



First Presbyterian Church of Athens

2022 Annual Report

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Contents

Staff Reports

Senior Pastor	2
Parish Associate	4
Director of Music and Organist	6
Director of Youth Ministries	8
Director of Children’s Ministries	10
Director of Weekday School	12

Commission & Committee Reports

Administration Commission	14
Congregational Care Commission	17
Education & Discipleship Commission	18
Fellowship and Evangelism Commission	19
Matthew 25 Commission	20
Mission and Outreach Commission	22
Worship and Music Commission	23
Nominations & Elections Committee	25

Features

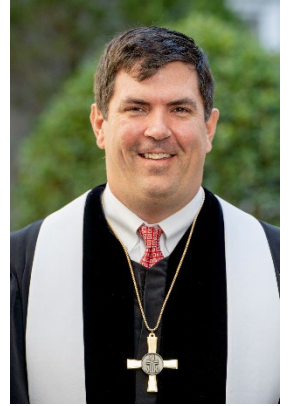
2022 Births and New Members	26
In Memoriam	27
Session	28
Staff	28

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

When I think of First Presbyterian Church of Athens and what the Lord has done in and through this church in 2022, the image of “The Big Tree” comes immediately to mind.

Near the village of McBaine, Missouri, about a half mile from the banks of the Missouri River, stands a burr oak tree that is estimated to be between 350 and 400 years old. It stands 90 feet tall and its branches span 130 feet, and its trunk is nearly 24 feet in circumference. It was already standing tall when the Lewis and Clark Expedition paddled by in 1804. It has survived lightning strikes, droughts, and floods, and local residents and students at the nearby University of Missouri simply refer to it as “The Big Tree.”



In the very first psalm, the psalmist declares that those who delight in the Lord and mediate on God’s Word are happy. “They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” (Psalm 1:3, NRSV).

The First Presbyterian Church of Athens has stood tall for over two centuries. Even though the past few years have been marked by global uncertainty and upheaval, thanks to God’s providence, your faithfulness and generosity, and the imagination and resilience of the staff, our church remains deeply rooted and growing.

Thank you for all the ways in which you continue to generously support the mission and ministry of the First Presbyterian Church of Athens. Your gifts are making a difference, and together, we’re creating 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.

We have completed nearly four years together as pastor and congregation, and it is such a joy and a privilege to be your pastor. Thank you for the countless ways in which you support my family and me.

May the peace of Christ be with you.

Dr. Ryan J. Baer, *Senior Pastor*

Parish Associate

Our congregation has a robust ministry to offer care to our members in need, through the Lay Caller Ministry, the Stephen's Ministry, the Congregational Care Commission, our network of small groups, our members, our staff, and the pastoral team. 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
- Leadership with the Stephen's Ministry facilitating the formation of caregiving relationships
- Advocacy for new ways to keep our seniors connected to the life of the church.

This year, our church graciously allowed me to take an extended maternity leave to welcome our second son Peter into the world and allow me to stay home with him until he was old enough to be vaccinated. They secured the skilled leadership of the Rev. Ron Gilreath to step into the role of Acting Parish Associate. During my leave, for seven months, Pastor Ron worked with staff to ensure a smooth continuity of pastoral care was provided to the congregation. I give thanks for his skilled, selfless service to the ministry of Christ's care in our midst, and I am grateful to be welcomed back into the caring ministry of our congregation to resume my work as Parish Associate.

My call is greatly supported by our staff and our members. In particular, I am grateful for:

- All who welcomed the church's pastors and caregiving members into their homes and lives this year
- All the ministering members in the pews who provide care to each other and let us know of those in need of a little extra pastoral support
- The collegiality amongst our Pastoral and Program Staff: Pastors Ryan, Carol, & Leigh, Kim & Natalie
- The collaboration with our administrative staff:
 - Lucy, who helps coordinate the pastoral team's caregiving and facilitates our Lay Caller visitation ministry;
 - Jen, who helps us keep track of members in need and sends all of our mailings, including the quarterly These Days daily devotional;
 - Paulo, who ensures our worship services, bulletins, sermons, and newsletters are online and also mailed as hard copies to our homebound members;
 - Jennifer, who facilitates reimbursements, such as spiritual materials for pastoral care and seasonal goodies for our homebound members.
- Congregational Care Commission:
 - Tom Landrum's two years of faithful service as outgoing Chair and member
 - The skilled leadership of Robyn McDonald as member and incoming Chair



- The continued participation of members Madeline Van Dyck, Bill Patterson, Judy Scanlon, Arlene Shirley, Harry Shuford, and Lawton Stephens in the caregiving ministry of our church.
- All who supported the return of our Christmas Tea
- The Stephen's Ministers, offering caregiving relationships to shepherd those in crisis:
 - Supervisory leaders Dawn Frisch, Lisa Oelke, Becky Hartman, and Susan Boatwright
 - Small group leaders: Marianne Causey, Bobbie Epting
 - Stephen's Ministers Ella Stewart, Karen Middendorf, Diane Hartzell, Bert Prestegard, Laura Toney, Julie Knowlton, Drew Marshall, Chuck Toney, Martha Harris, Harry Shuford, Kathy Allaire, Jean Bock, Judy Burch, Jerris Hayes, Deborah Googe, Kent Burel, Madeline Van Dyck, Jo Carol Nessel-Sale
- Lay Callers in their faithful, visitation to our homebound and hospitalized members:
 - Becky Hartman, Jerry Rogers, Jim McDonald, Lynn Merrill, Madeline Van Dyck, and Peggy Reigle
- The Mellows in their joyful caroling to cheer all those in Athens' senior living facilities
- My family's sacrificial support that allows me to continue to serve God faithfully.

