



# Pacific Northwest CONFERENCE NEWS

Mary Stamp, editor  
editor@pncuccnews.org

325 N. 125th St. - Seattle WA 98133 • (206) 725-8383 or (800) 954-8777 or (509) 535-1813

Winter 2026

## Annual Meeting planners invite, 'Come and See'

### Keynote speaker is Lillian Daniel, Conference Minister of Michigan

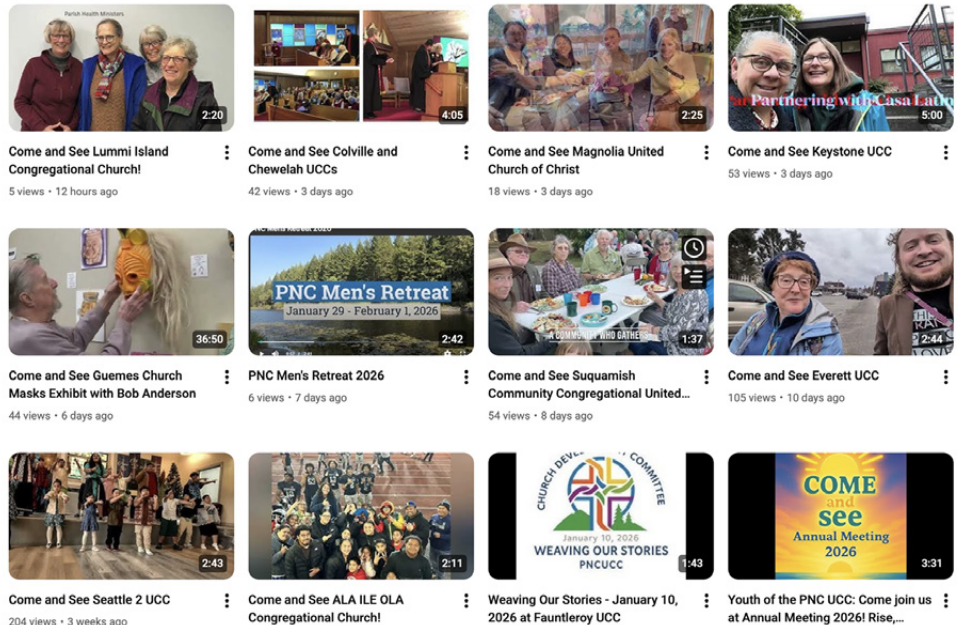
"Come and See" is the theme for the 2026 Pacific Northwest Conference United Church of Christ Annual Meeting and for videos congregations are creating to tell who they are.

"Come and See" is based on John 1:39: "He said to them, 'Come and See.' They came and saw where he was saying, and they remained with him that day."

The Annual Meeting will feature the PNC churches, celebrating what they have been up to. Planners have asked congregations to share about their lives.

"Come and See what the churches in the PNC have been up to. Come and See what the PNC youth of our conference think and want from church. Come and

Continued on page 5



"Come and See" videos about PNC conegations are available on the PNC YouTube.

## Board begins search, reviews constitution changes

Since Phil Hodson, designated PNW conference minister, announced by email on Dec. 3, that he withdrew his candidacy for the settled conference minister, the PNC Board of Directors formed a Search and Call Committee to develop a profile and receive nominations.

Sandy Wisecarver, moderator, said that they hoped to have seven people for that committee by the end of January.

Phil wrote: "I celebrate all that we have accomplished together these past 20 months. A ministry of presence is key to conference ministry, and I appreciate the ways congregations have welcomed me and the many talented clergy of this conference who have engaged with me.

"As you look forward, I pray the Spirit will give you clarity. You must

**The Rev. Phil Hodson  
ends as designated  
conference minister  
on June 26.**

discern who God is calling you to be in this moment—in keeping with the polity of the United Church of Christ—and be able to clearly articulate and share that vision," he wrote, expressing confidence "God is up to something in the PNC."

As Phil continues with the conference through June 30, 2026, the Board in a letter reviewed successes under his leadership of building the PNC staff team, setting N-Sid-Sen on a path for its full po-

tential, helping churches through pastoral transitions and crises, walking with Samoan churches and pastors to full communion with the PNCUCC and creating a draft for a new constitution and bylaws.

