easy for members to share content with their networks, effectively broadening our reach.

Traditional Media and Community Engagement While digital platforms are essential, we also value traditional media and in-person interactions to share our message.

- **Mailers:** We periodically send out mailers to residents in our area, highlighting special events and extending invitations to join us for worship and community activities.
- **Television Interviews:** Participating in local television interviews provides an opportunity to showcase our church's upcoming events and the impact we're making in the community, reaching individuals who might not be connected online.
- **Videos:** We produce videos that tell the story of our church, share testimonials, and provide insights into our various ministries. These videos are shared across multiple platforms, offering a dynamic way to engage viewers and convey our message.

Creating a Welcoming Environment Our evangelism efforts are also deeply rooted in the personal experiences of those who visit and engage with our church.

- **New Member Class:** Every Sunday, Pastor Woods offers a class aimed at visitors and others looking to learn more about SFUMC. This class meets at 10:00 AM in the Parlor and requires no signups or pre-reading. It is a casual gathering to explore what it means to be a United Methodist and our membership vows.
- **First-Time Guest Gifts:** To make newcomers feel valued, we will begin offering thoughtful gifts that include information about our church, a small token of appreciation, and details on how they can get involved.
- **T-Shirts:** Branded t-shirts not only foster a sense of belonging among members but also serve as walking invitations, sparking conversations about our church within the community.
- **Signage:** Clear and inviting signage around our campus ensures that visitors feel comfortable navigating our facilities, reflecting our commitment to hospitality.

Our front porch of evangelism at SFUMC is a dynamic blend of digital outreach, traditional media, personal hospitality, and an invitational culture. By utilizing diverse methods—such as emails, social media, mailers, videos, guest gifts, and fostering a welcoming environment—we ensure that the message of Christ's love is accessible and inviting to all.

Grace and Peace, Woods

As much as I don't like to admit it, there are many things I don't know. Like, I don't know how to fix a car. If the gas tank says E or the battery dies, I'm your guy. But if you have to bring out the tools, that's where I bow out. I don't understand much about particle physics — outside of what I learned from a few episodes of The Big Bang Theory. And I don't know how God's provision works, but I believe God provides.

It's funny; sometimes, I feel like I spend too much time pointing out the things God didn't do rather than naming the things He does. For example, I've had many conversations about how, as a Methodist, we don't believe God brought Hurricane Katrina to New Orleans, that He didn't give someone cancer because they weren't Christian, and that He probably isn't interested in the winners and losers of sporting events. The Bible never says, "Everything happens for a reason," and we don't subscribe to the doctrine of predestination. We believe God has given us free will and that sin is the result of human failures. After all, the word sin in Greek is hamartia, which literally means "to miss the mark."

But this past week, I experienced the activity of the Holy Spirit, and I can't help but share this Good News. I was reminded that while, at times, it is necessary to name the places where divine attribution has been misused, it can't be at the expense of sharing where we do see God at work. We might not be able to fully explain how or why, but faith is full of paradoxes and mysteries we can't explain. It's why every time we take communion, we call it "the mystery of faith." I might not always understand how or why God gives blessings, but I know we are blessed. I know God has provided for our congregation since it began, and the last nine months have been evidence of God's continued faithfulness and provision.

We went into this year planning to invest in our future by using up to \$144,000 from our savings to cover potential expenses over receipts. We did this because after cutting \$450,000 in expenses last fall, we didn't think it would be wise to cut anymore. Ultimately, the finance committee decided that you can't cut your way to growth. So, we made a budget that bet on ourselves and our future.

And since then, incredible things have happened!

Thanks to many hours of work and communication from Ted Langley, our Employee Retention Credit (from the Covid years) finally came in. So this year, we have already received more than \$220,000 in unexpected income, which should cover our potential deficit and help us increase our reserves.

Also, we met with our insurance agent, Allen Chapman, last Thursday, and he gave us incredible news. For the first time in my experience serving on the coast, our property insurance decreased — and not just a little. For years, insurance has gone up as the number of potential underwriters has gone down. This year, though, due to some unique circumstances, we were offered a policy that gives us identical coverage for roughly \$60,000 less. Additionally, if we have to make a claim, instead of a 3% deductible on the total value of all our buildings (\$12,000,000), it would just be 3% of the specific building impacted (for example, \$4,000,000 for the sanctuary). These policy improvements have been unheard of over the past decade.

Between the unexpected income and the massive reduction in premiums, it appears to me that God is once again providing for His church! And while both are great news, please don't hear me say we can take our foot off the gas. These things help relieve some of the financial pressure we knew we'd have this year, but they alone won't create a sustainable future. I am proud of our church in so many ways, and your financial generosity over the past nine months is above and beyond my expectations. Although our receipts were a little less than what we need on a per-quarter average, they were still greater than our expenses. Also, the first quarter revenue for a church is usually below average because people are extra generous around Christmas and downturns in attendance due to Mardi Gras break and such. Income from congregational generosity is seasonal, with the last month of the year typically seeing the highest percentage of revenue.

Ultimately, I know this is a generous congregation that wants to serve the Lord. It is evident in how you give your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. I also trust that God will provide. So, thank you for your generosity, which allows our church to do the work God has called us to. And I hope you will join me in continuing to praise and thank God for the provision we need!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Dear Church Family, I just wanted to take a moment to say thank you—truly and deeply—for your generosity and support through the first few months of 2025. Because of your faithful giving, so much good is happening at Spanish Fort UMC, and we couldn't do it without you.

At the start of this year, we took a step of faith. We knew we'd need to invest in our ministries and mission, even if that meant dipping into savings. But we also believed God would provide—and did He ever! Thanks to some behind-the-scenes work by Ted Langley, we received over \$220,000 in Employee Retention Credits—money we weren't even counting on! That unexpected blessing not only covered our projected shortfall but gave us the cash on hand to pay our annual insurance premium, which was renewed in April. And if you didn't hear, our property insurance actually went down by \$60,000—a huge and rare win. It's the kind of thing that doesn't happen often, and we're calling it what it is: a gift from God.

Even more exciting than good financial news is everything happening because of your giving.

Just in the first quarter of this year:

- Our children dove deep into the life of Jesus through crafts, games, and songs—and had an unforgettable time at Blue Lake Winter Retreat.
- Our youth have had great Sunday nights at Remedy and continued to build real community through things like Winter Revive, a Super Bowl hangout, and Galentine's brunch.
- Our missions team is hard at work planning our Serve Day and preparing for a trip to Costa Rica.
- Adult ministries launched new Bible studies, including a great Lenten study and a new women's group.
- Our worship teams—from choirs to tech crews—are pouring creativity and heart into each Sunday.
- And our trustees and volunteers are keeping our facilities in great shape, even tackling projects themselves to save money.

So again—thank you. Your giving is making a real difference in people's lives, both inside our church and out in the community.

That said, we can't take our foot off the gas. Like many churches, our giving tends to dip early in the year, and we've felt that. But we're hopeful and encouraged because even though receipts were a bit behind our goals, they were still higher than expenses. We know giving increases in quarters three and four, but more than that, we know God—and God's people—always show up!

So as we move toward Easter and into the rest of this exciting year, we're asking you to keep being generous, keep being faithful, and keep believing in the mission of this church.

God is up to something at Spanish Fort UMC, and we're so glad you're part of it.

Grace and Peace, Woods

I think you would be surprised by how many times someone has asked me what I do Monday-Saturday. To a person not heavily involved in church life, it would make sense if we only worked on Sundays. But as anyone who has spent much time in a church knows, there is a lot that goes on around here during the week. It takes a village to manage the day-to-day administration of a congregation.

As we continue exploring the metaphor of The Church House, we now enter the home office—the space where the planning happens, meetings take place, and decisions are made. If the garage represents the tools and systems that keep things running, the home office represents the strategic and prayerful leadership that directs the church’s ministries.

In a home, the office is where you manage the budget, file the paperwork, sign the documents, and plan for the future. In a church, this space is represented by our administrative committees and staff—a collection of faithful leaders working behind the scenes to ensure that Spanish Fort UMC operates as God calls us.

Administration By Staff

1. Financial Stewardship and Accounting

We take the stewardship of God’s resources seriously. Our operations staff ensures finances are managed with transparency and integrity.

- Receiving and Recording Gifts: Processes tithes, offerings, and designated gifts—online and in-person—with confidentiality and gratitude.
- Paying Invoices: Tracks expenses and ensures timely payments for utilities, vendors, and staff reimbursements.
- Budget Management: Supports finance committees in planning and monitoring the church’s annual budget and financial health.
- Giving Reports and Statements: Produces clear, timely giving statements for members and reports for leadership to evaluate trends and needs.

2. Property and Facility Management

- Vendor and Contractor Coordination: Schedules and oversees repair work, cleaning services,

HVAC maintenance, pest control, and more.

- Scheduling Spaces: Manages room reservations and setup plans for fellowship events, meetings, and outside rentals.
- Security and Accessibility: Works with Trustees to ensure our buildings meet safety, insurance, and accessibility standards.
- Maintenance Oversight: Maintains a record and schedule of routine tasks.

3. Planning and Logistics

Church events don't just happen—they are planned and supported by a team that excels in the details.

- Event Logistics: Supports ministry leaders with everything from calendars to catering, table layouts to tech setups.
- Volunteer Coordination: Assists with volunteer scheduling and support, especially for worship, hospitality, and seasonal events.
- Printing and Signage: Helps produce signs, handouts, flyers, name tags, and other materials that support a welcoming and informed environment.

Administration By Committee

1. Finance Committee – Stewarding the Church's Resources

The Finance Committee is responsible for overseeing the financial well-being of the church.

These leaders help create the budget, monitor income and expenses, and ensure that our financial decisions reflect our church's mission and values.

- Budget Planning: Collaborates with ministry leaders and staff to prepare and present the annual church budget.
- Monitoring Giving Trends: Analyzes offering patterns to help the church plan responsibly and respond wisely to economic shifts.

- Accountability:** Ensures proper financial controls are in place, including audit procedures and regular reporting to the church council.

2. Trustees – Caring for Church Property

The Board of Trustees acts as the legal custodian of the church's physical assets. They are responsible for the buildings, grounds, insurance, and maintenance of all church-owned property.

- Property Oversight:** Ensures that facilities are safe, clean, functional, and hospitable for all church activities.

- Maintenance and Upgrades:** Plans and manages both small repairs and large renovation projects in collaboration with staff.

- Insurance and Legal Concerns:** Reviews risk management, accessibility, and compliance issues annually.

- Use of Facilities:** Helps set policies for the use of buildings by outside groups and ensures the church property is stewarded wisely.

3. Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) – Supporting People in Ministry

SPRC serves as the “human resources” team of the church. They support the staff, maintain healthy communication between pastors and congregation, and ensure that personnel decisions are handled with grace and professionalism.

- Staff Support and Evaluation:** Works with the pastor to set goals, offer encouragement, and conduct evaluations.

- Hiring and Transitions:** Participates in the hiring of new staff and communicates with the district superintendent during pastoral appointments or transitions.

- Congregational Health:** Helps navigate conflict and celebrate staff achievements.

- Confidentiality and Care:** Operates in sensitive areas with discretion and spiritual maturity.

4. Church Council – Coordinating the Mission

The Church Council functions as the central coordinating body for the church's ministries. It ensures that all departments—missions, worship, discipleship, evangelism, and more—are aligned with the church's overall vision and strategy.

- Mission and Vision Oversight: Sets priorities for the church in partnership with the pastor.
- Strategic Planning: Discerns how God is calling the church to grow, serve, and reach others in the next season.
- Connecting Committees: Coordinates the work of other administrative and ministry teams to ensure a unified direction.
- Decision Making: Approves major church actions and represents the voice of the whole congregation.

5. Nominations Committee – Calling and Equipping Leaders

Often overlooked, this committee plays a vital role in the long-term health of the church. It discerns spiritual gifts and raises up new leaders for every ministry.

- Identifying Gifts: Works prayerfully to match members with roles that suit their talents and callings.
- Cultivating a Pipeline: Looks beyond the next year to develop a strong bench of future leaders.
- Creating Balance: Ensures diversity of age, gender, background, and experience across all church committees.

Each of these administrative bodies plays a unique role, but together, they form the backbone of shared leadership—a key value in the United Methodist Church. Our model is not one of top-down control but of collaborative discernment, rooted in prayer and guided by the Holy Spirit.

When these committees function well, they do more than just make decisions. They foster trust and they provide stability. Proper administration ensures our congregation is always moving forward—faithfully, transparently, and boldly.

If the library is where we grow, and the living room is where we worship, the home office is where we plan and lead. And while it may not always be visible to everyone, the work done here matters deeply.

To those who serve on these committees, thank you. Your wisdom and love for this church are vital to our future. If you've never thought about this part of our church life before—consider this your invitation to pray for our staff who serve so faithfully behind the scenes. And if you have administrative gifts, technology skills, or a heart for hospitality, we'd love to have you be part of this essential ministry.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Happy Palm Sunday!

If you were in church this morning, you heard our Lay Leader, Asher Carmichael, share some exciting and sad news. Rev. Dr. Kitsy Dixon's leadership has truly blessed us for the past five years. She has been a comforting and guiding presence to our church during times of celebration and trials. Her influence has been profound, and we are deeply grateful for her service. Although we wish she could stay with us forever, our bishop and district superintendent informed us that she is projected to be appointed to First United Methodist Church in Montgomery. This is an incredible opportunity for her, as FUMC Montgomery is one of our annual conference's oldest and most effective churches. While we are sad she won't be with us, we are excited to see what God will do through her in Montgomery. We are glad we have a few months with her as her appointment here doesn't end until mid-June. So, be sure to touch base with Kitsy to share your appreciation for her ministry with us.

Just as Kitsy has grown in her gifts here, we are thrilled to welcome our new associate pastor, Sarah Roberts, this summer. Sarah will be commissioned as a provisional Elder in the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference this June. She was raised in a military family, and although she has lived all over the world, she calls Alabama her home. She attended Huntingdon College, receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Christian Ministries, and was heavily involved in Campus Ministries all four years. During her freshman year at Huntingdon, she met her husband Josh while they were both working at the movie theater in Prattville. They have been together for 10 years, married for 6, and they have two "fur babies" (basset hounds named Eeyore and Tigger).

Sarah and Josh married a week after she graduated from Huntingdon and moved to Kentucky, where Sarah attended Asbury Theological Seminary and obtained a Master's Degree in Christian Ministry. Most recently, she has served as the Youth Minister at First United Methodist Church in Millbrook, Alabama. Sarah has a deep passion for preaching, teaching, discipleship, pastoral counseling, and creative missional evangelism. She and her husband share a love for video games and all things "geek culture," they hope to one day bridge the gap between the Church and the gaming community. When they aren't playing video games, Sarah and Josh love to watch movies, play with their "fur babies," and read fantasy novels. Sarah also has a passion for fitness - specifically Olympic weightlifting - and she and Josh enjoy participating in Brazilian jiu-jitsu when time allows.

I look forward to serving alongside Sarah and witnessing how God will use her in our community. In June, we will have a reception to say goodbye to Kitsy, and later in the summer,

we will have another to welcome Sarah. Stay tuned for more information about dates and times.

Thank you for your unwavering support of our pastors and staff. Your prayers and encouragement mean the world to us. As we embark on these changes, we ask for your continued prayer as we continue praying for our congregation!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Happy Easter!

That's right, Easter is not over. I'll be using that greeting for a while because Resurrection Sunday is the first day of Eastertide. This season of celebration continues until Pentecost Sunday on June 8th. Throughout Eastertide, we thank God for the gift of everlasting life and for the glimpses of the life that is to come.

We have much to celebrate at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. One specific thing is that the day after Pentecost is also the first day of our Annual Conference. This is the gathering of clergy and lay leaders from around the Alabama West-Florida area that happens every summer. And this particular conference is exciting because at the Monday night Ordination and Commissioning Service, our very own Rev. Dr. Kitsy Dixon will be ordained as an elder in full connection, and our incoming associate pastor, the soon-to-be Rev. Sarah Roberts, will be commissioned.

You have likely heard or read by now about our upcoming pastoral transition. Although we love Pastor Kitsy and wish she could stay with us forever, we know that God has great things in store for her at First United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

Likewise, I am sure the people of Millbrook First United Methodist Church feel the same way about Sarah's departure. With this being the second year in a row of pastoral transitions, I suspect there are a few questions about the appointment process in the United Methodist Church.

So let me offer you a few bullet points about how pastors get assigned to churches.

- There are two ordained orders in the United Methodist Church — Elders and Deacons.

- Elders are itinerant (can be moved by the Bishop), and are called to Word, Service, Order, and Table. Elders tend to serve as senior pastors or as associate pastors with a more general ministerial role. I am an ordained elder in full connection, Pastor Kitsy is a provisional elder and has been approved for ordination. Sarah Roberts is being commissioned as a provisional elder.

- Deacons are not itinerant, and are called to Word, Service, Compassion, and

Justice. Deacons connect the church to the world. Deacons find their own work and are then appointed by the bishop. They often specialize in a particular area of ministry. Pastor Mike is an ordained deacon in full connection.

-In addition to ordained pastors, there are also licensed local pastors. LLPs serve a vital role in our denomination. Though they are not ordained, they go through a Course of Study to learn how to serve God as a pastor. Many LLPs are bivocational or serve a charge with multiple, typically smaller, rural churches.

-Every pastor is appointed for one year at a time, and the appointment year begins on July 1. In December, pastors meet with a District Superintendent to reflect on their appointment and make a formal request to remain in their current appointment or to be appointed elsewhere.

-In this process, deacons keep the denomination informed of any potential changes to their employment, because they are not itinerant. This is slightly different from making their wishes known like an elder does.

-At the same time, the Staff Parish Relations Committee makes formal requests to the district superintendent about whether they would like the currently appointed pastor(s) to return or request a new appointment.

-This year, our SPRC reported to the Church Council that they requested all three of us (Kitsy, Mike, and I) remain at SFUMC.

-After all the district superintendents from around our annual conference have met with all the pastors and have received the reports from the SPRC, they gather with the bishop multiple times between January and March to discern the will of the Holy Spirit and make projected appointments.

-During that time, they continue dialogues with pastors and churches that have requested or should be expecting pastoral transitions.

-When making appointments, the bishop and cabinet take into account a lot of factors. Such as,

-The gifts of each individual pastor.

-The needs of each individual church.

-Familial needs of pastors (kids in school, aging parents, access to particular medical care, etc.)

-Length of pastoral tenure.

-Opportunities for pastor and congregational growth.

-Demographics of a region.

-And much more.

-With hundreds of pastors and churches to match, the work is very thoughtful and guided by prayer.

-Ultimately, the bishop makes the appointments of pastors after considering all the available information.

-It isn't always possible to honor every request, but the bishop and cabinet do their best to look at the health of the whole conference, in addition to the local church.

-For example, although our SPRC and I requested that Pastor Kitsy return next year, ultimately, the decision was made that she should be appointed to FUMC Montgomery instead. And if I take a less-biased view, I can see how good this will be for her. Although I, like you, love Kitsy and wish we could work together forever, there are opportunities for her in Montgomery that match her gifts and her ministerial desires that are not available in Baldwin County. Likewise, the more experiences we have in various churches, the more we can grow as pastors.

-So, whereas I am personally sad that Kitsy won't be in our office every day, I know she'll be where the Holy Spirit will use her in new and exciting ways.

-Similarly, we know God can make good come from all things, and in this particular case, I am excited that the bishop saw fit to appoint Sarah to SFUMC.

-Time and time again, our church has been blessed with strong associate pastors, many of whom were at the beginning of their careers. Pastors such as, Nolan Donald, Dana Brady, Deborah Bishop, Angie Long, Rebeca Rutherford, Kitsy Dixon, and now Sarah Roberts.

Spanish Fort has been a supportive congregation that offered opportunities for new pastors to gain knowledge and experience, and I am excited that we will be able to continue that work. I know you will welcome Sarah and her husband Josh with all the love and affirmation you have given me and my family, just as you have all the pastors who have come before us. This is a wonderful church that is exceptional at making people feel welcome!

If you ever have any questions about the appointment process, our denomination, congregation, or anything else, I hope you will reach out. I'd love to grab coffee or lunch with you!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Holy Week was amazing! Honestly, that could be my whole report because it says it all. I couldn't be happier or prouder of how well Holy Week went—really, how well all of Lent went.

The Bible studies were engaging, Ash Wednesday was meaningful, our worship services throughout the season were powerful — it was all so great! But I was truly blown away by Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter.

The sanctuary looked beautiful. I want to say a massive word of thanks to all our volunteers who helped set up and decorate, especially Connie Waggoner and Debbie Taylor. And thank you to Mike and Andy for planning and leading such incredible services. Celebrating communion on Maundy Thursday and walking through the darkness of Good Friday were deeply moving. Then on Easter Sunday—at sunrise, 8:45, and 11:00—I had an absolute blast celebrating with this church. The joy, the smiles, meeting new folks, and seeing family in town... it was all just incredible. I don't think I could survive Holy Week every week, but I'm already looking forward to next year!

The end of Holy Week is just the beginning of Easter. As we move into the Easter season, we're launching a new series called "It's All About Jesus." During this series, we'll read stories of Jesus appearing to his disciples after the resurrection and before the ascension. Over the next five weeks, we'll look closely at the final things Jesus said before returning to heaven. I hope you'll join us for worship during Eastertide—and don't forget to invite your family and friends.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Happy Easter, (it's still not Pentecost yet!)

There's always a mix of emotions when someone you care about takes a new step in their journey: celebration, gratitude, sadness, excitement, and hope all stirred together. That's exactly how I feel as we prepare to say goodbye to Rev. Dr. Kitsy Dixon.

For the past five years, Kitsy has been a steady, Spirit-filled leader for our congregation. It has been a joy to serve alongside her these past eleven months. She helped our church navigate a time of transition and has been a pillar of strength for so many. She has offered inspiration from the pulpit and kindness in every hallway conversation. She has pastored our congregation through the ordinary and the unexpected with remarkable grace.

Christ-centered ministry is rarely flashy, and it's always faithful. And that's what Kitsy has offered us. She has humbly directed attention toward Jesus while faithfully serving this congregation. She has been faithful in hospital rooms and committee meetings, in baptisms and funerals, in long staff meetings and quick prayers in the parking lot. Her fingerprints are all over the life of this church, from the confirmation classes to the preschool to the daily rhythms of our pastoral care.

And now, as she prepares to be ordained as an Elder in Full Connection this June, we get to cheer her on as she takes another faithful step in her calling. Although we will miss her, we celebrate her new appointment to First United Methodist Church in Montgomery. It's a well-deserved opportunity, and I can't wait to see the blessing she will be to that congregation, just as she has been to ours.

I hope you will join us in worship as she preaches her last sermon with us, and as we have a reception for her in the fellowship hall between the services. I also hope you'll take the time to reach out to Kitsy, send a note, say a prayer, give a hug. Let her know how much she's meant to you and to our church.

Transitions like this are never easy, but they are sacred. They remind us that the church belongs not to any one person or place, but to the movement of the Holy Spirit. And just as we've been blessed by Kitsy's presence, we now get to send her into a new season with our love, gratitude, and blessing.

Grace and Peace, Woods

We are a little past the halfway point in the process, so I wanted to give everyone an update on the work of our Vision Team.

Over the past several months, our Vision Team has met regularly to pray, reflect, listen, and imagine where God is leading Spanish Fort UMC in our next chapter. Discernment isn't just strategic planning; it's spiritual work. And each time we've gotten together has been a holy experience.

We started this process early this year, drawing on some helpful tools from across the church leadership world, but shaping it to fit who we are. We've been reading, asking good questions, looking at congregational data, and spending time with the stories that have shaped this church over the past few years. We've also taken seriously what we've heard from the congregation. The goal has never been to chase trends or try to become something we're not. Instead, our goal has been to name how and where God is leading us.

While the conversations have been honest and sometimes complex, there's been a surprising amount of clarity. We're starting to see some shared patterns and priorities take shape; not just ideas, but convictions about what kind of church we're becoming. That clarity is energizing. We don't have a finished vision statement yet, but we're getting close.

Alongside the vision itself, we've also started working on a few concrete things we believe will help move the church forward. We will have a full report on our work at the end of the summer.

But I want to share a few things that have come out of our conversations and that we will discuss during our upcoming listening sessions.

- First, almost everyone who filled out the survey voiced a hope that we would rethink the layout and structure of our physical campus. This Vision Team is not equipped with the personnel, nor do we have the bandwidth to create a definitive direction for that hope.

However, we will likely be recommending that the Trustees consider forming a building committee to take up the task.

- Second, we're exploring the possibility of launching a new, churchwide missional effort; something that draws from our best energy and engages the real needs of our community.

Past efforts like the Uniform Closet or the Prodissee Pantry have done that in powerful ways. We're asking: what could be the next one?

- Third, we're looking at how we organize and name our adult discipleship offerings. One of the things we've heard from both new folks and longtime members is that it can be hard to know what's available or where to plug in. Whereas we might create new offerings, it's not necessarily about changing everything. It's also about making our adult discipleship ministries more accessible and clear.

- Fourth, we're trying to develop a plan that offers new ways for people to build and strengthen relationships. One thing we've identified is that people long for meaningful connections in their lives, and the church can be the place to help bring those relationships into being.

As you have likely heard by now, we're hosting a series of listening sessions in June. Each session will be capped at 15 people and guided by a few open-ended questions about the future of the church. We hope these conversations will confirm what we've already discerned and offer some new surprises as well. You can sign up for a listening session at the link below.

[https://spanishfortumc.shelbnextchms.com/external/form/](https://spanishfortumc.shelbnextchms.com/external/form/c856ccc7-3a5f-45a8-8c16-17dce3c6285c)

c856ccc7-3a5f-45a8-8c16-17dce3c6285c This has been good, Spirit-led work. And while we're not finished yet, we're getting close. We anticipate bringing a more complete vision to the church around Labor Day. In the meantime, we're grateful for your prayers and your trust. This feels like a turning point for our church, and we're excited to keep walking through it together.

My wife and I have read a book to each of our three children almost every night of their lives. Of course, we've missed a few, like when they fall asleep watching a movie, or if we are out on a date. However, for the significant majority of their nights alive, we have lain in their bed or rocked them in the chair and read to them. Some nights, getting to the point where we sit down for the book can seem like a chore, or an extra obligation when I have work or other things to do. But I definitely never regret it in the moment, or in the moments immediately afterward when they give me a kiss and I tuck them in and tell them, "I love you always and forever." And they respond, "Forever and always to the moon and back, I win." And I say, "You do win." I kiss them on the head and turn out the light.

It's no monumental discovery for me to tell you that children's books are full of deep wisdom. I am sure we've all had moments where we read Winnie the Pooh and realized the loveable bear was right when he said, "Sometimes...the smallest things take up the most room in your heart." Or how

But my all-time favorite book to read with my daughter, August, is called *The Nuff*, by Veronica Waldrop. It is a heartfelt and empowering picture book written as a love letter from a mother to her daughters. It tells the story of a magical creature called The Nuff, a unicorn with a mismatched wing, who learns through ups and downs that she is enough just as she is. At its core, *The Nuff* is about resilience, identity, and unconditional love. The message is clear and powerful: you are enough, just as you are. The book is especially poignant because Veronica Waldrop wrote it for her daughters before she passed away from breast cancer, giving it a lasting emotional weight that resonates deeply with parents and children alike.

I cried the first time I read that book to August. And I won't lie and say I have only cried once while reading it. I hope that if I read it to her enough, it will take root and it will be something she will know to be true and can draw on one day. But also, I am reminded every time I read it that the same is true for me, and you, and everyone on earth.

God created us just as we are, and you are enough.

Most of my emails, updates, and sermons are very celebratory. I spend a lot of time drawing attention to the things we do well and the things that are worth praising. Part of that is strategic — I want everyone to know about all the exciting and great things that happen around here. However, it's also to remind us that things are never as bad in any given moment as our minds try to convince us they are.

Sadly, much of our brain space is given away to things that drag us down. We focus on what's wrong with us, or the world, or our church. This was a key part of another book, which is very different from *The Nuff*, but I think speaks the same language, called *Factfulness*. *Factfulness* is about the world being better than you think—not because everything is fine, but because we've been misled by our own dramatic instincts.

There is a chapter in the book about the negativity instinct — our tendency to notice the bad more than the good. It's a natural human bias, evolutionarily wired into us. Our ancestors survived by paying attention to threats and dangers. So today, our brains are still primed to react more strongly to negative information than to positive developments.

As Hans Rosling puts it: “Bad news is more likely to reach us. When things are getting better, we often don't hear about them.”

The big reasons for this that the authors of the book point out are:

1. The Media's Focus on Crisis
News outlets prioritize stories about disasters, crime, conflict, and corruption because that's what grabs attention. “Plane crashes” make headlines—“planes landed safely” doesn't. As a result, people get a skewed view of the world. We think everything is falling apart when, in reality, many trends are improving quietly and steadily.
2. Outdated Worldviews
Most people learned about the world from textbooks that haven't been updated — or they simply stopped learning after school. So they don't realize, for example, that:
 1. Global extreme poverty has dropped from 50% in 1966 to less than 10% today.
 2. Child mortality has plummeted.
 3. Literacy and education rates have soared.
 4. The world has improved, but our mental picture hasn't.
3. The Math of Good News
 1. Good things often happen slowly, gradually, and are statistical in nature—like the rise of education or access to clean water.
 2. Bad things, like a terrorist attack or natural disaster, are immediate, dramatic, and emotional—so they dominate attention.
4. Misconception That Improvement = Perfection
 1. When Rosling presented evidence that things are improving, people often pushed back: “But what about all the problems that still exist?”

And the key connection between Factfulness and The Nuff is this: Improvement doesn't mean perfection. It means progress. We can acknowledge how far we've come without ignoring what's still broken. Or as Veronica Waldrop writes, “Grace is amazing, perfection is not” (John Wesley might not like the semantics of that statement, but I think he'd agree with the spirit).

When compared against perfection, everything falls short. If you expect yourself to be perfect, you will be let down. If you expect your church to get everything right all the time, you will likely keep searching for a church for the rest of your life. If you think your pastor's mistakes are a character flaw, then I will always be flawed, even while trying to improve.

I say all this because I do spend most of my time in emails, letters, sermons, and announcements, celebrating and drawing attention to the wonderful things that happen here. But please know two things: 1. We are not perfect. 2. Things are better than we tend to admit.

As Wesleyans, we like to say that we are on the way to perfection, on the way being the key part. We strive to be more like Jesus, but there are plenty of times we fail along the way. There is a multitude of examples of how I have done so just in the past eleven months. Which is why

I thank God for His grace, and why I thank you for yours.

Things really are pretty great around here — not perfect, but pretty great. Just at the most basic ecclesial level, we are here. It has been sad to see many United Methodist churches close their doors over the past few years. Between COVID and the disaffiliations, the toll taken on many of our sister churches has been great, and has led to churches all over the country disbanding after decades or even more than a century of faithful service. But not only have we survived these turbulent times, we have thrived in spite of them. We have wonderful worship, discipleship, and service ministries. Our volunteers and committees are operating at a high level. Even through staff turnover, both administrative and programmatic, our church has/stepped up to bridge the gap as we find new people or as we dissolve a position. Although we've decreased our projected revenue and expenses, the work was prudent to the point where we've been able to cover all our expenses, including our apportionments. We've relaunched an international mission program, continued our faithful service, and opened our doors to various groups in our community. Sure, things could be better — they always can. But I for one, think things are going pretty great, and I am grateful for it.

The Nuff is a good book for me to read on the days I forget that, or when I feel like things not being what they can be is my fault. I think we can shoulder a bit too much blame when things aren't perfect. But things are rarely as bad as you think they are, and they are typically not the way they are entirely because of you. So let yourself off the hook a bit, and let others off a bit too. Things are likely better than you think, and if there is room to improve that's okay — we're on the way to perfection.

Happy Pentecost Sunday!

I am sorry there was no Friday email last week. We pulled in from our trip just in time for the last night of VBS, and by the time we made it home and got the kids to bed, I didn't have many creative thoughts left in my head to send out a Words From Woods!

However, before the week begins, I did want to remind you of a special few days coming up.