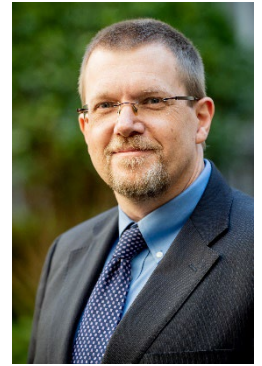


Thank you for trusting me with another year to serve this congregation as Parish Associate. Please let me know if you'd like a visit! May God bless you and keep you, be kind and gracious to you, and give you peace!

Rev. Margaret Davis, *Parish Associate*

Director of Music and Organist

The year 2022 was the most “normal” year we’ve had in a while, and we saw the return of many things we’ve missed. We did some things in our church, particularly in worship, that we haven’t done for three years, and I’m happy to say all choirs gradually returned over the course of 2022 and are now back to rehearsing and singing (or ringing).



In the first two months, we continued to issues related to the pandemic, with illness and concern, but the Chancel Choir continued singing every Sunday. In February, I had the honor of performing in a concert at Piedmont College in Demorest, playing the organ with an orchestra accompanying a chorus singing Schubert’s Mass in G.

In March, our regular Handbell Choir resumed weekly rehearsals, and the Handbell Choir performed the prelude on Palm Sunday, playing as a full group in worship for the first time since 2019.

April brought Holy Week. Before her retirement, Dr. Carol Strickland led the Maundy Thursday service leaving us with the charge to “love one another.” First Presbyterian Church hosted the joint Good Friday service with other Athens area Presbyterian churches. A combined choir of members from Covenant Presbyterian (Betsy Burmeiser, director), First Presbyterian, Friendship Presbyterian (Dr. Kevin Kelly, director), and residents from Presbyterian Village of Athens (Martha Clay, director). It was the largest choir in our loft since 2019. Easter brought the return of a full brass quintet of faculty and students from the UGA Hugh Hodgson School of Music, and the full choir singing for two services. The return of our full congregation singing Handel’s *Hallelujah* chorus from *Messiah* was glorious. Also in April, I had the great honor of traveling to Augusta to Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church to perform a recital in memory of Dr. John G. Schaeffer, my undergraduate organ teacher who died in 1996. That is something I have wanted to do since his passing, but have never had the opportunity. It was truly a highlight in my musical and personal life. Several members of our church traveled to Augusta to hear the performance.

In May, one of my UGA organ students performed a degree recital in our sanctuary. We also had our annual Scottish Reformation Sunday, complete with invited local and state leaders, our Great Highland Bagpiper, Henry Frantz, and a procession with Scottish tartan flags, all to celebrate our Presbyterian Scottish heritage.

In June, we took a group of adults, children, and youth to the Montreat Worship and Music Conference for the first time in two years. It was a great week of singing, worshipping, playing bells, creating artwork, learning, and enjoying the mountains of North Carolina. It was good to be back. I was planning to also attend the Sewanee Church Music Conference in July, but due to health problems I was not able to travel. After contracting Covid at the end of May, in the course of testing in the summer, some blockage of arteries was discovered. In August, I had a heart catheterization and had two stents put in. I am grateful to Dr. Matt Crim for diagnosing and treating this issue and I am grateful to be in better health now. After a short recovery, I was back to play for the Northeast Georgia Presbytery meeting hosted by our church.

In the fall, our St. Andrews and Cherub Choirs and Celebration Singers finally started rehearsing and singing again. After being off since 2020, our choir program for children and youth is in a time of rebuilding, but they are doing great. The combined choirs sang for Choir Dedication Sunday in October, with the St. Andrews Choir singing from the choir loft for the first time. The children and youth not only sang their anthems, but they also actively led the entire worship service with the adults, which is one of the main goals of our Voice for Life chorister training program. Although I had another plan, initially, with the historic death of Queen Elizabeth, we decided to sing an anthem *The Old Hundredth Psalm Tune* by Ralph Vaughn Williams, which was composed

for the coronation of the Queen Elizabeth in 1953. It was a good history lesson for our young people. The Handbell Choir played the prelude for Choir Dedication Sunday. In October, we returned to having our annual pre-race worship service before the Ath-Half. Also in the fall, our Wednesday night dinners resumed, and along with them, Wednesday rehearsals for St. Andrews Choir. In November, we observed All Saints' Day. For the first time since early 2020, the Mellows resumed singing at area senior care facilities. We had a great reunion starting our tour at Talmadge Terrace. As of November, we are back to having five singing choirs and a handbell choir in our church.

December was a busy month with our Live Nativity returning to the back parking lot. The Handbell Choir played inside and Dr. Bob Burton provided guitar music. The Mellows sang for the SAM Christmas Tea, which I sadly missed due to illness. I'm grateful to Dr. Martha Braswell who played in my place. Outside of the church, I played for the University of North Georgia Holiday Choral Festival in Gainesville. We had possibly the best Lessons and Carols service since my time at First Presbyterian, with representatives from several significant groups of our congregation as readers, and guest instrumentalists joining our Chancel Choir. We had our annual Service of the Longest Night, and three full Christmas Eve services with our Chancel Choir leading music. Christmas Day was on a Sunday morning this year, and we had a very nice service, but will be glad that will not occur again for some time.

I continue to enjoy teaching UGA organ students, who take their lessons in our sanctuary, and I am happy to report I have some young private organ students. If they are an indication of the future for organ and church music, things look good.

