



First Presbyterian Church of Athens

2021 Annual Report

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In response to God's grace, the mission of First Presbyterian Church of Athens is to create a community where people seek the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, rejoice in worship, and go forth sharing the love of Christ with Athens and the world!

Senior Pastor

One of the great joys I experienced in 2021 was the opportunity to coach our twin boys' Athens Little League baseball team. It was wonderful to be back on the ballfields after the 2020 Little League season was canceled due to the pandemic.

Baseball is one of the few sports that has no clock. Theoretically, so long as one team keeps batting and the other team fails to record three outs, a half-inning of baseball could go on indefinitely. And at the Little League level, sometimes it does seem like outs are rarer than hens' teeth and a half-inning of baseball will never end!

Of course, it only seems that way. Every baseball game eventually ends, even in Little League.

About a year ago, I remarked to a colleague that I thought we were entering the "late innings" of the global pandemic. When we made our ministry plans for 2021, we assumed that by summer 2021, the pandemic would be spoken of in the past rather than the present or future tenses.

For a time, it seemed that those assumptions were correct, but alas, the pandemic continues. I still believe that we are in the "late innings," but what we all wouldn't give for an out! Every pandemic in human history has eventually ended, and this one will, too.

Even though our plans for mission and ministry at First Presbyterian Church have continued to be reworked, the leadership of this church has smiled, dusted itself off, stood up, and said, "Let's play ball."

Because of God's amazing grace and the resilience and imagination of our congregation's leaders, members, and friends, even in these challenging times, the work of the church has never stopped. We have discovered and developed new ways of being the church, and to this very day, we continue to be a congregation that, in response to God's grace, creates a community where people seek the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, rejoice in worship, and go forth sharing the love of Christ with Athens and the world.

Within the pages of this report, you will read about how, by God's amazing grace, your generosity is making an impact for the kingdom of God here in Athens and beyond. None of it would happen without your faithful stewardship of the gifts that God has entrusted to you. Thank you for your continued generous support of this ministry, and even more, thank God for you.

We have completed nearly three years together as pastor and congregation, and I remain more convinced than ever that the best is yet to come for the First Presbyterian Church of Athens. Thank you for the countless ways in which you support me and my family. It is a joy and a privilege to be your pastor.

Very truly yours,

Dr. Ryan Baer, *Senior Pastor*



Associate Pastor

Dear Congregation,

A good bit of the New Testament is comprised of letters. Letters can be personal, informative, and usually fun to receive. Our culture has shifted from paper-and-pen letters largely to emails and online posts. But I still do occasionally receive missives that our friendly postal carrier Neil delivers. Here are a few snippets of some 2021 letters that bear Good News about the difference that this church is making in people's lives:



- from Don Mosely of Jubilee Partners, one of the recipients of our Outreach Grants and where a team from FPC renovated a small house used for refugees: *How I wish you and a lot of those hard-working and generous folks there at your church could get out to Jubilee to see the absolutely beautiful family from Afghanistan living in the house that some of you worked so hard to make better suited for such occupants. A family of seven are in that house, next door to another house with eight Afghans in it. Altogether, four adults, 15 beautiful children between the ages of 1 and 16. And this is their first opportunity in many months to go out into a playground, swing, slide, ride bikes, laugh, and shout for joy!*
- from a widow: *Our whole family appreciated Athens First Presbyterian but especially you, Lucy, and John. I relaxed and you took over planning the memorial service. I will write to the ladies in the kitchen, too. Special people! Thank the Mellows, as well. And let the session know that we appreciate being granted permission to hold the service in Athens. You all will always be my home church.*
- from a bride whose wedding I performed twice—a small one in a garden in May 2020 when the pandemic first hit, causing us to pivot, and a big one in our sanctuary a year later: *Thank you for not only helping make last year so memorable but for also continuing to help make our full wedding weekend special. First Presbyterian Church of Athens will forever hold a place in our hearts, and we will always love returning in the future.*
- from a member in response to Ryan's and my proclamation of the Word in spoken word and visual art as he read Genesis 1 and I painted large canvases in worship on September 12: *One would think that in the vast richness of the English language I could come up with words to describe Sunday's sermon set to art. It was wondrous. I was held rapt watching you move between canvases, going back and forth, to depict the Creation Story. It is something I hope never to unsee or to unhear.*

And now here is a thank you note from me to you: *I didn't know how much I needed resting and renewing until I relaxed into my three-month sabbatical over the summer. I cannot thank you enough for this marvelous gift! I was able to unwind from the responsibilities of ministry and enjoy unstructured time based at our mountain house walking in the woods, painting, making friends, and reveling in the beauty of God's creation, as well as traveling to take art classes and to connect with family and old friends. Before I left, a group of women from the congregation sent me off with a party and a stack of notes of encouragement which I savored by opening one a week throughout my time away. I am so privileged to be part of a family of faith that as you can see from the letters above is so helpful, caring, hospitable, and open to God's creative presence among us.*

With gratitude and love,

Carol Strickland, Associate Pastor

Parish Associate

As 2021 dawned, I remember peering into the COVID crystal ball with one of our seniors. She imagined this would all be over by late Spring. I cautioned her that it might very well stretch on into Fall 2021. She burst into laughter at such absurdity, saying, "I certainly hope not." It was not an unreasonable response, with vaccine distribution imminent for seniors. I imagined those would take time to distribute. It was inconceivable to me that we would still be trying to slay this ever-evolving dragon in 2022. As ever, but felt more forcefully these days, change is one of life's greatest constants. And as poet Maya Angelou once said, "If you can't change it, change your attitude."