1. Annual Conference and Service of Ordination and Commissioning

Tonight kicks off the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference in Pensacola. We hope you will join us tomorrow night as we celebrate Rev. Dr. Kitsy Dixon, who will be ordained as an elder, and Sarah Roberts, who will be commissioned as a provisional elder. The service will take place at Pensacola First United Methodist Church, beginning with a pre-concert at 6:30

PM and the service at 7:00 PM. If you can't join us in person, you can watch online at awfumc.org, and please keep Kitsy and Sarah in your prayers on this meaningful night.

2. Listening Sessions – Your Voice Matters!

As you've probably heard, our Vision Team is hosting listening sessions to help discern what God is calling us toward in our next season as a church. Your input really does matter! We want to hear your experiences, your ideas, and your hopes for our future. You can easily sign up online at spanishfortumc.org/listen. I hope you'll take the opportunity to join one soon.

3. Beach Day

Our Family Life Ministry is hosting a Beach Day at Gulf State Park this coming Saturday morning. Email loberjs@hotmail.com for more details.

Thank you for being a church that shows up and listens deeply to God and one another. It's a joy serving alongside each of you.

Grace and Peace, Woods

The 2025 session of the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference ended today, and I left feeling inspired, sad, fulfilled, regretful, a lot of conflicting emotions, and honestly a bit odd. I am decidedly and unapologetically United Methodist. The previenent grace of God brought me into this denomination, and the sanctifying grace of God daily draws me further into our tradition. My grandparents on both sides of my family were United Methodists. My parents are United Methodists. My sister is also an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, just as the godparents of my children are as well. I have a coke bottle in my office from the bicentennial celebration of Methodism in 1984. My shelves are full of books by John Wesley, Methodist scholars, and pastors who share this Wesleyan theology.

At various points of civilization, many religious traditions morphed from strictly theological beliefs into cultural identities. I know Jewish people who are agnostic but still identify as Jewish because it is as much about their social identity as it is their theological beliefs, and the same is true for people in other religions as well. After a while, religious groups create such a cultural imprint that the lines between religious and ethnic identity get blurred. That's how I feel about being United Methodist. It is equal parts theological choice and cultural heritage.

Which is why my feelings about leaving the Annual Conference are odd. This was my twenty-first time serving as a delegate to the annual conference. If not for being absent last year during the birth of our third child, it would have been my twenty-second consecutive session. I was baptized by Bishop Mike Watson at, then, Covenant United Methodist Church. I was confirmed by Bishop Lawson Bryan at First United Methodist Church in Dothan, Alabama. I do not have a big supernatural call story where I was told by God I was going to go into pastoral ministry — it is just something I have known I would do for most of my life. I first articulated my calling to be pastor in 2004 at a UMY gathering that was held at FUMC in Dothan. At that same gathering, I became the UMY President and subsequently a delegate to my first annual conference. As the UMY President, I was to serve on the conference board of nominations, the conference core team, and the conference board of Laity. I was given excused absences from school to spend many days driving to Montgomery and Blue Lake as a high school student to attend these meetings. The same year I became the UMY President my grandfather (who was our conference's Director of Lay Speaking) took me to attend my first lay-speaker training, and not long after I preached my first sermon at a small rural church in the Wiregrass. For the next few years, I would occasionally fill in as pulpit supply when small membership churches needed a preacher during their pastor's absence. While in high school, I was able to serve as the emcee for conference youth events such as Spring Fling and Energize.

At the 2007 Annual Conference, I was the fourth lay delegate elected to represent our annual conference at the 2008 General Conference in Fort Worth, Texas. The rest of that summer, and two additional summers in college, I worked at Noah's Ark, a United Methodist retreat center on the beach. That was the same year I began attending our conference's United Methodist College, Huntingdon College, to study religion in preparation for becoming a pastor. My first week in school, I began singing in the choir at FUMC Montgomery, and after three weeks into the semester, I was hired by Saint James United Methodist Church to be the youth worship leader. I worked there all four years of my undergraduate degree, after which I attended the United Methodist Seminary, Candler School of Theology at Emory University. The summer before seminary I served as the Interim Youth Director at Gulf Breeze UMC while still serving at Noah's Ark. While in seminary, I worked as the Director of Contemporary Worship at, then, Prattville United Methodist Church. I lived in Montgomery, on Sundays, Mondays, and Wednesdays, worked in Prattville, while commuting to Atlanta at 4:00 in the morning on Tuesdays and Thursdays with my friends Angie and Levi.

Immediately after graduating from the seminary, I was appointed to return to Huntingdon College to serve as the Chaplain of the College from 2014-2017. During that season, I spent many Sundays traveling to congregations in our conference to connect the college to the church further. I also began a tradition of taking Huntington students on seminary tours of Duke, Emory, and Asbury to help connect them to a few of our University Senate-approved M.Div. programs.

After Huntington, I was appointed to serve as the Associate Pastor and later the Executive Pastor at Dauphin Way UMC from 2017 to 2024. During my tenure at Dauphin Way, I served on the Southwest District Committee on Ministry, the Conference Board of Discipleship, the District Nominations Committee, and on the 213 subcommittee working on behalf of the Board of Trustees. While serving at DWUMC, I also earned a Doctor of Ministry from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C. Following my appointment at Dauphin Way, I began my current appointment as the Senior Pastor of Spanish Fort UMC.

I offer this terribly long, and somewhat indulgent, list of bonnifides as a way of saying all I have ever known is United Methodism. I have dedicated my life from a young age to serve God in and through the United Methodist Church. I have made plenty of mistakes along the way, but I also know I have been an agent of the Gospel because of my time serving in our tradition. And my time serving in most parts of our conference has afforded me a perspective that isn't unique but also isn't shared with a whole host of people.

As a young person in South Alabama, I went through a pretty typical theological development in some ways and atypical in others. I grew up in a pretty conservative area, went to a college that was theologically moderate with both conservative and progressive professors, and a seminary that was and is very theologically progressive. During college, I worked at an evangelically conservative congregation that offers a relatively charismatic form of Methodist contemporary worship. I was married in and then served in churches with some of the highest forms of liturgical traditional worship in Methodism. One of my closest relationships in seminary and immediately after was with a friend who is openly gay. My roommate in seminary was recently arrested at the US Capitol while praying against the budget. However, my wedding was officiated by two of my mentors who are now leaders of the GMC Emerald Coast Conference, and one of my best friends is being sued by and counter-suing our denomination as he and the church he leads attempt to depart the UMC with their buildings.

I've known the fullness of United Methodism in the Alabama West Florida, and while I am hopeful for its future, I am also saddened by its current state. Yes, amazing pastors and lay people remained in the UMC, but we've also been gutted. We've lost many of the people who made this conference great. I lament both the division and the response. Those who left and those who stayed. I identify with the group that departed and the one that remains. The tone of celebration and joy is in some ways, understandable based on everyone's experiences over the past few years. It's been hard. Fighting, Covid, unknown, speculation, smear campaigns, unkindness....it's been hard to serve in our denomination during all the recent upheaval. But for some reason I haven't yet turned the corner towards the celebration I witnessed at Annual Conference. I don't blame those who are celebrating, I don't even think they are wrong for doing so. They all have struggled hard as well, some more than others. And if we laugh to keep from crying that can be a good thing. I am just not there yet.

Maybe I am not convinced it's over, after all I feel like I am still carrying the soul exhaustion from having a month's worth of listening sessions two years ago where each meeting lasted between 3-4 hours and consisted of conversations and questions about people's feelings on human sexuality and whether or not they were going to leave the church. That is one of many data points that I led to my current state. However, it was not the most impactful and far from the last.

Ultimately, none of this has brought me to a place where I feel led to stop being a pastor. I love what I do — most of the time. SFUMC has been great this past year. Challenging in its own ways, but ultimately fulfilling and exciting. As far as my relationship with the denomination

goes, I don't want to ever be anything other than United Methodist. I have a hard time imagining letting go of what is such a large part of my identity, not just my theological conviction. In the end, if I were ever to leave the UMC, it wouldn't be because of theological, social, or ideological differences. It would be because our polity does not always create environments conducive for local churches and pastors to thrive. Our organizational requirements necessitate that positions be filled, even when there are no suitable candidates available. To operate boards and agencies that often lack the ability to contextualize, and in some cases are completely obsolete. We place people in positions of influence and then expect them to transition back to being peers with those they supervised, while in many cases, not being the best person to supervise to begin with. Our understanding of the orders and roles of clergy makes little theological sense, and whereas it met a need in a moment, in practice, it is now more confusing than helpful. Although you will hear some say we technically don't have "guaranteed appointments."

To be honest, when some of my friends ask me why I remain UMC, I could give them all sorts of reasons based on my ecclesiology and how I believe in the church more than my personal convictions or other theological justification. But when it comes down to it, I am a United Methodist Pastor because I promised I would be.

The Backyard – Family Life Ministries We're getting close to the end of our real estate-oriented exploration. It's been a few weeks, but if you've been following along with our Church House metaphor, you've stepped through spaces like the living room of worship, the kitchen of missions, the home office of administration and more. But today, we go out the back door, into a place filled with laughter, conversations, games, and gathering: The Backyard.

In a home, the backyard is where memories are made. It's where the kids run barefoot through the grass, where the grill gets fired up, and where people gather to relax and connect. In our church, the backyard represents our Family Life Ministries — fun, relational events that are designed to bring people together. These aren't programs where you have to be a Bible scholar or a longtime member. They're wide-open invitations for anyone and everyone to come, enjoy, and belong.

What Is Family Life Ministry?

At its core, Family Life Ministry is about connection. It's about building bridges between generations, between members and guests, and between church and community. These are events that make room for real relationships to grow.

- They're fun and lighthearted.
- They're unintimidating, so guests and newcomers feel welcome.
- They're often family-centric, but not exclusively for families with young kids.
- And they're designed to help us connect outside the walls of the sanctuary.

You don't need to sign up for a class or read a book, just show up and enjoy the company of others.

Examples of Our Backyard Events Here's a glimpse at some of the signature events that make our backyard such a vibrant space:

- Trunk or Treat: Each October, our parking lot turns into a festive maze of decorated trunks, costumes, candy, and community. It's a safe, joy-filled night that draws in families from across town, many of whom are visiting our church for the very first time.
- Easter Celebration / Trunk Hop: Around Holy Week, we transform our campus into a springtime celebration with games, candy-filled eggs, photo ops, snacks, crafts, and more.

This event brings in dozens of new faces and offers a way to connect celebration with the story of resurrection.

- Family Camp at Blue Lake: A weekend retreat for everyone, parents, grandparents, singles, kids, and anyone who calls our church home. With worship, games, shared meals, and campfires, it's a chance to step away from the busyness and simply enjoy time together in God's creation.
- Movie Nights: We break out the popcorn maker for family-friendly movies and good conversation. These are easy, low-commitment nights that foster joy and connection.
- Beach Day: Sometimes we just need a day to relax and share life by the water. Our Beach Day invites the whole church to enjoy sun and sabbath together.
- Other Fun Outings and Gatherings: From ice cream socials to Christmas caroling to potluck picnics, we're always looking for creative ways to gather and build friendships.

Why It Matters You might wonder why a church would dedicate energy to events that aren't overtly spiritual.

But don't be fooled, these gatherings are deeply spiritual in their own way.

- They create a soft place to land for people who are exploring faith or who've been away from church for a long time.
- They strengthen intergenerational connections, allowing children to see faith lived out in joyful, everyday moments.
- They remind us that Christian community should be full of joy, not just obligation.
- And they give us space to invite others into the life of the church without pressure or pretense.

A game of cornhole or a shared s'more might be the beginning of someone's faith journey. A casual invite to a Trunk or Treat could lead to a baptism a year later. These events aren't just add-ons, they're part of the fabric that makes this church feel like home.

And One Simple Way to Help: Register Early Have you ever planned a gathering, prepared everything just right, and then felt that little bit of worry wondering if people would actually show up?

Our staff feels that too, especially when planning Backyard events, Bible studies, youth activities, or family retreats. When you register ahead of time, it's not just filling out a form—it's an act of kindness. It helps us plan meals, prep materials, organize childcare, and create a welcoming space with confidence.

In worship, we talk about offering God our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.

Registering for an event is one small but meaningful way to live into that promise of presence. It helps turn a good plan into a great experience for everyone.

So next time you see an RSVP form, I hope you will take just a moment to fill it out, invite a friend, and come ready for joy.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Reflections from a few days at youth camp.

It is official, I am not cool.

Truthfully, I came to grips with that reality a long time ago — well before I even lost my hair.

However, it was confirmed this week. On Monday, I was in the middle of the caravan to Blue Lake, and in my truck were three teenage boys who spoke a language utterly foreign to me. On multiple occasions, I had to ask them to explain what they were talking about, and even sometimes what a particular word meant. I learned about video games I'd never heard of, social media trends, and vernacular I am convinced is more novel to know than practical to use. However, mixed in with the things I am too old to understand, they shared what they were most excited about for the coming week. And it was encouraging to hear how much they were looking forward to a week away for worship and Christian fellowship.

Summer Revive has been around for more than thirty years. It used to be called Camp Alpha until a revisioning around 2010. Being at Blue Lake for youth camp was so nostalgic. I spent every summer as an adolescent at youth camps and mission trips. In college and seminary, I worked in youth ministry and continued attending camps. Over the course of my life, I have spent more summers at youth camps than not. However, I have mostly been out of that season since I became a pastor and now have three young kids. So being there with our students brought back many fond memories. It was fun to be inundated with exciting worship, games, camp food, and most importantly, watching students encounter Jesus Christ.

Whether in worship, small groups, or fellowship time, watching students discover a new facet of the divine—and some even encounter Christ for the first time—is such an encouraging experience. It is exciting to hear someone say that they felt God move in their life or discover they are loved by the Lord in a way they've never known. I witnessed many of our youth have meaningful connections with God, and I was able to build new relationships with students I hadn't yet met.

All in all, though I missed my family, I was sad to leave early. I wasn't necessarily sad to go to bed before eleven o'clock, but I wish I could have seen even more of how God is moving in their lives. I look forward to getting to know more of the students who come to Remedy and strengthening the relationships I've made. Summerlyn Middleton and I will be leading our youth programming in July as our SPRC and search committee find the right person to step into the role. We are going to do an abbreviated Youth Week, July 13-15, with the first night being a time of worship and fellowship, then a bowling night, followed by a pool party. I am

grateful that during July, I will be able to learn even more about our amazing students and witness how the Holy Spirit is shaping them into the people God is calling them to be.

If you desire to volunteer in our Youth Ministry or if you are a parent and would like to be on the Youth Leadership Team, please email me at srpastor@spanishfortumc.org. Also, be sure to join us in worship on June 29 as we pray over Zack and give thanks for his many years of service to our church and the kingdom of God!

Grace and Peace, Woods

On Worship

Why Worship Still Matters Every now and then, I find myself asking the big questions: Why do we worship the way we do?

Why does it matter? And what does it mean that we gather, week after week, across generations and across the globe, to sing, pray, and break bread?

At its core, worship is the heart of our life together—it always has been. From the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness, to the early Church gathered in homes, to congregations around the world today, worship has been our anchor. Not because it entertains us or fills a time slot—but because it draws us closer to God and closer to one another.

As Constance Cherry puts it, “Worship flows from the person and work of God.” It’s not something we invented; it’s something we were invited into.

And if that’s true—if worship really is a response to God’s ongoing work in the world—then the way we worship says something about what we believe. It’s theological. It’s formational. And it’s worth paying attention to.

So in this week’s note, I want to share a few reflections from my doctoral project that speak to the why and how of worship. Not in academic terms—but in real-life, church-on-the-Eastern-Shore terms.

A Story That Starts Long Before Us Worship didn’t start with the church bulletin. It began with God—calling Moses from a burning bush, inviting the Israelites to gather and remember. It continued with songs sung by Miriam, David, and Mary. It showed up in meals shared by Jesus and his friends, and in the letters of Paul urging the church to sing and break bread and remember who they are.

One of the most beautiful truths about our faith is that we don’t worship a distant God—we worship the God who became flesh in Jesus. And when we gather, we’re joining the same movement that has been flowing through history since the beginning.

Singing the Faith If you’ve ever left church humming a hymn or belting a chorus in the car, you know this: music matters. It always has. From the Psalms to Paul and Silas singing in prison, song has been the heartbeat of God’s people.

Charles Wesley called it “lyrical theology.” Not just pretty words, but songs that carry the weight of grace, truth, and transformation.

And friends—when we sing together, we aren’t just filling time. We’re joining the voices of the saints. We’re giving shape to our joy and our longing, our praise and our pain.

A Table of Grace Then there’s Communion—the meal Jesus gave us to remember, to be nourished, and to encounter him again and again.

John Wesley called it “the grand channel of God’s grace.” In fact, he believed so deeply in the power of this sacrament that he urged people to receive it often—sometimes four or five times a week! For him, and for our United Methodist tradition, Holy Communion is more than ritual—it’s a living sign of God’s presence and promise.

It’s bread that reminds us we’re not alone. A cup that assures us we are forgiven. And a table that stretches across centuries, cultures, and continents.

What Makes Wesleyan Worship Unique?

If you’ve ever wondered what makes United Methodist worship distinct, here’s a simple way to think about it: it’s ordered, but open. Rooted, but relevant. Personal, but never private.

Wesley was an Anglican with a Methodist heart. He believed in liturgy, in rhythm, in reverence—but also in singing from the soul and in the real power of the Holy Spirit to show up and shake things loose. He believed worship should be both beautiful and transformational—shaped by grace, and shaping us in return.

He also believed that worship forms faith. Not just in the head, but in the heart and the body.

That’s why our tradition holds things like singing, sacraments, preaching, prayer, and response together—because all of it shapes us into the image of Christ.

Contemporary Worship and the Church Today In recent decades, we’ve seen an explosion of new worship styles—what we often call “Contemporary Worship.” And just like worship in the Bible and the early church, it’s evolving.

It’s not one thing. Some of it looks like a rock concert; some of it is quiet and liturgical; some is charismatic and spontaneous.

The reasons for this shift are complex—some rooted in the cultural moment, some in deep spiritual longing. But here’s what I think matters most: we need to hold Contemporary

Worship to the same theological standards as any other style.

Does it help people encounter the risen Christ?

Does it proclaim grace and invite response?

Does it connect us to the larger body of believers across time and space?

When done well, Contemporary Worship can do all of that—and more. But when we treat worship like a product to consume rather than a response to God, we miss the point.

As our Book of Discipline reminds us, “Christianity does not leap from New Testament times to the present as though nothing were to be learned from the great cloud of witnesses in between.”

Our worship, however fresh or creative, should never forget the deep well from which we draw.

Church, I believe with all my heart that worship is the heart of what we do—not just because it’s tradition, but because it’s where we meet Jesus.

It’s where grace is offered.

Where the Spirit moves.

Where the weary are restored.

Where we are reminded who—and whose—we are.

So thank you for showing up. For singing loud or whispering quiet. For receiving Communion with open hands. For worshiping in Spirit and truth.

We don’t gather just to go through the motions. We gather to be changed.

And by God’s grace—we are.

Grace and Peace, Woods

The Many Faces of Traditional Worship Hey Church Family, This week, I want to turn our attention to something that sometimes gets taken for granted but has shaped the church for centuries: Traditional Worship.

We throw that term around a lot—“traditional service,” “traditional music,” “traditional liturgy.”

But what do we actually mean by traditional? Because, depending on who you ask, that could mean a high church Latin Mass or a foot-stomping hymn sing in a brush arbor.

In truth, there’s no single version of Traditional Worship.

What we call “traditional” today is really a collection of different streams—each shaped by its context, theology, and culture. So in this week’s note, I thought I’d do a little tour through the major expressions of Traditional Worship across history and geography.

Not as a history lesson—but as a way to reflect on what we’ve inherited, and how it continues to shape what we do today. † Catholic & High Church Worship: Worship as Mystery Let’s start with one of the oldest traditions still practiced today: Roman Catholic Mass. This is worship as sacrament and mystery. Every movement, every symbol, every prayer is intentional—designed to reflect the holiness of God and the sacredness of the moment.

At its heart is Word and Table—Scripture readings, homily, prayers, and Eucharist. It’s deeply structured, highly symbolic, and often multilingual. The goal isn’t entertainment—it’s reverence.

It’s not about accessibility—it’s about transcendence.

Anglican, Episcopal, and some Lutheran traditions follow a similar pattern—sometimes called “High Church” liturgy—where robes, incense, processions, and ancient prayers guide the experience.

This style reminds us that worship isn’t always supposed to feel familiar. Sometimes it’s meant to feel other. Sacred. Holy.

" Camp Meeting Worship: Worship as Revival Now shift gears completely.

In the early 1800s, across frontier America, something new was stirring. Churches didn’t have steeples—they had sawdust floors and open skies. This was the Camp Meeting Movement—revivals led by traveling preachers with loud voices and louder conviction.

The music? Fervent and foot-tapping—songs like “I’ll Fly Away” or “Come Thou Fount,” often led by choirs or congregational singing with little to no instruments.

The sermons? Fiery, urgent, and aimed at conversion.

The structure? Looser. More responsive. But no less spiritual.

This style birthed much of what we now associate with early Methodism and Holiness traditions.

It reminds us that worship can be free, improvised, and deeply emotional—a Spirit-filled call to personal transformation. # Southern Baptist Traditional: Worship as Proclamation Then came the Southern Baptist traditional model, which shaped much of 20th-century American worship—especially in the South.

You can picture it, can’t you?

A choir in robes. A piano and organ. A worship bulletin with clear sections. The Doxology.

Maybe “Victory in Jesus.” A 30-minute sermon with three points and an altar call.

This version of traditional worship emphasized clarity and proclamation. The sermon was king. The music was meant to prepare hearts for the Word. And the structure offered comfort through consistency.

While it lacked the liturgical richness of High Church traditions, it offered something else: accessibility. And it became the heartbeat of countless communities across small-town America. \$ African American Traditional Worship: Worship as Power In Black churches—across Baptist, AME, and Holiness traditions—Traditional Worship took on another shape.

Call-and-response. Gospel choirs. Testimonies. Shouts of affirmation. The preacher as poet, prophet, and pastor—all at once.

Worship here was more than a service—it was a liberating event. Born out of struggle, forged in resilience, rooted in Scripture, and carried on waves of song and shout.

This version of worship reminds us that joy and lament often live side by side—and that the Spirit doesn’t just comfort, it empowers. % Liturgical Protestant Worship: Worship as Formation In some mainline Protestant settings—Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist—you’ll find a more structured “low church” liturgical experience.

The shape here often mirrors ancient patterns:

- Gathering
- Proclamation
- Response
- Sending

There's a bulletin, yes—but also intentional prayers, creeds, and Scripture readings. Music varies by context, but hymns like “Be Thou My Vision” or “How Great Thou Art” carry deep theological weight.

This version of traditional worship seeks to form people over time—to shape hearts and minds through rhythm, repetition, and ritual. It's not flashy. But it's faithful. & Why This Matters So why walk through all of this?

Because the word “traditional” doesn't mean uniform.

It means received.

It means practiced.

It means passed down.

Whether through incense or altar calls, robes or revival tents—traditional worship in its many forms has been the way God's people have learned to listen, respond, remember, and proclaim.

And when we understand those roots, we're better equipped to build something new—not from scratch, but from faithfulness.

That's what we're trying to do here at Spanish Fort—honor the rhythms that have shaped the Church for centuries, while still creating space for people to meet God in the here and now.

Thanks for being the kind of church that doesn't just care about what we do on Sundays—but why.

Whether you're drawn to candles or chords, bulletins or big screens—let's remember that what makes worship sacred isn't the style.

It's the Spirit moving through it.

And the people offering it.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Let's Talk About Contemporary Worship Let's talk about worship for a minute. Specifically, Contemporary Worship. If you've ever heard that phrase and thought, "Wait—what exactly does that mean?"—you're not alone. Some folks think it means a service with guitars and coffee. Others think it just means "not traditional." And technically, any worship that happens now is contemporary, right?

But here's the thing—just like not all Protestants worship the same way, not all "Contemporary Worship" looks or sounds the same either.

Over the last several months, I've been working on a project that explores how churches—particularly churches like ours—can design worship that is both deeply rooted and deeply relevant. So today, I want to pull back the curtain and share a bit of what I've learned. Not as a lecture, but as a pastoral conversation. Because I think it matters for how we pray, how we plan, and how we grow together.

Let's start by naming the elephant in the sanctuary: "Contemporary Worship" isn't one-size-fits-all. There are several different styles under that big umbrella, and they each come from different stories, with different goals.

Here are a few:

- Ancient-Future Worship** This is what theologian Robert Webber championed. It's not just a mash-up of old and new—it's a thoughtful return to early Christian worship, with Word, Table, and songs that point both backward and forward. It's less about style and more about substance. And while some churches call their service "Ancient-Future," they may actually be doing something else entirely—more of a "Blended" service.
- Blended Worship** Speaking of blended... this is often the attempt to include everyone's favorites—maybe a hymn here, a praise song there, and a little liturgy in between. The heart behind it is good. But in practice, it can be hard to pull off. In many churches I've studied, these services didn't last long or struggled to find a clear identity. They work best in smaller settings where community is the glue.
- Emergent Worship** Emergent worship grew out of a desire to reach people who didn't grow up in church. It's creative, intentional, and not afraid to bring ancient symbols (like crosses or candles) back into modern spaces. It's thoughtful about drawing newcomers into a deeper journey, not just a one-time experience.
- Pentecostal Worship** Vibrant. Expressive. Unscripted. This form of worship is all-in—hands lifted, voices raised, bodies moving. And while not every Pentecostal service is "contemporary," many have shaped what modern worship looks like today. The emphasis? Encountering the Holy Spirit, not just observing a service.

* Seeker-Sensitive Worship

In the 90s and early 2000s, churches like Willow Creek and Life.Church reimagined worship for folks who were skeptical of church altogether. Out went the organs and robes; in came video screens, rock bands, and messages instead of sermons. It wasn't about being flashy—it was about accessibility. But some critics worried it left behind too much of the church's depth.

+ Modern Contemporary Worship This is probably the style most people think of when they hear “Contemporary Worship.” It's the Hillsong/Passion/North Point-style format: high production value, full bands, seamless tech, and emotionally moving music. The flow is tight, the sermons are practical, and the goal is transformation. It's what many fast-growing churches offer every week. ■ A New Kind of Contemporary Worship Here's where this project—and maybe our future—comes in.

The kind of worship I've been working on tries to take the best of Modern Contemporary—engaging music, accessible teaching, excellence in planning—and blend it not with nostalgia, but with theology. We're asking, “What if our worship wasn't just appealing, but deeply faithful?”

What if we brought back the richness of Word and Table, prayers from the church's history, and the communal shape of ancient worship—but did it in a way that speaks the language of today?

This isn't about copying someone else's service. It's about becoming who we are, right here in Spanish Fort, rooted in the Wesleyan tradition and open to the Holy Spirit's leading.

Church, our worship doesn't need to be a concert. It doesn't need to be a museum. But it does need to be real. It needs to help people encounter the risen Jesus. It needs to shape hearts, renew minds, and build a church that looks more and more like Christ.

Thanks for being a part of that journey.

Grace and peace, Woods

Friday Reflections: What We Sing and Say Matters Dear Church Family, Let's talk for a moment about what actually happens in worship—not just the order of service, or who's preaching, or what songs are on the screens—but something deeper:

What are we really saying about God when we gather?

And perhaps even more importantly—do we believe it?

One of the more overlooked parts of Contemporary Worship is its theology. Not just the theology we preach, but the theology we sing. And let me tell you—if we're not paying attention, we can end up declaring things in worship that don't align with who we are or what we believe.

It's one of the reasons I've devoted an entire section of my doctoral work to this. Because I believe that being theologically sound is not just a good idea—it's part of our pastoral responsibility. And as United Methodists, we've inherited a theological lens that is rich, grace-filled, and deeply rooted in the love of God through Christ.

But here's the challenge: not every Contemporary Worship service, even in our own denomination, is created through that lens. During my years traveling to churches as a college chaplain, I saw firsthand how easily relevance could overtake substance. I heard popular songs that clashed with our core beliefs. I heard sermons built more on self-help strategies than Scripture. And I realized—this is something we need to talk about.

- First, Let's Talk About the Music

Music is one of the most visible (and audible) parts of any worship service. And it's often the thing people are most passionate about. But not every song on Christian radio is fit for worship.

Some are personal testimonies. Some are poetic expressions. Some are just... catchy.

So how do we decide what to sing? I ask a few questions:

- Does this song reflect what we believe about God?
- Is it theologically sound?
- Can our congregation sing it—together?

Now, to be clear: no song is perfect. Even our beloved hymnals contain lyrics that, upon close reading, may not fully align with Wesleyan theology. But that's okay—what matters is how we frame and balance the service.

For example, take a song like “Man of Sorrows” by Hillsong. Some critics say it emphasizes justification too heavily. And they're not wrong—it leans in that direction. But the lyrics themselves don't contradict our theology. They just tell one part of the story. That's why we pair songs carefully—maybe following that one with a prayer about sanctifying grace, or a song like “Holy Spirit” that reminds us God's work isn't done yet.

It's not about nitpicking lyrics. It's about curating worship that teaches our people the full, beautiful arc of grace: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying.

Here's how we think about song selection every week:

- Theological Integrity – Does it line up with our beliefs?
- Lyrical Depth – Does it say something true and beautiful?
- Singability – Can our people sing it easily?
- Contextual Fit – Does it make sense in our space, with our musicians, at this moment?
- Orientation – Does the song address God, or is it more of a reflection for the listener?
- Energy – What does the flow feel like, and how does the music move the congregation?

Worship leaders are more than musicians—they're theologians. They teach the faith, not from a pulpit, but through chords and choruses. . Now, Let's Talk About the Preaching If music sets the tone, preaching sets the trajectory.

In our congregation, just like many across the country, most people say they want two things in a sermon: 1.That it connects with their everyday life. 2.That it teaches them something about the Bible.

That's a good reminder: people don't want fluff. They're hungry for substance. But here's the catch—relevance without theology isn't discipleship.

In recent years, a particular style of preaching has taken off—what I call “prescriptive preaching.” It's the kind where the sermon is more of a life hack than a holy moment. Think “Five Steps to a Better Marriage” or “Three Ways to Conquer Anxiety.” It's tidy. It's

motivational. And it's everywhere.

But it's also problematic. Why?

Because it puts the preacher at the center of the solution. It tells people they can fix themselves if they just try harder. And it leaves very little room for grace, mystery, or the work of the Holy Spirit.

Wesleyan theology doesn't pretend faith is a formula. We believe in a God who walks with us, not just hands us a to-do list. That's why we try to root every sermon in Scripture—not just as a backdrop, but as the source of transformation.

One of the most helpful changes we've made at Dauphin Way is rotating preachers across all services. It keeps us united. It reminds the congregation that the message matters more than the messenger. And it helps all our worship feel connected to a bigger picture.

We've also committed to writing sermons together, which means no matter which service you attend, you're getting the same spiritual food. That shared voice has helped dissolve old divides and build a stronger church family.

So why does all this matter?

Because worship isn't just about what we like. It's about who we become.

The songs we sing, the sermons we preach, the prayers we pray—all of it forms us. It teaches us who God is and who we are. And if we're not careful, we can end up building worship that's emotionally moving but theologically thin.

My hope—and my heart—is that we keep offering worship that is full of beauty, depth, grace, and truth. Worship that invites people into something bigger than themselves. Worship that reflects the gospel we actually believe.

We don't have to choose between good music and good theology. We can have both.

We don't have to be trendy to be Spirit-filled.

We just have to be faithful.

And friends—you're helping make that happen.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Liturgy Isn't Just for the Traditional Crowd In one of our recent reflection groups, someone said something that I've heard many times before —maybe you've said or thought it too:

“Contemporary Worship just doesn't have liturgy.”

And you know what? I get it.

If you grew up in a more traditional setting—where the same creeds, prayers, and responses were part of every Sunday—you might look at a Contemporary Worship service and think, “Where's the structure? Where's the sacred rhythm?”

But here's the thing: every worship service has a liturgy. Even the ones that don't use bulletins or hymnals. Even the ones with electric guitars.

Liturgy simply means “the work of the people.” And every time we gather for worship—singing, praying, responding, receiving communion—we're participating in a shared rhythm. It's just that in Contemporary Worship, the shape of that rhythm often looks and feels different.

But different doesn't mean empty.

And modern doesn't have to mean disconnected from tradition.

Bringing Rhythm to the Room One of my goals in leading Contemporary Worship at Dauphin Way has been to gently connect us back to some of the ancient rhythms of the Church—not because we're trying to be something we're not, but because I believe those rhythms have something important to offer us, here and now.