Despite the continued trials we all face together as we recover from the last few difficult years, we continue to rebuild, to rediscover traditions we've missed and to create new ones. I'm grateful for all of the members of our choirs, and their parents, spouses, and other family members who support us. I'm grateful to have Charlotte Chromiak as our children's music assistant, directing the Cherub Choir and leading music in our children's education ministry. I'm grateful for colleagues in ministry on the church staff. In 2022, we sadly bid farewell to Dr. Carol Strickland, who retired, but we all look forward to the arrival of a new associate pastor when the time comes. And last, but certainly not least, I am grateful for this congregation, as we work together to 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*

Director of Youth Ministries

For adults who grew up in the church, youth group trips were often some of the most impactful, memorable experiences they had with their faith. Whether serving on a mission trip in Honduras, learning to ski on the slopes of West Virginia or attending a Christian conference with hundreds of youth from across the country, these opportunities to get outside of our comfort zones within the loving support of a church family can be life changing. I know they were for me.



Most of our current youth, however, had not had the opportunity to participate in a youth trip away from Athens due to the pandemic. After two years of staying home, in the summer of 2021 we were finally able to load up the church van and head up to Montreat, NC for the Montreat Youth Conference. We filled the house with our largest group yet - all but one were FIRST TIME CONFEREES!! In the course of one week, this group of 16 acquaintances became trusted friends who today have an active group text where they share highs and lows from their lives outside of church. It is a magical transformation to watch, and one that I cannot do justice with my own words. Instead, I will share some of their reflections from our week together. The theme was More Than Enough. I asked them to share where they felt God during the week:

Reflections from Montreat Youth Conference 2021

Dear God, I live in a bubble. A bubble without hurt, sadness, or problems. Struggling is weakness, not okay. This week I've realized that it doesn't have to be that way. You can be happy or sad, and you don't have to lie about how you feel or put on a mask. God doesn't want you to do this, he wants you to know that you are more than enough even when life gets hard.

I believe. Awake my soul. Guitar. Music. Small group. More than enough. Don't play church while the world is bleeding. The prince of peace. Resist. Rely. recognize. Receive. Esther. Reckless love. My lighthouse. Popcorn prayer. You are very very good. Resurrection people. Go into the public square on Monday. Be a prophet.

I felt close to God through the...music. It is a feeling that I truly can't put into words, much less show the impact accurately.

God showed me the bravery, sin, good trouble, kindness, reality, beauty of sound, love of others, and the struggles of this EARTH...you are more than enough. What did God say to me this week? To stay in contact with friends! This week my faith grew. This week god led me to new people. This week I realized I need to savor my youth. This week I understood the struggles of others near and far. You are very good.

This week God really spoke to me...we as god's people are called to show grace and justice to others. I am always loved. We cannot sit and play church while the world bleeds. Enough is Enough. Something I say could affect someone for the rest of their lives. Sometimes we all need to rest. Relying on god will help me live up to my full potential. You are more than enough.

I connect with god by taking a second to sit still in a quiet place and breathe.

God has told me that it is ok to open up to people. God has helped me grow our relationship. God has taught me how to talk about issues I see in the world. God has helped me become more thoughtful. God has given me amazing people to get to know this week. God has helped me open my eyes and heart. God has shown me I am more than enough. God has spoken to me through music, new people, old friends, Gail, Chris, dance, small group, and back home group.

God has spoken to me...through the friends I made, the people in my small group, the music and through bonding more with people in my church.

God spoke to me through many things this week. He spoke to me through Gail's key notes. He spoke to me in small groups through the new people I met. He spoke to me on top of the mountain we hiked. He spoke to me during the song Awake My Soul. He spoke to me as I watched the sunlight come in from the windows during worship. He spoke to me during the candlelight service around the lake. But most importantly, he spoke to me through the memories I had of my grandfather during this week. A lot of the sermons reminded me of what my grandfather fought for and what he preached. I could feel God through those memories. I found a place where I can finally feel and experience God without feeling pressured by other people.

I heard god speak to me this week when the wind rushed into the building during a sermon. I just felt that God had entered.

What did god say to me this week? I am very good. Everyone is very good. There is always hope and potential. I am powerful enough to be the change. I can't always do things alone. This world is beautiful. There are more than enough good people. Breathe. I need this place and these people. Everyone is/can be a prophet.

Powerful, right? This is why youth ministry is so important. This one week set the foundation for our community on Sunday nights that has continued to grow and welcome new members. It is an anchor in faith when doubt creeps in. It is the joy of running into a small group friend at a UGA football game. It is the reminder that in this big beautiful world, you are never alone. And you are always more than enough.

For more inspiration, watch this video we created: [Montreat 2022](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Montreat2022) or https://bit.ly/FPC_MYC22 .

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

Kim Ness, *Director of Youth Ministries*

Director of Children's Ministries

This has been another "WONDER-FULL" year in Children's Ministry! We began this year wondering about the word Lovingkindness. We learned that lovingkindness is more than just love and more than just kindness, it is love and kindness squished together. Lovingkindness is selfless love. It is taking the time to be aware of others' needs and struggles and willingness to feel with our sisters and brothers in Christ. Lovingkindness is grace, empathy, compassion and so much more.



We also wondered where lovingkindness originated (even though we had a pretty good idea!) and we learned that lovingkindness began with God. From the very beginning and forever, God has and will continue to share lovingkindness with all God's children and all creation. Lovingkindness is a part of who God is, it is in God's nature. Lovingkindness is God's BIG LOVE and BIG KINDNESS for all and as God's children we too must always try to share lovingkindness with others.