Our seniors understand this advice well. Change is constantly required of them – adjusting to major life transitions, like being distanced from family, accompanying their loved ones to the threshold of the life beyond this life and grieving their deaths, being unable to continue with former activities and finding new ones, downsizing their homes, adapting to deteriorating health and its limitations, accepting our own mortality and confronting loss of control over that process, and for almost two years now, coping with lonely isolation, prolonged boredom, feeling entrapped, restless, and anxious to get on with life, especially in the twilight of one's final chapter on Earth. Yet, our seniors are quite adept at changing their attitudes in the face of indomitable circumstances, choosing to focus on the present and live each day with attentive gratitude for the simplest blessings, like the faithful persistence of love, grace, and holy presence, in all circumstances. The Apostle Paul, who was well acquainted with change and hardship encourages attitude adjustment amongst the faithful in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Paul has to remind the church of this because, frankly, having such a universal cheerful disposition is a tall order for anyone, even Paul, who was never shy about lodging complaints. I suspect that the wellspring that waters such an attitude lies in gratitude and trust. After decades of faithful living, our seniors draw deep from this reservoir and we are wise to learn from their example.

My ministry as Parish Associate is primarily to share the love of Christ with our members that are homebound, in senior care facilities, in the hospital, or just going through difficult times. Through my role, this congregation provides its members and the larger community with:

- Care for members in senior care facilities and those who are homebound locally
- Support to the pastoral staff and congregation in their care of members and their caregivers in temporary or deteriorating situations, bereaved families, and those who have been hospitalized or undergone recent medical procedures.
- Continuity of worship leadership, as needed, through liturgy and preaching
- Steady leadership officiating funerals for members of the church, as requested
- Service on the Congregational Care commission
- Advocacy for new ways to keep our seniors connected to the life of the church

This year has seen big swings back and forth in how I was able to deliver care, with most of the care being offered through curbside or mailed deliveries and phone call updates. In summer, vaccinations opened things up a bit, with a relaxation of restrictions that allowed some physical visitation amongst the vaccinated, which, though masked and distanced, at least gave us the luxury of looking into each other's eyes to share concerns and lift them to God in prayer. In those interim months, we were sometimes permitted to make hospital visits to our members in need. While our seniors in care facilities and members in hospitals continue to enjoy more freedom of movement than in the initial shutdown, the arrival of a succession of two very viral variants and the resulting spread from holiday intermingling, even amongst the vaccinated, meant new restrictions for non-family, outside visitors in care facilities and hospitals. We continue to monitor and provide pastoral support for emergent

situations, call our senior members for updates, deliver weekly bulletins and sermons, and quarterly send a *These Days* daily PC-USA devotional. In addition to mailings of Lenten and Advent devotionals and ornaments, in 2021, we worked with staff, Congregational Care, and the Youth and Children's ministries to deliver three care packages of Christ's love from the church to our seniors. They received an Easter delivery of daisies, chocolate cross pops, scripture and prayer, and a wooden cross necklace. In summer, they received cards and fine soap. At Christmas, they received homemade cookies and an ornament.

As someone who strives for constancy and thrives with routine, this year has been so difficult, both personally and professionally. But I don't want to get mired in the hard. I want to adjust my attitude, as Paul recommended. When I look back on this year, what I will choose to remember is how this church showed up in big and small ways for each other. There was one summer week, where I was the pastor on deck, in which there were more than four funerals and deaths. I leaned hard on my colleagues that week and recall their abundant support. All year long, I will remember how the staff were gracious to each other and stepped up to provide continuity of care to the congregation, as we went through quarantines and disruptions to school and childcare, through sickness, sabbaticals, and surgeries, from birth to bereavement. I will remember those first delightful in-person visits post-lockdown, meals delivered to the sick and bereaved, water toys to young families quarantined with COVID, devotions shared with the divorcing, books of faithful farewells for those tying up loose ends before death, funeral plans made with love, and all the prayerful conversations we shared together. I will give thanks for all the love and care you shared with me when my brother died and recommit myself to the lost art of sending timely bereavement cards. I am grateful for my husband and son's sacrificial support that enables me to serve God faithfully in this place.

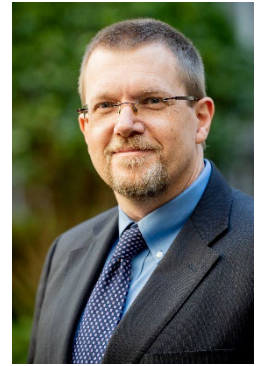
Our staff, our congregation, the faith that unites us is a bountiful gift to buoy us through difficult times of constant change. "In life and death, we belong to God...We trust in the one Triune God...Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still...In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit give us courage to pray without ceasing....to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth....With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (excerpts from *A Brief Statement of Faith* of the PC-USA)

Thank you for trusting me with another year to serve this congregation as Parish Associate. Whatever circumstances await us in 2022, I look forward to continuing to enjoy and glorify God with you in this space. May God bless you and keep you, be kind and gracious to you, and give you peace!

Rev. Margaret Davis, *Parish Associate*

Director of Music and Organist

The year 2020 was certainly challenging in ways we could never have imagined before. 2021 continued to bring new challenges. Even though our pandemic has continued to limit our activities, looking back, more happened in 2021 than we might think.



January and February – Our smaller and socially distanced handbell group, which we affectionately named the Handbell Quarantine Quire, continued rehearsing. This ensemble formed to play for two outdoor events in December 2020. They played in worship in February of 2021. Also in February, I performed an organ recital at the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta. The performance was lived-streamed (no “live” audience allowed in the building at that time) and was viewed by friends across the country. It was the first recital or concert of any kind that I played since the beginning of the pandemic. I dedicated the program to the memory of my mother, which was meaningful for me since we were not able to have a church memorial service for her. From January through April, I was fortunate to join a series of Zoom presentations from the Indiana University Organ Department featuring conversations with organists and church musicians in the UK, which was very interesting.