Worship shouldn't feel like two disconnected halves—30 minutes of music, then 30 minutes of preaching. That's not a conversation with God; that's a concert followed by a lecture.

Instead, we try to build our worship around a call-and-response pattern.

God speaks—we respond.

We pray—God listens.

We confess—God forgives.

We offer ourselves—God sends us out.

That back-and-forth, that holy dialogue, is at the heart of meaningful worship. And the more intentional we are in shaping the flow of the service, the more space we create for the Spirit to move—not just through content, but through rhythm.

Ancient Practices, Contemporary Posture Over the past few years, we've reintroduced a few time-tested practices into our Contemporary Worship—slowly, thoughtfully, and in ways that still feel authentic to our style. Here's a quick tour: / **Weekly Communion** This was already a beautiful part of our tradition when I arrived. But early on, I noticed the experience often felt rushed or unrooted. Now, we offer fuller liturgy from The United Methodist Hymnal each week—including confession, the Great Thanksgiving, and time for reflection. At first, it felt unfamiliar. Now? It feels like home. ✎ **Passing the Peace** This one made me nervous—it's easy for this to feel like forced small talk. But we frame it intentionally: not “greet your neighbor,” but “offer the peace of Christ.” A simple, 20-second reminder that we are not alone. And it's been surprisingly well received. 1 **Prayers of the People** Contemporary Worship can lean individualistic. But our faith is always communal. So every week, we pray for one another—by name, out loud, as one body. It connects us, and it reminds us worship isn't just about what we get. It's also about what we give. 2 **Intentional Silence** Silence is rare in our culture. And in Contemporary Worship, it's usually accidental. But we've started carving out space for silence—moments of stillness between songs or after the sermon.

Not because we forgot what's next—but because we're letting God speak. . **Communal Readings & Responses** While not as frequent, we've reintroduced moments like creeds, baptismal vows, and calls to worship—especially for special occasions. Participation is strong when the moment matters. And even if it feels more “traditional,” I believe it strengthens the identity of the church as a whole.

What This All Means At the end of the day, Contemporary Worship doesn't need to become something it's not. But it can benefit from reaching back into the well of our shared tradition.

When we recite the same prayers the saints have said for centuries... When we pause to let the Spirit speak... When we kneel at the table, or lift a prayer for someone by name... We remember that we're not inventing worship. We're inheriting it.

And we're adapting it—not abandoning it—for this moment.

Church, I believe our worship can be both fresh and faithful.

Both Spirit-led and liturgically rooted.

Both modern and meaningfully ancient.

Thanks for being part of a congregation that's willing to grow in depth without losing its heart.

We're not chasing trends—we're cultivating truth. And we're doing it together.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Why Worship Should Still Feel Like It Belongs Here Let's talk about something that doesn't get mentioned often—but everyone feels it the moment they walk into a room:

Atmosphere.

You know what I mean. The feeling when the lights dim and the music begins. When a friend waves across the chairs. When the screen glows just the right hue, or a lyric speaks directly to your heart. The little things that let you know—you're in the right place.

That's what I've been reflecting on this week as I wrap up another section of my doctoral project on Contemporary Worship. We've talked about theological soundness. We've talked about liturgical planning. But there's a third element I've been exploring too—and that's cultural relevance.

And before you tune out—this isn't about being cool or chasing trends. I promise.

It's about making sure our worship connects to the people we're actually trying to reach—here in Mobile, in 2025, with the voices and volunteers and hearts that make up this church.

Because here's the truth: a worship service can be biblically faithful and theologically rich—but if no one comes, or if people walk in and feel completely disconnected—then we've missed something important.

So this week, I want to share with you three ways we've tried to stay relevant—not for relevance's sake—but because we want to be a place where real people can meet the real God.

1. The Atmosphere Has to Feel Alive (and Real)

Worship is more than content—it's experience. It's the Spirit moving through the details. Lights, music, sound, seating, colors, words, warmth—they all play a part.

We don't want to manipulate emotion. Worship should never be about manufacturing tears or chasing goosebumps. But God made us with emotions and intellect. Good atmosphere helps us bring our full selves to God—not just our heads, but our hearts too.

That's why we think about things like lighting and layout. We set the chairs close. We keep lighting low—but not dark. We match LED colors to the tone of the music (warm and bright for upbeat songs, cool and soft for reflective ones). We arrange the space to feel full without being crowded. And even though we meet in a gym—by the grace of God and a good team—it becomes a sanctuary every week.

More than all that though—atmosphere flows from ethos. If the people leading worship are warm, vulnerable, honest, and engaged, the congregation will feel it. If we're defensive, distant, or inauthentic—that comes through too.

2. Authenticity Beats Perfection

Worship isn't a show.

But it can feel like one if we're not careful. That's why we've worked hard to tear down that invisible "fourth wall" between the stage and the seats. Because the goal isn't that you'd sit and watch—we want you to participate.

Here are some things we've done to foster authenticity:

- We engage the room. We try to speak to the people gathered, not at them. Whether that's a spontaneous comment, a personal story, or a familiar name—I try to preach with the congregation, not just to it.
- We enlist lots of people. From band members and Scripture readers to communion servers and greeters—our worship isn't just led by staff. It's a family affair. When you see someone you know on stage, it changes how you experience the service.
- We own the hiccups. If a song goes sideways, or the mic dies, or someone starts in the wrong key—we laugh, we recover, and we keep worshipping. No pretending. No polish. Just grace.
- We let people in on the "why." I love when we can explain, "Here's why we chose this song," or "This is why the service looks a little different today." Giving people insight turns attendees into insiders.

The more we can be real with each other, the more worship becomes shared.

3. The Room Isn't Sacred—but It Can Be Set Apart

It may surprise you, but one of the most impactful things we do each week is... adjust the chairs.

Really. Something as simple as not putting out too many chairs can make the room feel fuller, warmer, more intimate. And when we need to add chairs mid-service? That's not a failure—it's an opportunity. Our greeters love it. They get to meet people while they serve.

We also think about:

- The distance from the stage to the people (we keep it close).
- Visual design—colors on screen, lighting tones, images, lyrics.
- Intentional décor, even in a gym, to signal this is sacred space.

All of this comes together not to create a production—but to create an invitation.

4. Hospitality Is the First Sermon We Preach

No matter how good the music is or how biblical the sermon might be—if someone doesn't feel welcome, it won't matter.

We want people to feel seen, known, and loved before the first note ever plays.

That's why hospitality is a huge part of our Sunday experience. Between greeters, ushers, communion stewards, band members, and behind-the-scenes volunteers, we rely on nearly 24 people every week just to make church happen.

And yes—volunteer burnout is real. That's why we've launched a twice-a-year campaign to encourage everyone in the congregation to serve in at least one role, once a month. Not because we need warm bodies—but because the more people who serve, the more connected and invested our community becomes.

And here's the best part: when we asked people if Dauphin Way felt welcoming, 77% said yes.

That's something to celebrate.

Church, I don't think being "relevant" is about putting on a show or chasing trends.

I think it's about being present.

Being aware of where God has planted us.

And doing everything we can to create an environment where people feel like they belong.

We don't need to be the biggest or the flashiest church. We just need to be faithful—and thoughtful—in how we steward what God's given us.

Thank you for helping us create that kind of worship experience. One that's theologically sound, liturgically thoughtful, and beautifully present in this moment.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Things To Consider I love to talk about worship. I love to plan worship. I just love worship. Studying worship was a crucial part of my higher education, and my doctoral project was focused on the why and how of worship.

There are more ways and expressions of worship than I can count. There are various liturgical styles, elements, and philosophies of worship. Worship is not static, but tradition is welcome; it's not careless, but can be spontaneous. Outside of the fact that we only worship the One True God, there is a great deal of variety in Christian practice.

However, I would like to draw our attention to a few habits that we fall into as worshipers that are worth considering further. These behaviors don't disqualify the acts of worship or the worshiper, and I have done each of these things at times in my life. Also, it's important to note that worship doesn't have to be perfect to be true, and thank God for that!

Yet, we should always look to grow in how we worship, just like all aspects of our faith journey.

So, let's look at four things that commonly happen during worship that are worth a second look.

1. Father God, We Just....

I believe the "Father God, We Just" prayers are earnest attempts to commune with the Divine. As my wife pointed out, for some, repeating the phrase can be a way of recentering oneself to keep the attention on God. However, the repetition might also be the result of praying too fast. Take it from someone who talks fast and often without thinking, the "Father God, We Just" prayers used to be my bread and butter.

If you don't know what I am talking about, the prayers go like this.

"Father God We Just thank you for this chance to be together today, Father God, and we just ask that you help us focus on you Father God, and we just know in our heart of hearts Father God that you are a good good Father, and so we just want to be more like you our Father God....."

Ever heard one of those prayers? Ever prayed on yourself? Technically, there is nothing "wrong" with this prayer. Shoot, at least you're praying. But when the phrase is not a means of redirecting our attention to God, we might be using the Lord's name like a filler word, similar to "umm" and "uhh."

When we talk to your family or friends, we don't say, "Hey, Woods, it's good to see you today, Woods. I hope that you are doing well, and I have really missed you, Woods. So, Woods, if you don't mind, can we just go get some pizza, Woods?"

The key to breaking the habit of filler words of any kind in prayer is simply to slow down. Don't be nervous about what you are going to say. Take time to collect your thoughts and don't be afraid to leave space for silence and the movements of the Holy Spirit. Silence is a welcome addition to prayers.

2. The Direction of Prayers

Prayers can be corporate or they can be individual, but they are always oriented towards God.

Whether you want to imagine God up in the sky, sitting next to you, in your heart, or anywhere else, the physical direction doesn't really matter. It just matters that we direct our prayers to God.

Sometimes, we preachers and liturgists will change the direction of our prayer mid-offering. It will begin, "Gracious God, we give thanks for this chance to worship you, and we are grateful for this space to gather. And to everyone in this place tonight, I hope you recognize how lucky we are to have this incredible music and worship. God, we give you all of our worship. And remember that God loves you no matter what."

Did you catch the shift? It goes from addressing God to addressing the people in the room. This is a small example, but it is a pretty common practice. In addition to sacraments and affirmations, worship services are primarily made up of prayers and proclamations. In worship planning, we often refer to these as calls and responses. Prayers can be written, extemporaneous, musical, or other various creative expressions. Proclamations are when the congregation receives what God has to say, through means like scripture readings, sermons, videos, or other elements. When we pray, our direction is to God, and when we proclaim, it is to the people.

3. Land the Plane

This one is not limited to worship, but I tend to notice it, and am guilty of it most at the end of sermons. My grandfather was a Lay Speaker, and he took me to my first training when I was fourteen. The one thing he said to me over and over about preaching was, "Start strong, stop short, and leave them wanting more." I recognize that nowadays, the proper length of a sermon is all over the map and is entirely dependent on a person's tradition. If you go to an

Episcopalian service, you'll likely get a 10-15 minute homily; if you go to some of the largest and fastest growing nondenominational services, you might get a sermon that is 40+ minutes. Like most things, United Methodists fall in the middle, and my average sermon is around 22 minutes (not saying that is the same for all United Methodists, but it's common for us to be between 15-25).

I think, regardless of the length of a sermon, the ending is crucial. Yet, when listening to countless sermons, we preachers often struggle with setting the plane down. And I'm not even talking about the quality of sticking the landing; I just mean putting the thing on the runway.

Sometimes we revisit one or more of our points too many times. Sometimes we try one more pull at the heartstrings in case the first few didn't tug hard enough. Sometimes we have everything wrapped up, only to offer another story.

It's not uncommon for the sermon to be done long before the preacher is finished preaching.

Sermons that don't stick the landing lose a significant portion of their effectiveness.

4. Too Many Scripture Passages

This one is the most subjective and is somewhat related to preaching style. I am a narrative preacher; I like to tell the story of one scripture passage and then add in other stories, elaboration, and application. Other people are expository preachers; they take a scripture passage and walk through every line meticulously, drawing out meaning and information. Some preachers teach more than preach, and others tell so many jokes they straddle the line between sermon and stand-up comedy (another thing I have been guilty of).

I don't think there is any one preaching style that is superior to another. However, a habit that happens regardless of the style is the tendency to inundate the congregation with so many different scripture selections that we lose the forest for the trees. It's one thing if you have a passage that tells one cohesive story over twenty verses; it's another thing when we use twenty different scripture passages to try to tell one story. When we jump around too much, we risk leaving the listener behind because they are still processing the previous scripture selection. It's better to stick to a main text and pull in one or two additional selections that point back to the thread we are following in the initial reading.

Bonus This is partly related to worship, but also to more aspects of our faith. I have a hard time with the phrase, "I am spiritual but not religious." In my mind, it sounds like refusing to participate in organized religion is a more holy path. Or a like religiosity waters down true

connection to God.

But Jesus himself was extremely “religious.” He often quotes from and participates in his religion. In fact, his followers set up all sorts of guidelines for religious observance. Many of Paul’s letters address matters of religious practice that we still follow today. And almost the entire New Testament was written to churches, not individuals.

The Bible was written to, for, and by communities of faith. Religions passed it down. Without religion, we wouldn’t have this faith. Belonging to a faith community is of paramount importance in the Bible. To be a faithful Christian, you shouldn’t be in sustained, intentional isolation.

The person who is “spiritual but not religious” doesn’t sound more enlightened; it strikes me as arrogant. It is a byproduct of a culture that encourages individuality over all else. It reflects a world that tells us our own experience and personal beliefs are the chief authority and that the weight of institutions shouldn’t tie us down.

Don’t get me wrong, I am not saying religions are perfect - far from it. But ours does represent the body of Christ. And if the left ear wants to wander off in self-expression to say they are better on their own, that’s its decision, but it’s not the body of Christ by itself. It’s just the left ear.

Final Thoughts At its core, worship is the heart of our life together; it always has been. From the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness, to the early Church gathered in homes, to congregations around the world today, worship is our anchor. Not because it entertains us or fills a time slot, but because it draws us closer to God and closer to one another.

It’s not something we invented; it’s something we were invited into.

If worship really is a response to God’s ongoing work in the world, then the way we worship says something about what we believe. It’s theological. It’s formational. And it’s worth paying attention to.

What are Traditional and Contemporary Worship?

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the church-world went through what is commonly referred to as “the worship wars.” It was a time when contemporary worship was gaining traction, and churches were wondering whether to offer a service in this new style. Some jumped on board quickly, others decided it wasn’t right for their congregation, but many mainline

denominations went through a season of internal consternation between those who wanted the new expression and those who did not.

I, for one, am glad that time is over. During our listening sessions in June, almost everyone expressed appreciation that we offer both styles of worship at SFUMC. When naming their personal stylistic preferences, they never did so at the expense of or by diminishing the other style. I'm also glad we offer both styles of worship. However, we are quickly becoming a bit of an outlier for doing so.

Most younger churches (founded in the last thirty years) offer contemporary worship as their exclusive style. Most older congregations, particularly rural churches, Episcopalians, and Catholic Churches, exclusively offer traditional worship. There are fewer multigenerational churches, and even fewer that offer high-quality versions of multiple styles.

I can't predict the future, so I have no idea if we will always offer both styles at SFUMC.

However, I know that right now I am glad we do, and our Vision Team didn't discern anything over the past six months that led us to believe we ought to explore changing that in the near future.

So, for a moment, let's consider our two worship services. When we discuss worship broadly, these words "contemporary" and "traditional" suffice. But when we drill down on the specifics, we find there is actually a lot more variation and subgenres within each style.

If you've ever found yourself wondering what exactly we mean when we toss around words like "traditional" or "contemporary," you're not alone. Maybe you grew up with organs and hymnals, or maybe you're more at home with guitars and big screens. Maybe you've bounced between both and still aren't sure how to describe what counts as worship.

If you were to create a spectrum of worship and place the two services we offer at Spanish Fort UMC on it, you would find that our contemporary is far from the most contemporary, and our traditional is not the most traditional.

Traditional Catholic Mass/Word and Table Contemporary Sunday School Aesthetic Revival Gospel Emergent Seeker Sensitive Blended Modern Contemporary Pentecostal/ Praise and Worship SFUMC Traditional SFUMC Contemporary The graphic above isn't perfect because there is no linear progression of worship styles. Like many churches, both our services incorporate elements from various styles. For example, it is traditional for us to recite the Apostles' Creed in our contemporary service, and it is contemporary for us to have screens in

our traditional service. However, it at least helps us see that there are various ways to describe what we mean by traditional and contemporary.

So what do we mean by “traditional” worship?

For some, traditional worship is the Catholic Mass or high church services—robes, incense, ancient prayers, and a deep sense of the sacred. Here, worship is intentionally mysterious, drawing us into the holiness of God through symbols and ritual.

My professor Edward Phillips says that for protestants, many of the services we often think of as “traditional” are better categorized as “Aesthetic Worship.” In his book *The Purpose, Pattern, and Character of Worship*, he says, “Today, congregations that still embrace Aesthetic Worship advertise themselves as Traditional churches. At the very least, Traditional Worship means the use of hymns, robed choirs, classical-style anthems, an organ, printed responsive reading, call to worship, confession, Lord's Prayer, elaborate offertory, and academic vestments on the clergy. In some orders, the pastoral prayer and offertory follow the sermon, rather than precede it, illustrating the influence of the Word and Table model...Finally, Traditional Worship almost always includes a children's sermon, showing the continuing influence of the Sunday School model.”

Other versions of traditional worship remind us of fiery revivals from early Methodism, with sawdust floors, call-and-response singing, and sermons aimed at the heart. Still others might recall the Southern Baptist or other mainline Protestant traditions: choirs in robes, bulletins with a familiar flow, hymns that have shaped generations, and longer sections dedicated to the proclamation of the Word.

In African American churches, traditional worship is alive with gospel choirs, powerful preaching, testimonies, and a Spirit that comforts and empowers. These services are a reminder that worship can be liberation and healing, not just routine. However, there are also Modern Contemporary versions of the Gospel experience as well.

The point is, there's no single “traditional.” There are layers upon layers, each style reflecting different ways people have sought God's presence, wrestled with faith, and tried to be faithful in their own time and place.

The same is true for “contemporary.”

For some, “contemporary” means a service with a praise band and modern music. For others, it means creativity and accessibility, video screens, coffee, and messages that connect with real

life.

But just like with traditional, contemporary worship isn't one-size-fits-all.

There are "Blended" services that blend old and new. "Emergent" worship that experiments with art, silence, and ancient symbols in fresh ways. Some churches go all-in with a "Hillsong-esque" style, full-production, music, and moving lights. Others still follow the model Willow Creek was famous for innovating and try to be "Seeker-Sensitive," designing worship for folks who are just dipping their toes into faith.

And then there are Pentecostal and charismatic churches, where worship is unscripted, expressive, and all about encountering the Holy Spirit in real time. But like Gospel worship, there are traditional versions of Pentecostal just as there are contemporary versions.

So why does all this matter for us?

At Spanish Fort UMC, we try to create a worship life that is deeply rooted in our faith but is also unafraid to innovate. We want to honor the best of what's been handed down, while also listening for the Spirit's new movement. We never want to create worship services just for their appeal if they are not also deeply faithful.

Here's the heart of it: contemporary worship is more than just a concert, and traditional worship is more than a museum. True worship, regardless of style needs to be real. It needs to help people meet Jesus, to shape hearts and minds, and to build up a church that looks more and more like Christ.

What makes worship sacred isn't the style—it's the Spirit moving through it.

Thank you for being the kind of church that cares about the "why" and the "how" behind what we do. Our roots run deep, but the Spirit is always doing a new thing. Thank you for honoring the rhythms that have shaped us for centuries while also making space for new encounters with God.

Grace and peace, Woods

What a year it has been!

It's funny how the experience of being overwhelmed can be both a good and a bad thing. I think most often, we feel overwhelmed by our responsibilities, busy schedules, the emotional toll of life, and the stress of performing at a high level. At various times over the past year, I have felt each of those things. But when I sat down to write this note, I found myself not overwhelmed by the weight of life but instead by deep gratitude.

I am overwhelmed by the number of people who have joined our church, by the faithfulness of our volunteers, by the gifts of worship, the joy of service, the sound of kids laughing in the halls, the quiet prayers, the witness of mission trips, meals, meetings, studies, retreats, and so much more.

Most importantly, I am overwhelmed by the grace of God. God's grace has been ever present all year.

Next week marks one whole year since we started this season together at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. And as I look back on these twelve months, I'm filled with gratitude for what God has done and for what I believe God is still doing through this church.

I want to celebrate the movement of the Holy Spirit across the nine areas of ministry we offer SFUMC. And goodness, there is a lot to celebrate!

1. Welcoming and Evangelism

Over 70 people have officially joined Spanish Fort UMC since last July!

That's not just a number, it's dozens of stories of belonging. It's new friends who came once and stayed. Families who visited at Christmas or Easter and never left. People who said, "This feels like home." And it's because of you.

We have increased our social media presence and launched our Tuesday Spanish Fort Spotlight and Friday Words from Woods, which for me are more than announcements; they are ways we stay connected.

On Sunday mornings at 10:00, I've had the privilege of leading a casual, open-door New Member class in the parlor. Dozens have stopped by to ask questions and share stories. Some came back the next week to join. Others just needed to know they were welcome.

This year, we also rolled out a new logo and fresh visual identity for Spanish Fort UMC. Simple yet rooted in our congregational identity, the new design helps tell our story more clearly — one of welcome and a Christ-centered community.

2. Prayer and Care Ministries

Some of the most powerful moments in this church over the last year didn't happen in public; they happened in hospital rooms, coffee shops, quiet visits, phone calls, and text messages.

We think a lot about our Congregational Care ministries. Through these efforts, prayer is not just a spiritual practice but a way for more people to engage in ministry. Our Congregational Care team has been active in checking on members, visiting hospitals, and walking alongside families in times of need.

Behind the scenes, our church has been quietly sharing God's love in the biggest times of need.

Congregational Care reminds us that the Spirit is still there even when you don't see what's happening.

3. Missions and Service

From Baldwin Family Village to flood buckets for hurricane survivors... from coats for veterans to hygiene kits and blankets for our neighbors... this church has offered servant hands and open hearts.

You gave nearly \$5,000 to Embrace Alabama Kids.

You gave supply kits, collected donations, worked at the church and the Wesley Foundation, and shared meals with those who needed hope.

And you didn't stop with local ministry. Our partnership with Wesley College in Tanzania through the Harambe offering connected our Lenten sacrifices to life-changing scholarships across the world.

We even relaunched our annual mission trips to Costa Rica, because the calling to serve doesn't have a zip code.

4. Discipleship Ministries

This past year, we made a bold shift in our discipleship model, aligning programming for children, youth, and adults on Sunday evenings.

Every week, the energy in our education wing was palpable.

- Little Lights (Pre-K and Kindergarten) grew in their faith with age-appropriate lessons and crafts.
- Shine Kids (1st–3rd grade) dove into Bible stories.
- Connect (4th–6th grade) began to ask deeper questions and take ownership of their spiritual growth.
- Remedy (7th–12th grade) continued to form strong bonds through worship and Christian fellowship.

Vacation Bible School was a huge success! Our staff and volunteers were nothing short of amazing, showing up with energy and heart every day to create something truly special.

Elizabeth, Beth, Zack, and Summerlyn have all offered incredible leadership to our children's and youth ministries, and it has been a privilege to serve alongside them.

Even though Adult Discipleship is in a time of transition, there were still many examples of adults growing in their faith and knowledge of God. Our Sunday School classes remained strong, our Entering the Passion of Jesus Lenten study created rich spiritual dialogue, and our women's and men's groups provided both learning and life-giving fellowship.

And all year long, we've been laying the groundwork for a more robust Adult Discipleship strategy. This fall, I believe we'll turn another corner. We are building a church of lifelong learners.

5. Worship

We talk a lot about worship. And rightly so.

Worship is the heart of our church. It's where everything flows in and out. And what a year of worship it's been.

We offer two weekly worship services —Traditional and Contemporary—each Spirit-filled and rooted in Scripture. We celebrated communion. We baptized children and adults. We remembered our saints. And we lifted our voices and hearts together.

- We also experienced:

- Beautifully planned combined services.
- Creative sermon series that spoke to our real lives.
- Holy Week services that walked us toward the cross and Easter sunrise that greeted us with hope.
- An Advent season that reminded us of God's quiet arrival.
- And we did it all as one church—different expressions, one foundation.

Worship doesn't just happen. It's crafted. It's prayed over. Mike and Andy meet with me weekly to talk through every detail of each worship service. They both pour countless hours of effort into planning worship and recruiting volunteers. Because worship isn't just the work of one person, it is led by dozens of volunteers and staff—ushers, musicians, tech teams, decorators, communion preparers, and greeters.

6. Fellowship and Connection

If there are two things I know about church folks, it's that we like to eat and we enjoy being together.

We are in the process of reigniting the spark of fellowship. We have ideas for new forms of connection that don't require study guides or inside information—just a desire to be together.

The Primetimers have been a shining example of what it looks like to live into connection, joyfully and consistently. Their year has been full of trips to see the Blue Angels, plays, dinner outings, and more.

I think we are just scratching the surface of the types of opportunities we have for fellowship and connection at SFUMC.

7. Operations

Let me tell you something: if you've ever fixed a faucet, moved a chair, run cables, set up a tent, watered a plant, fixed a lightbulb, printed a bulletin, or run sound, you've ministered.

Behind every ministry is a structure. And thanks to the work of our Trustees, our Altar Guild, our United Methodist Men, and our dedicated volunteers, we've strengthened the operational side of the house.

This year, we launched ShelbyNext, our new church database, giving platform, directory tool, and event registration hub. It's not flashy, but it's already transforming how we stay connected and organized.

We also continued the good work of budget oversight and strategic stewardship of our buildings and grounds. It's not always glamorous, from maintenance to insurance policies to volunteer groundskeeping. But it's good work.

8. Administration and Leadership

We began the year by restructuring and relaunching our administrative teams: Church Council, Finance, Trustees, Nominations, and SPRC. 38 people stepped up to serve on these teams. They didn't just attend meetings, they led with prayer and purpose.

We hosted our leadership orientation in January. We launched better communication systems. We streamlined some of our scheduling. And we brought clarity to the roles we serve, because good administration is spiritual work.

We also welcomed Robin, Elisha, Summerlyn, and Erin into key staff positions—each of them bringing passion and excellence to the work. Our existing team stepped into new roles with grace and grit.

Spanish Fort UMC is better because of the people behind the paperwork. I'm proud of what this team is building.

9. Family Life and Events

We believe church should be fun. And this year proved it.

We hosted an incredible Trunk-or-Treat event, welcoming over 500 people to our campus. We reimagined our Easter celebration, which was a great success even when the rain moved us indoors. And we began imagining what a full year of Family Life Ministries could look like: seasonal meals, summer outdoor movie nights, intergenerational gatherings, and a church culture that knows how to play together.

Looking Ahead – Vision, Community, and the Next Chapter For me, a major highlight of the past year has been the launch of our Vision Team.

This incredible group of leaders is walking through a multi-month process of discernment and strategic planning. We've already collected surveys, hosted listening sessions, and begun

gathering the dreams and values of our congregation.

Over the next few months, we'll move into synthesis and strategy, eventually casting a Spirit-led vision for the next 1-3 years of Spanish Fort UMC's ministry.

Final Word – What Comes Next If you're still reading... thank you. You are a big part of this church. And your faithful prayers, presence, service, giving, and witness have made this year what it is.

We are not the same church we were twelve months ago, but no church is. We said goodbye to Pastor Kitsy, and next week we will welcome Pastor Sarah. Our connectional system reminds us that the Church doesn't belong to the pastor or any individual person. The Church is God's, and it is a living, breathing organism. It changes and grows and adapts.

We're growing—spiritually and numerically.

We're listening—prayerfully and intentionally.

We're moving—carefully yet boldly.

And we're dreaming together about what it means to be the Body of Christ in this community, in this season, with these gifts.

Even though everything is not perfect yet, let's not lose sight of all the good things God is doing.

Let's be the church that celebrates.

Let's be the church that supports one another.

Let's be the church that believes the best is not behind us... but right in front of us.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Happy Fourth of July!

I love Independence Day, both the movie and the holiday. When I lived in Panama City, I bought some white tennis shoes with the American flag on them, which I would wear every Fourth of July. I have an awesome red, white, and blue tie-dye shirt with a giant eagle on it that I cut the sleeves off of before a Toby Keith concert, which goes great with the shoes. I love the fireworks, the pageantry, and all the festivities that accompany celebrating our country and the freedom we are afforded as citizens.

There is much about our country for which we can be thankful. In addition to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, our country gives us the chance to vote in democratic elections, the freedom to speak our minds, to worship where and how we want, and so much more. There is a lot that I love about being a citizen of the United States of America. I take great pride in my country.

Pride in one's nation can foster a healthy nation-state. In the Bible, we see numerous nations that take pride in their people and leadership — including the Israelites. Yet, there is a thread that runs from the beginning to the end of our scripture, warning us about the dangers of idolatry. For the Bible, idolatry is to be avoided at all costs. In simplest terms, idolatry is putting anything before or above God. Idolatry can creep into our lives unknowingly. If we're not careful, money, power, homes, sports, and even our country can become idols. I am thankful for both my God and my country, but my chief allegiance is to Jesus Christ. Above all else, I surrender to, advocate on behalf of, and have dedicated my life to be a servant of Jesus Christ.

To be an American and a person of faith, for me, is quite simple. It begins not with our citizenship on earth, but with our citizenship in heaven. I place my faith in God above my faith in the nation. But that doesn't mean I don't believe in my country — in fact, the opposite. I believe in this country more than I can say. I believe in our capacity to do good. I believe in our ability to be a beacon of hope. I even believe that one day our soccer team might win the World Cup.

And so during worship on Sunday, I can proudly sing, "America! America! God shed his grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea." Because asking God for grace to help us foster good relationships is a worthy prayer request. Likewise, I am grateful that "heroes proved in liberating strife (that they loved their country) and mercy more than life!"

We are the beneficiaries of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

I love the stanza, “America! America! May God thy gold refine, till all success be nobleness, and every gain divine,” because I, too, want our success to be nobleness —meaning the quality of being noble, encompassing traits like high moral character, integrity, and generosity.

And I want every grain to be divine.

Ultimately, as a Christian American, I can: 1.Express my gratitude for the sacrifices of so many. 2.And be proud/grateful to live in the United States of America.

While: 3.Not valuing my country more than my God. 4.Wanting us to be the best version of our country we can be. 5.And recognizing that God is the God of all nations, and we are part of a global community.

So, as we celebrate Independence Day today, I can’t think of a better prayer for this holiday than the final stanza from the hymn America the Beautiful,

- “O beautiful for patriot dream...” — That’s us, you and me.

- “That sees beyond the years...” — We have to look beyond our own time and our own desires to make things better for future generations.

- “Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!” — and when we look beyond our years, we dream of a future where there are no more tears, everyone has what they need, and sorrow is no more.

- “America! America! God mend thine every flaw,” - We confess we are not perfect, but we want to be. We want God’s forgiveness and redemption.

- “Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.” - And this is my favorite line. We profess that virtue and freedom must go hand in hand. This is a prayer that asks God to help us root our nature, our very soul, in self-discipline, and that God would help us create a just society where freedom is enshrined forever in law.

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!

America! America! God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.

I heard a song by Christina Perri and Ben Rector for the first time this week. It actually came out in 2022, but I somehow missed it. It's called "back in time," and it's about a former couple looking back on their story; remembering the good, even though their relationship didn't last forever.

Listening to it got me thinking about endings. Most endings don't feel very good. Not just breakups, but any kind of ending: losing a job, watching our kids leave home, saying goodbye to someone we love. Endings are heavy with emotion. More often than not, they come with heartbreak and sadness.

Maybe endings are so heavy because eternity is too hard to imagine.

You see, as Christians, we trust that one day everything will be made right. There's a future—an eternity—where there's no more sorrow, pain, or loss. We say things like "Jesus will reign," or "every knee will bow," and sometimes those words become so familiar we stop hearing them.

But have you ever stopped to wonder: What does eternity really mean?

For one thing, it means that nothing good is ever truly lost. What's good, what's lasting, isn't subject to endings. In eternity, what matters most doesn't end; it's just transformed, carried forward — maybe paused for a moment, but never gone.

The relationships that stood the test of time. The sacrifices people made for us. The hopes, the dreams, the acts of kindness, these are the things that remain. But all the rest? The pain, the heartbreak, the disappointment? Those are the things destined to pass away. They end because they were never meant to last forever.