We are reminded in *The Parable of the Good Shepherd* that Jesus is our Good Shepherd and as his sheep he shares lovingkindness with us and takes care of us. However, we are not just the sheep. God calls each one of us to be good shepherds and to share lovingkindness with one another. Lovingkindness is a powerful word that can do powerful things and I am happy to report that in 2022 our First Pres Kiddos have begun to share BIG lovingkindness in many POWERFUL ways!

- ✓ 50 Happy Easter Handmade Cards created and delivered to FP Homebound Members and Senior Bethel Neighborhood Residents (March/April)
- ✓ 80 \$10 Chick-fil-A Gift Cards purchased and delivered to the children and youth of The Bethel Neighborhood, our Bethel Buddies (May/June)
- ✓ 80 Summer Snack Bags prepared and delivered to our Bethel Buddies (June)
- ✓ 20 High Quality Backpacks purchased and delivered to our Bethel Buddy Big Kids (July)
- ✓ 80 Coloring Books and Crayon Boxes collected and delivered to our Bethel Buddies (July/Aug)
- ✓ 200 Chocolate Chip Cookies baked, bagged, and delivered to our Bethel Buddies (July/Aug)
- ✓ A Sidewalk full of Chalk Pictures and Messages of Lovingkindness decorated for our Athens Neighbors and Church Family (Aug)
- ✓ 80 Happy Halloween Treat and Snack Bags prepared and delivered to our Bethel Buddies (Oct)
- ✓ "Trick or Treated for UNICEF" and raised \$350.00 to help support children around the world (Oct)
- ✓ 50 Christmas Cards and 50 "Charlie Brown themed" mini-Christmas Trees decorated and given to our First Pres Senior Adult Tea Guests (Dec)
- ✓ 80 Bethel Buddy Blanket Bundles prepared and delivered to our Bethel Buddies (Dec)

Thank you, First Presbyterian, for your continued support of our children and this sweet ministry. You helped the children raise over \$3,000 this year which allowed for them to share BIG LOVE and BIG KINDNESS with our neighbors right here in Athens and around the world.

Thank you, First Presbyterian, for your continued support of me as Director of Children's Ministry and our wonderful Children's Ministry Volunteer Team and Staff. Your support helps us to provide much needed lovingkindness with our children throughout the year.

We may be beginning a new year, but that doesn't mean that we are done sharing lovingkindness. In fact, we are just getting started! I look forward to seeing how our children and Children's Ministry continue to wonder and seek out more ways that we can continue to share God's BIG LOVE and BIG KINDNESS in 2023!

Natalie Bishop, *Director of Children's Ministry*

Director of Weekday School

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

The 2021-2022 was a big success, though it began amidst the backdrop of more concern with the pandemic. 131 children were able to attend beginning on our originally scheduled date in late August, with 25 teachers and staff. In our classrooms, play, friendships, social interaction, love of school, curiosity, and delight in learning thrived. Parents were extraordinarily grateful for this normalcy in their children's world. January 2022 saw challenges as Omicron seemed more easily passed in our community, but we made it through!



The Outreach Commission allocates Scholarship Funds for needy families annually. This year I am highlighting a family with a two-year-old boy who thrived here in our program after a long period of isolation due to the world pandemic. He came in very shy and fretful, and progressed within two months to a healthier, happier personality, curious, full of giggles, etc. His father was a UGA grad student, and his mother was not employed outside of the home when he came to us. They needed food stamps to survive, and we were able to grant them a scholarship during this challenging time. The mother was able to pick up some bit of part time work to help her family while the child was with us in school, and we were able to help their two, turning three year old thrive through the end of the official pandemic, and have some feeling of friends and a community. Through the years, helping American and foreign students in this way has been an absolute hallmark of First Presbyterian Church and Weekday School. It is good to know that you can help someone who has a plan to succeed, but just needs a hand up for awhile to make it in this world! Education has long been one of the keys to being secure in our world, and we are grateful that we are blessed to have these resources to help young children as well as the families be successful and bridge them to the next part of their story.

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

Elaine Johnson, *Weekday School Director*

Administration Commission

Commission Members: Chair, Michelle Clendenen-Shaw, Phyllis Crowell, Kemp Gaskill, Jim Dove, Andy Jordan, Denise Horton, Smith Wilson, Jimbo Laboon, Ryan Baer, *Senior Pastor*, Jennifer Adams, *Staff Accountant*

The Administration Commission is comprised of the following committees: Finance, Nominations & Elections, Personnel, and Property.

The pandemic continued to erupt during the early part of 2022. We are thankful for the answered prayers that over time we were able to come back together in person and worship.

Our very own Roger Burbage retired early in the year as Church Administrator. We are thankful for Roger's years of service to our church (Jeanie's too). We are incredibly happy that they are enjoying retirement.

Mentionable accomplishments during 2022:

- Provided administrative support to Dr. Baer, staff, and other Committees.
- Review financial data and prepared the Annual Administration Committee Budget for 2023.
- Development and monitoring of the Church's budget and financial performance.

Our committees worked rigorously over the course of the year and below are additional accomplishments.

Finance Committee:

First Presbyterian is rich in numerous ways, and we are graced by God's presence. We have a wonderful staff, beautiful facilities, and generous congregation who support our church with their energetic volunteer efforts and financial gifts. We count our blessings for all these things.

During 2022, the Finance Committee continued to ensure the safeguarding of the church's funds as stewards of the financial resources entrusted by God to FPC. We maintained our focus on healthy practices and our financial performance transparency. The committee set up ongoing processes to support all ministries' ongoing funding needs.