The letter from the Board expressed the need for meaningful efforts in community-building and asked for churches' to embrace the gifts God wishes for the future of the PNC-UCC.

Sandy said the 12th edition of the constitution and bylaws was ready for discussions on Zoom Tuesday and Wednesday, Jan. 20 and 21, with a final version to be released in February for the Annual Meeting, March 13 and 14 in Seattle.

"The vote will be an up or down vote. No changes will be made at the annual meeting," said Sandy.

# UCC conference ministers visit Washington DC

## Reports & Comments



By The Rev.  
Phil Hodson  
Designated  
Conference  
Minister

Stay  
involved  
and  
get  
more  
people  
involved.

Twenty-two UCC conference ministers met Oct. 27 to 30 in Washington D.C. on the theme, “Love Knows No Borders.”

The Council of Conference Ministers gathered on Capitol Hill for a time of education and engagement. The event was organized for the United Church of Christ Office of Public Policy & Advocacy, and was centered around lifting up the real, lived stories experienced within and around the communities where our congregations are located across the country as a direct result of the policies being undertaken by the present administration.

On our first day together, we heard from policy experts on specific pieces of legislation that impact our ability to keep individuals safe while practicing our faith. We met with organizers from within the Central Atlantic Conference of the United Church of Christ and other groups who train for peaceful protest and engage on the issues in and around our nation’s capital.

We learned about resources available to our churches at [www.votervoice.net](http://www.votervoice.net) and about daily updates on refugee resettlement with Church World Service at [www.interfaithimmigration.org](http://www.interfaithimmigration.org).

Our DC Peace Team gave us training for prayer vigil security.

On our second full day together, we took a prayer walk from the United Methodist Building, where we gathered and our policy offices are located, to the Supreme Court, Library of Congress and the Capitol building.

As we walked together, we sang. At each stop, we shared Scripture and prayed together for our judges, our federal employees, our legislators and all who are impacted—all of us—by what is unfolding now.

From there we broke into groups of three or four and were given specific congressional offices to visit.

Outreach had been made to more than 50 offices, but only 18 agreed to meet with our groups. The group I was part of visited one Senator from California, two California House offices and one Massachusetts House office.

At each meeting we delivered postcards gathered from among our congregations and shared stories pertinent to the districts each member of Congress represented.

We met with one representative in-person, who was excited to visit with us and genuinely appreciated the time we took to share and then pray over them. Members of the staff in each office were warm, appreciative and engaged throughout the day.

Everywhere we went, the feedback was the same: “Stay involved.” and “Get more people involved.”

Our elected representatives want to hear from us. They need to hear our thoughts on legislation and find the lived experiences of constituents incredibly helpful to know as they work with colleagues and endeavor to do what they have been elected to do.

We ended our time together with a prayer vigil at the United Methodist Building, joined by members of the community and leaders from the national setting and the National Council of Churches.

There are some practical things we can all do.

- We can write and phone our representatives. They want to hear from us on the issues. They would also love to receive our stories, sharing the ways what is happening now is directly impacting us and those we know.

- We can speak up in our communities on the issues in ways that are hope-filled, engaging and filled with personal story. Story changes hearts and lives.

- We can lend our support, sometimes without acknowledgment, to organizations who are doing the work daily in helping them to make positive change.

- We can vote.

*For more information, see the video on “Love Knows No Borders” to learn more at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dg7QWV9mJVg>*

## Transitions announced

**Melanie Childers** was installed as pastor at Shalom UCC in Richland on Oct. 12.

**Adina Meyer** was ordained at Keystone UCC on Oct. 19.

**Mark Travis** was called as the new settled pastor at Eagle Harbor UCC on Bainbridge Island beginning Oct. 27.

**Naomi Schulz** has been called to serve as pastor at Fox Island UCC as of Nov. 1.

**Christine Tata** was installed Nov. 9 as pastor to serve Chewelah UCC and First Congregational UCC in Colville. She has recently resigned.

On Nov. 10, **Kevin Bechhold** was called as pastor at Richmond Beach UCC in Shoreline.