That's why I say there are no good endings, because good things don't truly end—they're remade, restored, and gathered up into eternity. Of course, every headline is an oversimplification. When a teacher retires, the years in the classroom come to a close; their time as a teacher technically "ends." But not the impact. Not the lives changed. The good lingers, long after the ending.

I keep coming back to a scene I often quote from the film *Wit*. If you've never seen it, prepare yourself. It's beautiful and gut-wrenching. Emma Thompson plays an English professor facing

terminal illness, and throughout her journey, she returns again and again to John Donne's "Holy Sonnet Ten"—the famous "Death, be not proud."

There's a moment where she recalls her old advisor, who isn't upset about her writing, but instead chastizes Thompson about the punctuation she used in quoting Donne. In the version Thompson uses for her essay, the poem goes out with a bang: "And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die!"—exclamation points, capital letters, all the drama you'd expect from a final curtain call.

But the original Donne is quieter. It's just, "and death shall be no more, death thou shalt die."

No capital D, no fireworks—just a single comma, a breath, marking the boundary between this life and what comes next.

And that subtle shift says so much. In our faith, death is not the final barrier, not a dramatic, slamming door. It's a comma, a pause, not a period.

For those who hope in Christ, the move from this life to the next isn't a leap into the unknown, but a gentle passing—one breath to another. We rejoin all that has remained and live in a reality that has no endings, because everything is as it should be.

And so, I pray we can remember: what matters most can't be snuffed out. Good things aren't lost to time—they're held by God, reshaped and restored, part of a story that's still being written. Because in the end, for all that truly matters, there are no good endings—just new beginnings that last for eternity.

P .S. Here is a link to the scene from Wit. You should definitely check it out.

I thought July would be a bit more chill than June, and it was...for the first week. I was home every weeknight from July 1-4. But after that, I was swept up in all the exciting things we had planned for the month. I guess I failed to look forward at the calendar for everything we had planned! I don't say that to brag or lament; I truly love what I do, and I am grateful for every opportunity to live into my calling.

This month, we wrapped up our Vision Team meetings, and I'll have much more to say about that at Church Council and in worship over the coming months. I couldn't be prouder of our team. Every meeting was life-giving. The presence of the Holy Spirit was evident each time we gathered. Worship has been wonderful week after week, and I officiated two funerals at the Veterans Cemetery. If you haven't been out there, you should. It is a beautiful area, and both

the services I led were deeply meaningful experiences. We welcomed a visiting Youth Choir, held all of our committee meetings, I participated in a District Nominations Committee meeting, and had a fantastic fall planning session with our staff and volunteers.

Of everything that's happened this month, though, the most fun I've had has been with our students. After Zach's departure at the end of June, Summerlyn and I have stepped in to lead youth ministry while SPRC continues the search for our next Youth Minister. I spent six years in youth ministry—four full-time, two part-time—and I honestly thought that chapter was closed.

While I know I'm not the long-term solution, these past few weeks with our students have been an unexpected blessing. We've had great worship together, repainted and cleaned the youth room, hosted a pool party, a river night, and—my favorite—a Youth Week game night. It was a joy teaching the students one of my favorite games from my youth ministry days, and we played some of the classics like sardines and signs. Even when our pickleball plans fell through, the students still wanted to hang out. The best part was that no one was hiding behind their phones or sitting on the sidelines. Game night was full of laughter and pure Christian fellowship. I didn't know what to expect stepping into this role for a season, but it's been nothing short of wonderful. We have some incredible young people in our church, and I am a better pastor for having spent this time with them.

Looking ahead, I want to encourage everyone to be present in worship on August 17th as we cast the new vision for our church. God has been so faithful this past year, and I can't wait to share not only some Good News about what we've seen, but also where we believe God is calling us next. The Vision Team has prayed diligently and sought the Lord's guidance, and I know God has great things in store for us. I'm excited about what we've discerned, and I can't wait to share it with you soon.

Grace and Peace, Woods

When You Say Nothin' At All Sometimes, even we preachers can't think of something to say. And as Alison Krauss once sang, "You say it best, when you say nothin' at all."

So, in lieu of an extended thought, I'd like to offer you a list of resources. Every week, someone asks me, "What should I read/watch/listen to if I want to understand faith/the Bible/Methodism better?" So, below are some examples of the types of things I recommend in various situations.

Not all of them are for everyone, and not everything in all of them is spot on. However, by and large, these are all good resources if you are looking for new ways to engage your faith.

Daily Devotional Guides

- A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God - Ruben Job (There are a few versions of this book. Each has readings, prayers, and reflections based on the lectionary for daily worship.)
- The Grand Sweep - J. Ellsworth Kalas
- The Bible Recap - Tara Leigh Cobble (There is a podcast that goes along with it.)
- Lights A Lovely Mile - Eugene Peterson
- Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life - Tish Warren, Andy Crouch

Books

- About the Bible
- The Bible Tells Me So - Peter Enns
- Making Sense of the Bible - Adam Hamilton
- A Long Obedience in the Same Direction - Eugene Peterson (A book on the Psalms of Ascent)
- Scripture and the Authority of God - N.T. Wright
- Inspired - Rachel Held Evans (Though it doesn't cover the entire spectrum the way Inspired does, Evans' A Year of Biblical Womanhood is also terrific.)
- What Is The Bible - Rob Bell

- About Matters Related to Faith
- The Raggamuffin Gospel - Brennan Manning
- Surprised by Hope - N.T. Wright
- Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved - Kate Bowler
- Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation - Robert Mulholland
- The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self - Robert Mulholland
- Searching for Sunday - Rachel Held Evans
- The Sin of Certainty - Peter Enns
- Life Together - Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- The Cost of Discipleship - Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- The Wounded Healer - Henri Nouwen
- The Pastor: A Memoir - Eugene Peterson
- The Orthodox Heretic - Pete Rollins
- The Will of God - Leslie Weatherhead
- About Methodism
- Wesley vs Calvin - Don Thorsen (I don't love the title since Wesley himself once said he was within a hair's breadth of Calvin, but it's a good book to show the similarities and differences between Wesleyanism and Calvinism).
- The Wesley Challenge - Chris Folmsbee
- A Disciple's Path - Jim Harnish (typically used in a group study, but excellent content).
- Three Simple Rules - Ruben Job
- The Sermons of John Wesley - Edited by Randy Maddox (not the easiest reading)
- Responsible Grace - Randy Maddox (one of the best books about Wesleyan theology in the

world. However, it is one we were assigned in seminary and use for our ordination paper. So it can be a bit of a dense read.)

Podcasts

- The Bible Project (Also, their videos on YouTube are wonderful; I use them all the time.)

- Exploring My Strange Bible

- Ask NT Wright Anything

- The Bible For Normal People

- Everything Happens

- No Small Endeavor

Random Other Things

- !! The Bible Project Videos <https://thebibleproject.com> !!!

Not Finished Yet I remember sitting in Reagan National Airport in 2017, killing time by listening to that week's episode of my favorite new podcast, "Revisionist History." The show was in its first season, and I liked all the episodes up to that point, but season one episode seven, titled "Hallelujah," was on another level. I listened to every episode of the first four seasons of Revisionist History, but kind of fell off during season five. It wasn't bad or anything, but a lot of habits changed in 2020, and my podcast listening went the way of my diet and waistline.

I haven't thought about Revisionist History much in the past five years, despite it still showing up in a long list of podcast episodes that hit my queue each week. Until recently, when I saw the title "Encore: Hallelujah." Turns out Gladwell is rereleasing his four favorite episodes, and this one was one of them.

If you haven't listened to it before, you should; it's great. But if you don't have time, the gist of the episode is this. Gladwell explores two different kinds of genius. One has sparks of innovation that produce something incredible quickly. The other unfolds over time with slower, iterative creations.

Conceptual innovators are people like Picasso and Bob Dylan. They are brilliant and can create things quickly and have a clear vision. Experimental innovators are people like Cezanne and

Elvis Costello. Their creations evolve through experimentation and refinement.

Gladwell reframes our understanding of success as more than instant revelation but as a process that often involves failure, patience, and multiple revisions.

His main illustration was the song Hallelujah, written by Leonard Cohen. It took Cohen five years to write Hallelujah. And when he released the first version, the song sounded so different from what we have all come to know today. In fact, he continued to tinker with the lyrics and later released another version that also failed to gain attention. That was until John Cale heard Cohen playing it live and decided to release a cover in 1991. Cale's version sounds a lot more like the version we all know because it is the version that inspired Jeff Buckley's rendition. For many, Buckley's is the quintessential version of Hallelujah. Others have done variations, some of the more famous being k.d. lang, Rufus Wainwright (the version from Shrek), Brandi Carlile, and many more. But most people are doing a cover of Buckley covering Cale's version. And one of the saddest ironies is that Buckley's version wasn't even popular when it was released.

Although it is excellent, it didn't get attention until his tragic drowning in the Mississippi River three years after he released the song.

Hallelujah is one of the most recognizable and truly great songs of the 20th century. But it was no flash in the pan. And it wasn't some brilliant idea that was perfect on the first take. Cohen began writing the song in 1979, he recorded it in 1984, and the song didn't become truly popular until 1997. It was an experimental innovation. It took iterations and time to become its best version.

And the reason why I loved this episode of the podcast so much, and didn't hesitate to relisten when it was rereleased, is because I think as much as this is a story about art, it is also a story about faith.

Faith is a lot more like Cezanne and Costello than Dylan and Picasso. Sure there are initial moments that happen early in our journey. They are electric and can set us on fire for the Lord.

But anyone who has been on The Way for a while can tell you those are rare. They are intense and wonderful, but they cannot sustain.

Justification is the moment of conceptual innovation where our hearts are strangely warmed, and we are set ablaze by the Holy Spirit. However, most of our journey is a lot of working things out. A lot of experimental innovation. It's as Eugene Peterson says, "A long obedience

in the same direction.”

If we expect the journey of faith to be constant sparks of life-changing revelation that reform our foundations of belief and existence, then the path of a Christian will never satisfy. We will turn down the wrong paths, seeking momentary fleeting pleasures to try and fulfill that desire.

We will begin to use, or follow, or worship temporary pleasures to give us a fix of emotional intoxication.

To truly follow Jesus means coming back to the same questions over and over again. It means rereading scriptures we’ve read dozens of times. It means going to church Sunday after Sunday and finding that the life of a true disciple exists in the iterative repetition of faithfulness.

And that is actually a good thing.

You see, matters of faith and even the life of a local church are not about how quickly we reach some imagined destination. Faith can’t follow the early Facebook creed of “moving fast and breaking things.” No, faith is methodical. It is transformational over time. Our faith journey is one of patience and persistence. It’s continuing even when things are hard. Because faith is a thing of eternity, and when our existence inhabits the realm of eternity, even after 10,000 years we will have “no fewer days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.”

So take that next step, and then take another. Don’t give up and don’t give in. Follow the path of righteousness and know, even if it seems hard at times, there is still no better path to take.

The beautiful moments I pray you experience are when, after years of faithfulness, years of seemingly taking baby step after baby step, you stop and look back. You look back on years of following Jesus and see a lifetime of travel that has led you further than you could have ever imagined. That one day you will look on the life you have lived with Jesus and see that God has been at work during each step of the journey, helping you draw closer to Him with every repetitive act of faithfulness.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Serenity Have you ever had moments when you are unsure what to pray?

Of course, you have. We all have.

There are times in life when the right words or even the motivation to pray elude us. Sure, some prayers roll off the tongue like a waterfall. But I can think of plenty of examples in my life where I desperately leaned into Paul's words from Romans, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."

In those times when I am hurting, scared, or unsure of what to pray, I am grateful that God saw fit to work through people long before I came around. We are not the first people to feel the things we feel, ask the questions we ask, or worry about the things we do. And one of the gifts of tradition is that we can look to the example of others about how to live, and act, and pray.

There is a prayer from our tradition that I lean on during those moments of muted uncertainty.

It's by Reinhold Niebuhr, a pastor and theologian in the twentieth century. It is a pretty famous and common prayer that has helped many people struggling with hurts, habits, and hangups for decades.

It goes like this, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

This prayer is offered at Celebrate Recovery, graduation ceremonies, and by parents all over the world! However, it was popularized in the 1940s by the group Alcoholics Anonymous. It became ubiquitous at their meetings and in the lives of the members. I have never been to an AA meeting, but my mom has. My mother has struggled with sobriety from drugs and alcohol for the past fifteen years. And I am proud to say that in May, earlier this year, she received her one-year sober chip for the first time, and my dad was there to present it to her. This aspect of our lives has been a long journey for our family, but during each of the ups and downs, this has been an important prayer.

There are four important aspects to this prayer. The first is that God can grant serenity. That's not a word we use very much. We tend to opt for peace, understanding, or patience. But there is something notable about serenity. It isn't just the absence of chaos; it's the presence of stillness within the soul. It's the kind of deep, settled state that can remain even when life is swirling around you. It's more gift than grit. Serenity doesn't necessarily fix your circumstances; it reframes them. It's not about everything being okay, it's about being okay

anyway.

In the prayer, the serenity God offers comes in three ways.

First, from the acceptance of things outside our control. We spend so much time being angry or yelling at the wind because of circumstances beyond our control. We cannot control others' behavior. We cannot turn back time or realign the stars. We will never find serenity if we can't accept that there are some things beyond our individual abilities to affect.

Second, there are things we can control, but to change them takes courage. Though it may seem counterintuitive, we can find serenity at the feet of courage. This is the part of the prayer I often reflect on the most. Not just recognizing what is changeable, but a need for courage to change it. Pastors can become paralyzed by problems, just like anyone else.

Sometimes I'd rather just go back to bed. Delegate a situation that needs change to someone else, or say, "That is 'Future Woods' problem." I can think of multiple examples when I said I don't have the time, energy, or capacity to deal with an issue. When in truth, the thing that prevented me from working for change was fear. Fear that it will be hard, or that I will fail. Fear that people won't listen or that they will misunderstand. So, in those moments, what I need more than anything else is courage to do hard things, to be who God has called me to be, and trust that the Holy Spirit will guide me.

Third, serenity is a gift of wisdom, and wisdom is a gift of God. Even from a young age, Solomon knew enough to know what he didn't know, which is why when beginning as king, he asked for wisdom. Wisdom allows us to discern what is real from our spiraling anxieties. When our minds race from fixating on unsolvable problems, wisdom grants us the capacity to let go and trust God. Wisdom is the product of Proverbs 3: "Trust in the Lord with your whole heart, lean not on your own understanding, acknowledge Him in all your ways, and He will direct your paths." Serenity is a gift of wisdom because wisdom allows us to see that the world does not rest on our shoulders, and our endless obsessions about things we cannot affect are meaningless toils.

So, TLDR: 1. Serenity = good. 2. There are things you can't control. 3. It takes courage to change the things you can. 4. Wisdom allows us to discern between the two and grants serenity through discovery.

The next time you are lost and unsure what to pray, I invite you to join the chorus of faithful Christians who have found comfort in these words. Don't be afraid to admit your needs and

trust that even when you are unsure, God will be there. I pray you will be able to let go of the things you can't control. That you will have the courage to change what you can, that God will grant you wisdom to know the difference, and through it all, you will find serenity.

Hey everyone, throughout this year our Vision Team has been asking: Where is God calling Spanish Fort United Methodist Church? the team began this process knowing we weren't just doing strategic planning—we were entering into a season of prayer, listening, and discernment, asking God to guide every conversation.

We started by reminding ourselves of something essential: this is God's church. The vision for our future isn't about personal preferences or keeping up with trends. It's about faithfully stepping into the mission Christ has given us, following the Holy Spirit's lead, and trusting that God's plans are always greater than our own.

Over the past several months, the Vision Team has spent many hours meeting together, studying our community, and listening to you. We sent out a church wide survey, and hosted in-home listening sessions with members of our congregation, representing every age group, ministry area, and worship service. We heard what you love about this church, where you've seen God move in powerful ways, and where you feel we can grow.

We talked about our strengths—the things we do well and the things that make Spanish Fort UMC feel like home. We also talked honestly about challenges—about places where we need more clarity, more unity, and more focus.

We prayed together before, during, and after these conversations. We read Scripture. We asked God to help us see not just what we might want to do, but what God wants us to do. And slowly, through those prayers and conversations, a clear picture began to emerge.

First, we agreed that the mission of our congregation should be the same as the mission of the United Methodist Church as a whole.

To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

This simple step not only connects us to our tradition but also simplifies why we do the things we do, and keeps us from having to redefine our why every few years. We are United Methodist and this is the mission of our denomination. It's not new—it's the same mission that's been guiding faithful Christians for generations—but it's just as vital today as it's ever been.

But mission alone doesn't capture our unique personality as a church or the way we live that mission out here in Spanish Fort. If the mission is the why, then vision is the how. So we prayed for a vision statement that would fit who we are in this season and where God is calling us—a sentence that could guide our ministries and help everyone know what we're aiming for together.

And we discerned that God is calling us, To be a home connecting all people through worship, service, fellowship, and discipleship, guided by Christ's love.

That word home is important. In Scripture, the people of God are often described as a household or a family. A home is more than a building—it's a place where you are welcomed, where you belong, where you're known and loved. We want to be that kind of church. Not just an organization that hosts events, but a spiritual home where anyone can walk in and feel, "I belong here."

To live into that vision, we've identified four ministry values that will guide everything we do:

Worship, Serve, Connect, and Grow. Let me share what each one means for us in this next season.

We are blessed to have two distinct worship services—one traditional and one contemporary.

Each has its own personality, music, and rhythm, and each helps people connect with God in meaningful ways. We heard over and over that our church values both, and that each service is an important part of who we are.

But we also know that people really like it when we offer combined services. We enjoy seeing people from other services, and the feeling of community when the whole sanctuary is full.

Currently, we offer six combined services a year, but they are always on holidays or Sundays, when more people are out of town. Moving forward, we want to create occasional combined worship services on days when we can all come together as one body, not just out of convenience. And when we do, we're going to make it a true celebration, often we will share a meal afterward so we can stay and enjoy life together around the table.

We also heard just how important service is to our church. We have a rich history of serving God and our community. Many years ago we started the prodisee pantry, and the uniform closet. Once we hosted the entire middle school for almost an entire spring semester. We still have incredible partners like Baldwin Family Village, Kidz Eat, and Family Promise to name

a few.

But one of the most exciting things to come out of our Vision Team is that we'll be launching something called Dinner Church. This will be a regular gathering where people who need it the most can come here and share a meal together, no strings attached. After dinner, there will be opportunities for people to attend groups and classes that meet real needs—things like Grief Share, AA, financial planning, parenting support, and more. And because we know family life can be hectic, we'll provide childcare so parents can fully participate.

In addition to Dinner Church, we'll also be creating a bi-annual thrift store. Twice a year we will invite the church and community to donate items for the sale. Before the doors open to the public, people in need will be able to come and take what they need at little to no cost. Then, when the sale opens to everyone, the proceeds will go directly to support our missions ministry.

So we've talked about Worship and Service, let's talk a bit about how we are all called to connect and grow.

The quick answer is that from now on everything we offer is called groups. We are not doing away with any of our current ministries, but streamlining all our adult offerings under one umbrella.

We believe relationships matter. We need to connect to one another—not just in worship, but in everyday life. That's why we're creating Fellowship Groups. These gatherings are designed for connection: things like supper clubs, and affinity groups around shared interests like woodworking or crafting, your group could center around game night, or knitting. If you are looking for your people, and a place to connect a fellowship group is a great place to start.

The other type of groups are discipleship groups—traditionally, we've called these things like Sunday school classes, Bible studies, pastor led classes, and small groups. But from now on they are all called Discipleship Groups. Some discipleship groups meet on Sunday mornings at 10:00 some meet for six weeks and are taught by a pastor on Sunday nights or Wednesday afternoon.

Regardless of the time, place, or structure, this realignment makes it clear that no matter the format, the purpose is the same: to help people grow as followers of Jesus. In the months ahead, we'll be launching new groups and encouraging every member to take a next step in their spiritual growth.

The last thing I want to share is something that is very far from a final plan, but the seeds of a new hope. One thing we heard over and over in every setting was a general dissatisfaction with the current layout of our physical campus. As such, in adopting this vision, the Church Council has directed the Trustees to form a building committee to explore how we might reimagine the use of our facilities. The Vision Team gave specific instructions that the committee should explore the possibility of consolidating our campus and creating a premier full-day child care program on our main campus. Currently, we have a wonderful preschool that meets half the day.

However, we heard many times that childcare is a huge need in our area, and the options are limited. So in an ideal scenario, we would come up with a plan that allows us to consolidate our campuses to one location, provide a service to the community that also generates revenue for the church, and has additional components that can be used by the congregation.

We do not expect this part of the vision to go quickly. We imagine it will take between 12 and 18 months just to generate a plan for our church to consider, let alone the time it will take to execute. Also, we recognize the ideal scenario might not be possible in our current economic climate, but we trust the building committee to explore all possibilities of how to best utilize the resources God has given us.

Outside the work of the building committee, most the initiatives from our Vision Team will launch in the first quarter of 2026, but we aren't waiting until January to begin. We're already taking steps to prepare, to organize, and to invite people to get involved.

Church, this is God's vision for us. It's not just a plan we came up with—it's the result of months of prayer, conversation, and listening for the Spirit's guidance. And as we step into this next season, we will keep praying, keep listening, and keep seeking God's direction together.

Over the next few weeks, you'll have the opportunity to make a commitment—to recommit yourself to the life and mission of this church, not only with your finances, but with your prayers, your presence, your service, and your witness. I hope you will pray about what that commitment means to you and your family.

We believe God is calling Spanish Fort UMC to be a home—a place where all people can find connection, purpose, and the love of Christ. And there's always room for one more in this house.

So never forget, you are welcome here, and we hope you'll join us on this journey!

I have mentioned this before, but something I struggle with is the concept of God's provision. I believe in it, but I don't understand it. And more than that, I am often suspicious of people when they claim to have received it. This week, I find myself again wrestling with the idea, and I am very close to becoming a walking double standard. Because once again, I have been struck by a situation that I can only describe as God providing.

Earlier this year, I told you that God clearly provided for our church when unexpected revenue came in in the form of IRS payments that we'd been waiting on for years. These funds covered our planned deficit. We went into this year expecting to have a deficit and planned to cover our overages from money in savings. However, back in 2021, Ted Langley applied for pandemic-related aid on behalf of the church, and though it was approved, it was delayed multiple times.

However, when we least expected it, those funds came in right when we needed them the most. The amount delivered and the timing of the receipt seemed too perfect to be anything other than God providing.

Now, I am once again giving thanks because of divine timing. I have loved working with all our staff, and serving with this amazing team has been a highlight of my ministry. It was a blessing when Robin Ross came to work with us, and I have enjoyed having her work next to my office this past year. It was also heartwarming, while also sad, that when she told me she had accepted a new job, she also said she was joining the church. It was encouraging to know that in this congregation, Robin didn't just find an employer, she also found a church home.

So I am glad Robin will still be around, but I am equally glad that the Lord saw fit to align the perfect timing with her successor. The day after Robin told me she was resigning, Margie Walters walked into my office to talk about her interest in helping with a new missions ministry we are launching (that you'll hear more about on Sunday). She told me she was transitioning out of her full-time role as the Director of Baldwin Family Village and would have some time to help with this new endeavor. And as we were talking, I said, "Well, would you like to make your involvement in this new ministry a facet of a part-time job and step into the role of our Executive Assistant?" Although the skies didn't part and the sun beams didn't come down, it sure felt like they did. For both of us, it felt so right — so divine. And we affirmed that the timing and the sense of peace had to be a product of the Holy Spirit's involvement.

Ultimately, I don't know how, when, or why God chooses to act/provide if and when He does. I am always suspicious when someone attributes something arbitrary to divine intervention. I

don't think God causes sports teams to win or lose. I am hesitant to give God the credit when I hit one straight off the tee. I don't think God sends hurricanes to punish people or uses gambling wins as a means of rewarding someone with financial riches. I am much slower than maybe I should be to chalk something up to the work of the Holy Spirit. The reception of the IRS funds was a product of Ted Langley putting in hard work on our behalf, but I do think the timing was God's. Likewise, Robin has been a great employee who is moving to the perfect situation for her, but it seems more than a coincidence that the exact type of person we need at this moment walked into my office the very next day.

I will always pray for God's provision and look for it in our lives. I may not understand it, nor can I explain it. But I guess that's why it's a part of faith. After all, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In the end, I am just excited that Margie is coming to work at the church beginning September 3rd, and I know she is going to be a huge blessing to our office, just as she and her family have been to our congregation for years.

If you see Robin around, be sure to tell her "thank you!" And if you see Margie, be sure to tell her "welcome" (even though she's already been here a long time)!

My son, Bradshaw, was escorted to the car by his teacher this week. Teachers escorting a child to the car is rarely a good thing. It turns out that our new kindergartner has needed to be redirected a bit since starting school. On Wednesday, he ran out of his classroom, down the hall, and when caught, he laid down on the ground, kicking and whining that he wanted his sister — that part is kind of sweet.

It's ironic that Bradshaw is the mild-mannered, quiet kid at home. He is respectful, kind, and plays independently. But out and about, at church, and now school, you would think he's auditioning for Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*. However, our oldest child, August, is the exact opposite. At home, she is prone to meltdowns, easily aggravated, and dislikes anything involving physical activity. However, everything we have heard from her teachers and Sunday school leaders throughout her life is that she is exceptionally respectful, well-mannered, and kind.

As cliché as it is, no two kids, even in the same family, are the same. Scientists have asked for centuries whether nature or nurture plays a bigger role in their development, and you can read papers arguing for each. However, one thing is true about every young person living in America today: they are all growing up in a world that is very different from every generation before them.

Each generation has faced unique challenges, and every age group has had struggles particular to their time of adolescence. Yet, I think the environment our young people currently experience is the most seismic shift from the one that came before than any generation has had to navigate before. I don't necessarily mean to say that it is the hardest. This generation, like the past few, has not watched tens of thousands of people get drafted and sent to war. They have access to running water, electricity, and modern medical care. I suspect the generation that was born right before the great depression or the black death has a stronger case that their childhood was harder.

But I do believe the chasm of experience between those born after 1997 and those born before is wider than any two generations in history. And this is not a unique opinion; there is a lot of evidence that suggests as much. Some of the more compelling evidence about the generational age gap and the potential harms facing young people is what inspired me to lead a new class this fall. "Faith and Phones" begins September 14th, with a setup/preview as a part of the Raising Young Disciples Event on September 7th. This class is aimed to help anyone investing in young people better aid them in navigating their lives and faith in a world inundated with screens.

Let me be clear, though, I am not an expert on raising young people. Often when I teach classes at the church, I act in a capacity of "theologian in residence." When teaching on the Bible or matters of faith, it is usually assumed the pastor is trained and the most educated on the subject, and therefore most qualified to teach. However, in this church, there are better parents than me, teachers who know more than I do, and sage people who have been around young people and have wisdom to share.

This class is not me saying, I have done the best version of parenting and now I know all the things, so just do what I do. As indicated by the beginning of this letter, we are figuring things out as we go! Rather, our time together will be an exploration into shaping young people, with specific attention on how technology is impacting human development. Instead of relying on anecdotal experiences alone, we will consider thoughts put forth by knowledgeable sources such as Andy Crouch, Lisa Damour, John Burn-Murdoch, Jonathan Haidt, Derek Thompson, Richard Freed, and Anya Kamenetz. We will pair some of their work with lessons from scripture and discuss the ways the modern world intersects with principles in the Bible. We will offer stories and testimonies of successes and failures about how we navigate technology. And we will try to discover how we can lead our students to live healthy and fulfilled lives.

Whether you are a parent, grandparent, or simply a faithful follower of Jesus who wants to better understand the intersection of faith and technology, I hope you will join us on Sunday nights, September 14th - October 19th, at 5:30 PM.

Grace and Peace, Woods

You should go to Family Camp!

My message today is simple: what are you waiting for? Sign up for Family Camp.

This is not “families with young kids camp,” or “large families camp” — the term “Family” means “Church Family.” This weekend away is for everyone, regardless of age, family size, or membership tenure.

I am thrilled that we are partnering with Dauphin Way United Methodist for our Family Camp this Fall. My sister Gillian and I are thankful that the churches we serve have this opportunity to join together for a life-giving weekend. November 14-16, we will head to Blue Lake in Andalusia for a very simple and relaxing weekend away. Family Camp is one of my favorite experiences as a pastor, and I recommend it to everyone. It is relaxing, low-stakes, and stress-free. There is a huge room full of snacks, and I eat more junk food than one would think possible. You can get there as early as Friday afternoon, or you can wait to come Friday night after football and other activities have wrapped up. There will probably still be people away playing cards when you get there!

During the weekend, you are able to unplug from the busyness of the fall calendar and enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit. The kids all play together, and the adults are actually able to have meaningful conversations. Church members whose kids are grown and out of the house are able to pour into the next generation, and singles are able to find new connections with people both in and out of their phase of life.

I never worry about where my kids are when we're at Family Camp, I know they are safe and having fun. Everyone pitches in with coraling when necessary, and there is a nursery for the youngest during the brief lesson(s) on Saturday. Over the course of the weekend, we worship, share communion, play family games, and have a lot of free time.

I don't need to have a crystal ball to know that you need to go to Family Camp. It can benefit everyone. If I can make a pitch for you to do any single event this Fall, the top of my list would be setting aside November 14-16 to join us at Blue Lake. Do it so that your family has a chance to reset, or so that you can individually rest, or so that all of us can build deeper relationships with God and one another.

If you have questions or want to know more, give me a call. I truly hope you will sign up. I promise you won't regret it!

Grace and Peace, Woods

English is a complicated language. Just ask anyone learning it for the first time. Words that sound the same are spelled differently. Others are spelled the same but mean entirely different things.

There's there, their, and they're. Deer and dear. Bear and bare. Led sounds like lead, but it is the past tense of lead, which is a command, not a metal. A bat can be a winged mammal or something you swing at a baseball. Content can describe your emotional state or the stuff inside your backpack. I once argued that it would be fair for my parents to take me to the fair.

Yeah. English can be confusing.

But it becomes even more so when the practical meaning of a word isn't found in Merriam-Webster but rather in how it's used by different people in different places. The same word can mean one thing to you and something entirely different to me. That's not just semantics; that's sociology, psychology, and theology all rolled into one.

These words with slippery meanings are often called buzzwords, terms that say as much about the speaker's background or worldview as they do about the actual topic. In business, we have words like synergy and brand. In politics, terms like conservative and liberal can start a conversation or end it. And in the church, we've got plenty of our own multi-meaning words.

Certain theological terms, depending on who says them, how they're used, and what tone accompanies them, can light up your mental dashboard with assumptions. When I hear "sovereignty" used multiple times in a sentence, or "grace" spoken with a certain flair, I start listening with a more curious ear. Not because those words are wrong, but because they often carry deeper signals; it's like theological shorthand.

Here's my issue: I don't think we should surrender certain words just because they've been overused, weaponized, or distorted by others. I believe some buzzwords still hold deep, meaningful truths about who God is and what it means to be the Church. But if we're going to use them, let's be honest about what they mean, and what they don't.

There are five theological buzzwords I want to revisit. Let's reclaim what's worth keeping and critique what needs refining.

1. Sovereign

Most Christians affirm that God is sovereign, but in some circles, the word does a lot more work than others. For many Calvinists, especially Reformed Calvinists, God's sovereignty is

the starting point and the backbone of their theology. Every event, every decision, every outcome is predetermined by the will of God.

In a Methodist or Episcopal context, the word might show up, but it is rarely the starting place.

God's sovereignty is real, but it's expressed through self-limitation. God could control everything, but chooses not to. God invites partnership. Sovereignty, in this view, isn't about determinism; it's about power expressed through love, not control.

I affirm God's sovereignty, but through the lens of Christ. The clearest expression of divine power is the cross, where God chooses surrender. Sovereignty doesn't have to mean predestination or a power that generates fear. It can mean choosing to honor our agency and inviting us into redemption freely.

So when you hear someone really lean into the notion of God's sovereignty, God's control, it can often say more about them and their theological convictions, just as someone who leans heavily into God's grace says something about them. Which brings me to our next word...

2. Grace

If sovereignty is the anthem of Calvinism, grace is the heartbeat of Methodism.