Thanks to cost containment efforts and the remarkable generosity of the members of First Presbyterian, we end the year with a profit of \$4,940.00. Session and staff made a broad and concerted effort to hold down expenses in any areas they could without diminishing their ability to serve our community.

As we transition to 2023, we will continue to ensure the church's strong financial position to live out our mission by cultivating community, crossing divides, and changing lives.

Noteworthy accomplishments during 2022:

- Church liability insurance coverage was put out for bid in 2022. There were minor differences in coverage offered by those bidding. Church Mutual won the renewal. With this renewal, we were able to increase our coverage by \$1.3 million with a slight increase in cost of \$69.
- The finance committee met with the committee chairs to review our preliminary budget requests. This allowed them to ask questions and have further discussion on their needs and why. This meeting provided productive conversation and a balanced budget for 2023. Our thanks are extended to the committee chairs and session for their dedication, prayers, and continue support.

- The Financial Manual was updated to re-assign duties previously performed by the Accounting Assistant to others in the organization. A special thank you to Jennifer Adams, Staff Accountant, and Jennifer Sunderlin, Receptionist and Administrative Assistant, who have graciously taken on additional duties.

For those of you who have a role in watching over the church's finances, we can't thank staff and the congregation enough for their effort and generosity. Thank you all for your continued dedication to the financial stewardship of the church. You allow the church to dream big and make bold plans about our priorities and possibilities for the coming year. Equally important is your personal commitment to God.

Personnel Committee:

The Personnel Committee believes that our staff is a critical aspect in achieving the church's mission. Although the pandemic caused it to look different this year, the church had an excellent opportunity to join in God's transforming work in our city.

We had the opportunity to experience the blessings that come with talented and creative staff using their gifts to live out our calling in new innovative ways. Our worship, technical, and program staff members have used technology to create community and have given our church opportunities to live out love, supporting our FPC family as well as our neighbors.

Notable accomplishments during 2022:

- Efforts on a Personnel Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines for the Church began in 2021, and a final draft was completed early last year. The document was approved upon formal presentation to the Session. The manual provides information regarding employment policies and practices and is intended to provide guidelines for the exercise of management and discretion in personnel matters.
- The Committee, upon retirement of the Church Administrator, worked to restructure duties related to fiscal management and coordinated the search/selection for the Church Accountant position (Jennifer Adams). The Committee also defined duties for the Office Administrator position (Lucy Bell Johnson), directed efforts to fill the Interim Associate Pastor position (Reverend Leigh Bonner), and Sunday Morning Manager (Aiden Dowling).

Property Committee:

The Property Committee maintains and improves our facilities to support our ministries.

During 2022, the Property Committee continued to maintain our wonderful facility with the financial gifts of the congregation, many volunteer hours by members and aided by our Office Administrator, Lucy Bell Johnson. A special thanks goes to our Church Sexton, Wayne Brock, who has the knowledge and energy and gives that extra effort to ensure that all areas of the church not only look good but operate smoothly. Wayne rebuilt the Sanctuary shutters and, in the process, saved us thousands of dollars over replacement. With his many skills he has enabled us to repair items in the church that were formally subcontracted out to other vendors. We perform all carpet cleaning, pressure washing, minor electrical, plumbing and carpentry repairs in house.

The Columbarium project is almost finished after many Covid supply chain issues. Landscaping and lighting will be the last two remaining items to be completed. Our committee, consisting of Mike and Ann Bascle, Chris Gazlay, and Jack Vandiver have worked through the issues across countless meetings.

Our 68,000 sq. foot building offers many challenges but with our faith we continue to offer a beautiful facility that in part dates to 1845.

This coming year, 2023, we intend to find ways to staff creatively and support the ever-changing landscape of these times. We are excited about the opportunities God has given us to love neighbors and grateful for a team that wholeheartedly serves as an extension of every ministry and the departments they support.

Respectfully submitted by: Jim Dove, Personnel Chair; Smith Wilson, Property Chair; Michelle Clendenen-Shaw, Finance Chair

Congregational Care Commission

The Congregational Care Commission of Athens First Presbyterian Church is composed of energetic and creative Church volunteers as well as caring and engaged individuals from the ministerial team and Church Office. The Commission met monthly via Zoom and provided oversight of outreach activities performed by monthly correspondence and prayer chain teams. With the help of the Parish Associate, the members reviewed a tracking sheet which described needs of individuals recovering from illness or surgery, or who are experiencing a family member death or personal crisis.

The Commission “restarted” the practice of offering home or “extended” communion linking homebound members with Elder-led teams which served Holy Communion in that member’s home. In addition, the Commission planned and coordinated a Christmas Tea event for seniors, also a “restart” since pandemic restrictions were lifted. This “Christmas Homecoming Tea” was co-chaired by Arlene Shirley and Greta Covington, and supported by Lucy Bell Johnson, Jen Sunderlin and others.

The Commission supported a grief counseling program proposed by acting Parish Associate Ron Gilreath, and continued its support of the Church-wide Name Badge project which Rev. Ryan Baer and Rev. Carol Strickland had earlier proposed.

The Commission extended appreciation to Associate Pastor Carol Strickland on the occasion of her retirement for her extraordinary support for the Commission’s work. The Commission also is grateful for the interim service provided by Rev. Ron Gilreath following Rev. Strickland’s retirement. In similar fashion, the Commission appreciates the many contributions of Rev. Leigh Bonner who serves as Interim Associate Pastor. The Reverend Margaret Davis, absent for family leave during the year, is now back in full service as Parish Associate, and the Commission is grateful for her role.