**Dee Eisenhauer** retired from Eagle Harbor on Bainbridge Island and was honored at a farewell service on Nov. 25.

**Shirley Hutchinson**, who died on Dec. 27, was the wife of the Rev. Ronald Hutchinson.

**Kerri Berlin** received lay ministerial standing to serve at St. Paul's UCC in Seattle on Jan. 4.

**Ruth Flucke** died on Jan. 5 in Wisconsin. She was the wife of the Rev. Rod Mackenzie, who died a year ago.

**Chris Morton** died Jan. 7, at Hospice House. Her spouse was the Rev. Megan Crouse. Chris was one of the first women ordained in the Pacific Northwest Conference of the UCC.

## Boundary trainings set

Tara Barber, UCC minister for ministerial support and accountability, and Melanie Oommen, minister for committee on ministry development and leadership, will offer two boundary training sessions in the first quarter.

On Monday, Jan. 26, there is "Boundary Training for Ministers in Specialized Settings." Tara said that "serving in specialized settings requires particular attention to boundaries within the ministry setting and home church that are challenging and different from those serving as local pastors."

The session will focus on issues these ministers face and provide opportunities to reflect on best practices and growth.

*For information, visit <https://ucc.zoom.us/meeting/register/tzIk7sTtR-ROITWm-VY46w#/registration>.*

On Thursday, March 12, they will offer "Boundary Awareness Training for Retired Ministers." Tara pointed out that maintain-

ing healthy boundaries is challenging at any stage in ministry and it is particularly difficult when transitioning out of the last call and while in retirement.

These trainings complete individual requirements for boundary training only when authorized by a local Committee on Ministry. Participants must be able to use Zoom chat and breakout rooms and have their camera turned on throughout the time.

*For information or to register, visit <https://ucc.zoom.us/meeting/register/WwxaUcxeS8ywl-gg5IglFg#/registration>.*

## Stewardship webinars held

There will be Stewardship Webinars offered as Orientation for Treasurers from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m., Wednesday, Jan. 28

The presentation reviews basic aspects of the treasurer, financial secretary and trustee roles in a local congregation. It includes creating a "financial dashboard" to help fellow board members understand the finances of the congregation, effective ways to record and thank donors for their gifts, and best practices around cash controls and cash management.

The Rev. Andrew Warner, CFRE, president of the Wisconsin Foundation UCC, will lead the presentation.

*For information, visit [https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/p\\_hl1G-k4TPSaEF-2ykNqSg#/registration](https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/p_hl1G-k4TPSaEF-2ykNqSg#/registration)*

## Nominations due by Feb. 13

The PNC Ministry Resources Committee (MRC) invites members of PNC churches to help "build communities of abundance, justice and hope during this time of transition."

Al Bentley, Ann Lev, Barbara Anderson, Indigo Brown, Jenn Hagedorn and Kathleen Morgan serve on the committee that nominates members of other committees. Nominations or inquiries are requested by Feb. 13.

They are seeking to promote diverse membership on all the committees—welcoming laity and clergy of all races and ethnicities, ages, gender expressions, sexual orientations, and geographic locations.

The ability to hold meetings on Zoom removes barriers of travel time and cost to make participation accessible and build relationships with friends across the Conference.

Participation on committees invites sharing stories, seeking solutions, building

connections and learning about the work of the conference and national UCC.

"Committee members are to be committed to the UCC and PNC, a collaborative spirit grounded in our shared values—as an Open and Affirming, Anti-Racist, Just Peace conference—and time to devote to monthly meetings and additional projects as needed over a two-year term," they said.

New committee members are nominated by the MRC and the slate is approved at the Annual Meeting March 13 to 14. Nominees do not need to be present to be approved.

*Nominations may be sent to Jenn Hagedorn by Feb. 13, by calling her at 206-265-2834 or emailing [pastor@spiritopeaceucc.org](mailto:pastor@spiritopeaceucc.org).*

## UCUCC shares Lecture Series

University Congregational UCC in Seattle welcomes members of the PNC to join in its Lecture Series with John Philip Newell and Cami Twilling on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Feb. 20 to 21.