We love grace. We preach it, teach it, sing about it, and design our entire theological framework around it. There is the prevenient grace that goes before us, the justifying grace that saves us, and the sanctifying grace that leads us on.

But Methodists don't have the market cornered on grace. And I have to admit, sometimes grace comes off a little too squishy. It can be misheard as leniency or passivity. Critics accuse Methodists of being "soft" on sin because of our deep trust in God's mercy. And sometimes... that's fair. The pendulum can swing too far.

But grace, real grace, is not permissiveness. As Randy Maddox teaches in his concept of "responsible grace," grace doesn't cancel accountability; it enables it. God's grace convicts.

"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." As Paul said to the Romans, "To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law."

God's grace convicts us of our sin. Grace disciplines. Grace gives us the power to change, and then changes us. It's not a free pass, it's a sacred path. Grace forgives, yes, but it also

transforms.

3. Inclusive

Now we're wading into murky waters.

"Inclusive" is one of those words that can spark celebration or suspicion, depending on your background. For some, it signals radical hospitality and a commitment to welcome all people.

For others, it signals a compromise of theological convictions.

But here's the thing: Jesus was radically inclusive. He broke social barriers. He welcomed sinners. He elevated women. He dined with tax collectors. He touched lepers. He included the excluded, without compromising the truth of God's call to transformation.

To be inclusive doesn't mean abandoning Scripture. It means imitating Jesus. It means building a table where all are welcomed and challenged. It means understanding that grace and truth are not opposites but dance partners. Being inclusive is not a laissez-faire invitation to say anything goes. Inclusion without discipleship becomes indulgence. But discipleship without inclusion becomes legalism.

The Church must hold both inclusion and discipleship. If God's love is for everyone, then our church should be too.

4. Bible-Believing

This might be my pet peeve.

I love the Bible. I believe in the Bible. I preach the Bible. But in certain circles, when someone says they are a "Bible-believing Christian," they often mean more than just affirmation of Scripture; they mean a specific interpretation of Scripture.

That phrase has become a kind of shorthand for literalism, inerrancy, and often, a rejection of historical-critical scholarship. And by that definition, many people would say I don't "really" believe the Bible.

But I do. Deeply.

To be Bible-believing doesn't mean we read the text like a science manual or a legislative code.

It means we read it as God's inspired word, through the lenses of genre, culture, covenant, and most of all, Jesus. I believe the Bible points us to the Living Word, Christ himself. And if our interpretation of Scripture doesn't look like Jesus...we're probably reading it wrong.

5. Evangelical

This is a beautiful word. It comes from the Greek word euangelion and literally translates to English as "good news" or "gospel." It was tied to the mission of the Church to proclaim and embody the Gospel.

Today, evangelical often describes a sociopolitical identity more than a spiritual one. It's been absorbed into partisan rhetoric. In many polls, "evangelical" now tells you more about someone's voting record than their view of the resurrection. And to be honest, we have seen a degradation of the term as more and more self-proclaimed evangelicals are decreasing their religious participation.

Recent research from Ryan Burge (a professor at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis) reveals that: 1. Self-identified evangelicals are attending church less frequently. 2. The number of self-identified evangelicals who seldom or never go to church is increasing.

This is to say that the word continues to grow in popularity as an identity, while the religious participation of those who claim it is decreasing. I don't point this out to disparage the term, or even the individuals who claim to be evangelical and don't go to church. Rather, to point out that language shifts and when the gospel becomes a political football, we all lose.

Ultimately, I don't want to have to be liberal to be inclusive or conservative to be evangelical when Jesus calls me to be both, because He was!

So what do we do with all these words?

We redeem them. We use them carefully. We teach them clearly. And we never forget that words matter, but the Word made flesh matters more.

I am an evangelical, Bible-believing, inclusive Christian who knows that God is sovereign and full of grace. If you follow the rhetoric of the world, it would seem like all those things can't be true at the same time. But when you dig deeper, you realize that most buzzwords mean more than they appear at first glance.

Let's not surrender language to fear or tribalism. Let's speak with grace, with clarity, and with the kind of love that neither waters down the truth nor weaponizes it. Because at the end of the day, the Church isn't about buzzwords.

It's about Good News.

And that's a word worth sharing.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Dear Church, On behalf of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, we are delighted to share some exciting news with you. After prayerful discernment and a thorough search process, we are pleased to announce the hiring of Sean Harnas as our new Youth Minister at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church.

Sean comes to us with a strong background in ministry and a heart for walking alongside young people in their journey of faith. For nearly a decade, he served as a Youth Pastor in Pensacola, where he ministered to students in grades 7–12 and developed strong discipleship and leadership programs. Beyond his church ministry, Sean has also invested in students as a high school soccer coach and teacher, bringing both passion and encouragement to the next generation.

Sean earned his Bachelor of Theology from Oral Roberts University, followed by a Master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy, graduating with honors. He is currently serving as a Registered Marriage and Family Therapist Intern, working with couples, families, teens, and individuals. His approach to ministry and counseling is both strengths-based and relational, focusing on helping people cultivate healthy relationships.

Sean and his wife, Vanessa, were married in 2008 and have four children: Jady, Gracie, Lily, and Ezra. When not pouring into students or counseling families, Sean enjoys time with his family, coaching on the soccer field, and surfing.

As with all new hires at Spanish Fort UMC, Sean will begin with a 90-day probationary period. Because Sean will continue serving as a therapist in Pensacola, we will be especially intentional during this time of reflection. We hope to ensure that he is able to support his family and maintain his personal health while providing the presence and leadership we are looking for in a youth minister. We believe being intentional in prayer and reflection during his first three months will set both Sean and our youth ministry up for long-term success.

We are confident that Sean's gifts and experience will be a tremendous blessing to our entire church. He will officially begin next Sunday, September 7th. He will be at Remedy and stop by to meet our parents during the Raising Young Disciples event in the Fellowship Hall at 5:30. We look forward to welcoming him, his wife, and their children into the Spanish Fort UMC family.

Please be in prayer for Sean and his family as they make this transition, and join us in giving them a warm SFUMC welcome!

With gratitude, Lynn Langley Chair, Staff-Parish Relations Committee Rev. Dr. Woods Lisenby Senior Pastor I often get the question, “How do we know if something is God’s will?” I love this question because it shows a genuine desire to know and follow God’s will. And I also love it because our entire journey as Christ followers is really about learning to discern and align our will with God’s. There’s no stage of faith where we stop listening for God’s leading. As my favorite quote from Eugene Peterson goes, the Christian life is “a long obedience in the same direction.” But that direction often winds, twists, and bends, and we need the Spirit’s light to guide the path.

Every time I teach a new member class, I spend time talking about how United Methodists understand the movements of the Holy Spirit. Which is another way of asking, What is God’s will? We believe the Holy Spirit is active and alive, working on our behalf, comforting the hurting, guiding the faithful, and revealing truth. As the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit makes known to us what is most true and right about how we are to live.

So, discerning God’s will begins with attuning our hearts and minds to the Spirit’s movement. In our tradition, we do this by engaging Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Methodist-nerds call that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a framework for listening to the Spirit’s voice.

If you’re searching for the Spirit’s leading, start with an openness to Scripture. Don’t come with an agenda, bending the Bible to your will. Instead, let the Word transform you. Let the text read you more than you read it.

I love the Bible. I believe in the Bible. I preach the Bible. But I also know that when people say “Bible-believing Christian,” it often means more than a love for Scripture — it’s usually shorthand for a very specific interpretation of Scripture. Too often, it implies literalism, inerrancy, or a rejection of historical-critical scholarship. And by that definition, some might say I don’t “really” believe the Bible.

But I do. Deeply.

To be Bible-believing doesn’t mean treating Scripture like a science manual or legislative code.

It means reading it as God’s inspired word through the lenses of genre, covenant, culture, and most of all, Jesus. The Bible points us to the Living Word, Christ himself. If our interpretation doesn’t look like Jesus, then we’re probably reading it wrong.

From there, we bring Scripture into conversation with the traditions that have shaped the faith.

By “tradition,” we don’t just mean United Methodism — we mean the great cloud of witnesses across time and place: the holy catholic (universal) church. We stand on the shoulders of Anglicans, Catholics, Armenians, Orthodox thinkers, Reformers, and Jewish writers whose reflections have shaped the faith we inherit. We are not the first to wrestle with questions of faith, suffering, justice, or hope. Others have walked this path before us, and we draw from their wisdom and their encounters with the Spirit.

And through it all, we use reason. God never asks us to check our brains at the door. United Methodism has always been a tradition that values honest questions and meaningful conversation, even when we don’t agree. Critical thinking and respectful disagreement are not threats to faith but evidence that our faith is alive.

Which brings us to experience. Our actions, and the actions of others, create experiences we must discern: Is this of God? Am I walking in God’s will? Is what I’m seeing in someone else’s life aligned with God’s Spirit?

The first thing I’ll say about experience is that it requires community. Imagine if two people say, ‘God told them something was true,’ but the things each person heard were polar opposites and contradict each other. Then, who decides what’s true? The Bible tells us that the Church is where truth is discerned. For centuries, communities of faith have tested, confirmed, and corrected one another. Our culture leans toward radical individualism, but discipleship calls us to submit to something greater than ourselves: the body of Christ.

So, how do we know if something is God’s will?

Here’s the test: if you are seeking the Spirit through Scripture, Reason, Tradition, and Experience, and if you are discerning alongside trusted people in the Church, then there will be evidence.

And that evidence is fruit.

If it’s of God, it will bear the fruit of the Spirit. Those fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If your words, decisions, or actions cultivate these fruits, they are likely in line with God’s will. If they don’t, if they instead produce hate, violence, cruelty, oppression, slander, or malice, then they are not of God.

So ask yourself: do my words and actions bear fruit? Do people experience love, patience, and kindness from me? Do they see faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in me? If so, you're walking in step with the Spirit.

If not, you may just have a fridge full of bad grapes that need cleaning out.

As much as I don't like them, I have come to appreciate the truth of clichés. I used to think of myself as too cool and original for the common sayings and tropes of life. But the older I get, the more I realize how factual the collective wisdom of humanity actually is. I now accept that when it comes to parenting, all the clichés are true. You'll never be more tired...No two kids are the same, even when raised the same...etc.

And it's not just parenting; broad clichés about life are equally true. Like, practice makes perfect.

I am a better writer and preacher for having done both a lot. The phrase actions speak louder than words echoes the classic words of the Apostle James, who said, "Faith without works is dead." But the two clichés I've been sitting with the most this last week are life is fragile and ignorance is bliss.

Before last week, a fact of which I was ignorant is that a "cornual (interstitial) pregnancy is observed in approximately 2-4% of cases involving ectopic pregnancies. A cornual gestation is considered to be a highly perilous and potentially life-threatening form of ectopic pregnancy, with a mortality rate that is two to five times more than that of other types of ectopic pregnancies" (National Library of Medicine). Ignorance was bliss, and I am glad I didn't know last week what I know now, because if I had, my anxieties would have been significantly higher before Brianna's surgery. My fear only skyrocketed after the doctors and nurses explained everything to me.

Last Thursday, Brianna felt bad enough to get checked out by a doctor, which was a big red flag for me. My wife is the toughest person I know, and if she says she needs to get checked out, I know it has to be serious. We were fairly convinced that she had appendicitis based on the location, only to find out that she was pregnant for a fifth time. While we were stunned, we quickly shifted into the "ok, now what" phase. We started talking about preschool, car situations, and all the things. I told her that I hoped it was a girl to even things out and that I wanted to name her Clementine or Evangeline, good southern names that she'd ruled out in the past. All the while, we were apprehensive about the pain she felt. Then the doctor told us that the pregnancy was ectopic, it had ruptured, and that Brianna was bleeding internally. She was

immediately transferred to USA Children's and Women's via ambulance. She was prepped and sent back to surgery in just a few hours. In less than a workday's time, we went from having another baby to losing a second in pregnancy, all while Brianna's life was in as much jeopardy as it has ever been.

I am thankful for the ignorance I had in the few hours before and during Bri's surgery. But in the aftermath of last week, I have been thinking every day about just how fragile life is. Just how close I was to not having my life partner and my kids not having their mother. And how quickly we went from welcoming new life to losing it. I am grateful for my three children; they are wonderful. And the thought of having two other children we will not meet on this side of eternity is heartbreaking.

Between Brianna's situation and another baby never to be born, I was reminded all over again that life is fragile.

That fact has continued to be reinforced these last couple of days, not only because of what we went through, but also because of the death of Charlie Kirk, and the ensuing conversations around political violence that have dominated the news and social media. That might be an odd transition, but while sitting in the hospital room and at home, I was trying to keep up with the events of last week.

I didn't mention Charlie Kirk's assassination on Sunday during worship, not because of an intentional decision not to. But by the time we got home from the hospital on Saturday afternoon, my entire focus was on my wife and kids. When she went to sleep, I reviewed the sermon I wrote earlier in the week and went over the music I would lead in the contemporary service the next day, since Andy was out of town.

I am not sure if anyone was upset that I did not bring it up on Sunday. This week, I read a lot of back and forth on the internet about pastors being criticized for not talking about it, and others who were celebrated for bringing it up. I also noticed that some pastors were criticized for discussing it, while others were praised for not mentioning it. I'll be honest and say that my attention was split on Sunday. As I was still trying to process the previous couple of days of chaos in our family, I tried to shift my focus to preaching both services and leading the band at 11:00. I tend to be pretty one-track-minded on Sunday mornings. So, if you came to church expecting your pastor to speak into the turmoil of the week, I apologize if you felt like I let you down.

As I have been processing my family's experience and watching our country process the events of last week, I am not sure what I have to offer that hasn't already been said by someone wiser, more spiritual, or more thoughtful than I am. Like everyone, my heart breaks for Erika Kirk and for their two children. I felt the fear only for a moment that she now lives with for a lifetime.

When I was in the recovery room after cancer surgery, my wife had a similar fearful experience when a blood vessel in my throat blew out, and they had to take me back for an emergency second surgery. The last word she got before I passed out was a text from me saying, "I'm having a hard time breathing." Then she didn't hear from me or the doctors for forty-five minutes.

We've now each had similar experiences. And the fear of something happening to you pales in comparison to potentially losing someone you love. Erika has had to experience that reality in a way that no person should ever have to. And I pray that the Holy Spirit comforts her in a way only God can.

For many, Charlie Kirk's killing and the conversations that followed have made life feel even more fragile. I am not stepping out on a limb by saying that, as a society, we have become desensitized to death and violence. We are inundated with news stories of school shootings, mass murders, and a robust recent history of political violence including, "the assassination of Brian Thompson, the health care executive, the assassination of Minnesota House Speaker and her husband, the shooting of a Minnesota state senator and his wife, the attempted assassination of President Donald Trump, the attack on Nancy Pelosi's home and her husband, and a plot to kidnap and kill the governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer." Too often, these stories are just that, stories. They live in the abstract until they happen to someone we know or care about. But last week, it was obvious that a heinous act of violence moved from the collective subconscious and gripped the hearts and minds of our country. Our brains were shocked awake to life's fragility and the atrocious reality of violence and murder.

Murder is appalling. Senseless violence, political violence, and violence born of hatred are abhorrent. These things break the heart of God and should break ours as well. In the kingdom of God, these things do not exist, and our hearts yearn for God's kingdom. We all long for a day when there will be no weeping, no sorrow, no hurting, and no pain. When the kingdom of God is fully made known on earth as it is in heaven. The day when every knee will bow and tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

On that day, there will be no more murders or ectopic pregnancies. No more crimes or cancer. No more loss of any kind and no more hatred or fear. And until that day, it is the calling of Christ's followers to work against all the evils of this world. To speak out against violence and not become desensitized to senseless killings of any kind. Our churches are to be a place of welcome and healing for those who have gone through traumas, and a place of cultivating healthy children and adults who work to make this world better.

For those who have been struggling with making sense of violence and/or the discourse of the past week. For those who long for a better world but are losing hope in the face of overwhelming circumstances. For those who were wondering why your pastor hasn't weighed in while so many others have. Let me offer you the most compelling and comforting words I can. It was the text my sister read after my grandfather took his own life in 2011. It was the scripture passage that we held onto, and continue to hold onto in our darkest moments. It comes from Paul's letter to the Romans, and I have nothing more true or profound I could give you than what the Bible offers us in this selection.

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. 19 The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. 20 Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. 22 We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. 23 And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. 24 We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? 25 But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience. 26 In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. 27 The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. 28 We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

- Romans 8:18-28 (CEB)

I pray you will know that whatever pain we experience now pales in comparison to the goodness God has for our future. But as you wait with the sorrows that come from living in a fallen world, you will discover that God is with you. And when you don't know what to pray,

know that the Spirit intercedes on your behalf. Don't give up hope. And trust that God can make good come from anything. No matter what.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Cc 9-25 I love the fall and the new rhythms that come with it. I love football Saturdays, the beginning of cooler weather, and our regular Sunday evening programming. Little Lights, Shine Kids, Connect, Remedy, and Adult Discipleship Groups are all back in full swing, and I couldn't be more excited about it. Thank you to our volunteers helping with children's and youth ministry.

Thank you to those who are participating in the "faith and phones" Discipleship Group, and to all who are serving on a Sunday morning during worship. So many people serve in various capacities throughout our church. Sometimes it's hard to even remember just how many different areas of ministry we offer, and how many people are serving in each. However, I am constantly impressed by the time and effort our church members put in each and every week to support the ministries we offer.

I also want to say thank you and welcome Sean Harnas and Margie Walters. They both joined our church staff over the past month and are already doing great work. Sean has had fruitful Sunday nights at Remedy, and began a new morning Bible study before school once a week. I have been grateful for his initiative and willingness to dive into the deep end with both feet.

Margie has adapted quickly to our administrative systems and processes. She is already continuing Robin's work to manage our ShelbyNext database, schedule baptisms and weddings, and help manage ongoing events. Likewise, she and Pastor Sarah are in the creative brainstorming phase of planning Dinner Church, and it is exciting to hear all the things they are excited about.

Lastly, just a big round of applause for all of our new leaders who will be installed in January.

For the first time in my tenure, we have every position in our committee structure nominated and accepted, including a brand-new Study/Building Committee. Our new and returning leaders are committed to providing transparent and effective leadership for our congregation, and I could not be more grateful for their commitment. Nothing around here is the work of a single person; it takes the whole body to do the work of the Church. I am thankful for the ways our congregation steps up to serve and pour out for Jesus and others.

If you ever want to know more about our congregation or have questions, I hope you will join me on Sunday mornings at 10:00 right inside the Fellowship Hall for a time to meet with a pastor and talk about whatever is on your mind. Hope to see you soon!

Grace and Peace, Woods

Before jumping into this week's note, I just want to say once again, thank you. I usually revise my Friday emails on Thursday nights after the kids go to bed. However, for the second time this week, and the third time since the 11th, Brianna and I find ourselves back at Children's and Women's Hospital. I am writing this section from our room after spending the night in the ER.

Thankfully, things are progressing well, and she is expected to be discharged tomorrow. But when things were moving fast last night, it was once again our family, and this congregation, who were with us through it all. Pastor Mike came up to pray with me at 10:00 p.m. last night.

Our staff was checking in all night. And countless members from our congregation were texting and praying with us.

So, although I would rather Brianna not continue having these types of experiences, this congregation's actions only further solidify my thoughts for this week.

Thank you for being the Church.

What is the Church?

I guess it depends on who you ask or the context. Sometime between 1050 and 1350, the Germans created the word kirche which became how most of the world understood what a church is. Kirche means "church building." 6690 Spanish Fort Blvd. Spanish Fort, Alabama 36527 is a kirche. However, before there was kirche there was the Greek word ekklesia. And ekklesia wasn't a location, it was a movement. In Greek, ekklesia means "assembly."

A kirche (church) is there whether there are any people present or not. But you can't have an ekklesia (Church) without the body of believers. The Church (ekklesia) might meet in a church (kirche), but the Church (ekklesia) is not any one church (kirche).

If that's too convoluted, just remember the old hymn, "I am the church! You are the church!

We are the church together! All who follow Jesus, all around the world! Yes, we're the church together!... The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple; the church is not a resting place; the church is a people."

The past two weeks, my family and I have been reminded just how much of a blessing it is to belong to the Church. Spanish Fort United Methodist is more than the buildings at the corner of 31 and 225. It is the Discipleship Groups that gave us DoorDash Gift cards. The families that brought us lasagnas and casseroles. And the countless individuals who have called and

sent texts/letters. Thank you for being the Church to our family.

I hope everyone can experience the joy of belonging to the Church. To feel love, support, kindness, and generosity, we have felt. If you or anyone you know is looking for a place to belong, I hope you know, or will tell them, that there is a congregation in Spanish Fort full of incredible people who would love to welcome them.

As we conclude our Vision Series, Welcome Home, this Sunday, I hope you will join us in recommitting (or committing for the first time) to being part of the Church. And that, as we do, we make specific efforts to live out the calling of God for the Church in this local congregation.

Together we will promise God and one another our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. Each year, we remake this commitment as a way of affirming our desire to be the Church. We are celebrating that we are not a dead institution, but a living, breathing community transformed by God's grace.

This year, specifically, is about rallying around the vision God has given us for how best to be the Church God has called us to be. We believe God is calling us "to be a place connecting all people through worship, service, fellowship, and discipleship, guided by Christ's love."

As United Methodists, our mission is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." And as the people who gather together at 6690 Spanish Fort Blvd. We believe the best way for us to do that is to make sure everyone knows they have a home here. To proclaim to the whole world that they are welcome. And we want everyone to know that in this Church there is a place to worship together, to pour out for others, to make meaningful life-long relationships, and to grow deeper in our knowledge of Jesus Christ.

This Church is alive and excited about the future. I am proud to pastor a congregation that values being a part of the Church. A congregation that looks beyond itself and asks, "What does our community need? How can we serve? Who needs an invitation to know they belong?"

This whole year, it has been exciting to dream about what is next, and to hear from you about where you see God at work. And now that we are here, on the eve of committing to this vision together, I invite you to pray. Pray about how God will use you in this next season. Where is God calling you to step up and serve? How are you going to be more present in worship and discipleship? Are you going to lead a Fellowship Group or a Discipleship Group? Will you make a financial commitment to this congregation for the first time? Are you ready to jump

into the choir or contemporary worship team? The children's and youth ministries would love to have you. The dinner church will need your help. Kidz Eat, Family Promise, Baldwin Family Village, and Disaster Relief efforts are always looking for more people to jump in.

If you are committing to the Church, then I hope you will pray about how God is calling you to take that commitment seriously. To make the Church a thing of true importance in your life, and not just another in a long line of commitments. That you will see this congregation as the place, and more importantly, the people, who are going to help you be who God has called you to be.

I hope you will join us as we seek to be the Church of Jesus Christ together.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Yesterday, I texted Rev. Mike and Rev. Sarah at 4:30 a.m. and told them I wouldn't be able to attend worship, and asked them to cover for me. It was supposed to be commitment Sunday, but they had to audible on the spot. I could not be more grateful for them, our staff, our church, and our family for stepping up when we've needed them lately. To say things have been chaotic the past few weeks is a bit of an understatement, but yesterday was the scariest part so far.

We first came to the Children's and Women's Hospital on the 11th after we went to the freestanding ER on Hillcrest for what we thought was appendicitis. We soon found out Brianna was pregnant. We had no idea. I mean, she'd just placed 2nd in our triathlon four days before!

They told us we were expecting our fourth child, and then two hours later, she was taken by ambulance for an emergency surgery because the pregnancy was ectopic, it had ruptured, and she was bleeding internally. Asher and Blair sat with me throughout the entire surgery, well into the evening. After surgery, the doctor told me it was a cornual ectopic pregnancy, and the rupture was the largest she'd ever seen. They had to remove a quarter of her uterus, but after a few days in the hospital, we went home to recover.

Although she improved, Bri never fully got better. Then last Monday, her OB advised us to go back to the hospital because of possible further internal bleeding. We spent all that day getting scans, and eventually they told us she had an 8cm hematoma. Thankfully, she didn't have to go back under for complete surgery. They drained it bedside and sent us home. She spent the next few days packing the wound at home, and a sweet church member, Ali, even came by to help.

Then on Wednesday night, she started having a fever. It persisted, and Thursday night we were advised to go back to the hospital. When we got here, they did an ultrasound that showed more internal bleeding, and they were immediately preparing to take her back to surgery. Micah Wright came to be with us and stay with me if she was going to have surgery. Pastor Mike came and prayed with us at 10:00 PM before we thought she was going back. However, after an additional CT scan, they determined that what they had thought was blood could actually just be fluid, and there was no active bleeding. However, she had an infection and some inflammation in her bowel. After thirteen hours in the ER, they admitted us to a room and started her on IV antibiotics.

She really perked up on Friday night and was doing well most of Saturday, so they switched her to a solid diet and oral antibiotics. However, she began to feel nauseous throughout the

evening.

At 1:00 AM, she was in extreme pain and was sick to her stomach. They ordered blood tests and another CT scan. The scan showed that the inflamed bowel was now completely obstructed. And then things started moving very fast.

They called in the OR team and prepped her for surgery. Within an hour of telling us that she was going to have surgery, they took her back. They warned us beforehand that this was an exploratory surgery and they didn't know what they might find. In the best-case scenario, the bowel was kinked and could just be untwisted, but she might have to have a resection, and if things went poorly, she would be transferred to the ICU and the USA Medical Center.

Brianna's mother and I walked with her and the nurses to the PACU around 5:30 AM, and before we even made it back to the room to wait, Lee Walters was there to be with me in case I was alone at the hospital. He stayed with us the whole time Bri was in surgery. My sister came and got the kids, even though it was Sunday morning, and she's a pastor; she allowed my father-in-law to be with us. She and Charles have been amazing throughout this whole experience, taking care of the kids on a moment's notice.

I received updates throughout the surgery, and afterwards, her OB, who is fantastic, came and informed me that they had found the problem area. After the first surgery, the bowel turned over on itself in the area where part of the uterus was removed and adhered to the remaining section.

They ended up having to remove 18 inches of small intestine. Thankfully, they were able to reconnect them, and she didn't have to have a colostomy. She does have an NG tube and will be slowly working up to liquids and eventually food over the next five to seven days while we continue to stay at C&W.

She is currently in a great deal of pain, but hopefully turning a corner towards recovery. She has been through so much over the past few weeks and has a long road ahead. But she is the strongest person I know. I am the luckiest man alive and have the most incredible wife. I have always known that, but the past few weeks have made me even more aware. Our prayer now is that Bri recovers and that there are no further complications. Hopefully, we will go home sometime at the end of the week or the beginning of the next.

Thanks doesn't begin to convey how grateful I am for our friends and family who have been with us through it all. Our church has been amazing, covering us in prayers, sending DoorDash

gift cards, helping with the kids, making food, visiting us, and sending hundreds of supportive text messages and phone calls. If I have missed your message or call over the past few weeks, I apologize. I am trying to keep up, but just know your outreach does not go unnoticed or unappreciated.

Brianna's sister and parents have traveled back and forth between Montgomery and Mobile multiple times. Our godfamily, Kristen and Micah, have been such a support. My family has been . I can't fathom what it is like to go through something like this without the support that we have had. I am grateful for the people of Spanish Fort UMC and all the churches we have served that have reached out and been praying. You are our people, and we can't imagine life without you. Thank you all for being there for us.

A few years ago, I became enamored with the writings of Eugene Peterson. He was a pastor and author best known for paraphrasing the Bible into a work called *The Message*. I've used his collection of sermons, *Light a Lovely Mile*, in my personal devotions. His memoir is inspiring, and he's written many other books for those looking to deepen their spiritual journey. But the book of his I quote the most, both the content and the title, is *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

That book is an easy read, but I wouldn't call it a quick one. Not because you can't read it quickly, but because you shouldn't. It's a book about faithful discipleship, rooted in the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120–134). These were pilgrim songs sung by travelers heading to Jerusalem for the annual festivals. As Peterson explains, "Topographically, Jerusalem was the highest city in Palestine, and so all who traveled there spent much of their time ascending. But the ascent was not only literal, it was also a metaphor: the trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, an existence that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity—what Paul described as the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus."

As you read these psalms, you find that each one captures a different moment of life's realities.

Some are filled with praise and thanksgiving, others with lament and sorrow. These songs express hope for the future and reflection on the past. They ask God for guidance and wisdom, and for protection from evil. It's impossible to get through this book without coming to a chapter and thinking, "Yes. That's me right now." Or, "I remember being in that season." These psalms draw something out of us, and Peterson helps name and nurture that connection.

But more than any one chapter or one psalm, what I love most is how the Songs of Ascent as a whole capture the fullness of life. The way they remind us that life is made up of seasons, and

that to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, you have to keep going. Keep walking. The book's subtitle is *Discipleship in an Instant Society*, and Peterson wrote it in response to how the "I need it now" mentality of modern life has seeped into our spirituality. He writes, "One aspect of the world that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once."

As a pastor, teacher, and theologian, Peterson helped people see the beauty and necessity of belonging to a Christian community. He names how essential the Church is to the Christian journey. These psalms help us see the danger of a "go at it alone spirituality." He continues, "In the world, religion is understood as a visit to an attractive site to be made when we have adequate leisure...this long obedience in the same direction (is something) the world does so much to discourage."

I'm telling you about this book today because I've been reminded of its truths in more ways than I can count over the past month. Belonging to the Church is vital to prepare all of us for the hard seasons. It is our devotion when things are good that allows us to journey through the times that are hard. Recently, Brianna and I, and really our whole family, have gone through some very difficult weeks. And it was the discipleship we practiced before the storm that we drew strength from during it. Likewise, following Jesus as a part of the Church has afforded us an unending list of people who've called, reached out, prayed, and supported us. Those relationships didn't magically appear when we were admitted to the hospital. They were forged over years of doing life with others. Every season before this one gave us the people to lean on when the struggle showed up.

We recently finished a worship series about rhythms, and the overarching theme was largely drawn from Peterson's book. For a month, we sat with the idea that there's no such thing as perfect balance in life. Balance can be measured, calculated, predicted—and life is none of those things. Life is unpredictable, uneven, and chaotic at times. But even if life isn't balanced, it does have rhythms. In the micro sense, there are daily rhythms, habits and practices that draw us closer to Christ and one another. In the macro sense, there are rhythms to life itself, seasons of joy and sorrow, growth and loss, waiting and rejoicing. These rhythms echo through the Songs of Ascent.

There are seasons that feel overwhelming; too much, too painful, too uncertain. But faithful discipleship teaches us that, "Though the sorrow may last for the night, the joy comes in the morning."

On the journey to Jerusalem, the pilgrims lamented the brokenness of the world (Psalm 120).

They laughed and sang songs of joy (Psalm 126). They cried out with hope in suffering (Psalm 130). And all the while, they kept walking together. That's probably the part I appreciate most:

Peterson's recognition that these are songs, not monologues. They're sung by people, not a person. For millennia, these psalms have been read by and to communities of faith. This road we're on, it's not a solo trek. As Peterson puts it, "Everyone who travels the road of faith requires assistance from time to time. We need cheering up when spirits flag; we need direction when the way is unclear."

Friends, I hope you take your journey of discipleship seriously and that you find joy in it. The unfortunate truth is that we all forget how important discipleship is until we need it the most.

And when things get hard, and they will, I pray you won't give up. Your struggles and hardships will not be the end of your story. I also hope you know that you don't have to walk this journey alone. That's not how God intends it. Individual study is important, but it's just one piece of the Christian life. To truly walk The Way, you have to sing the songs with others.

Ultimately, I pray you discover in Jesus the One who can do more than all we ask or imagine.

That in Christ you find the hope, love, and grace that God has already made available to you.

And I pray that if you know someone who needs to join us on this journey, you'll invite them to come be a part of what God is doing at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. Because I know there's a whole chorus of people here ready to welcome them into our songs.

Thank you to all who attended our Charge Conference on Tuesday night.

It was a wonderful evening celebrating what God has been doing in and through the life of our congregation. Each pastor is required to provide a report on the past year's ministry, and mine was largely a compilation of previous Words from Woods reflections. Still, if you'd like a snapshot of what this past year has been like for our church, my Charge Conference report is below.

There are moments when timeless truths suddenly feel like brand-new revelations. I've been sitting with one of those this week. This past Sunday's sermon was one I needed to receive as much as I needed to share. We began a three-week journey through the parable of the Good Samaritan. Though it's a familiar story, parables often contain multiple layers of truth that emerge when we shift our perspective. This week, we read it through the eyes of the Levite.