The Commission extends sincere appreciation for the contributions of the Church Office team, especially Lucy Bell Johnson and Jenn Sunderlin. Their support was essential to the ability of the Congregational Care Commission to plan and carry out events and programs that met needs of the Church congregation.

The Commission is grateful for Elder Robyn McDonald’s agreement to serve as Commission Chair for the coming term. Special appreciation is also extended to each member of the Commission for their faithful service over these past years.

Respectfully submitted,

Tom Landrum, on behalf of the Commission

Education & Discipleship Commission

Commission Members: Melinda DeMaria, Chair, Kent Burel, Rod Canfield, Paul Lee, Ryan Baer, Senior Pastor, Leigh Bonner, Interim Associate 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 for all ages, Middle and High School Youth Group, Confirmation Class, Wednesday@First/Fellowship@First programming, Bible studies, small groups and the Church Library.

Our work has continued to be focused on 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. The programmatic branches of this commission are critical, thriving and vital to our church and community life.

As a commission we continued to work to connect in our support of our church staff in their specific areas within our commission. We were fortunate to welcome an additional session member on the commission this year, Paul Lee.

In one of our main goals last year, 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. With the welcoming of our interim Associate Pastor, Leigh Bonner, in this last year we have largely handed that document over to Associate Pastor Nominating Committee as they do their work to recreate the Ministry Information Form for our APNC to move forward with our search and hopeful call.

This has allowed us to begin a deepening discernment with Rev. Bonner. As we close out this year, we are working toward this discernment in a more formal process to prepare this commission for the work ahead to support our respective areas of the church; we are looking forward to working with other commissions as well. Ultimately this will help us with welcoming our new Associate Pastor and nurturing our steps to move forward in supporting the various branches of the church in faith formation at all stages of the church and how it impacts the community as well.

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: Church dinners and receptions, Wednesday@First Dinners, Atrium refreshments, First Things (New Member Class) and Reception, new member engagement and evangelism efforts.

Commission Members: Judy Burch, Chair, Matthew Jones, Keith Oelke, Randy Riner, Chuck Toney

This past year has been a “reopening” for our commission as we were able to host and serve in person gatherings on a regular basis again.

It was agreed to serve doughnut holes on Sunday mornings as Atrium Refreshments. The Sunday Morning manager picks them up each week and places them in the Atrium for our members to enjoy. Receptions were hosted in February and April for our new members classes. In August we hosted the Welcome Back Biscuit Brunch to celebrate the resuming of two worship services and Sunday School.

In the fall, the commission planned and worked the Wed@First dinners which included catered meals from Weaver D’s, Barberitos and Taziki’s. These Wed@First dinners were well attended. It was wonderful to enjoy a sense of community by sharing meals together again around a table.

We appreciate the support of our staff which made all the above events a pleasure to organize. The commission has enjoyed serving our members throughout the year.

Judy Burch, Chair

Matthew 25 Commission

Commission members: Rob Haire (Chair), Sarah Bryan, Sharon Logan, Kim Ness.

In 2021 the Session voted unanimously to become a Matthew 25 church. In February of 2022, the Session voted to establish a Commission to help implement Matthew 25 initiatives throughout First Presbyterian Church of Athens.

Founding Commission Members were: Rob Haire, chair; Kim Ness, staff lead; Denise Horton, Sharon Logan, and Sarah Bryan.

What does it mean to call ourselves a Matthew 25 church?

Matthew 25 is an invitation from PCUSA to join with other congregations around the country and the world to implement the values of Jesus as stated in Matthew 25:31–46 which says:

“40 “...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ ...45 ‘...Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

Convicted by this passage, both the 222nd and 223rd General Assemblies (2016 and 2018) exhorted PC(USA) congregations to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor.

According to PCUSA, to follow the teachings of Jesus as outlined in Matthew 25, a church should strive to work on three interlocking mission emphases:

- building congregational vitality,
- eradicating systemic poverty, and
- dismantling structural racism.

Essentially, as disciples of Christ, we are called upon to *advocate and in our actions* to break down the *systems, practices and thinking* that underlie social and economic injustice against people of color and those marginalized by society.

One of our first orders of business this year was to develop a mission statement to guide this Commission in implementing Jesus’s words into action.

The Matthew 25 Commission Mission Statement is:

“To recognize Christ’s urgent call to be a church of compassion and action, where God’s love, justice and mercy shine forth. To provide opportunities to better understand and actively engage in the world around us. To help address the needs of those who Jesus called the “least of these.” To demonstrate that as Christians we are saved to serve, sharing the radical love of Jesus.”

How is Matthew 25 different than what we have long done in Mission and Outreach?

Matthew 25 is very similar to M/O as the target population served is often similar (e.g., homeless; impoverished; immigrants, etc.), but while M/O is focused mainly on addressing the negative impacts on these populations, Matthew 25 looks for ways to engage that will go deeper to understand and perhaps address the causes of poverty and racism.

A wonderful way to best understand the similarities and differences between Mission and Outreach and Matthew 25 is through this quote attributed to the late South African Bishop and Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu who said:

“There comes a point where we need to stop pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in.”

Matthew 25 seeks to learn and understand why “people are falling in” due to systemic poverty or structural racism, and, where possible, act to address the cause.

Over the course of 2023, we began to implement our vision to learn, understand and eventually, to act on Matthew 25 initiatives by having several book studies, bringing in guest speakers with a Matthew 25 focus during the Inquirers Sunday school class, and conducting congregation wide workshops.