John Philip and Cami will help participants respond to and heal through connection with the earth featuring discussion on John Philip's new book, *The Great Search*, a collection of essays about seekers through the ages. A discussion guide is available for book groups interested in discussing and reflecting on the book.

*For information and to register, email [lectureseries@universityucc.org](mailto:lectureseries@universityucc.org) or visit <https://www.eventbrite.com> and search for John Philip Newell.*

## FAN plans Interfaith Advocacy

The Faith Action Network of Washington (FAN) is planning Interfaith Advocacy Day (IFAD) from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., Thursday, Feb. 12, in Olympia. The event is one of the largest gatherings of people of faith in the state Capitol, bringing voices of compassion and justice to elected leaders.

Participants come from across the state and meet with their legislators and staff to express their support for and concerns about bills being proposed and considered this session. There will be plenaries and workshops on issues, opportunities to meet advocates from legislative districts to prepare for visits, and for those who register by Jan. 29 appointments to visit with legislators and their legislative assistants. There is no cost to participate in IFAD this year because of the generosity of donors.

*For information, email [fan@fanwa.org](mailto:fan@fanwa.org) or visit [fanwa.org/interfaith-advocacy-day](http://fanwa.org/interfaith-advocacy-day).*

## Conference News Briefs



# PNC members gather to weave together stories

Roselynn Savini Selix and Emily Tanis-Likkel, co-chairs of the Church Development Committee (CDC) helped the committee convene a day of “Weaving Our Stories” on Saturday, Jan. 10, at Fauntleroy UCC in Seattle.

The event, intended as a practical and prophetic gathering, drew more than 80 people in person and more online to share stories and resources.

**In these uncertain times**, the goal was to strengthen ties that bind members of the PNC UCC churches to build God’s kin-dom, to form networks of care and to help people thrive.

The day gave space for participants to listen, share and connect. Facilitators guided conversations to weave together stories, deepen relationships, and discover shared purpose.

Emily and other conveners invited participants to leave with at least two new relationships and some actionable steps to strengthen them, their ministry and the shared life of the conference.

After half an hour of singing, led primarily by about 26 youth from the Samoan Congregational Christian Church (Ala ILe Ola) in Seattle, Emily welcomed participants, recognizing many may feel unraveled, in grief or anxious about the state of the world.

**The Church Development Committee** convened the gathering as a time for people to listen to each other’s stories to discover connections and common purpose.

“I hope we experience a microcosm of the good we envision for humanity, for relationships rooted in love, for diversity not division. Let us be woven together in God’s grace,” said Emily.

Committee members helping lead the worship and sessions were Emily of Alki UCC, Kaila Russell of Tolt UCC in



**Youth from Samoan Congregational Christian (Ala ILe Ola) in Seattle sing during worship.**

Carnation, Catherine Foote of Bellevue Congregational UCC, Margo Richardson of Northshore UCC, Betsy Runke of Everett UCC, Va’a Alaelua of the Christian Worship Center in Anchorage, Mana’o Satele-Vaovasa and Roselynn of Ala ILe Ola Church in Seattle.

**In a prayer**, Rose recognized that each person came from different places, stories and journeys and invited the Holy Spirit to be present in their hearts, words and listening, opening each to share their stories, listen to others and be gentle with each other’s stories.

“God, remind us that every voice matters and every story is held by your love,” she prayed. “Weave us together, our faith, our culture, our experiences, our hopes into one beautiful community.”

**Emily said the CDC** met last June and dreamed of a day of collaborative conversation as part of their mission of church formation and transformation.

“It’s important to connect by sharing stories,” she said.

Before the event, participants filled out a survey on the three greatest challenges their church experiences, what they need and what they can share. Based on surveys, breakout group topics were chosen for the morning and afternoon.

**Some churches** have big buildings and need renters for income and to infuse their spaces with life and energy. Many Samoan churches are outgrowing their spaces and need space

where they don’t have to rush to finish Sunday school, worship and a meal within two-hours. Danette Koloi of the Samoan Congregational Christian Church II in Seattle led a group on use of church spaces.

**To encourage global** and local partnerships, Phil Hodson, designated conference minister, led a group about partner projects, events and initiatives.

**In online group**, Karen Nooney shared her experience of being on a search committee to call one pastor to serve the newly yoked Colville and Chewelah churches.