On Wednesday, a gentleman showed up at the church unexpectedly, saying the Lord had sent him here. In my experience, people who drop by unannounced are usually there for one of three reasons: they're in need and hope the church can help, they have a strong opinion they'd like the pastor to affirm or amplify, or they're wrestling with questions of faith and need someone to talk to.

But Robert—the gentleman who came by—surprised me. He didn't need anything. He had no agenda or opinions to share. He possessed a mature, grounded faith and wasn't seeking counsel.

He simply said he came to pray with me and for me.

Since retiring from education, Robert spends one or two days each week driving from his home in Baker, Florida, to pray for pastors. He follows where he feels the Lord is leading, stopping at churches with cars in the parking lot. He goes inside, asks if the pastor is in, and offers prayer.

He's been doing this for several years and has prayed with over a hundred pastors. He feels it's his calling—a ministry to those who serve in vocational ministry.

I'll admit, I was hesitant at first, as this was an unusual experience for me. But Robert was sincere. After about twenty minutes of conversation, he offered a thoughtful and heartfelt prayer for me and our congregation. And I knew the Holy Spirit was present the moment he prayed nearly the same type of affirmation that had "strangely warmed my heart" just a few nights before.

You see, every Saturday night, I put the kids to bed, sit next to Brianna, put the football game on mute, and pull out my laptop to review my sermon. Usually, I wrote it a few weeks earlier, and I spend a couple of hours revising and internalizing it for Sunday morning.

This week, after I finished—and after that terrible Auburn game—I was lying in bed praying when a line from my sermon struck me like lightning:

You are not the hero of the story; Jesus is the hero of the story.

When the Holy Spirit spoke those words back to me, I felt a relief I hadn't felt in a long time. As pastors, it's easy to feel like the success or failure of a congregation rests on our shoulders. It's a mix of hubris, expectations, and experience. But regardless of the reason, carrying the weight of a church's health can consume a pastor's mental, physical, and spiritual well-being.

And despite the fact that our congregation continually proves how capable and faithful its people are, I realized how much I've been living under that pressure—the pressure to perform, to prepare perfectly, to deliver great sermons, to integrate the most effective systems and processes.

For the better part of a month, though, my focus shifted entirely to my family. I checked in as I could and joined most staff meetings, but my hand was loosely on the wheel. And unsurprisingly, the church was just fine without me. We have a wonderful, capable staff, and our congregation continued to show up, pour out, and serve faithfully.

So on Saturday night, as I was lying in bed praying my mind wandered to all the things that were on the agenda to consider this week—the budget process, pledge cards, staff retreat, worship details, the Costa Rica mission trip, Dinner Church, new committee members, Charge Conference, sermons, small groups, children's and youth ministries, Fall Festival, and Advent. It was like my mind was racing a million miles a minute. However, just as the pressure began to feel actually physical, the Lord reminded me:

You are not the hero of the story; Jesus is the hero of the story.

Then on Wednesday, Robert prayed, "Lord, please remind Woods that your yoke is easy and your burden is light." And on his words, I heard the same truth again.

You are not the hero of the story; Jesus is the hero of the story.

Both instances were a reminder for me that this is Jesus' church—not mine, not our staff's, not any member's. It will succeed if we follow Jesus, and it will fail if we don't. It's that simple. The health of our congregation isn't measured by membership numbers or finances, but by whether we are being led by the Holy Spirit to follow Christ. No amount of energy or anxiety, mine or anyone else's, can cause this church to thrive on our own. It's only when our efforts are directed by Christ that we bear fruit.

I've always known truths like "you can't do it on your own," "there's more to life than work," and "this is God's church." But this week, I got to experience those truths in a fresh and personal way.

I will always work hard and do my best. I will be honest and transparent. I will strive to be the pastor God has called me to be. But I'm grateful to know that I don't have to be the hero—and neither do you—because Jesus already has that role covered.

Over the past month, I've been reminded again how deeply blessed my family and I are to be a part of Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. As Brianna and I spent quite a bit of time in and out of the hospital, you surrounded us with love and care, through meals, prayers, cards, and words of encouragement that meant more than you could imagine. We've felt the love of Christ through this congregation in tangible ways, and I want to say thank you. You have embodied what it means to be the church, a community that carries one another's burdens and shares one another's joys.

Meanwhile, the ministry here at Spanish Fort UMC has been moving forward with continued energy. I have really enjoyed our "Samaritan" sermon series. I love it when we can sit with the same Scripture for multiple weeks and dive into the various things God can reveal through it.

Also, our fall programming is clicking on all cylinders. And we had an incredible staff retreat last week. It was a holy time where we were able to get away for the day and go to Fish River. We shared in worship and prayer, we told some of our personal stories, and strengthened the bonds we've been building. We also worked on the 2026 calendar. I am excited for all the things God has in store for us over the coming year.

Lastly, I was thrilled with how our Fall Festival turned out last Sunday! It was an incredible night for our church and community. Even though the rain forced us indoors, more than 450 people came through our doors, filling the building with laughter and community spirit. The Cook-Off was once again a big hit, both for the fun it brought and the good it accomplished. The proceeds from the event go to support the Wesley Foundation at the University of South Alabama, helping us invest in the next generation of college students growing in faith.

It was one of those nights that captured the very best of Spanish Fort UMC. Our congregation was a witness of joy and hospitality to our community. As we head toward the close of this year, I am grateful for all that God is doing through and among us. Thank you for the countless ways you love one another and serve our community in Jesus' name.

Grace and Peace, Woods

This week, I'd like to direct your attention to our Spanish Fort Monthly. My report for the month is in there, and I figured you don't need two things to read from me!

Summerlyn continues to do a fabulous job with these publications. She puts a lot of work into them, and I hope you will take the time to go through it and read about all the exciting things happening at Spanish Fort United Methodist Church!

Grace and Peace, Woods

I've been rereading *The Ragamuffin Gospel* lately. Our men's group is going to discuss it soon, and it's the first time in years that I've revisited one of my favorite books. If you're looking for something new to read or want to understand God's grace a little better, I recommend you check it out.

The most recent edition added a new section to the end of the book, a guide of nineteen reflections for a spiritual retreat. It's made up of short selections from throughout the book, described as "nineteen mercies." Each is just a few paragraphs meant to spur the mind toward deeper reflection and meditation. On our recent staff retreat, we used these reflections as guides for our time of worship.

My reflection included a Zen story about a monk from the third chapter of the book. When I first read the story while rereading the book, I rolled my eyes and thought it was silly. But when I read it again in worship during our retreat, it struck me in a new way. The story goes like this:

"A monk was being pursued by a ferocious tiger. The monk raced to the edge of a cliff, glanced back, and saw the growling tiger about to spring. The monk spotted a rope dangling over the edge of the cliff. He grabbed it and began shinnying down the side of the cliff out of the clutches of the tiger. Whew! Narrow escape. The monk then looked down and saw a quarry of jagged rocks five hundred feet below. He looked up and saw the tiger poised atop the cliff with bared claws. Just then, two mice began to nibble at the rope. What to do? The monk saw a strawberry within arm's reach, growing out of the face of the cliff. He plucked it, ate it, and exclaimed, 'Yum! That's the best strawberry I've ever tasted in my entire life.'" (*The Ragamuffin Gospel*, p. 54)

I can't tell you how many times I've heard things like "appreciate the moment," "live in the now," or "don't miss out on the present." As a parent, you hear that "the days are long but the years are short." Every older person will tell you how fast life flies by. Countless meditation apps help you ground yourself or focus on what's happening around you. And like many things, when I hear everyone saying the same thing, I tend to be a contrarian (it's not my most endearing quality).

In my mind, part of my role as a pastor is to help prepare us for what comes next. We have to do financial outlooks, stewardship planning, staff improvement, and program calendaring. Likewise, I know there's great value in connecting our future story to the things God has done in the past. I like talking about the great things God has done in and through the life of our

congregation and our individual lives. I think, as humans, our minds are made to live both in the past and the future. We have this biological imperative not to repeat our mistakes; it's why we get nervous around a hot stove if we touched one as a kid. Likewise, our need for food often prompts us to think about what our next meal will be or where it will come from.

So I've often turned my nose up in response to this whole "be in the moment" movement that is so in vogue. But sitting there with our staff two weeks ago, rereading the story about the monk, I couldn't have been more grateful for the reminder to be present in that moment—because it was a holy moment. Our team gathered together for a day away at Fish River to worship, pray, celebrate, plan, and pour into each other. We shared our stories, our tears, and our desires. The Holy Spirit was in the room, and it was evident that we all have a deep love and trust for one another.

My hope is that we are creating the kind of work environment we want to see in the world. We're cultivating an ethos of mutual support and love. We share our joys and concerns. We pray together, we laugh together, we come alongside each other. I'm so grateful to every member of our team, and I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to serve alongside. Every person who works here does so because they love the Lord and they love this church. All of them could be somewhere else, doing something else, but they choose to serve God at this time, in this place.

I hope you know how lucky we are to have a church staff that works so well together. I don't want to jinx it, but a team of a dozen that's free of conflict and can disagree peaceably is a gift.

We all have different skills and gifts, and that, in itself, is a blessing because it allows us to complement one another.

So today, I'm glad not to be a contrarian. I'm happy to appreciate this moment. Because working on a team like this doesn't always happen. There are precious few places I know where an entire staff gets along as well as this one and whose joy is as complete as ours. There might be mice nibbling the rope above us, and who knows—there could be sharp rocks below. But for now, we're just enjoying the strawberries.

A Hill Worth Dying On My friend Jason is on a mission to reclaim evangelicalism. He is brilliant, and he understands the Bible and theology better than just about anyone I know. However, his awareness of culture shifts sometimes lags a little. I remember when he realized the word "evangelical" had become fused to a political identity. He was baffled. He wasn't offended by the word becoming associated with conservatism over any other political

ideology. What rattled him was that the word meant to describe the calling of the whole church had been limited to only one corner of it.

To him, and in my mind as well, all Christians should be evangelical regardless of their political leanings.

At the time, I laughed at him. His quest felt quixotic. I thought he was fighting a losing battle with little hope of making an impact. Truth be told, I still think he's swimming upstream. But here I am adding my voice to his, sending his little manifesto to the couple hundred people who open this email or tap the Facebook link. And I guess that is a win for Jason. He might not win the war on his own, but he influenced enough people to amplify the message and get the word out. Like the efforts of the early Christians, worthwhile and long-lasting societal change starts small, like an ember, but it grows into a roaring flame capable of transforming the entire landscape.

So let me turn the question toward you. What conviction are you willing to voice even when it feels like no one is listening? What cause will you champion even if it seems unconventional?

What hill do you believe is worth dying on? Let me share mine.

Discipleship isn't meant to be easy.

Anyone who reads my work knows brevity is not my spiritual gift. But I am convinced worthwhile things rarely thrive when summarized for simplicity's sake. We live in a world that wants everything easier and ready-made. Listicles, short reels, sped-up YouTube videos.

"Someone prepare my meals or groceries and send them to my house." We get impatient when a file takes longer than a few seconds to load. We don't want to wait in line at TSA.

And let me say, not all those things are bad. Some of them make life bearable. When a baby melts down, siblings are fighting, and your spouse is recovering from surgery, grocery delivery feels like grace. When you're repairing a sink, a sped-up YouTube tutorial is fine because you already know the basics. If you fly frequently for work, a faster security screening process makes sense.

The trouble comes when the habits that shape the rest of our lives seep into our spiritual lives.

"Preacher, just give me the five easy steps to be a faithful Christian." "Y'all just decide what the church should do and tell us when to be there." We want an app that summarizes the Bible so we don't have to read it.

This is the hilltop I stand on. Discipleship isn't meant to be easy. Christianity is not best when it is sped up. Your faith journey doesn't need to be optimally optimized. Faith grows through attention and patience. Following Jesus asks something of you.

Yes, I write a lot of words. Not because I think I am especially wise. I write because the life of a church is complex, and transparency matters to me. This church does not belong to me. It belongs to God and to the people who call it home. Part of my responsibility is to lead by making sure you know what I know about the life of this congregation. I am here every day. I live, eat, and breathe SFUMC. And it is important to me that you know everything I do (except what is held in pastoral confidence). The best ways I've found to do that are to talk with you and write to you.

These aren't the kind of topics that fit into a typical sermon. Sermons are meant to inspire us to transform our lives, and church-related business doesn't tend to inspire many people. So we write the emails and the summaries and the Church Council reports because shared knowledge forms shared commitment. It asks something of you beyond Sunday attendance. Being a part of a church means putting in time. It means more than showing up to worship or dropping your kids off. It means engaging and staying informed. You don't have to read everything we produce to be a faithful church member, but you should read some of it. We provide as much as we can to cover all facets of our congregation, so that if you have an interest or curiosity, the information is there.

Which leads me to my other, more personal, reflection on writing. A few months ago, I changed how I view the typical Friday Pastor's Note. I write less about church-related business in these emails because there are other platforms for that information. Instead, I want these to be something that engages your imagination. Sometimes they are longer than other things we are used to reading. And again, it's not because I love seeing my own thoughts on the page. It's because long-form reading is becoming rare. There are only a few places left where we read anything longer than a list of bullet points. And I want to offer you reflections that stretch your capacity for sustained attention. Something that strengthens the muscles needed for prayer, discernment, and reflection.

Did you know that in almost every city, the Sunday paper used to feature articles of 2000 to 4000 words? A typical weekday news article used to be between 900 and 1200 words. Even in the 1990s, when newspapers began to decline, there were still between 110 and 170 articles in a daily paper. My typical Friday note is 700 words. So far, this note has been 985 words; about the length of one newspaper article (by comparison, my average sermon has 2,350 words and

lasts 22 minutes).

Don't get me wrong, I like podcasts and videos. I consume a lot of them. And I know it might sound out of touch to compare the Pastor's Note to a medium like the dying newspaper industry.

But reading does something different to the mind. It forces you to hold focus. It cultivates an inner stillness. This is the same posture we desperately need to recognize God's presence in a frantic world. Long-form reading draws us into a subject for more than 30 seconds. Truthfully, it helps us be better Christians. My hope is that when I write at length, I'm giving you a chance to slow down and dwell on something that points you toward the divine.

I like making videos and providing alternative ways to engage our faith. I will continue to offer content about our church and faith reflections in other ways. And I know that leaning into long- form writing instead of giving weekly bullet points or putting all my eggs into audio or video might seem counterintuitive. But I think of it as intentionally swimming upstream.

Ultimately, all of this is a setup for next week's note titled, "Swimming Upstream." It is a longer piece, closer to an old Sunday feature. I've been thinking and working on it for a few months. I'll put out the podcast and the video versions, too, so you can pick the format that works best for you. But it was definitely written to be read. And even if it is not next week's Pastor's Note, I hope you will find something to engage with that stretches your attention and prompts you to linger longer in pondering the mysteries of God. I hope you'll carve out a quiet stretch of time to let wonder rise again. And I hope you'll find joy in choosing the more life-giving ways to engage your faith, even if they might not be the simplest.

Grace and Peace, Woods

If you're wondering, "Why is this so long?" I will direct you to last week's note, which was a setup for this week and an explanation for why this note is longer than most.

If you'd like to listen to today's reflection, you can find a podcast version of this note [here](#), and a video version [here](#).

Swimming Upstream: Church Work On A Less Popular Path I spent a lot of nights in the summer of 2009 playing guitar with George Wallace III. Although he is the third, his friends all called him George Jr. He's close with the Millers, the family that adopted me during college. I lived in one of the rooms upstairs, and there were always other people coming in and out, staying for a few days or weeks at a time.

George and his family were with us for a while that summer. Sadly, his twenty-five-year-old son, Corey, had died in May and was laid to rest at their family plot in the capital city. The Miller house became a kind of surrogate Wallace house during those weeks, and I did my best to just stay out of the way. But a lot of nights, after everyone had left, I'd find myself on the porch or in the living room with George, guitars in hand. We'd play music, and, man, that dude can play.

Especially the blues. And I don't think there was a more fitting soundtrack for that season of grief than the blues.

After that summer, George was still around a good bit. He ran to reclaim his former role as the state treasurer, but ultimately lost. And then after stepping away from politics, he turned his attention to providing a fuller accounting of his father's life. He wrote a book called *Governor George Wallace: The Man You Never Knew*. The book was his attempt to convey the transformation Governor Wallace went through in the later years of his life.

George has spent the past decade talking about his father. In a 2020 Op-Ed for WBRC News, he wrote:

"Though he was a leader in preserving the Old South custom of segregation, he was an equally determined advocate of progress and racial reconciliation once the antiquated way of life was dissolved.

He often met with leaders like Rev. Joseph Lowry, Congressman John Lewis, and Jesse Jackson to candidly discuss his errors of judgment, and he spoke from the pulpit of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to apologize to congregants for past actions.

A close friend of Edgar Daniel “E.D.” Nixon...my father was asked to serve as a pallbearer at his funeral.

Shortly after my father’s passing in 1998, Rev. Jesse Jackson wrote a condolence letter to my sisters and me that makes the argument more powerfully than I could ever attempt. A portion of his letter read: “I saw a repentant Wallace in his latter years - a transformed man for the good. I saw a man with a greater vision of inclusion - walls replaced by bridges, bridges which lead to open doors, doors which lead to change in education, health care, and equal opportunity for people, black and white, who were left behind. George Wallace deserves forgiveness, redemption, and restoration.”¹

Living with the Millers was a wonderful season of my life. And when I think back on my time with George Jr., the story that sticks with me the most came one morning at breakfast. We were talking about his dad, and George said, “You know my father didn’t initially run on the issue of segregation.” And an article PBS even supports this, noting of his first political campaign of 1946: “Wallace wins his first election, as a representative of Barbour County in the Alabama legislature. Focused on enhancing Alabama’s industry and education, Wallace became known as progressive and liberal in his dealings with and treatment of black Alabamians.”² George told me his father got caught up. In his early speeches, Wallace focused on education and industry. He spoke against the Ku Klux Klan and received the NAACP’s endorsement. But he lost the 1958 gubernatorial primary by more than 64,000 votes to John Patterson, who ran with the backing of the KKK.

That defeat changed him. After that, he decided to swim downstream.

George described a moment on the next campaign trail when his father mentioned segregation in a speech and heard people begin stomping their feet. Their reaction was immediate. From then on, whenever he spoke, he made sure to bring up segregation because he knew it would animate the crowd. In 1962, “Running on a pro-segregation, pro-states’ rights platform, Wallace (was) elected governor of Alabama in a landslide victory.”³ The rest is history. The famous speech in January. The schoolhouse door in June. And for most people, that part of his life is the whole story. But for George Jr., it’s more complicated than that.

So he has been trying to tell the entire arc of his father’s life: the early progressive record, the turn downstream into segregationist politics, and the later years of repentance and reconciliation.

The Cost of Swimming Upstream Governor Wallace's story, in its own way, is a cautionary tale about how easy it is to swim downstream. Swimming with the current is usually rewarded. It makes you popular. It can even make you powerful. But sometimes the downstream current is headed in the wrong direction.

Governor Wallace didn't begin swimming in the same direction; he chose to do so. When he did, he gained power and influence, but sacrificed something much greater. And he spent the last years of his life trying to atone for those mistakes.

We usually think of swimming upstream as resisting popular opinion or doing the harder thing.

The phrase is used negatively, as if going against the grain just makes life more complicated than it needs to be. But in nature, salmon swim upstream for a reason. They aren't being stubborn.

They are working for something better; they are choosing life beyond themselves. The upstream journey is harder, but it protects the next generation. It serves a greater good.

Swimming upstream is not just hard; for most salmon, it leads to death. And yet, it is the direction Christians are called to go. It's not a sentimental idea but a deeply biblical one.

-Romans 6:3-4 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

-Colossians 3:3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

-Galatians 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me".

Dying to ourselves and finding life in Christ is a very real and often underappreciated part of our faith. It is the product of swimming upstream. Jesus told his followers to love enemies, forgive seventy times seven, give without repayment, take up crosses, and bless those who curse them.

That is swimming upstream. He warned them that following him would strain friendships and force them to make choices that made little sense to the crowds around them. He told them to leave nets behind and walk away from certainty. "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it

hated me first.”

Jesus isn't the first biblical witness to this countercultural life. Think of Daniel refusing to eat the king's food, or Esther risking her life to speak truth to power. Moses walked back into Egypt when he would have preferred to stay hidden in Midian forever. Think of Jeremiah buying a field in a war zone because God told him hope was still possible. The earliest Christians lived this reality. They refused to bow to Caesar, refused to abandon the poor, refused to let the empire's whims shape their morality.

Scripture is full of people who went against the current because the current was flowing in the wrong direction.

There are plenty of moments when the easier path is right in front of us, and it is so tempting.

Sometimes, I make the unfortunate decision to take it. The easy path avoids hard conversations.

It glides past conflict. It lets the loudest voices set the tone. It soft-pedals the Gospel so no one gets uncomfortable. It downplays discipleship when discipleship might require someone to lay something down.

But the easy path rarely leads to transformation.

Following God isn't always hard, but it's rarely effortless. It asks something of us. It shapes us into a people who take the longer road because the longer road leads toward Christ.

In the church, we often talk about swimming upstream as moving against the current of the world. But I equally find myself noticing the places where the Church is best served by swimming in the opposite direction of those most prominent in our own endeavors.

Deep Discipleship is rarely sexy.

God is at work in all sorts of churches. There is no single way to worship or create a Christian community. I don't believe anyone should denigrate other traditions or practices because they differ from our own. I do, though, think it is good to name the particulars about our traditions that make us unique. And to celebrate the specific aspects of our beliefs that make us who we are.

After all, we primarily act as we do because of what we believe.

I have learned a lot over the past two decades of ministry. I have been in traditional and contemporary churches. Ones that are on the cutting edge and others that are steeped in liturgy. I have been lucky enough to travel the world and experience worship in other cultures and languages. Some of my favorite worship experiences were extremely charismatic, and others were marked by ancient rites. And I am convinced that the most faithful ministry is rarely the most popular.

Christianity has discovered a formula that helps churches catch attention quickly. The fastest-growing churches feel electric the moment you walk in. The music is polished. The lights are warm. The crowd has energy. It's easy to be impressed. And often those churches are doing beautiful, faithful work. But discipleship is different from excitement. Discipleship is cultivated.

It happens over years of faithfully following Jesus.

Faith doesn't require buildings, the newest technology, a children's wing with all the bells and whistles, or a social media manager. Those things are nice, and I give thanks for them. But faithfulness at its core is about reading Scripture aloud, praying for one another, carrying one another's burdens, and learning how to live a different kind of life.

Deep discipleship is often slow. It asks people to linger with Scripture until it sinks in. It asks them to sit with questions that don't have quick answers. It invites them to confess things they would rather keep hidden. It draws them into friendships where they are known. It urges them to practice generosity and service that no one applauds.

Churches that shape disciples tend to feel quieter, but if you pay attention, you notice something steady underneath. People who have been shaped slowly often make decisions out of conviction instead of impulse. They carry peace into difficult conversations. They become the kind of people others can lean on. They learn to pray the way children learn to speak, one word at a time, until it becomes natural.

This isn't trendy or likely to go viral, but it's deep. And depth is what carries a church through storms.

And I say the same about denominations.

I've heard all the criticism of denominations. Some of it is earned. Structures can calcify.

Committees can multiply. People can get more devoted to the institution than to the gospel. But I've noticed that whenever something in the world shakes people, the first question they ask isn't "Which church has the best app?" It's "Where is hope? Who can help me understand what God is doing in all this?"

At their best, denominations give us a long memory and keep us from idolizing anyone over Jesus. They let us borrow wisdom from people who lived faithfully long before we arrived. They keep us from inventing Christianity in our own image.

When I think about the church across centuries, I picture a river system, not a single stream. The Christian faith has always flowed in many directions at once, shaped by geography and culture.

Denominations are part of that story. They hold memory and carry the work of people who wrestled with Scripture long before we were born.

I am a cradle Methodist, but as an adult, I choose to remain one. There is no doubt that this faith nurtured me. But I also believe the Wesleyan way of understanding Jesus reflects an intrinsic part of our human nature. Our emphasis on grace did not appear out of nowhere. It was born out of centuries of Christians naming what is true about God and then shaped by years of preaching, community building, journal writing, and discussions in this theological vein.

Denominations preserve this kind of heritage. They give us the chance to hold something older than ourselves. When a denomination is healthy, it creates a shared theological vocabulary. It helps congregations ask good questions and offers accountability. It forms a pattern of worship and belief that becomes a kind of home. And when disagreements arise, it gives structure to the conversation so that people aren't left adrift in their own opinions.

In a world that often encourages spiritual independence, denominations call us back to shared identity. They ask us to take our place in a long line of believers who kept the church alive in seasons equally as complex as ours. It might not be fashionable, but it is grounding.

You should be able to hear the tradition in the pastor's preaching.

According to Pew Research, the average sermon length in the fastest-growing churches (evangelical/non-denominational) is 39:00 minutes. The shortest sermons are usually offered in Catholic and Episcopal/Anglican churches (14:00 minutes). And as with many things, John Wesley and the Wesleyan Way are often considered the *via media* (the middle way), with the

average Methodist sermon lasting about 20:00-25:00 minutes. My average over the past 18 months at SFUMC is 22:16.

The hardest thing about preaching is that sermons are expected to be both inspiring and educational. It's tempting to take the easiest route to accomplish both things. You can preach a forty-minute sermon with many practical steps, and everyone leaves thinking, "I can do that on Monday." And sometimes that is really useful.

But the Scriptures don't work that way. They lead with stories that draw us in. They surprise you and ask questions that linger. The parables of Jesus don't wrap themselves up neatly. They don't promise that your life will improve if you simply follow the instructions. They create space inside you where truth can settle.

Good preaching gives us something to wrestle with. It nudges us to pay attention to where Christ is moving. It helps us see patterns that need changing or habits that need nourishing. It often requires imagination, because spiritual truth rarely shows up as a diagram. It is more like good art than good advice.

The kind of preaching that invites imagination might not always generate pithy hashtags, but it honors how people grow. It is far easier to preach a listicle. "Five ways to fix your marriage."

"Seven habits of highly spiritual Christians." "Three steps to peace." People love those sermons.

They feel practical and neat. And occasionally, yes, practical clarity is helpful. But Scripture doesn't speak in listicles. It engages our imagination and invites us to deeper thinking. It unsettles us, it surprises us, it pulls us into mystery and transformation.

That kind of preaching is not as popular on Instagram because it requires more wrestling. It doesn't always offer fill-in-the-blanks or premade notes. But for me, it is the better way of engaging with the Word. Preaching doesn't change lives; habits change lives. But preaching can inspire us to begin that change or renew our transformation. It forms people who see the world differently.

Growth rarely comes from a single moment of clarity. It comes from returning again and again to what God is doing and allowing that truth to take root. Sermons that follow that path won't always produce immediate reactions; they might not make people stomp their feet, but over time, they help people see the world with new eyes.

Which is the same for how I understand church leadership.

There are quicker and more popular ways to lead a church. A single person can make decisions faster than a committee, and a streamlined structure moves with fewer delays. A smaller leadership circle can adapt in moments that demand rapid change. But churches aren't only built for efficiency; they're built for discernment.

Discernment takes time and voices. It takes the wisdom of people who have lived different lives and are willing to listen to one another. Committees can be slow, but slow is not always bad.

Slow gives space for reflection. Slow lets people feel heard. Slow helps the church recognize patterns that might go unnoticed when one person is making all the decisions.

The Methodist way has always tried to honor that. When committees work well, they carry a congregation together rather than depending on a single leader. They help people take ownership of the ministries they serve and share responsibility for both their success and their struggles.

There's something deeply biblical about making decisions in community. The early church gathered to pray, debate, listen, and decide. It took time, but it created a sense of shared direction. When a church follows that pattern, the path may be slower, but the unity is deeper.

Intention, not excuse.

It's easy to hear me advocating for swimming upstream and mistake it for an excuse. The church has used faithfulness as an excuse before. Plenty of leaders have blamed failure to make progress on their pursuit of a more right way. I don't want to repeat that mistake. We shouldn't use spirituality as a scapegoat for a lack of growth. I believe without a doubt that a church should grow, and we should be advancing the work of the kingdom.

But intentionality is not the same as stagnation. Embracing a kind of change that grows from the inside out rather than the outside in takes time. Swimming in a harder direction takes longer. It means the church won't always be the trendiest place in town. It means people from the outside might not understand the choices we make. It means we won't fit neatly into the polarized categories that dominate public life.

It also means the church becomes a place where people from different backgrounds and political leanings can sit in the same pew and share communion at the same table. That kind of

unity is harder to achieve than loud agreement. People get behind a compelling argument, but they are sustained by a faith that requires them to ask why they are arguing. Anger can generate fast growth, but things born of anger rarely last.

A church that holds together many different kinds of people becomes a living witness to the reconciliation Christ brings.

So yes, our way is upstream.

As far as our congregation goes, operationally, we are efficient in the areas that need streamlining. We honor the generosity of our congregation by using the resources we are given to the best of our ability. Our staff went from 10 full-time and 8 part-time people three years ago to 4 full-time and 7 part-time members. But I believe we are offering just as effective ministry with fewer financial and personnel resources.

However, my desire is not that we will be the most efficient church; it's that we will be a faithful one. Genuine faithfulness rarely attracts applause. It won't always be immediately understood.

But over time, an upstream church learns to trust the work God is doing beneath the surface, like a seed growing before it breaks the ground. It learns to wait and listen. It learns to grow in ways that aren't driven by reaction or hurry.

Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, knowing full well what awaited him there. Nothing about it was easy. Nothing about that made sense. But the way of God rarely aligns with the path of least resistance. The way of Christ is about obedience, not convenience.

Upstream isn't glamorous, but it leads toward life. It takes us back to the places where faith is born and renewed. It allows the next generation to find clear water. It teaches us to depend on the Spirit rather than momentum.

If we keep swimming upstream together, I believe we'll discover a strength we didn't know we had and a faith that won't wash away when the current rises.

1. & 3. WBRC. "Auburn University Petition Fails to Recognize Full Story of Gov. George C. Wallace." June 9, 2020. Accessed December 16, 2025. <https://www.wbrc.com/2020/06/09/auburn-university-petition-fails-recognize-full-story-gov-george-c-wallace/>

2. PBS American Experience. George Wallace' s Life. PBS. Accessed December 16, 2025.
<https://>

www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/wallace-george-wallaces-life/. PBS We are living through the first generation-wide experiment in raising children whose primary world is digital. Most of us did not grow up with smartphones in our pockets or social media in our hands. Today, those forces shape the daily experience of children and teenagers more than school, church, neighbors, or even family rhythms. And while every generation has its worries and its quirks, something genuinely new is happening in the cultural soil our kids are growing in.

It is not simply that they are looking at screens; it is that screens are shaping how they think, what they fear, how they relate, and even who they are becoming.

As a pastor, a parent, and a follower of Jesus, I have been trying to understand how formation works in 2025. Back in September, we began a class called Faith and Phones. Unfortunately, it was cut short due to unexpected circumstances in my family's life. However, I think the content of that class is vitally important for the Church today. I plan to try offering it again sometime in the future. But for now, I wanted to share a summary of some of the things we discussed and didn't get to. So I asked ChatGPT to summarize all the notes and handouts I made for the class. I then took that and edited it to make today's email.

The class was initially inspired by the work of Jonathan Haidt, whose two books, *The Coddling of the American Mind* and *The Anxious Generation*, both provide profound insights into this topic. However, I found that the most helpful way to frame this conversation comes from the work of two people who aren't theologians at all: journalist John Burn-Murdoch and writer Derek Thompson. Together, they give us language for something we're all feeling intuitively: life is faster, thinner, louder, and lonelier than it used to be. Burn-Murdoch organizes it like this: the digital world offers distractions and causes displacement, leading to a decline in conscientiousness.

In the simplest terms, our devices are doing two things at once: they are capturing our attention and crowding out our relationships. The result is a decline in conscientiousness; our ability to focus, persevere, complete tasks, manage impulses, and live with purpose. And that decline isn't just a quirk of personality. It touches on the very heart of Christian discipleship.

What follows is my attempt to summarize what is happening, ground it in research and Scripture, and suggest a path forward for families, young people, and especially the Church.

1. The Age of Distraction: When Attention Becomes a

Battleground Tristan Harris, the former Google design ethicist, once said, “If you’re not paying for the product, you are the product.” He wasn’t being dramatic. He was describing an economy in which the most valuable commodity isn’t oil or gold but your attention.