One of our first efforts this year to facilitate learning about Matthew 25 was a “40 Day Challenge” during Lent. The Commission (largely Kim Ness!) put together articles, videos, bible readings and other information about Matthew 25 element. The Congregation was offered an opportunity to read and view these materials over the 40 days of Lent.

In May we had our first congregation wide meeting where we discussed what it means to be a Matthew 25 church and how to best introduce and implement the tenants of Matthew 25 here at FPC Athens. We had great discussions centering on the readings and materials made available during the “Matthew 25 Lenten Challenge.”

We kicked off the summer with a learning and understanding opportunity by reading and discussing the book, “I’m Still Here, Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness” by Austin Channing. We had a wonderful discussion about this book, which was facilitated by Sharon Logan.

Sarah Bryan kicked off our Fall bible study with a foundational discussion on what the Bible and Jesus have to say about the need to actively address the causes, as well as the effects, of poverty and racism.

Denise Horton invited and interviewed George Collins, who is often found in and around our church, to come share his personal homelessness story. It was an endearing, eye-opening glimpse into his life.

In early October, Leigh Bonner, our Interim Associate Pastor, led our Matthew 25 meeting in a discussion about mission work. Leigh discussed her prior experiences doing mission work at home and abroad. She shared many interesting stories from her mission experiences around the world and introduced us to the idea of building a mission partnership.

Rev. David Lewicki, co-pastor of North Decatur Presbyterian Church and interim chair of Presbyterians for a Better Georgia had a ZOOM conversation with the Matthew 25 Commission. PBG is a partnership of PCUSA congregations supporting public policy to serve our most vulnerable neighbors.

In late October, Evan Mills, Director of Housing Programs for Advantage Behavioral Health Systems spoke to the Inquirer’s Class about the challenges of homelessness in Athens.

In November, Jamie Scott, director of Sparrow’s Nest, spoke to the Inquirers class. Sparrow’s Nest was founded in the early 1990s as an outreach ministry of Christ Life Church. It provides a variety of services including breakfast and lunch, laundry and shower services, emergency food aid, clothes closet and a social services ministry.

Rob Haire, Chair

Mission & Outreach Commission

Commission members: Mark Hopkins (Chair), Bertis Downs, Susan Boatwright, Brenda Glasscock, Carl Bergmann, Denise Horton, Rob Haire, Jennifer Abbott, Joe Neighbors, Jean Bock, Jerry Rodgers, Kitty Donnan, Karen Burg, Kim Ness, Mary Burton, Richard Lane, Robbie Bryan, Sally Vandiver, Shannon Brooks, Tom Wilfong, Leigh Bonner (Interim Associate Pastor).

In January, the commission distributed \$103,600 in funds to 24 agencies through a grant application and review process. These agencies included both global and local mission outreach with most of the funding going to Bethlehem Ministries, The Ark United Ministries, ACCA Meals on Wheels, and Athens Nurse's Clinic. Each of these agencies serves the poor and/or homeless in our community. Another \$120,900 were distributed to other agencies that did not go through a grant process. These agencies included The Weekday School – Scholarships and Ministry, Presbytery of Northeast Georgia – Assessment and General Benevolence, PCUSA Missionary Cheryl Barnes, Montreat, and Columbia Theological Seminary.

The following is a month-to-month volunteer opportunity:

Our Daily Bread has a core set of volunteers that purchase, cook, and serve breakfasts and lunches twice a month.

January – Martin Luther King Day of Service - **Project Safe Thrift Store** (15 volunteers)

February – **Red Cross Blood Drive** – goal of 25 pints of blood was achieved (30 volunteers)

March – **Habitat for Humanity/Family Promise** – Renovation of a quadraplex apartments for transitioning individuals out of homelessness

April – Project Safe Thrift Store

May – Family Promise – Overnight stays at Milledge Avenue Baptist Church housing homeless individuals and families

August – Red Cross Blood Drive – we usually only do this once a year, but because we reached our goal and the Blood Bank is running low the Red Cross contacted us to hold another event. We also reached our goal of 25 units. (30 volunteers)

September – **Presbyterian Student Center** – prepare and serve meal to students.

October – Presbyterian Student Center – prepare and serve meal to students, Kentucky Flood Relief

November – **Casa Christmas Cards, Thanksgiving Food Bags, ACCA Meals on Wheels** (Thanksgiving Day), Presbyterian Student Center – prepare and serve meal.

December – **Benevolence Market, Diaper Bank** – gifts of diaper collected at Christmas Eve Service, **Salvation Army Angel Tree**

Minute for Missions were also presented for each of the four Major Offerings taken each year: One Great Hour of Sharing, Pentecost, Peace and Global Witness, Christmas Joy.

This report reflects the immense compassion of those on the commission for those that are poverty stricken and their willingness to serve the least of these in their times of need.

Respectfully,

Mark S. Hopkins, 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*

The work of the Worship and Music Commission is the work of many hands; it is work that directly touches all members of our church family. It is work that was severely disrupted by events of the last three years.

The commission is grateful for the patience and adaptability of all as we put those events behind us.

The commission is appreciative of the lessons learned from those events and is eager to see them embraced and enhanced as we move forward.

Three of particular note are:

- The adoption and continued refining of streaming services as a ministry to those at home or homebound.
- The incorporation of gluten free wafers and the procurement of individual serving packets of the elements; each of which makes the Sacrament of Communion more readily available to greater numbers of communicants.
- Initiating a training session for new Elders as to how to prepare for, serve and clean up after Communion.

From the foregoing it is clear that many (often unseen) moving parts play a role on Sunday mornings.