March – This month saw a very big and long-awaited event, the installation of our new Antiphonal Organ by the Schantz Organ Company. Smith Wilson and his crew had built the chambers and made preparations, and two teams from Schantz installed, voiced, and tuned the seven new ranks. The Antiphonal Organ was given as a gift from Drs. William and Brita Barry, in honor of the United States Military Academy. The project exceeded my expectations and we’ve been enjoying it ever since.

April – Easter was different, but we were still able to celebrate two guest trumpeters from the University of Georgia Hugh Hodgson School of Music, one a faculty member, and one an alumnus. Also, as part of my effort to continue a collegial relationship with our university, I accompanied another graduate trumpet major in making a recording for a job audition. It is a joy to work with our music students and assist them in their education and career journeys.

May – This month saw the return of our Scottish Reformation Sunday complete with Henry Frantz on the Great Highland Bagpipes, and a procession with Scottish flags and kilts. It was a great way to celebrate our Scottish heritage as Presbyterians. In May also had the opportunity to do something I could not normally do – using our new communication tool, Zoom, I gave members of the Inquirers’ class a guided tour of our organ, including an up-close demonstration of the organ console (keyboards, pedals, stops, etc.), and I showed the group inside the chambers of both the new Antiphonal division and the main organ, showing them the pipes and inner-workings of our fine instrument. It would not have occurred to me before Zoom that there might be a way to “take” an entire Sunday school class inside the organ.

The last Sunday in May also saw the long-awaited return of a choir to lead our worship services. At the time, the CDC had deemed it safe for fully-vaccinated people to sing together indoors. I quickly assembled a group of willing and able singers, and the choir was met with unexpected applause when they entered the choir loft for the first time in more than a year.

June/July – Summer is usually a time when we take a break from weeknight choir rehearsals, but the choir was so happy to be singing again, we started rehearsing again too. Summer brought a series of virtual conferences that I participated in online. I took part in the Indiana University Sacred Music Intensive conference, as well as conferences presented by the Presbyterian Association of Musicians, the Association of Anglican Musicians, the Sewanee Church Music Conference, and the Royal School of Church Music. My teacher and mentor, Marilyn

Keiser, performed recitals in two of these conferences and was interviewed in one. I discovered quite a bit of new organ repertoire and I am still learning and playing new works in services and recitals. I have also continued to learn new choral music and creative ways to have choirs adapt to our current situation. Adapting, being flexible, and learning new ways has been an unexpected benefit from this pandemic.

August/September – At the start of the year, we continued to make progress back to “normal,” resuming two Sunday services. The handbell ensemble began rehearsing again and preparing for more outdoor performances. Unfortunately, we experienced another surge in the pandemic, wearing masks became necessary again, even for those vaccinated, and we made the decision to suspend weeknight choir rehearsals for a while. We have continued to have the choir singing in worship. In order to adapt to this situation, copies of music and recordings are e-mailed for choir members to practice at home, and the choir meets to rehearse on Sunday mornings only.

October/November – The fall brought the return of the Ath-half race and our pre-race service. Although we had made plans earlier in the year for the Chancel Choir to perform a requiem in November, with disruptions in the rehearsal schedule and the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, we postponed that performance. In the continued spirit of adapting to our situation, in its place, I performed an organ recital on an All Saints theme called *Steals On the Ear*, a line borrowed from the hymn *For All the Saints*. The recital was well-attended in person, and the live-stream was viewed across the country. In the program, I performed two pieces new to me, and several other works which had specific significance for All Saints. While we have all missed gathering in person on many occasions, an advantage of our live-streamed services and concerts is that many of us have been able to see and hear things we would not be able to in person. It has been a time of struggle and sacrifice, but there have been good things to come out of it.

December – Advent and Christmas usually bring a flurry of activity, and this year was no exception. I performed a Handel organ concerto with students in two holiday concerts at UGA, I was organist for a Lessons and Carols service at Commerce Presbyterian Church, our Handbell Quarantine Quire performed outdoors for our Live Nativity, I played for the FPC Weekday School Christmas program, we had our Festival of Lessons and Carols with the largest choir we’ve had since the beginning of the pandemic, I played for the Service of the Longest Night, and we saw the return of three in-person Christmas Eve services, with a choir at 6:00 and 8:00.

I have also continued to enjoy teaching organ students through UGA, helping them gain skills for current and future work as church musicians. I’ve also continued to receive calls from churches looking for organists. It is rewarding to help prepare organists and to pair them with churches.

This has been another challenging year, in some ways, more so than the previous year. While we have learned more about what we’re dealing with, things continue to evolve and we continue to navigate through it all. We continue to keep trying, we adapt and find creative ways to be the church. I am grateful for the dedicated choir members we have. I am grateful for John Tsao going above and beyond as a soloist when needed. I am grateful for colleagues on our church staff who have continued to work hard, to adapt, and to support each other through these unprecedented times. I am especially grateful for our Senior Pastor, Dr. Ryan Baer, who has continued to provide steady, supportive, and compassionate leadership while having the difficult task of leading and making seemingly impossible decisions, while at the same time trusting the staff to make decisions and do the best work we can in our own areas. Last, but not least, I am grateful for this congregation, as we continue to find our way, as best we can, through these challenging times, together, and for remaining faithful to God and to our church.

Soli Deo Gloria (to God alone be the glory).

Dr. John T. Coble, *Director of Music and Organist*

Director of Youth Ministries

At the most recent new member class, I asked how many people were members of a youth group as a teen. Nearly everyone raised their hands. I expect that if we polled our entire congregation, two thirds would also reply yes. While youth group is filled with fun and games, it also sets the foundation for an adult relationship with God. It provides a space for questioning, exploring, and reckoning. How does the wonder-filled faith you are taught as a child fit with the hurting world you currently see today? Where is God? Where do I belong?