The companies shaping our digital lives, Apple, Meta, TikTok, YouTube, aren’t neutral platforms. They are attention-maximizing machines, engineered to keep us scrolling and clicking for as long as possible. Features like infinite scroll, autoplay, push notifications, streaks, and personalized recommendation engines are not conveniences; they are forms of psychological capture.

This matters more than we think. Attention isn’t just mental currency; it is the gateway to our desires and our formation. As the late Dallas Willard once put it, “The first act of love is always the giving of attention.” If that’s true, then the first act of spiritual sabotage might well be the constant theft of attention.

Distraction works by fragmenting the mind into a thousand little impulses. It shortens our capacity for sustained thought, deep reading, and meditative prayer.

We see the effects everywhere:

- long-form reading is down,
- shallow browsing is up,
- teens report difficulty concentrating on homework,
- adults confess they can’t focus long enough to pray or read Scripture without checking their phones.

John Burn-Murdoch’s reporting shows a stunning decrease in reading for pleasure among teenagers, paired with an explosion of short-form video consumption. It’s not that reading is morally superior; it’s that reading strengthens the cognitive muscles that relationships, faith, and work rely on. Screens, especially short-form and algorithm-driven ones, train the opposite impulses: quick novelty, constant stimulation, low friction, and escapist loops.

Psalm 1 gives us a picture of the kind of life God desires: “Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water.”

The contrast is the “chaff that the wind drives away.”

A distracted life, constantly uprooted, always scrolling, endlessly reactive, resembles chaff. A spiritually attentive life, rooted, meditative, stable, resembles a tree.

The modern digital environment is not neutral. It is cultivating chaff-like habits in a generation desperate for rootedness.

2. The Age of Displacement: When Digital Life Replaces

Real Life But distraction is only half the story. It steals attention, yes, but it also erodes something deeper: presence.

Derek Thompson argues that we are entering what he calls “The Anti-Social Century,” a period marked by “voluntary solitude”—not the meaningful solitude of contemplation but the lonely solitude of convenience. In one of his descriptions, he observes: “All of this time alone, at home, on the phone, is not just affecting us as individuals. It’s making society weaker, meaner, and more delusional.”

We see this everywhere:

- Solo dining is up.
- Fewer young people go on dates.
- Teen hangouts have plummeted.
- Third places—parks, cafés, libraries, churches—are emptying.
- Even inside homes, family members often sit in the same room but live in different digital worlds.

Sociologist Sherry Turkle puts it sharply: “We expect more from technology and less from each other.”

This is the heart of displacement: screens do not simply entertain us; they replace the people who used to form us.

For teenagers, this means face-to-face friendships decline while online interactions rise. Their social muscles weaken. Their emotional coping tools shrink. Their resilience suffers. Lisa Damour notes that one of the strongest predictors of emotional health in teens is “the presence

of supportive peers and adults in their daily, embodied life.” When digital life displaces that, anxiety rises, not because kids are weaker, but because the support structures they need are thinner.

For adults, displacement looks like declining trust in institutions such as the government, schools, media, and even the church. People retreat into online tribes, private entertainment, or high-risk financial speculation (sports betting, crypto) because embodied institutions feel distant or unreliable.

The result is a society that is relationally undernourished but digitally overstimulated.

Scripture offers a counter-vision: “Do not neglect to meet together... but encourage one another.” (Hebrews 10:25). The early church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Christianity is an embodied faith. The Word became flesh—not pixels—and dwelt among us.

When digital life displaces embodied life, we are not just losing connection. We are drifting from the very pattern of Christ’s incarnation.

3. The Decline in Conscientiousness: Formation by

Fragmentation Burn-Murdoch has pointed out something especially surprising: the combined weight of distraction and displacement appears to be contributing to a measurable decline in conscientiousness among young people.

Conscientiousness is one of the Big Five personality traits. It includes:

- perseverance,
- task completion,
- impulse control,
- self-discipline,
- delay of gratification,
- reliability.

It is one of the strongest predictors of positive life outcomes—far more predictive than childhood happiness or even intelligence. Lisa Damour highlights research showing that childhood conscientiousness is strongly correlated with adult well-being, stability, and

flourishing.

And here is the alarming part: distraction + displacement = less conscientiousness.

A scattered mind cannot persevere. A lonely child doesn't practice social responsibility. A displaced teen doesn't develop the confidence and follow-through that come from actual tasks, real friendships, part-time jobs, responsibilities, and rituals.

Digital life creates the illusion of engagement without the development of discipline.

This is not a moral failure. It's an environmental one.

Kids today are growing up in an ecosystem that weakens the very traits that make adult life possible.

And for Christians, conscientiousness isn't merely a psychological trait. It is part of discipleship.

Eugene Peterson said it best, "Christian discipleship is a decision to walk in His ways steadily and firmly, and then finding that the way integrates all our natural abilities and gifts."

A generation raised in distraction and displacement struggles to maintain the very habits that form Christian character.

4. The Church's Call: Rebuilding an Embodied, Attentive,

Resilient Community So what do we do?

Well, the answer is not simply to give up and throw in the towel on conscientiousness. Also, we don't ban phones and hope for the best. We definitely don't shame families or demonize screens.

Instead, we rebuild connection and reclaim attention.

The gathered worship of the church is countercultural in the best way; it asks us to sit still, listen deeply, pray, and be present to God and one another. These are ancient rhythms of resistance against our distracted age.

Likewise, shared meals, youth group, choir, discipleship groups, mission trips, and potlucks all embody us in the community of faith. The church is one of the last places in American life where people gather across generations, in the flesh, to practice love.

We also restore trust. In a world suspicious of institutions, the church becomes a place of refuge, where character is formed, not consumed; where relationships matter more than opinions; where trust is rebuilt through presence.

And if we do all these things, we form, or reform, conscientiousness. The Christian life is full of practices that build character: weekly worship, daily prayer, confession, generosity, and service.

These are holy habits that strengthen the muscles modern life is weakening.

The Church is meant to offer the world what it cannot give itself. Digital life gives us convenience. The Gospel gives us communion. Digital life gives us entertainment. The Gospel gives us transformation. Digital life gives us constant updates. The Gospel gives us eternal hope.

I believe this moment, this confusing, hyper-connected, lonely, distracted moment, may actually be one of the greatest opportunities for Christian witness we've seen in a long time.

Because what the world is starving for—attention, presence, community, meaning, faithfulness—the church was built to offer.

Our role is not to panic or condemn. Our role is to offer a better way.

Grace and peace, Woods

Advent is here! As the song goes, this is the most wonderful time of the year. There is so much going on over the next few weeks at SFUMC, and we hope you will join us for it all. You can find all the details in our newest edition of the Spanish Fort Monthly. However, some highlights include: Advent Celebration, Primetimer's Christmas Party, Breakfast with Santa, Spanish Fort Christmas Parade, Christmas Musical Worship Services, Youth Christmas Party, Christmas Eve Candlelight Services, and excellent weekly services each Sunday during Advent.

So with that in mind, instead of a Pastoral Note, I encourage you to read our newest Spanish Fort Monthly at the link below!

Grace and Peace, Woods

I didn't know Governor Wallace personally, and although a son isn't typically an unbiased source, PBS corroborates Junior's account of his father's later years. They wrote:

"After a four-year political hiatus, Wallace returns to the Governor's Mansion, defeating his opponent easily, largely with the help of the majority black vote. During what would be Wallace's final term as governor, he appoints a record number of black Alabamians to government positions and establishes the so-called Wallace Coalition, which included the Alabama Education Association, organized labor, black political organizations, and trial lawyers.

Wallace addresses the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and pronounces his past stand on segregation in the schools "wrong."

The same is true for how we measure things.

Most worthwhile things begin quietly. You almost never notice the first signs of their arrival. A garden changes by inches. A child grows in small, ordinary moments. Friendships are built across thousands of conversations. Even faith tends to deepen in ways that feel ordinary at first.

Church growth is no different. People don't forgive easily the first time they try. They don't wake up suddenly wise. These things grow inside us the same way saplings grow into trees. They learn their strength over time.

Faithful, incremental growth may look unimpressive, but it is often more stable than the fast kind. It encourages patience. It helps congregations avoid the trap of chasing novelty just because something feels exciting. Intentional growth roots people in practices that hold them steady when life gets complicated.

Jesus used images that captured this kind of work. Fields, soil, seeds, vineyards, none of these settings are fast-paced. Farmers learn to trust that what is happening beneath the surface matters even when they cannot see it. Churches must learn the same trust. When people grow in faith a little at a time, they develop convictions that won't wash away the next time the cultural tide turns.

Incremental growth never makes headlines, but it makes saints.

The same principle applies to children and youth ministry.

We tend to judge youth ministry based on its ability to draw a crowd. But the true measure of its worth is whether it shapes a life. Giveaways, big events, and loud music work. The energy is fun, and there's nothing wrong with creating moments that make young people feel excited to be at church.

But excitement rarely carries them through the harder moments; relationships do. I'm all for a good giveaway to generate excitement as long as it's partnered with adults who know their names and ask about their week. Good lessons that go deeper than good slogans. Conversations that let kids bring their real questions to the surface shape an adolescent's upbringing.

Children's and youth ministry built on relationships requires patience. Leaders have to show up again and again. Volunteers have to learn the stories of the kids they serve. Teaching has to move at a pace that allows questions. A ministry like that doesn't usually look as impressive at first glance, but its long-term fruit is unmistakable.

Young people who are shaped by a community of trust tend to return to that trust later in life.

They remember the adults who took their questions seriously. They remember the sense of belonging they felt. They remember Scripture passages that stuck with them. They carry those memories into college and adulthood. The current in those environments can be strong; relationships become anchor lines.

Upstream youth and children's ministry is the kind that walks alongside rather than entertains from a distance. It takes more time, but it creates roots.

New Year's Resolutions I don't usually make a big deal out of New Year's resolutions, but this year I noticed something about mine that felt worth naming. They are a little broader than years past. There is a bit more generality and nuance to accomplishing them. Although I typically lean into specificity, I am finding this to be a season of life that requires a bit more grace.

So my resolutions are simple. Read more. Eat out less. People.

The first two probably don't surprise anyone. Like a lot of us, I spend more time on my phone than I want to admit. I've written recently about distraction and how easily our attention gets pulled away from the people and moments right in front of us. Reading feels like an act of resistance to that. Not because books are morally superior to screens, but because reading slows me down in a way my phone never does.

Eating out less is not what I would call noble; it's just practical. I eat lunch out far too often, usually by myself. I am not giving up the kind of lunches that build relationships. In fact, I want to do more lunches with other people. I just want to move away from the ones that are convenience disguised as necessity.

Those two resolutions are personal and family-oriented. The third one is pastoral.

I'm wired to be with people. That hasn't changed, even if the shape of my energy has. Having young children has taught me that I do, in fact, have limits. I still gain life from conversation and connection, but I also know now when I need quiet.

When I first came to Spanish Fort, my calendar was full of coffee, lunches, conversations, and listening. That was exactly what that season required. In the past year, my focus shifted. I have spent most of my time creating or modifying necessary systems, managing finances, and developing operational structures. I spent a lot of time preparing for committee meetings and leading the Vision Team. And I wrote a lot. It was the right work at the right time, and I don't regret it.

But somewhere along the way, I felt the relational side of pastoral ministry begin to thin. It didn't disappear, but definitely drifted to the margins. And that's the part of my work I never want to lose.

So this year, I will be more available. Please never think my time is more valuable than yours. I was appointed here to pastor, and that means being present and interruptible. I want to make more phone calls and spend more time sitting across tables. If you've been meaning to grab coffee or stop by the office to simply talk, I mean it when I say I'd like that. And if you get a call or a text out of the blue, that's probably me trying to live into this resolution.

What struck me as I thought about all of this is how different these resolutions are from the ones I used to make. There was a time when my goals were highly specific and intensely measurable.

Run a half-marathon. Run a full marathon. Swim 2 miles at a pace of < 2:00/100 meters. Bike 112 miles. I've had weight goals and fat percentage goals. In the past, everything was clearly defined and aggressively tracked.

As life has become fuller and more complex, those kinds of goals have become less helpful.

Marriage, children, ministry, friendships, extended family, and the unpredictable nature of each day all resist a narrow focus. The more precise my goals became, the more frustrated I felt when reality refused to cooperate.

So, over time, my approach has shifted. My resolutions are broader now. Less about hitting exact numbers and more about direction and posture. Not because I've stopped caring about growth, or trying to create excuses, but because I've learned that some kinds of growth can't be forced or measured neatly.

Read more. Eat out less. People.

They're not dramatic resolutions, and they won't impress anyone. But they create space to live a more fulfilled life.

So we're only about a week in. How are your resolutions going? And if you haven't made any, it's never too late to come up with ideas to improve yourself. Or maybe discover something to make life a little more livable.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Recently, I was thinking about Paul's words in 1 Corinthians, where he compares the life of faith to running a race. It's a passage that has long shaped how I've imagined my calling. He talks about running in such a way as to win, not flailing around without aim. For years, that image fit neatly with how I understood ministry. Work hard and leave it all on the course.

I identified with this motif because once upon a time, we used to train for long races. Prior to having children, Brianna and I competed in marathons and Ironmans. We'd have these long days where training itself became the point. We'd spend eight hours on Saturdays swimming, biking, and running. It consumed almost every moment before and after work.

I don't do that anymore. We competed in one sprint (short-distance) triathlon last year, and I think I am good with our new quota of one short race per year. But here's the thing, even with all that effort we used to put into long-distance races, I was never close to the front of the pack. The winners finished in eight or nine hours, while I finished way later. I'm proud of our efforts, but I was never an elite competitor.

So I was wondering the other day: even if I had the physical gifts to compete at a top level, would I want the life that comes with it? It's easy to say no as a way make myself feel better, since it's never been a real possibility. But truthfully, elite endurance athletes eat, sleep, and breathe their sport. Everything else bends around that one focus. Family life, friendships, and all ordinary rhythms get pushed to the margins for this one goal. It's not impossible to hold those things together, but it is rare.

That realization led me back to Paul, especially his earlier words in 1 Corinthians, where he discusses marriage. Paul is honest. It's easier to give yourself fully to the work of the Lord if you are not married. It's easier to be available at all hours. Easier to drop everything when the phone rings. Easier to live with a singular focus.

Paul is writing to the Corinthians at a time when they believed Jesus would return immediately; most of his words and advice were offered through this lens. But even still, as a pastor, I know he's right. Ministry is simpler without a spouse and children. It's more efficient, and there are fewer competing claims on your time and attention.

He writes, "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do....An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord.

But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world.” 1 Corinthians 7:8, 32-34 He is correct. Singular focus is easier. It is easier to serve the Lord without being married.

But easier is not the same thing as fuller.

Part of being Christian is learning how to read the Bible with the whole story in mind. As Christians, we read the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation. When we do that, we discover that human beings are created for relationships. When we read the Bible in its entirety, I don't see a God who calls us to narrow lives defined by one consuming pursuit. I see a God who consistently names family, covenant, presence, and love as wonderful things, not distractions.

I don't regret becoming a pastor. I don't regret getting married. I don't regret having children.

This is the best life I can imagine. But I've had to accept something that doesn't come easily to me.

Just as I will never win an Ironman, I will never win the race to be the pastor who devotes the most amount of time to the church. That isn't because I don't care or because I'm coasting. It's because I have chosen to give my attention to other things that matter deeply to me.

I look at pastors who are absolutely crushing it. People who are bringing about growth and who have big platforms and limitless budgets. And some of them can manage it all. But for most, there is a quiet cost. Something that doesn't get the attention it deserves because of the focus required to have that level of devotion to a vocation. I have spoken to kids who wish they could have spent more time with their parents. Spouses who carry more than their share. Lives that shrink down to church and little else. That doesn't mean they are bad people. It just means their pendulum swings differently from mine.

And I know this is not unique to pastoral ministry. Anyone who cares about their vocation and family will ultimately have to ask whether they can be an elite spouse and entrepreneur; do they have the bandwidth to be the best parent and professional.

I know I work hard. The church doesn't get the leftovers of my efforts. I try to build rhythms that honor my relationship with God, my family, and the church. And those rhythms aren't static.

Some seasons demand me give more of my attention to the church. Other seasons demand more at home. But, ultimately, over the long arc, my family gets more of me. And I've come to believe that this makes me a healthier pastor, not a weaker one.

So I'm writing this as your pastor to ask: how about you? Which way does the arc of your attention bend, and is it in the direction you want? Most of us have multiple things we focus on, and I wonder, where do you give the majority of your attention?

I still believe in running the race well. I believe in effort, discipline, and faithfulness. But I'll never be interested in racing in a way that causes my marriage or my children to suffer. I'm not chasing a crown that requires me to sacrifice the people God entrusted to my care.

The race is worth running. I'm just learning that there's more than one way to run it faithfully.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Dear Church Family, As you review your end-of-year financial statement, let me just say that last year was a good year for our church. It's not that everything was easy, or that all problems have been solved. It was good because we shared in God's work together.

Over the last year, we welcomed new members into the life of Spanish Fort United Methodist Church. People invited neighbors to worship, they showed up consistently and taught classes, worked with children and students, opened doors, sang in the choir, ran sound, served meals, and stayed late when it would have been easier to go home.

We strengthened our staff in important ways, giving key ministries the leadership they needed to be healthy and sustainable. We hosted meaningful events that brought people onto our campus who might not otherwise walk through our doors. We continued serving our community through outreach and mission, often in ways that never show up on a spreadsheet but that still shape lives. We worshiped together week after week, trusting that God's faithfulness would remain evident in our congregation.

The year ahead holds its own set of opportunities. We are continuing the work set out by our Vision Team. Last year, we spent time listening carefully for where God is leading us next. Now, we are taking steps toward creating systems and processes that will shape the future ministries of this church. We are exploring questions about our facilities so that our spaces serve our mission well. We are investing in discipleship, especially for families, children, and students, because formation does not happen by accident. And we are committed to being thoughtful and responsible as we steward what has been entrusted to us.

The financial statement you are reviewing reflects that posture. It represents careful planning and a desire to align our resources with what we believe God has called us to do together. It also reflects your trust, and that is something I do not take lightly.

Thank you for giving faithfully. Thank you for supporting the ministry of this church in ways both seen and unseen. And thank you for believing that God is still at work here and choosing to be part of it.

I am grateful to be your pastor, and I am hopeful about where we are headed together.

Grace and peace, Woods

Dear Church Family, Over the past few weeks, I have found myself grateful and encouraged by how our new Groups Ministry is taking shape. Groups are meeting, people are showing up, and real connections are already forming. That is exactly what we hoped to see and is very much worth celebrating!

As with any paradigm shift, when our Vision Team decided to move to a discipleship model around “Groups,” we knew that regular communication was vital to the initiative’s success. If, along the way to launching new Groups, you have been unsure about what we’re talking about or how to plug in, I apologize, and I want to make sure everyone in our church knows what we mean when we say, “you should be in a Group.”

Simply put, Groups are the primary way we help people move beyond worship alone and into deeper connection with one another. Worship matters; it is central to who we are. But belonging and growth happen when people know your name, and you have space to talk, listen, learn, and laugh together.

At Spanish Fort UMC, everything that builds connections and/or deepens your faith journey is a Group. We have two types of Groups: Fellowship Groups and Discipleship Groups.

Discipleship Groups are centered on learning and growing in faith. These include gatherings such as Bible studies, short-term pastor-led classes, Sunday school classes, accountability groups, and topic-focused studies such as What Makes Us, Us, Taking Jesus to School, and Women in the Word. These groups are about Scripture, theology, prayer, and the practices that shape us as followers of Jesus.

Fellowship Groups are groups centered on connection through shared interests and low-pressure gatherings. These include Mahjong, the No Book Book Club, woodworking, supper clubs, PrimeTimers, UMM, and Senior Ladies Breakfast Group. These gatherings are not about curriculum or homework. They are about being with people, building trust, and creating space for relationships to grow naturally.

In another season of church life, churches organized everyone around one model. There would be an annual big push to get all members to sign up for the same time of gathering built around a unified structure. We’d say, “Everyone needs to be in a Supper Club,” or “Everyone needs to join a Small Group that meets once a week for dinner and Bible study.” The Vision Team spent a good bit of time asking whether a “single type of group” approach fits who we are today. The clear answer was no. Our congregation is too diverse in age, schedules, life stages, and experiences for a single model to serve everyone well.

So instead, we've named everything we do "Groups" and are trusting that people will find the kind of connection that fits their season of life. Ideally, many of us will find ourselves in both a discipleship group and a fellowship group. Realistically, my hope is simpler than that. I want everyone connected to something beyond Sunday morning worship.

That is why I am so encouraged by what is already happening. Our Discipleship Groups are meeting consistently and drawing a wide range of participants. Our Fellowship Groups are growing, sometimes faster than we expected. New groups are forming because people are paying attention to needs and stepping up to lead. That is exactly how this ministry is meant to work.

If you are already part of a group, thank you for showing up and helping create spaces where others can belong. If you are not, I want to encourage you to take that next step. Look through the list of groups in this week's Spotlight. Try something that sounds interesting. You do not need to know anyone ahead of time. You do not need to commit forever. You just need to start somewhere.

And if God is calling you to help us begin something new, please reachout to Pastor Sarah at sarah@spanishfortumc.org and let her know!

We were not created to walk this life alone. Groups are one of the primary ways we live that truth together.

Grace and peace, Woods

December and January were both amazing months at SFUMC!

Throughout Advent, worship, hospitality, missions, programming, and operations worked together seamlessly, and the spirit of the season reflected the kind of church we are becoming.

Advent culminated with over 500 people joining us for worship during our Christmas Eve services!

Our Advent mission focus bore tangible fruit. We raised more than \$3,000 for Embrace Alabama Kids, supporting foster care and adoption ministries in our state. In addition, during Epiphany, the Children's Ministry collected 1,100 diapers and 2,800 wipes to donate to Babies First, meeting a real and immediate need for families in our community. These were simple acts of generosity, but they represent the kind of outward-facing faith we are committed to nurturing. 2026 has brought continued momentum. New members have joined the church, and several others are finding their place. Our Groups Ministry continues to take shape with both discipleship and fellowship offerings. Groups such as Mahjong, Women in the Word, multiple Sunday evening classes, and a new Sunday morning group are all meeting regularly and drawing consistent participation. While there is still work to do, I am excited about what is happening.

Our Children's and Student Ministries are also back in full swing with their weekly programming. Also, some of our children are heading to retreat this weekend, with youth following next weekend. These retreats offer opportunities for spiritual growth and deepening relationships.

From a stewardship perspective, we continue to move in the right direction. While we are still projecting a deficit budget, the size of that deficit has decreased, indicating continued improvement and alignment in our finances. Donations have already begun coming in for the spring thrift store, signaling early support before it even opens its doors.

Looking ahead, I am excited about Lent this year. On Ash Wednesday, we will host a spaghetti dinner to help raise funds for upcoming mission trips. Our Lenten offering and special collections will support the ministry we partner with in Costa Rica. And we have a new Lenten devotional project. Throughout Lent, we will offer videos, podcasts, and written devotional resources shaped around the lectionary texts. These are recorded conversations with local pastors, reflecting together on Scripture and the life of the Church. This allows all of us to engage in Lent through multiple access points.

Taken together, December and January show a church that is not standing still. Worship participation is strong. Mission giving is tangible. Groups are forming. Finances are moving in a healthier direction. New people are finding a home. As we move toward Lent, we do so with gratitude for the work already underway and a steady confidence in where God is leading us next.

Thank you for your leadership and your faithfulness in the work we share.

Grace and Peace, Woods

Well, we are right back in the middle of another Mardi Gras season.

It came early this year. Early enough that when king cake started showing up at work, some of us were still recovering from Christmas. Early enough that waistbands may not have fully forgiven us for ham, dressing, and whatever cookies were still hanging around the house.

My family went to the second Dauphin Island parade last weekend, and we will likely attend a few more before the season is over. After eight years of taking kids to parades, I feel like I've got it down to a science. I really hit my stride a few years ago when I almost mastered the full Fat Tuesday parade schedule. Brianna was working, Wyatt hadn't yet been born, and I took August and Bradshaw to downtown Mobile. We posted up on Royal Street with a stroller, a folding chair, snacks, games, and blankets. We claimed a spot around 9:00 a.m. and planned to stay until the last daytime parade ended at 2:00 p.m.

We parked the stroller, set up the chair, and walked to Serda's for coffee. I kept the baby bag with me all day, which came in clutch when I discovered some trouser treasure in my three-year-old son's underwear. Not a diaper. Not a pull-up. Actual underwear. But I packed a full change of clothes for such possibilities, so I was not thrown off my game in the slightest. We positioned ourselves near Chick-fil-A so we could get food after the 10:30 parade without standing in line forever. I even parked the truck facing the river so I could pull straight onto Water Street and avoid most of the traffic when it was time to leave.

By 1:45, I'd almost pitched a perfect game and felt like a Mardi Gras parade professional. But then, halfway through the last parade, Bradshaw got hit in the head by a hand pump, the type that you'd use to inflate a basketball. Now, I have been hit by beads. I have been hit by ramen noodles. I have been hit by all sorts of unexpected throws. But the hand pump was a first.

Needless to say, there was no recovering from that. The perfect game was blown on account of poor defense. We packed up the double stroller and tried to navigate a crowd that was four or five rows deep. I got plenty of nasty looks and a few comments about trying to push a stroller mid-parade. But I didn't care; I was just frustrated about being so close to doing everything right, except being alert for flying hand pumps.

I have to say, although we have a good time at the parades, after almost a decade of attending the festivities, there is still one thing I have not figured out about Mardi Gras. When the season winds down, what are we supposed to do with all of the stuff?!? The beads, the stuffed animals with "2002" embroidered on the bottom. The crushed moon pies that no one actually likes, especially the banana ones.

We save a few things for daycare parades. But even after that, there is a crate full of junk that eventually gets donated or tossed. I am not complaining. The joy is in being there. In catching and laughing. In sharing the experience. But when the parades are over, most of what we bring home doesn't last.

It fades or breaks. It turns to "dust."

The image of Mardi Gras dust has been sitting with me as we head toward the end of this season and begin turning our attention toward Lent.

Every year, the church reads Jesus' words from Matthew 6 around this time. About giving without fanfare. About praying without performance. About fasting, without everyone needing to know how serious and spiritual we are. These are words I need more often than I would like to admit. I am not immune to hoping someone notices or wanting affirmation.

But a few years ago, a different part of the passage began grabbing my attention.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Now, when I read this passage, I can't help but stop and ask a simple question. What are the things that actually last?

So much of what fills our days is like Mardi Gras throws. Not just physical things, but words, reactions, resentments, anxieties. They feel important in the moment. They pile up quickly.

They crowd our attention. And yet, over time, they do not endure.

When I am anxious, irritated, or jealous, I have started asking myself: Will this exist in eternity?

When I feel resentment toward someone. When I get stuck replaying an argument that really did not matter. When I catch myself comparing my work to someone else's, recognition. I try to pause and ask whether this is something that lasts or something that will eventually settle into dust.

In the physical world, dust has a way of multiplying. You clean one surface, and somehow there is more the next day. It's like dust makes more dust. The same thing happens as we live our lives. Small frustrations stack up. Minor grievances feed each other. Before long, it becomes hard to see what actually matters; dust makes more dust.

Lent is like an air purifier, or a spiritual dustbuster.

In just a couple of weeks, we will mark our foreheads with ashes and hear the words, “From dust you came and to dust you shall return.” That is not meant to shame us. It is meant to free us. Lent tells us that not everything deserves our energy. It reminds us that we do not have to carry everything. Some things are meant to be released.

Lent is about asking, are we storing up things that will remain in eternity, like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Or are we storing up extra hours doomscrolling, or tearing each other down?

Lent is about paying attention to where our hearts are being trained to dwell. It is about letting go of what will not last so that there is room for what will.

As we move through these final weeks of parades and king cake, I invite you to begin your reflection. Start asking yourself what in your life will outlast this season. Ask what is worth holding onto and what might be dust.

When Ash Wednesday arrives, we will begin that work together. And, in a way, I am very excited for this Lent, because I think it will be a defining season in which God speaks new things into this congregation. I pray you will join us as we listen to God together.

Grace and peace, Woods

March through June 2026

On Friday, April 25, and Saturday, April 26, we're hosting our first-ever "Pop-Up Thrift Store!" A team led by Joanna Bass has been working to plan the layout, sort donations, recruit volunteers, and think through every detail. I'm grateful for them, and I'm genuinely excited about what these two days will look like.

Friday, April 25, we open to the public at noon and run until 4:00 PM. Friday morning is reserved for folks connected to our Community Dinner ministry, who get early access as an act of hospitality -- that feels right to me. Saturday, April 26, we go all day, 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM. There will be live music from 10:00 to 1:00, and a local bakery will be set up outside. Come hungry.

The items are donated by people in our congregation and community, and they're priced to move. We're not trying to run an antique shop or nickel-and-dime anybody. We want people to walk away with things they actually need.

Two reasons: first, to bless others. We are offering vouchers to members of our community who can be blessed with new clothes or home items. This is one of the ways we get to be the church to those not in our congregation -- tangible, useful, and open to anyone who walks through the door. I love that about it.

Second, we want to protect our missions ministry budget. In general, churches need alternative revenue streams, in addition to the congregation's generosity, to keep up with rising prices. We are a little over halfway through a two-year financial restructuring, where we have been rightsizing our spending to match our revenue. However, we are the Church, and missions, benevolence, and serving others are what we do. So all the money raised will go to our missions budget so we can do the things God is calling us to do.

We need volunteers, and we need them in a few different ways. Setup starts the week of April 13 to get racks and tables in place, and then April 18 through 23 to organize and sort donations. The sale itself runs from April 25 to 26.

If you have students in your life who need service hours -- through Boy Scouts, NHS, Beta Club, Key Club, or just because they're good kids who want to do something meaningful -- we have specific slots for them on April 22 and 23 from 3:30 to 5:30 PM, and all day Saturday the 26th. Please pass that along.

For adults, we need cashiers, floor staff, people to help keep the clothing section organized, and cleanup crews. Pastor Sarah will be in the fellowship area between worship services on March 22 to answer questions and get you plugged in.

You can sign up to volunteer at <https://spanishfortumc.org/thriftstore>.

We're also taking donations. If you have items in good shape that are ready for a new home, bring them. And if you're a dry-cleaning person with a pile of wire hangers taking up space in your closet, bring those too; we need A LOT of them.

Even if you aren't able to volunteer, come shop. Bring a neighbor or someone who's never set foot on our campus. Share the video on Facebook and Instagram and get the word out! Part of what I love about this event is that it's an easy, low-pressure reason to invite somebody into our space and show them who we are. That matters as much as anything else we're doing that weekend.

If you have any questions, you can email Pastor Sarah at sarah@spanishfortumc.org.

I want to share an update in our Children's Ministry. Beth Allen is transitioning to a volunteer role after serving the past two years as our Co-Director of Children's Ministry. We are deeply grateful for the way she has served this church in this season and in the many other areas of ministry over the years. Her care and presence have shaped so much of what our children experience week in and week out.

The good news is that she is not going anywhere. In many ways, you may not notice much change. Beth will continue to serve and be part of the life of this ministry. When Children's Moments return in the fall, you will still see her up front from time to time, and she will remain involved behind the scenes as well.

As our Children's Director, Elizabeth DeRocher will continue to lead the ministry, just as she has in recent years. Elizabeth has been steady and faithful in this role, and our church is better because of her leadership. I am grateful for Elizabeth, and I hope you will take the opportunity to thank her when you see her.

We are also excited to welcome Scott Clemons as our Children's Assistant beginning in mid-April. He will serve through the summer, and then in the fall, we will look at the possibility of adding an additional nursery worker. With more young families joining us, especially those with children under three, we are considering how to expand nursery support for both Sunday mornings and evenings.

Palm Sunday was awesome! We had around fifty children waving palm branches, the children's choir sang, and the combined service was thrilling. That afternoon, more than 225 people came out for the Easter Celebration, and the energy carried throughout the day. Thank you to everyone who volunteered and/or showed up.

I hope you experienced something meaningful in our Maundy Thursday service last night, and I look forward to gathering again tonight for Good Friday, and again on Easter morning!

Sunrise at 6:30, likely in the sanctuary due to weather

Can't wait to see you more this weekend, and be sure to invite someone to join you!