We give thanks for the joyful noise of the choir and the work of the flower committees that evokes the first garden, the greeters who welcome you with a smile, the ushers who pass out bulletins, find hearing aids and collect the offering, the lay readers who bring us into the Word of God.

John Simpson and Jimbo LaBoon deserve special notice for their consummate shepherding of the ushers; frequently being the only ushers as we returned to in-person services in 2020.

Lastly, to all those who answer the call to serve Communion and to clean up, thank you.

Beverly Phares,
Chair, Worship & Music Commission

2023 Communion Schedule

Sunday, January 1	First Sunday January
Thursday, January 19	Session Worship
Sunday, February 5	First Sunday February
Thursday, February 16	Session Worship
Wednesday, February 22	Ash Wednesday (12 pm, 7 pm)
Sunday, March 5	First Sunday February
Thursday, March 16	Session Worship
Sunday, April 2	First Sunday April Palm Sunday
Thursday, April 6	Maundy Thursday (7 pm)
Thursday, April 20	Session Worship
Sunday, May 7	First Sunday/Scottish Reformation
Thursday, May 18	Session Worship
Sunday, June 4	First Sunday June
Thursday, June 15	Session Worship
Sunday, July 2	First Sunday July
Sunday, August 6	First Sunday August
Thursday, August 17	Session Worship
Sunday, September 3	First Sunday September
Thursday, September 21	Session Worship
Sunday, October 1	First Sunday/World Communion
Thursday, October 19	Session Worship
Sunday, November 5	First Sunday November
Thursday, November 16	Session Worship
Sunday, December 3	First Sunday December
Thursday, December 21	Session Worship
Sunday December 24	Christmas Eve (6 pm, 8 pm)
Sunday, January 7, 2024	First Sunday January

Nominations and Elections Committee

The members of this year's committee were Beverly Phares, Chair, Keith Oelke, Vice Chair, Richard Lane, Kathy Bangle, Angela Hunt, and Ryan Baer serving ex-officio.

"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 nominees, first for the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee, and then for the elder nominees for the Class of 2025. 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 August 14, 2022, at a Called Congregational meeting the committee put forward the following nominees for the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee:

Jill Hopkins	Jerry Rogers
Don DeMaria	Margaret Sapp
Dick Ferguson	Laura Toney
Mike Morris	Madeline Van Dyck

On October 23, 2022, at a Called Congregational meeting the committee put forward the following nominees for the Ruling Elder Class of 2025:

Lindsay Griffeth	Jeffrey Trapnell
Angela Hunt	Patrick Tritt
Dan Nadenicek	John Turner
Karen Phillips	Pat Waldrip
Ethelyn Simpson	

Respectfully submitted,
Beverly Phares, Chair

Congratulations on the Births of:

Andrew Bear Brantley
John Brooks Marsh
Peter Collins Davis
Martin Quinn Jones
Vivian Eleanor Santos

We welcome our new members in 2022:

Susan Baldwin
Paithan Campbell
Melisha Gilreath
Alan and Lynn Merrill
Katie Payne
Jeanette Adams
Pearl Attaway
Melinda Beckett
Earl and Sandra Brooks
Jan Johnson
Terry Miller
Mark and Sarah Murray
Amanda and Michael Prochaska
Margaret and Mike Smith

Confirmation Class:

Elinor Camille Attaway
Claire Elizabeth Bruner
Benjamin Woods Carey
Emma Fulyn Clarke
Catherine Anne DeMaria
Lorenzo Lewis Fischetti
Lane Roethlisberger Holloway
Katherine Marie Ness
Jackson Reese Parker
Samuel Parrish Seward
Sloane McLeod Turner

In Memoriam:

Ann Swanson Jones	January 25, 2022
Anne Hinton Wilfong	January 26, 2022
Wanda Wilcox	January 28, 2022
James Clarence Price	February 16, 2022
Mildred Carithers Bergh	February 21, 2022
Francis C. Johnston	February 26, 2022
Helen Moberg Crosby	March 13, 2022
Albert Francis Ike, Jr.	April 25, 2022
Joseph Wilson Berry	April 26, 2022
Lee James Padgett	May 8, 2022
Allen Dupree King, Jr.	July 3, 2022
Harold Wilson (H.W.) Hartman III	August 15, 2022
Ruth Williams Curtis	September 3, 2022
Jeremy Kilpatrick	September 17, 2022
Jean Kelley Hopkins	September 30, 2022
James Baird Pope, Jr.	December 13, 2022

Session

Ryan Baer, *Moderator*, Kitty Donnan, *Clerk of Session*

CLASS OF 2022

Karen Burg
Michelle Clendenen-Shaw
Kitty Donnan
Rob Haire
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

CLASS OF 2024

Shannon Brooks
Phyllis Crowell
Kemp Gaskill
Denise Horton
Paul Lee
Sharon Logan
Bruce Middendorf
Randy Riner
Chuck Toney

Staff

Dr. Ryan Baer, *Senior Pastor*

The Rev. Leigh Bonner, *Interim 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*

Mrs. Lucy Bell Johnson, *Office Administrator*

Mr. Paulo Santos, *Communications Specialist*

Mrs. Jennifer Sunderlin, *Receptionist/Accounting Assistant*

Ms. Jennifer Adams, *Church Accountant*

Mrs. Marcy Fabris, *Weekday School Administrative Assistant*

Ms. Rita Raines, *Nursery Coordinator*

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

Mr. Wayne Brock, *Sexton*

Mr. Aiden Dowling, *Sunday Morning Manager*

Mrs. Madeline Van Dyck, *Parish Nurse*