The impact of the pandemic on our youth cannot be understated. Nearly two years in, and our youth are struggling. They may not have been at an increased risk for illness, but their mental health, connection to peers and sense of safety in our world will have repercussions far into adulthood. Countless studies on the impact of Covid on teens reveal an increased sense of isolation, anxiety and depression, across all demographics. Add in the missed milestones - birthday parties, proms, and graduation with the loss of your typical high school social scene and we have a whole generation that is coming of age in a "new normal." Think about Your "normal" middle/high school experiences. Mine included Friday night football games, after school clubs, soccer practice, movie nights, church youth group and lots of just hanging at friends' houses. That has not been the case for so many of our teens these last two years; and why I believe youth ministry is even more important today than in the past.

Since that first shut-down-Sunday in March 2020, we have provided a weekly space for youth to come together, to feel safe and supported, to be known and to simply have fun! Over Zoom, we laughed through family trivia nights and Chopped cooking competitions. We marked the one year anniversary of the pandemic with an online service of hope and lament. When it was finally safe to meet in person, we wore masks while participating in a Lenten prayer walk through downtown Athens. And on May 2nd, Scottish Reformation Sunday, we hosted The Amazing Race: Highland Games. Families competed in twelve challenges all around the church building. From writing limericks to tossing a "caber", it was a great night to be together as our last youth group of the school year.

As we prepared to begin the 2021-2022 school year, we made another set of changes to better serve the needs of our youth. First, we hired a Middle School Coordinator to lead the ever increasing number of active middle schoolers. Erin Osborne, who literally grew up in our youth group and attends UGA, now works part-time to plan and lead all middle school activities. Second, we welcomed youth from Covenant Presbyterian Church to join our youth group. This summer I was contacted by a member of their Session to ask for help. Their church is in a time of transition and they do not currently have a youth program. As a connectional church, of course, we said yes and it's been a great fit! Third, we blessed a new confirmation class using a hybrid model. Taking new tools developed last year, this class of twelve is meeting with Dr. Baer to talk about what they are learning asynchronously on Google classroom. It's been a great way to share information and provide an opportunity for reflection on their own time, while building a strong community when we meet in person. Lastly, we made meeting in-person a priority. While Zoom was invaluable last year, our youth were craving time to simply be together. In the Fall, we transformed the lower parking garage into our own field for outdoor games and icebreakers. We purchased 30 tailgate chairs and circled up on the patio outside the PIT for Bible study and conversation. We even met a few times at my house for fire pit chats. As the weather got colder, we put on our masks and spread out in Fellowship Hall, including hosting the annual Elf Movie Night, complete with onesies, bean bag chairs and a gift exchange.

While many things in youth ministry have changed since the pandemic began, our mission remains the same: to draw youth into a journey of faith, prepare them for lifelong discipleship, and inspire them to carry the love of Christ to Athens and the world. And I would add, to **help youth know they are safe, deeply loved, and never alone**, for that is what all young people desperately need. We covet your prayers as we continue to navigate uncertain times together.

With appreciation for all you give to support our youth ministry,

- Kim Ness, *Director of Youth Ministries*

Director of Children's Ministries

What a year 2021 has been! It has been one filled with a mix of emotions. Unfortunately, stress and frustration have continued due to this ever-changing pandemic; YET this year has also been one filled with joy and celebration! And because of this church's strong support of Children's Ministry – physically, emotionally, and financially – we have grown in a variety of ways this year! We have welcomed new friends to our Circle of Wonder, learned new ways of gathering and worshipping together, and discovered new opportunities to share the light and love of Christ with neighbors in need.



As I think through all the ways we have connected and grown over 2021, many comments from our families come to mind...

"Thank you for sharing (virtually) Story and Wondering Time with us! Wondering together has turned into such a sweet one on one time with my child!"

"Thank you for sending home our very own Godly Play stories so that we can experience them with our children. This has become such a meaningful worship time for our family."

"Thank you for all the support and resources that have been provided during these hard times."

"Thank you for doing everything you can to keep our children safe as we move back to in person. We feel safer at our church than in many other places."

"We love that the courtyard is being used more. We hope that may continue!"

"I am overwhelmed at how these Wonder Boxes are filled with so many wonderful hands-on resources for our children!"

"We thoroughly enjoyed this year's Night of Wonder! It was incredibly charming to see all the individual personalities of the children allowed to shine in their own unique ways. I love how you love our children and I'm so thankful for this ministry!"

And then a few of my favorite comments from children recently shared with me ...

"Mrs. Natalie, this is the best Baby Jesus we have ever had. Even if he is just a baby doll. He is so cute!"

"Mrs. Natalie, may I keep my special Gabriel wings on so that I can show my parents!"

"Mrs. Natalie, I will be ready to be Mary."

Lastly, I want to share a very special moment that I, along with a few of our wonderful Children's Ministry volunteers, witnessed this past fall.

After our Sunday morning Godly Play story, we always take time for our prayer circle. The children have learned that during this special time it is very important to give all our friends in our circle time to talk to God either out loud, in our hearts, or we may not have any prayer words at that moment which is of course just fine. One Sunday morning our prayer circle gathered, and the prayer began. I said a prayer and then said "Amen" which

signals to the person next to me that it is their turn to say a prayer. Now, you may think that most children just say “Amen” and that we finish our prayer circle quickly. However, most of the time this is not the case. The prayer circle continued with a few short prayers out loud and a mixture of silent prayers and “Amen.” And then the prayer came to one of our youngest friends. After a few minutes of silence, I peeked to see if this sweet child knew it was his turn. He definitely knew it was his turn as you could tell he was thinking very hard to himself. One of our volunteers quietly reminded him to say “Amen” once he was done praying to which he responded politely, “I’m thinkin.” After a few more minutes of “thinkin” this precious child of God prayed out loud, “Thank you God for my family and Baby Jesus. Amen.”

Thank you, First Presbyterian, for loving all our children of God. Thank you for providing extra time and a beautiful, safe space that honors these children. Thank you for providing an abundance of meaningful and spiritual resources that support our children and families. Thank you, Children’s Ministry Volunteers for your devotion and attention that you shower our children with on Sunday mornings. And thank you, Church Family for your continued trust and support of me as I guide this wonderful ministry into a new year.