Looking ahead, I want to put something on your calendar for the end of June. On Sunday, June 28, at 5:30 PM we will host A Night of Worship for churches from around Mobile Bay here at Spanish Fort UMC. This evening will be set aside for one purpose. Worship. It's not anything complicated with any extra agenda. It's just a chance to gather with others from around the area in the presence of God.

The band will be made up of pastors and church staff from congregations across our area. Many of the people who lead worship every week rarely get the chance to simply participate. This night creates that space for them while also opening the door to anyone who wants to come.

It will be a relaxed, primarily contemporary, service open to all ages. Whether you are deeply connected to a church or just exploring, there is a place for you here. I hope you will plan to come and invite others to join you.

For more information, you can reach out to me directly.

Easter is not just a day, it's a season!

Eastertide begins on Easter Sunday and runs all the way to Pentecost. That means you can keep telling people "Happy Easter" for another six weeks. Easter is fifty days of joy and celebration, and at Spanish Fort UMC we intend to take full advantage of that!

New Members One of the oldest traditions of the church is that Eastertide is the season when new converts were baptized and brought into the community of faith. The early church treated this season as the natural time to step into something new. We want to pick that tradition back up.

If you have been on the fence about joining the church, or if you have been waiting for the right moment, this is it. Easter is the right moment. If you want to talk with me about what membership looks like here or if you have any questions about it, please reach out. You can email me at srpastor@spanishfortumc.org or call me at 334-803-5030.

Baptisms During Eastertide Another reason to celebrate is that people in our church are planning to be baptized this season, and I could not be more excited!

We explored the possibility of organizing a single baptism service down at the bay where we could all gather together and celebrate at once. The schedule did not cooperate for this Easter, but we will try again in the future. In the meantime, we are setting up a way to offer immersion baptisms on campus at the end of any service throughout Eastertide, beginning April 19. So if you want to be baptized by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion, any Sunday between then and Pentecost is available. The one thing we ask is that if you want to be baptized by immersion, please let us know in advance so we can prepare for it.

If you want to know more about baptism, what it is, and what we believe about it, scroll to the bottom of this note.

What's Ahead There is a lot to celebrate between now and Pentecost. Here is a look at what is coming:

April 23–24 | Pop-Up Thrift Store

Our inaugural Pop-Up Thrift Store is almost here. You have heard a lot about it, but you can [click here](#) to find details on how to volunteer.

April 26 | Combined Children's Worship

10:00 AM. Our kids will lead almost every aspect of the worship service. After the service, food trucks and Joe's Pizza will be set up outside so we can all have lunch and celebrate together.

May 3 | Last Day of Regular Programming

May 3rd is the last day of regular children's and youth evening programming for the school year. Our youth will continue meeting through the summer on a less consistent schedule, but the children's weekly programming will be on break until the new school year.

May 10 | Mother's Day

We will take time to celebrate and honor the women who have shaped our lives and our church.

May 17 | Graduating Seniors Sunday

We will honor our graduating seniors with a churchwide breakfast at 9:45 in the Fellowship Hall, followed by time for families to socialize and take pictures before seniors are recognized during the 11:00 worship service.

June 1 | Pentecost

We close out Eastertide with Pentecost, the birthday of the church. We will gather for a combined service at 10:00 AM to celebrate what God has given us and what God is still doing in this place.

On any Sunday between now and June 1, if you or someone in your family wants to be baptized or join the church, we want to make it happen! Just let us know, and we can set it up!

See you Sunday.

— Woods

Have you ever been baptized? If not, or if it happened a long time ago, and you want to remember your baptism, we want to give everyone that opportunity on May 17.

After the 11:00 service, we are heading to the Fairhope beach. We will grill out hot dogs and hamburgers and spend time together as a church family. Then, for anyone who wants to be baptized or to remember their baptism, we will gather at the water. If you have questions or want to talk about it before that Sunday, feel free to reach out to me via email at

srpastor@spanishfortumc.org or call me at 334-803-5030.

And if you're not sure what we mean by baptism, or you're curious how we understand it here, let me answer some of the most common questions people ask about the practice.

What is baptism?

It is a sacrament; a work of God, not our own. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Baptism isn't a ceremony we keep out of tradition or habit. We believe something real is happening. When a person is baptized, God is at work in them. The water is the visible sign of what God is doing within a person.

So what exactly is God doing? Two things, really.

The first is that God is offering justifying grace to the person being baptized. This is the grace of forgiveness, of new birth and regeneration. Paul describes it in Romans 6 as being buried with Christ and raised with him to new life. Baptism is the moment a person enters into that death and resurrection. The old life is covered, and the new one begins. It is not the only way God works, but it is one of the clearest invitations God extends.

The second thing happening in baptism is that a person is being initiated into the body of Christ.

You become part of the Church, not just a local congregation, but the whole communion of believers across time. This is why we practice baptism in community and not in private. When a baptism takes place at Spanish Fort UMC, the congregation makes a covenant with the person being baptized, promising to walk with them in the faith. The water is personal, but it is never isolated.

A person can experience God's salvation prior to being baptized. We believe we are saved by grace through faith, and that God's grace is not confined to any one act or moment. But we do believe that something significant happens in baptism. God shows up, and His grace is real.

Should I be rebaptized?

One of the most common questions we get: if I was baptized as a baby and don't remember it, do I need to do it again? The short answer is no. We don't rebaptize at Spanish Fort UMC. If baptism is God's work and not ours, then God didn't make a mistake the first time and doesn't need to redo it.

However, you can remember your baptism and reaffirm your faith in Christ. That is actually what confirmation is, students aren't being baptized again, they are claiming the faith as their own and affirming what God did in their life. And that reaffirmation can happen more than once, at any point in your life. There is a real difference between reaffirming and rebaptizing. And on the 17th, everyone in our church is invited to come to the water to “be baptized” or “remember their baptism.”

Why do we baptize babies?

As United Methodists, we believe in prevenient grace, which is the conviction that God's grace moves toward a person before they are even aware of it. When parents bring a child to be baptized, they are not earning anything or checking a box. They are bringing their child before God and trusting that God's grace is already reaching that child before they can reach back. The congregation makes a promise alongside the family to help raise that child in the faith. When the child grows up, confirmation is their chance to say yes to what God did in them before they could speak.

Adults who have never been baptized can be baptized as a public expression of their faith in Jesus. Both infant and adult baptisms are holy and worth celebrating.

Why do we sprinkle, pour, and immerse (dunk)?

Another common question people ask is some version of "do y'all sprinkle or do y'all dunk?"

Our answer is yes.

The United Methodist Church practices baptism by sprinkling, pouring, and full immersion.

Sprinkling is most common in our congregation. Pouring is when water is poured over the head from a shell, a vase, or another vessel. Immersion is a full submersion in water, and we are glad to offer it. On May 17, all three will be available.

Many Christians feel strongly that immersion is the only proper way to baptize, and they often point to the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3 as the reason: after his baptism, the text says he "went up out of the water," which some read as evidence he had been fully submerged. That is one reading. But it is worth noting that the Greek word translated "went up" there is the same word Matthew uses when Jesus goes up a mountain, or when Zacchaeus goes up a tree. It simply means he moved upward, which could just as well mean he walked up the bank of the Jordan after standing in the river.

It's also worth knowing that much of the earliest Christian art depicting Jesus' baptism shows John pouring water over Jesus' head from a shell, not dunking him. This is why many traditions still use a shell-shaped bowl for baptisms.

None of this is meant to argue against immersion. We practice it gladly. The point is that the Bible doesn't give us a step-by-step method, and the history of the church reflects that freedom.

What matters is that God is at work in the act, not the mechanics of how the water moves.

So we hope everyone will join us on May 17 at the Fairhope beach, whether you are going to be baptized, remembering your baptism, or simply showing up as the church to celebrate those taking their next step in faith. Come to eat and fellowship, and if the Spirit moves you, come to the water.

Grace and Peace, Woods

I had a conversation this week with someone who told me I wasn't allowed to judge him. I asked why not. He said it was in the Bible.

To his credit, Matthew 7:1 does say "Do not judge." But that's not where the verse stops. Jesus goes on: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

The difference between the first half and the whole passage matters. Somewhere along the way, Christians came to a collective conviction that we are not supposed to judge one another at all. The idea that only God can judge shows up in song lyrics and social media memes. It has the ring of humility, and I understand why people like it. Nobody wants to be accused of being judgmental. The problem is that it isn't actually what Scripture teaches.

God is, of course, the ultimate Judge. God alone decides salvation, and no human being has the authority to determine whether another person is saved. I want to be clear about that before I go any further. Scripture does, however, draw a distinction between the judgment that belongs to God and the accountability that belongs to the body of Christ. The first is God's alone. The second is something Scripture expects us to practice with one another, and it's woven into what it means to be part of the Church.

My friend's comment was what you might call prooftexting. Prooftexting happens when someone pulls a single verse out of its setting and uses it to make Scripture say what they already wanted it to say. It's dangerous because it feels right. You've got a Bible verse and you're quoting God, so who can argue? But a verse stripped from its context isn't really Scripture functioning as Scripture. One of the reasons I almost always preach from a longer section of text is to guard myself against this. I'd rather stay close to what the passage is actually saying than land on something clever I could make it say.

If my friend had kept reading Matthew 7, he would have seen that Jesus is warning about hypocrisy. The measure you use for others will be the measure used for you. That's a teaching about how judgment can be practiced faithfully, with humility and self-awareness. And the rest of the New Testament picks up this same thread.

Paul asks the Corinthians, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside." (1 Corinthians 5:12-13)

Paul tells the Galatians, "If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently." (Galatians 6:1)

James closes his letter with a word about bringing back a brother or sister who has wandered from the truth. (James 5:19-20)

And Jesus, in Matthew 18, gives the church a pattern for confronting a member who has sinned. Go privately first. If that doesn't land, bring along one or two witnesses. If that still doesn't move the situation, bring it before the whole church. (Matthew 18:15-17. Keep this one in the back of your mind for Sunday. We will come back to it.)

These passages are not an invitation to become moral inspectors of each other's lives. They are a description of what love inside the body of Christ looks like when it takes sin and discipleship seriously. Paul's word in Galatians is "restore." James' word is "bring back." That is the register the New Testament is operating in. The posture is return.

Here are a few things about judgment and accountability that are actually true.

1. God is the ultimate Judge. We don't get to decide whether another person is or isn't going to heaven. We can only have the assurance of our own salvation. Assuming someone is or isn't bound for hell puts us in the place of God, and that's its own kind of sin.
2. There is a place for naming how another Christian's behavior lines up with the faith they profess. This is how the Church has always loved its people well, by being willing to say what we see in one another.
3. This applies only to fellow Christians. Those outside the faith have not taken vows to follow Jesus, and their lives are not ours to measure. Paul says plainly that God will judge those outside.
4. Accountability within the church is about discipleship inside the faith community. Every person is accountable under the law of the land regardless of their faith. You cannot break a law and then say "my religion says it's fine." That isn't what any of this is about.

The harder truth underneath all of this is that accountability has never been the opposite of grace. It is grace taking the long view. A friend who loves you enough to say what they see is doing something different than a friend content to watch you drift. That is what Paul means by "restore." It is what James means by "bring back."

None of this is easy. It's hard to hear from a friend that they think you have wandered. It's hard to say it. But if we aren't willing to do either one, the kind of community the New Testament imagines begins to come apart.

On Sunday we will pick up Matthew 18 and see how Jesus wants this to work inside the life of a community. Until then, I'd ask you to sit with the question underneath all of this: who in your life has permission to tell you the truth about how you're living? And who have you given yourself permission to love that honestly in return?

April was, without question, one of the fullest months of my ministry at Spanish Fort UMC. And I don't mean that as a complaint, but a celebration! The congregation showed up with energy and a genuine excitement to participate in what God is doing here, and the result was a month that exceeded every expectation I had going into it.

We entered the month still in the closing days of Lent, finishing the "Leaning Into Lent" sermon series and the Mon/Wed/Fri devotional video collaboration with area pastors. Holy Week began with a fun Palm Sunday service followed by "Easter Celebration." During EC, our Silent Auction raised \$1,300 for our Missions Ministry! After Monday, the rest of Holy Week gave us a chance to move slowly and deliberately toward the resurrection. Thank you to everyone who served during our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. By the time Easter Sunday arrived, there was a palpable sense of anticipation for the resurrection.

Easter itself was a high moment for our congregation. Attendance was not only strong, but it was also up from last year's Easter attendance. There was something in the room that is hard to put into words but easy to recognize. Those are the kinds of Sundays that remind us how special it is to belong to Christ's Church.

Our inaugural Pop-Up Thrift Store was a significant undertaking and an overwhelming success. I went home last Saturday night so tired, but proud! The Thrift Store was a gift in many ways. It gave us a chance to serve those in need. There are some beautiful stories of families who participated in the Community Dinner on Thursday night, who were blessed by receiving new clothes and household items. Also, we had hundreds of people come through the doors on Friday and Saturday to shop and support.

Altogether, the Thrift Store raised over \$7,000 for our Missions Ministries! And perhaps the most life-giving blessing for me was to watch new relationships forming and previous friendships deepen. We got to spend a lot of time together, and work side by side, and those kinds of experiences are what build relationships and memories. I want to give special thanks to Joanna Bass, the Desotells, and Pastor Sarah for leading this effort. This new initiative required a lot of moving parts to come together, and I was blown away by how many volunteers showed up.

We are having a debrief meeting soon to reflect on the event and begin preparations for our next one!

Combined Children's Worship and Food Truck Lunch

April started and ended with a bang! The first Sunday was Easter, and the last was our Children's Worship Service and Food Truck Lunch. Our kids led almost every aspect of the 10:00 AM worship service, and they did it with confidence and joy. Watching our children lead the congregation was a reminder that our discipleship ministries are thriving. Elizabeth, Pastor Mike, and all the Children's Ministry team deserve enormous credit for what they are building.

After the service, food trucks and Joe's Pizza set up outside, and even though it was raining, families stayed and enjoyed fellowship. We were just a church being a church together, and it was hard to imagine anywhere else I'd rather have been.

Lastly, I am excited that more people are joining the church, and even more families have indicated they want to join and/or be baptized. We have been trying to recover the Eastertide tradition of welcoming new members into the community of faith, and it is bearing fruit. So if you have been thinking about joining the church or have any questions about baptism, please let me know!

April was indeed a full month, and it is one I will never forget! I am grateful to serve alongside this staff and congregation as we head into all that God has before us!

The remaining weeks of Eastertide are full:

May 3 is the last day of regular children's and youth evening programming for the school year. Youth will continue meeting through the summer on a modified schedule.

May 10 is Mother's Day, and we will take time to honor the women who have shaped this congregation.

May 17 is Graduating Seniors Sunday, beginning with a churchwide breakfast at 9:45 in the Fellowship Hall, senior recognition during the 11:00 service, and then a gathering at the Fairhope beach for baptisms and remembrance of baptism. This has the potential to be one of the most memorable Sundays of the year.

June 1 is Pentecost, the birthday of the church. We will celebrate with a combined 10:00 AM service.

June 28 is the community worship event, featuring a band of pastors and church staff from across the Mobile Bay area. Planning is ongoing and the event is on track.

And just like that, spring is turning into summer. The Azaleas have already bloomed, and the pollen from the live oaks seems to be slowing down a bit. I hope you got your tomatoes in the ground before now. It's not too late, but you might not win any produce awards this year. We have entered into the waiting period. The transitional time between seasons. Summer crops are planted, and most of the action is happening out of sight, underground. If we are able to see anything yet, it's just the beginnings of the plant that will grow.

I am reminded of the plants because of something that happened yesterday. One of the most gratifying things in pastoral work is knowing something you said landed. At the National Day of Prayer event, Brad Bass said he remembered something his pastor once said about planting seeds that we may not live to see harvested. Out of everything I talk about, and I know that is a lot, the fact that was what stuck with him was really exciting. Because it might be one of the most important things I believe about ministry and the Christian life.

I keep coming back to the idea of planting seeds because Jesus talked about this idea a lot. Read through the Gospels, and you start to notice the pattern. The kingdom is a mustard seed someone plants in a garden, the smallest of all seeds, that grows up into something a bird can nest in. The kingdom is like a woman who folds leaven (a small amount) into dough until the whole batch rises. The kingdom is sown ground that yields thirty, sixty, a hundredfold depending on the soil. The kingdom is a field someone quietly buys because he stumbled onto a small hidden treasure.

If you read Mark 4, Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises, night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows. All the man did was scatter the seeds, and the earth produced the crop. First the stalk, then the head, then the grain. Only when the harvest is ready does he come back with the sickle.

When Jesus wanted to describe what the kingdom looks like in the ordinary lives of his disciples, he reached for something small. Something that grows on its own, over time. There is the initial work, then a whole bunch of waiting.

Our world is fixated on immediate things. We are consumed by the desire to see results now. We want to see how our actions result in immediate consequences. And I can appreciate that desire. I want to know that what I do matters. I want to see the fruit of my labor. Results are what make us feel validated for our efforts and decisions.

But that is not how Jesus describes the inbreaking of the Kingdom.

I think about the work we are doing at SFUMC. There is no doubt that we evaluate our work and take seriously the stewardship of what God has given us. But our chief concern is not whether our effort immediately produces the largest crop as fast as possible. Sure, there is a part of me, especially after a hard week, that wishes our efforts would fill the whole sanctuary tomorrow. But I know that every time I sit with Jesus' own words about how the kingdom comes, I find myself put back in my place. The incremental growth we are seeing each week at SFUMC, in membership and in any other means of evaluation, reminds me of what Jesus said the kingdom looks like.

Our growth over the last few years has been meaningful. We've seen over a hundred people join the church, we've celebrated baptisms, our Groups for children, youth, and adults have all taken on new life. And all of it has been happening piece by piece. It's looked like a longtime member rediscovering a prayer practice they had set aside, or someone walking into the building for the first time because a friend kept quietly showing up here themselves. Most of that is invisible from the outside. It has happened in stages. But it is happening, and it lasts.

One of the gifts of understanding the kingdom this way is that it allows us to release a particular kind of anxiety. There are voices in Christianity that make us think rapid expansion is the only way to gauge success. There are strategies we can employ to drive conversions and things we can say to stir people up. I understand the appeal of leaders who will say whatever it takes to create fast growth. There is something energizing about being a part of something that validates our own opinions. But, more than anything, I care about a strong foundation. I care about building something that will outlast our generation. Just as I want my house to be on concrete, I want our congregation to have strength beneath it. It takes time to pour the slab and to frame the walls. Growing the church is like building a house or like patient farming. It takes time.

Building the Kingdom this way asks something of you. Mostly, it asks for patience. The slow image of the Kingdom is harder to live with than the urgent one. It asks that you trust God to be doing real things in the soil that we cannot see. We do the things God asks of us, and then we trust the Spirit to work. It's not always easy to trust what we can't quantify, but if we are faithful, we can be assured that God will use all our efforts.

On the heels of the National Day of Prayer, I am reminded of how important prayer is to this kind of Kingdom building. Prayer is the practice that slowly forms patient people. You cannot rush it or perform for a perfect score. You can only keep showing up. Over time, prayer rearranges what you want and what you trust, and it makes you the kind of person who can

wait on slow things without losing heart.

So that is where I am landing this week. I want us to keep being a slow-growing church. Jesus described his own kingdom that way, and I trust Christ.

Friends,

I want to introduce something new at the bottom of these Friday notes. Starting soon, every Pastor's Note will close with a short section where I answer a question someone in the congregation has sent me. Comments and concerns are welcome too. The premise is simple. People in this church have questions, and most of them never reach me.

The questions cover a lot of ground. Some are theological. Others have to do with worship, money, staffing, the building, or a ministry that someone is worried about. And many of them are not really questions at all, they are concerns. Someone might be frustrated about a decision and want to know why we made it. Someone else might have the sense that something is not going the way it should, and not know what to do with that.

Sometimes I hear about these concerns, but almost never from the person who is actually carrying them. They reach me secondhand, through someone who cares about you but cannot answer what is bothering you or do anything to address it. That sideways path is hard on everyone involved, and it leaves the staff and leadership of this church working in the dark instead of working with you.

So we are setting up a form. I'll link to it at the bottom of every Friday note. You can use it to send a question, a comment, a complaint, or something you've been curious about. I'll do my best to respond to one each week in this space. If more come in than I can fit, I'll work through them as I'm able.

I want to be honest about one piece of this. The form will have an option to submit anonymously. I wrestled with that. A few weeks ago, I preached on the harm of triangulation and the call to bring our concerns directly to the people who can do something about them. Our staff has been working hard on what it looks like to be publicly accountable to one another and to keep concerns from drifting sideways. Including an anonymous option on this form sits a little crosswise with all of that, and I want to admit it openly.

Here is why I am including it anyway. The whole point is to surface questions and concerns that are not currently reaching me. If anonymity is what it takes for someone to actually press send, I would rather have the question than the silence. I'll still encourage you, every time, to put your name on what you ask. Your name lets me follow up with you. It lets me ask a clarifying question or sit down over coffee when that's what a situation really calls for. Anonymity closes those doors. So when you can sign what you ask, please do. When you genuinely cannot, the form is still open to you.

[Form link will go here once it's live in Shelby. You'll see it at the bottom of every Friday note from then on.]

To give you a sense of what this section will look like, here are three questions that have reached me that I am happy to answer.

****Where is the money raised for "missions" actually going?***

The short answer is: all of our missions. SFUMC's mission work happens on several tracks at once. Locally, we partner with agencies that meet some of the hardest needs in Baldwin County. Prodissee Pantry runs one of the largest food relief operations in the area. Family Promise hosts families experiencing homelessness in a host-site rotation. Baldwin Family Village serves survivors of domestic violence and their children. Kidz Eatz feeds elementary-age children on weekends. The William Green Veterans Home in Bay Minette gives us a place to honor and care for veterans. Through our denominational connections we give to the USA Wesley Foundation campus ministry and to Embrace Alabama Kids, the foster and adoption ministry of our conference. We support missionaries serving abroad and on college campuses. Out of our own building, we host the weekly Community Dinner at the West Campus and our new Thrift Store. Each year we send adult and youth teams to Costa Rica. Our Missions Team also organizes seasonal supply drives for several of the partners above.

This year we have planned several new fundraisers because we want this work to keep happening. We are in a season of right-sizing the budget. Some parts of our budget are fixed and have to be paid each month. The missions line is one of the lines that flexes depending on what we raise. Right now over \$40,000 of our budget is tied to these mission ministries. The money we raise through fundraisers is not extra dollars stacked on top of that amount. It helps make sure those ministries stay in the budget even as we tighten our spending elsewhere. We are called to serve others. That is who we are, and missions is the outreach arm of this church. So when we ask you to give to a fundraiser, this is the work it makes possible.

****Are the participants on the upcoming mission trip paying their own way, or is the church paying?***

Yes, each participant is paying for their own trip. Each year we also set aside a small amount for mission trip scholarships, so that someone who feels led to go but cannot afford the full cost can still go. To be eligible for a scholarship, a person needs to have been serving in other ministries of the church first. Beyond that, every participant is encouraged to write letters of

support to friends and family asking for sponsorship.

A mission trip has costs beyond travel and lodging, all tied to the ministry happening on the ground. Those include work materials for the projects we take on, tips for the drivers we hire, supplies for the VBS we run during the week, and the smaller expenses that come up once we are there. Our church has traditionally covered those costs so the trip stays affordable for participants. The more people who go, the higher those costs run. This year we have seventeen people going, which is fantastic and expensive. That is why we have asked anyone who is willing to help offset those extra costs to consider doing so.

I want to be clear about one thing. Helping with mission trip costs is not a requirement of anyone, and it should never come out of your regular giving to the church. Designated giving that replaces what you would otherwise give to the church is one of the things that gets congregations in trouble. I'll have more to say about that in another note. If you are able to give toward this trip over and above your usual commitment, that is exactly the kind of help we are asking for, and we are deeply grateful for it.

****Why do we sometimes follow the lectionary in worship and other times not?**** [Short answer to come. I'll explain what the lectionary is and how it shapes our worship year, including the seasons when I step off of it for a sermon series.]

If something is on your mind, I would love to hear it. The form will be linked next Friday. Until then, I am always up for lunch or coffee. To be honest, Sunday mornings are not when I am at my best for a real conversation. My mind tends to be in a hundred places at once. If Sunday morning is the time that works for you, come find me in the parlor at 10:00 AM for "Meet the Pastor." That is exactly what it is there for.

Grace and peace, Woods

We all know you're not supposed to judge a book by its cover. It's something we've all heard. But it can leave us missing something else that's true. Covers are signals. They are trying to communicate something. Someone picked the font and the color scheme. They chose how the outside would speak about the inside before you ever opened it. And it works on us. A reader survey found that around 80% of buyers said the cover was a factor in whether or not they bought a book.

This past Sunday, I found myself thinking a lot about signals. During worship, I got the gift of sitting in the pew while Pastor Sarah preached. She delivered a dynamite sermon. I want to remind you about part of it, but first, I want to tell you about everything I noticed while she was preaching. I was watching, and I was struck by how many things were speaking to us at once.

Worship is full of signals. Every choice we make on a Sunday morning is communicating something. The songs we sing, the color of the paraments, the clothes we wear, the instruments on the stage, the words on the screen, what gets read aloud, and what doesn't. None of it is accidental. Someone chose it, and the people sitting in those pews are receiving it.

But the thing about signals is that they don't always land the way they are sent. A hymn that warms one person can put another on edge. An opening line of a sermon can sound gracious in one ear and political in the next. We all receive things through the lenses of our experiences.

One of the reasons we love combined services is that they are visible proof that we are one congregation. One body, usually in two services, gathers together in the same space. We all show up on a day like Pentecost Sunday and feel something good. Being together in service brings a sense of unity.

But sometimes a service like that can feel like we are getting more signals than we are used to. Every element is still saying something to every person in there. If your usual diet is one style of worship, a service that mixes styles can feel less like a feast and more like a strange combination of food groups. That is true if you love contemporary worship and find yourself in a long traditional liturgy. It is also true the other way around. What is wonderful about a combined service is the same thing that makes it hard to do every week. There is a reason none of the largest or fastest-growing churches of the last twenty years have made blended worship their primary mode. It is beautiful in moments, but it's hard to sustain every Sunday.

So let me walk you through some of what I was noticing, and what those things might have been saying to different people in the room.

When we sang Come Thou Fount with the band, that was already two signals at once. The hymn itself is centuries old, which signals continuity with the church across time. The band arrangement signals openness and a willingness not to do everything one way. Some people received both happily. A few may have preferred the song they love in its original arrangement.

When Pastor Sarah said in her sermon, “all are welcome,” she was naming a piece of our Vision Statement. But when some hear that phrase, they think it is a progressive talking point, while others hear it as one of the most orthodox claims the church can make. The same four words, sent into the room, received as opposite signals. People hear what their formation has trained them to hear.

We opened with "America the Beautiful," and last week I preached on the dangers of Christian nationalism, so I wondered whether the hymn might muddy that message. But if you read the verses carefully, the hymn is actually a prayer about a country that is not yet what God would make it. It asks for mending. But not everyone reads the verses carefully on a Sunday morning. Some receive it as unbridled patriotism. Others hear a prayer for a country still learning to be just.

There were quieter signals all around us. Red paraments that communicate the fire of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. The cross processional says that everything that follows is under the sign of Christ. Kneeling rails invite prayer. A centered altar table says the meal is at the heart of what we do. A woman preaching, which is itself a signal in this part of the country, because not every tradition allows it. A traditional pulpit rather than a contemporary stand or table. Stained glass high above. Acolytes and candles.

I am not writing this to argue how something should have landed for you on Sunday. I am writing it because the practice of worship depends on a posture I have come to value more and more. Most of what we do in a service was chosen with intention. We try to create atmospheres conducive to encountering the Holy Spirit. But how any of it is received is shaped by the history each of us brings into the building. And the long work of being a congregation with real differences is learning to give each other the benefit of the doubt about when a signal is received in an unintended way. If someone likes one thing, that doesn't make everything else less valuable. Just like if we have an opinion, it doesn't mean every other opinion is invalid.

This goes all the way back to my very first sermon at SFUMC and something I will say until I die. To be the community of Christ, we have to operate from a presumption of grace. When we

are concerned about something, we should ask if a signal got crossed between what was said and how it was received.

Pentecost is a fitting Sunday to notice this. The first Pentecost was a room full of people hearing the same Spirit in different languages. Nobody received it identically. And the church was born anyway. That was what Pastor Sarah helped us realize on Sunday: that we don't have to be the same to be one. You may like a certain style or aesthetic, but you can still be one with a person who values the opposite.

Grace and Peace,

Woods

Question: Why do we need to have police at most of our worship activities?

This question lines up with the idea of signals I was just writing about, but it deserves its own answer. It is a fair question, and I take it seriously. I have served in more than one church where this question has come up. The practice didn't start as a political statement. It started as a response to the long and discouraging record of violence in worship spaces in this country over the past decade. I won't provide links to the incidents here. The volume is depressing enough that anyone who follows the news already knows what I mean. In response to these tragedies, churches around the country began thinking carefully about how to keep their people safe, and many, ours included, decided an officer on campus was part of the answer.

Even though it has become standard practice for us, it isn't wrong to ask how others receive the signal of having an armed officer in the narthex. Not every signal we send lands the same way for everyone, and being serious as a worship community means remaining willing to hear from anyone for whom a given choice is uncomfortable.

I surveyed congregations on this during past appointments, and more than 90% of the people in the pews approved of having an officer present. I haven't done a congregational survey on the subject here, but I have little reason to think SFUMC would be drastically different. That being said, if you feel uneasy about it, your concern is real, and I don't want it to go unheard.

As the person ultimately charged with the safety of this congregation, I rest easier knowing someone trained is watching the back of the room while I am paying attention to what is happening up front. I have had several experiences in my ministry where having an officer on campus was especially helpful; some were because of a serious threat, others were medical or

weather-related. I am grateful, every Sunday, that someone equipped for that work is in the building.

The officers we have are also wonderful people. Officer Josey is one of the most popular faces here on a given Sunday, and the men he coordinates carry the same spirit. They speak to visitors and know our kids by name. I truly believe the way the actual people occupy the role makes a real difference in how the role is received.

Thank you for asking. The cost this practice carries for some readers is something I want to keep sitting with rather than wave off. We want every person who walks through our doors to know they were thought about, including those for whom this signal communicates something unintended.

Grateful for you,

Woods

If you stepped into the West Campus this week, you might have wondered where the building went. For one week it became Rainforest Falls, and the transformation was stellar! Vacation Bible School took over, and it has been one of the best weeks of the year.

Elizabeth did a beautiful job leading the effort. Long before the first child walked through the doors, she was recruiting volunteers and working through a hundred details most of us never see. Her leadership showed in every part of it. Thank you, Elizabeth.

Margie, Elisha, and Scott deserve special thanks for the hours upon hours they spent decorating. They were up at the West Campus day after day, turning hallways and classrooms into a rainforest. And they were far from alone. In the weeks leading up to VBS, volunteers came up to help prepare the building. By the time the children arrived, the whole place truly looked like Rainforest Falls.

I had a blast playing the part of Dr. Flint Flutterbye. The kids and I spent all week looking for my butterfly, but sadly, we never did find it. Maybe one day we will, but I can tell you I had at least as much fun as the children did.

It takes an all-hands-on-deck effort from an army of volunteers to make VBS happen. Think about what a week like this requires. Every group of children needs adults to guide them, and we need people for the games, the snacks, the music, the scripture lessons, the crafts; it all depends on somebody saying yes. This congregation stepped up over and over, and I couldn't be more grateful!

One of the things I love most about VBS is that no one pays a dime to attend. It is a gift to our community, given with no strings attached. Some of the children who came this week might not walk into a church at any other time of year. For one week, they were welcomed by name into a building decorated just for them, and they heard about the love of God. If that is the only impression of church they carry with them into the rest of the year, it is a good one. That alone is worth every hour our volunteers gave.

My hope is that it will not be the only impression. If you crossed paths with a VBS family this week, I hope you will invite them back. They have already seen our church at its best. Sunday morning is a natural next step, and they will find the same welcome waiting for them. In fact, our children will be singing some of their VBS songs during the 11:00 o'clock service on Sunday.

This week has been a blast. I am proud of our congregation for pulling off such a successful event, and grateful to serve a church that is so eager to share Christ's love. Thank you to everyone who served.

See you Sunday.

Grace and Peace,

Woods