Natalie Bishop, *Director of Children’s Ministries*

Director of Weekday School

As a reminder, our annual report always covers the most recently COMPLETED school year.

The 2020-2021 was a year of historic success for children at the Weekday School during a year of extreme pandemic challenge for the world. 132 children were able to attend beginning on our originally scheduled date in late August, with 25 teachers and staff. A system of protocols was established to protect all during the worldwide pandemic of Covid 19. The fact that the Weekday School is a closed group of families that were all informed and agreed to these protocols, with our program having no visitors, etc. by nature, made this a possibility within our walls. After 9 individual open houses for our nine classrooms, parents did not come inside the building again for the rest of the school year, with the exception of a couple of well distanced programs in larger areas of the church for individual classes, and Pre-K graduation. But inside our classrooms, play, friendships, social interaction, love of school, curiosity, and delight in learning thrived. While other preschools in the area waited a month to watch us before they opened, or didn't open at all, we were able, thanks be to God, to stay open the entire year with the exception of one class closing for two weeks due to an assistant teacher becoming ill. Thankfully there was no spread, and she had a light case. Parents were extraordinarily grateful for this normalcy in their children's world. As Dr. Matt Crim expressed it, the Weekday School was "wildly successful" in navigating this situation to serve children during this extremely difficult time. None of us knew in August whether we would be open a week, a month, three months, or the year. A good plan and a complete follow, through yielded tremendous blessings for children within our church building.



The Outreach Commission allocates Scholarship Funds for needy families annually. One of several families that has benefited from your generosity for this year was a family with two young girls, one who had already graduated from the Weekday School. The father has had a state funded medical transport business for the community for those without resources to get to medical appointments on their own. During the pandemic, his business went from running 8-9 vans to one van per day. The mother stayed home. It has to be well planned to afford the tuition for preschool, but the pandemic made it an impossibility. Your scholarship funds allowed this child to stay in school when the pandemic all but took their small business away. This same young man takes away mountains of straw each year after Live Nativity as his way of helping the school. He has done this with a servant's heart for at least six of our 10 years of Live Nativity, and tells me each year it is his duty even after the girls are out of the school. We are so blessed that we had the funds to help the family stay in the school when they were struggling with the loss of the business during this long pandemic. (shared with permission.)

It has been a challenging but rewarding year for First Presbyterian Weekday School. We are grateful to continue the mission we have been charge with as a part of First Presbyterian Church.

Elaine Johnson, *Weekday School Director*

Church Administrator

The pandemic continued to linger on for the entire year of 2021 and continues to be with us as we begin into 2022. Fortunately, we have begun to have in person worship services and while in person attendance hasn't reached normal prior to pandemic levels it is available to all who wish to come. Live streaming is still available, and many members are participating in that manner.

Our operating budget for 2021 was a mirror of 2020 and due to the continuation of the pandemic revenue was slightly less than budget and expenses were slightly greater. Our property committee has made substantial progress in constructing the columbarium and over 60 member families have already purchased their niches.

Many of our activities occurred via Zoom, but there were some drive-by events, including a successful Live Nativity, with over 500 people viewing the animals on our front steps.

We are grateful that our members continue to provide their financial support and enable the church to continue its support of the Athens community. We look forward to a new year when all of us will be able to enjoy in-person worship together and rejoice in our vibrant congregation.

Roger Burbage

Church Administrator



Administration Commission

Commission Members: Chair Michelle Clendenen-Shaw, Ed Ferguson, Mixon Robinson, Jim Dove, Elizabeth Earl, Andy Jordan, Smith Wilson, Jimbo Laboon, Ryan Baer, *Senior Pastor*, Roger Burbage, *Church Administrator*

The purpose of the Administration Commission is to manage the resources God has entrusted us, maintain our assets with care, and love and nurture our personnel. Four Teams comprise the Administration Commission and each Team is charged with specific responsibilities in Finance, Nominations & Elections, Personnel and Property.

The Administration Commission was privileged to provide First Presbyterian Church of Athens with the knowledge and organization needed assist in keeping our ministry moving forward during the Covid crisis. We took pride in advancing the Lord's work, caring for, maintaining, and improving our assets, loving, and nurturing our personnel, while acting on behalf of our church during this year that was anything but normal.

The Administration Commission is comprised of Four Teams and each team is charged with specific responsibilities in Finance, Nomination & Elections, Personnel and Property. As this year has drawn to an end, we detail some of our many accomplishments:

- Operating Budget for 2021 was practical and due to the continuation of the pandemic revenue was less than budgeted and expenses were more than budgeted in several areas. We owe a debt of gratitude to our generous congregation.
- The Personnel Committee was chaired by Elizabeth Earl. Work has been completed on a Personnel Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines for the church, and presented to the session in 2022 for approval. It was created to provide information about the employment policies and practices of First Presbyterian Church of Athens. It is intended to provide guidelines for the exercise of management and discretion in the personnel areas.
- The Property Committee was chaired by Smith Wilson. During 2021 FPCA unveiled the plans for a columbarium memorial being built next to the sanctuary on the west end of the property. Funding for the ground-breaking was a generous donation by Mike and Ann Bascle. The remainder of the \$400,000 project will be funded by niche sales and borrowing from endowment funds of which will be repaid through the sale of niches. Our significant completion date is in April 2022. The practice of cremation and placing urns in columbarium dates as far back as the Principessa Margherita in 6 A.D. in Italy. Congregants worshipping each week and on special occasions enjoy the finest music possible because of our true musician Dr. John Coble and our magnificent pipe organ. During 2021 the challenge of an exciting project was created by Bill and Brita Barry with their more than generous donation to add Antiphonal Organ Pipes in the sanctuary. The organ is a hybrid, a combination of wind instrument and keyboard instrument, and produces a tremendous variety of sounds. Repair and painting of the exterior sanctuary shutters began. The repair project continues in house. One quarter was completed in the lower section of the courtyard. Completion date in March is anticipated depending on available funds.
- During 2021, the Chair of the Finance Committee was Michelle Clendenen-Shaw. The committee undertook work to compile and create a Financial Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines for the church. This is a foundation for an effective system of internal controls; guidance in current financial activities; criteria for decisions on appropriate accounting treatment; and management with direction and guidance regarding accounting transactions, procedures, and reports for uniformity. This will ensure that proper records of income and expenditures are maintained and that financial objectives are met.

The Finance Committee has responsibility to ensure that the church's income remains in line with rising costs. During 2021 FPCA paid \$60,432.71 in interest on the debt. Work continued with the campaign to eliminate the remaining renovation debt. Much progress has been made over the course of the last three campaigns but there is still work to be done.

Elizabeth Earl, Personnel Commission

Smith Wilson, Property Commission

Michelle Clendenen-Shaw, Administration Commission

Congregational Care Commission

Commission Members: Tom Landrum, *Chair*, Robyn McDonald, Judy Burch, Bill Patterson, Arlene Shirley, Lawton Stephens, Jeanie Burbage, Greta Covington, Jeanne Nadenicek, Harry Shuford, Madeline VanDyck, *Parish Nurse*, Carol Strickland, *Associate Pastor*, Margaret Davis, *Parish Pastor*, Lucy Bell Johnson, *Church Staff Liaison*

The mission of the Congregational Care Commission is to nurture, care and respond to the needs of the congregation. Our committee and its multitude of volunteers have been hard at work to do just that. From breaking down flowers after Sunday service and delivering them to those who might need a little lift, to providing rides to those who may not otherwise be able to attend church functions, the ministries of the CCC are aimed at sharing God's love with all of our members.

The Congregational Care Commission of Athens First Presbyterian met monthly by Zoom during the months of January through November of 2021.

Aided by the outreach ministry of Rev. Carol Strickland and Rev. Margaret Davis, and by the extraordinarily organized work of Office staff members Lucy Bell Johnson and Jennifer Sunderlin, the Commission secured volunteers to provide support on a monthly basis for Prayer Chain which responded with appropriate prayers for congregants facing illness or bereavement, and for a Correspondence team to reach out to congregants with messages of Christian sympathy and encouragement. At each Commission Meeting, members reviewed a tracking sheet on the status of Church members with respect to their spiritual and personal needs, all designed to help achieve appropriate personal contact. A system of "lay callers" supported regular contacts and "touches" for members with spiritual care needs.

Due to restrictions resulting from the COVID pandemic, the traditional Senior Adult Sunday event and the Christmas Tea were not held for the second consecutive year. Instead, Commission members and Church staff prepared gift bags for personal delivery to congregants confined to their homes. The Commission partnered with the Church Youth Ministry to prepare cards and messages that were part of the gift bags. For a Christmas touch, the Commission made use of delivery of home-baked cookies by volunteers.

The Commission helped conduct a study to assess the need and strategy for a "name badge" program whereby Church members would display name identification on their clothing at Church events. Commission funds were budgeted to pay for the first issue of plastic, magnetized name badges and Commission members helped organize the initial pick-up of the badges. Office staff members Lucy Johnson and Jennifer Sunderlin provided critical and essential support for this effort. The initial pick-up was supported by a steady stream of information on the Church webpage and in Church bulletins. The name badge program will continue into 2022.

There were other efforts by volunteers to support worship and outreach, including a sanctuary flower volunteer effort, and volunteer responses for those in need of transportation to Church services. The Commission members believed their work was especially needed during this past year, and there will be a continuing need so long as First Presbyterian faces pandemic-related challenges.

Tom Landrum, *Congregational Care Commission Chair*

Education & Discipleship Commission

Commission Members: Melinda DeMaria, Chair, Kent Burel, Rod Canfield, Ryan Baer, *Senior Pastor*, Natalie Bishop, *Director of Children's Ministries*, Elaine Johnson, *Director of Weekday School*, Kim Ness, *Director of Youth Ministries*, Margaret Sapp, Laura and Edgar Seward

The Education and Discipleship Commission is charged with the following responsibilities: Church Nursery, Children's Church, Vacation Bible School, Sunday School (all ages), Middle School and High School Youth Group, Confirmation Class, Wednesday@First/Fellowship@First programming, Bible studies, small groups, and the Church Library.

Our year has seen a desire to reconnect and resume a semblance of stabilization which the church can provide through its programming and the connected nature of our congregation. Given the challenges that have existed the commission worked to support areas under our purview as best as possible and to support our church staff in their efforts.

For specific reports pertaining to the Weekday School, Children's Ministries and Youth Groups, please refer to the staff member submitted reports.

As a commission we worked to connect in our support of our church staff in their specific areas within our commission. We sought to broaden our input and impact and therein added three congregational members to the commission who have been wonderful additions.

Through many hands, input and time from Dr. Strickland, Kent Burel, Natalie Bishop and numerous volunteers, our church library has been cleaned, reorganized and structured in a way we hope to be more broadly used by our congregation.

We recognized that as a commission we needed to note the successes of our Adult Education programming and connect with our members who are passionate about this area of the church's ministry in hopes to evaluate and look at our needs. This led to the creation of the Faith Formation group led by Dr. Strickland and Kent Burel. The commission is excited to see where the Faith Formation group makes recommendations to think strategically about how to take what our church is doing so well and take us to the next level in serving this area of our congregation and its members.

Melinda W. DeMaria, *Education & Discipleship Commission Chair*

Fellowship & Evangelism Commission

Commission Mission Statement: *The Fellowship and Evangelism Commission provides growth opportunities for our members to connect and build relationships with one another outside of the regular Church and Sunday school time. The commission also welcomes guests to our church, invites them to become part of our family, encourages new members, and communicates about the life of the church with the larger community.*

Fellowship and Evangelism includes: Most Church wide dinners and receptions, Fellowship@First Wednesday Night Dinners, Atrium Refreshments, Annual Picnic, Red Coat Band Picnic, First Things (New Member Class) and Reception, Sports Teams, Presbyterian Women, First Friends, Primetime Presbyterians (PTP's), New Member engagement and Evangelism efforts.

Commission Members: Grace Lu, Matt Jones, Keith Oelke, Rosemary Stancil, Chair

During the past year, all personal contact has been special because Covid 19 has limited it especially during the beginning of the year. Even something as small as delivering and receiving a rose bush for 2021 session members presented a happy opportunity to see one another.

In the summer the commission planned for First Presbyterian Church to host the August Northeast Georgia Presbytery meeting only to have it moved to a zoom format at the last minute because of Covid 19. The Fellowship and Evangelism Commission had planned with volunteers for registration, a light breakfast, snack, lunch, hosts, flower arrangements, table decorations and other hosting duties.

In the fall, the commission planned Wednesday@First meals. Time after time we planned Wednesday night dinner only to have it cancelled due to COVID 19. The church then decided it would be best to wait until the spring and try again.

The purpose of Atrium Refreshments is to invite those who attend the 11 o'clock worship service to linger a few moments to visit with each other and to give a personal welcome to visitors. Because of COVID 19, Atrium refreshments were suspended this year.

We had one class for new members in the fall ("First Things") with a reception for them after worship in the Atrium.

Finally, in October we were able to hold a church wide reception on the church porch recognizing new members. We also organized and held a church picnic at Sandy Creek Park that was enjoyed by almost 100 of our congregation. Both of these events were relaxed opportunities to visit with each other. As the severity of the virus has fluctuated, so have our opportunities to gather. Hopefully, these restrictions will be behind us.

Rosemary Stancil, *Fellowship & Evangelism Commission Chair*

Mission & Outreach Commission

Commission Members: Rob Haire, *Chair*, Mary Burton, Sally Vandiver, Brenda Glasscock, Karen Burg, Carol Strickland, *Associate Pastor*, Tom Wilfong, Kitty Donnan, Jerry Rogers, Bertis Downs, Denise Horton, Richard Lane, Robbie Bryan, Mark Hopkins, Joe Powell, Kim Ness, *Director of Youth Ministries*, Jean Bock, Susan Boatwright

The budget for M/O was approved with an additional \$8000 to distribute on behalf of the church to grantees applying for financial support.

The grantees receiving funding this year were: Bethlehem Ministry, Inc. The Ark United Ministry Outreach Center; ACCA's Meals on Wheels (MOW) Program; Athens Nurses Clinic; Our Daily Bread Reimbursement; Athens Area Emergency Food Bank; Athens Amistad (Casa de Amistad); Family Promise (IHNA); Family Promise of Athens Reimbursement; Food Bank of Northeast Georgia; Strong Girls Serve Inc.; Clarke County Mentor Program; Neighborhood Health Center; All God's Children; WINGS Guatemala ; Books For Keeps ; Athens YMCA; Homeless Day Center Reimbursement; Extra Special People; Jubilee Partners; Athens Area Diaper Bank. We also dispersed funding to Presbyterian and Christian education efforts.

In addition to awarding grants and performing our normal Mission and Outreach activities this year, we were also charged by Session with finding "big projects" to fund. As a result of the generosity of the church and less overhead expenses, and a portion of a federal grant that was forgiven, the church had a supplement of funds for 2021. While some of these funds were used to retire a portion of our building debt, Session turned to Mission and Outreach to see if we could identify one or more "big projects" that would benefit our local community. Accordingly, M/O canvassed our annual grantees and other areas in the Community by email and personal contact to determine if there was a substantial project in the Athens area that needed funding. We received 12 proposals from the Community for funding of large projects. M/O formed a sub-committee of current ruling elders on M/O to further evaluate the proposals and make recommendations to Mission and Outreach.

The Session, on recommendation from Mission and Outreach, committed to providing funding in the amount of \$70,000 dollars to the Athens Area Immigration Council in funding a Hispanic Community Center for Athens. There is no permanent meeting structure for our Hispanic community. Unfortunately, after a year of work identifying and selecting a Matthew 25 worthy opportunity, AIRC informed us in December of 2021 that they had to decline the grant First Pres offered due to their inability to fundraise the amount needed to complete this project.

While this is disappointing for the Commission, M/O will be working on putting together and funding with \$30,000 a social justice entrepreneur effort we have named the Galilee Project. Much more on that next year. The details of this effort will be developed and implemented in 2022.

Rob Haire, *Mission & Outreach Commission Chair*

Worship & Music Commission

Commission Members: Beverly Phares, *Chair*, Larry Jones, Sarah Bryan, Dr. Ryan Baer, *Senior Pastor*, and Dr. John Coble, *Director of Music and Organist*

When the Worship and music Commission made its 2020 report, COVID was in its first phase during the second half of the year. Knowledge was shifting and so also were ideas of best practices in response.

What we had hoped were one-time interruptions/disruptions and the responses to them became, all too soon, the new normal as we moved into 2021 and Delta and Omicron.

The attention to streaming and technology in the last half of 2020 by Bryan Owens and Jack Palmer laid a strong foundation for adjustments to worship in 2021.

2021 saw -> a reopening of church to in-person worship and with that, addressing questions of (both voluntarily and in response to public health mandates) mask wearing and temperature taking, the presence (or not) of the choir, total numbers of in-person worshippers (by reservation only), social time in the atrium moving to the porch, passing of the peace with waves, social distancing in the pews, and limits to congregational singing and responses.

Flexibility was particularly important in the preparation and serving of the sacrament of communion. We were accustomed to passing the bread and cup or taking it by intinction. We learned to pick up a single-serving communion cup with wafer and drop off our offering on our way into the sanctuary.

The commission was at all times mindful of public health guidance, the concerns of individual members and the need for flexibility in the outer appearances and practices of worship all while holding true to the essential tenets and practices of worship. Dr. Baer reminded us that the church is not the building and that the church was not closed. The church is wherever we are and wherever we may gather.

Beverly Phares, *Worship & Music Commission Chair*

2022 Communion Schedule

Beverly Phares, *Worship and Music Commission Chair*

Sunday, January 2	First Sunday of New Year
Sunday, February 6	February Communion
Thursday, February 17	Session Worship
Wednesday, March 2	Ash Wednesday (12 pm, 7 pm)
Sunday, March 6	March Communion
Thursday, March 17	Session Worship
Sunday, April 3	April Communion
Thursday, April 7	Session Worship

Thursday, April 14	Maundy Thursday (7 pm)
Sunday, May 1	May Communion, Scottish Reformation Sunday
Thursday, May 19	Session Worship
Sunday, June 5	June Communion
Thursday, June 16	Session Worship
Sunday, July 3	July Communion
Sunday, August 7	August Communion
Thursday, August 18	Session Worship
Sunday September 4	September Communion
Thursday, September 15	Session Worship
Sunday, October 2	World Communion Sunday
Thursday, October 20	Session Worship
Sunday, November 6	November Communion
Thursday, November 17	Session Worship
Sunday, December 4	December Communion
Thursday, December 15	Session Worship
Saturday, December 24	Christmas Eve (6 pm, 8 pm)
Sunday, January 1, 2023	First Sunday of New Year

Nominations and Elections Committee

Committee Members: Jennifer Abbott, *Chair*, Beverly Phares, *Vice Chair*, Joe Neighbors, Greta Covington, Julie Knowlton and Robby Bryan and Ryan Baer, who by virtue of his office as pastor serves the committee ex-officio and without vote.

“The function of the Nominations and Elections Committee is to nominate congregational members for the Session, the Church Nominating Committee, the Pastor/Associate Pastors Search Committees and any other committees requested by Session.” (Session Handbook)

The committee worked diligently to develop a slate of elder nominees for the Class of 2024. In our work, we were mindful that the Book of Order requires that the councils of the church shall give full expression to the rich diversity of the church’s membership.

On September 26, 2021, at a called congregational meeting the committee put forward the following nominees for the Ruling Elder Class of 2024:

Paul Lee

Shannon Brooks

Bruce Middendorf

Denise Horton

Kemp Gaskill

Phyllis Crowell

Chuck Toney

Sharon Logan

Randy Riner

The committee also worked diligently to fill the two unexpired terms in the Class of 2022. Elders Rob Haire and Michelle Clendenen-Shaw have agreed to roll from the Class of 2021 to the Class of 2022, effectively extending their service to the session by one additional year.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Abbott, *Chair*

Congratulations on the Births of:

Griffith Bowen Overbaugh

Marshall Wade Manning

Julia Louise Klopp

James Hanks Padgett

Walker Jude Padgett

Reid Naomi Rogers

Remmick Campbell Norman

We welcome our new members in 2021:

Christiane Fletcher

Patsy Gregory

Nancy Hernandez

Rod Hernandez

In Memoriam:

Jillian Smith Crim	January 19, 2021
Emily Aderholt Barrow	February 12, 2021
Frank Wade Sherrill	February 18, 2021
Delmer Delano Dunn	March 22, 2021
George Marshall Scott, Jr.	April 10, 2021
Gwen West Griffin	May 1, 2021
Clyde Everett Noble	June 9, 2021
Dorothy June Handley	June 19, 2021
John Warren Adams	June 27, 2021
William Harold Short	June 30, 2021
Winfield Morgan “Skeets” Baldwin, Jr.	September 29, 2021
Ethel Colville	November 28, 2021
Lester Mills Crawford	December 23, 2021

Session

Ryan Baer, *Moderator*, Kitty Donnan, *Clerk of Session*, Carol Strickland, *Associate Pastor*

CLASS OF 2021

Jennifer Walden Abbott
Michelle Clendenen-Shaw
Elizabeth Earl
Ed Ferguson
Rob Haire
Grace Lu
Chris Pope
Mixon Robinson
Rosemary Stancil

CLASS OF 2022

Karen Burg
Kitty Donnan
Larry Jones
Andy Jordan
Jimbo LaBoon
Tom Landrum
Beverly Phares
Smith Wilson

CLASS OF 2023

Sarah Bryan
Judy Burch
Kent Burel
Rod Canfield
Melinda DeMaria
Jim Dove
Mark Hopkins
Matt Jones
Robyn McDonald
Keith Oelke

Staff

Dr. Ryan Baer, *Senior Pastor*

Dr. Carol Strickland, *Associate Pastor*

The Rev. Margaret Davis, *Parish Associate*

Dr. John Coble, *Director of Music and Organist*

Mrs. Kim Ness, *Director of Youth Ministries*

Mrs. Natalie Bishop, *Director of Children's Ministries*

Mrs. Elaine Johnson, *Director of Weekday School*

Mr. Roger Burbage, *Church Administrator*

Mrs. Lucy Bell Johnson, *Administrative Assistant for Congregational Care & Membership*

Mr. Paulo Santos, *Communications Specialist*

Mrs. Jennifer Sunderlin, *Receptionist/Administrative Assistant*

Mrs. Angie Townsend, *Accountant*

Mrs. Marcy Fabris, *Weekday School Administrative Assistant*

Ms. Rita Raines, *Nursery Coordinator*

Mrs. Charlotte Chromiak, *Children's Music Assistant*

Ms. Rebecca Carlton, *Sunday Morning Manager*

Mrs. Madeline Van Dyck, *Parish Nurse*