**Va’a in Anchorage** led an online group on intergenerational churches and the need to listen to youth. Recently he gathered 350 youth from various churches, using an anti-racism grant from the CDC.

**Conference treasurer** Andy Warren facilitated a conversation on finance, inviting ideas on how churches can raise funds for their ministries.

**For churches beginning** to explore the Open and Affirming process and those who have been ONA for decades, Pastor Amy Johnson helped them explore how to live more fully into their queer affirming identity.

**For those wishing** for hands-on creativity and an opportunity to weave, Kaila Russell, an artist, led a session.

**Elizabeth Maupin** of Spirit of Peace in Issaquah led discussion on what is lifegiving and what is depleting in ministry. “The wisdom we need is not

in a lofty place but is here in all of us in this room. We can learn from one another,” said Emily.

Before the breakout groups, Catherine reminded, “We are not alone. We can act together.”

**Seeing a weaving** in Fauntleroy’s fellowship hall that Kaila had guided an annual meeting to create from strips of cloth each PNC church brought to make a new story, Catherine found the strip from University Congregational UCC. It was from a curtain that had hung in the fellowship hall probably when she was a child. It reminded her of people she loved, stories they told and ways they worked together.

**“The church needs** our gifts,” she said. “I see Christ’s face reflected in all of us. Early church writers said we are not alone and we can’t do it alone. We are in a world that wants to convince us we are alone and we can’t act, but we are here together and God will make a way. To act together, we have to know each other’s stories.”

**“The world wants** to convince us that even though we are together, we are not enough. We’re too small, insignificant or powerless to make a difference. The early church taught us that no matter how small or broken we are as the church, God is bigger than our fears or problems. God will make a way,” Catherine affirmed.

**“Our story is bigger** than here and now. We came from a host of witnesses before us and are surrounded by an incredible cloud of witnesses,” she said. “There is a vision beyond us, so, church, never put a period where God has put a comma. God is not finished with us or this country. Our job is to cooperate and let God do God’s wondrous work among us to make a difference in our world.”

**For information**, see <https://www.youtube.com/@FauntleroyChurchUCC/streams>.



# Youth will lead Annual Meeting worship experiences

## Continued from page 1

See what the PNC has been up to,” says the invitation on the Annual Meeting 2026 website.

The first video was prepared by the Samoan youth at the Christian Worship Center in Anchorage as an invitation for youth to come and join them at the Annual Meeting. As of press time, 10 were posted at <https://www.youtube.com/@PacificNorthwestConference>. They include videos from Guemes Island, Suquamish, Everett, Seattle 2 Samoan, Ala I Le Ola, Lummi Island, Colville/Chewelah, Magnolia and Keystone

Annual Meeting 2026 will be held Friday and Saturday, March 13 and 14, at the Doubletree Suites by Hilton at the Seattle Airport-Southcenter.

The location was chosen to accommodate all the meetings, worship, workshops and meals in one hotel where people are staying so they can gather outside the official meetings.

**Scholarship funds are** being raised to cover the \$200 to \$500 costs for youth to attend, depending on travel. Friday night youth are bringing worship—hip hop, praise music and dance to show their joy and faith—because, as one Samoan youth said, “songs speak to our generation.”

The PNC is inviting youth not only to attend, but also to actively participate in recognition that young people are not just the future of the churches, but their insights help shape programs and appeal to others in the younger generation.

The Rev. Va’a Alaelua, pastor of the Christian Worship Center, said in the invitation, “our young leaders invite youth across the conference to come together for worship that is real to show what happens when young people join up and worship God with everything they have.”



**Lillian Daniel is the keynote speaker.** Photo courtesy of Lillian Daniel

“Come and see what God is doing, and go and tell the worlds,” he said.

To help share “Come and See” videos about churches, Beth Astarte is receiving videos by email at [office@pncucc.org](mailto:office@pncucc.org).

While some churches are preparing and sending her videos, she is also receiving information from congregations and helping them prepare videos.

**The keynote speaker is** the Rev. Lillian Daniel, the conference minister of the Michigan Conference and author whose latest book, *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don’t Belong To*, has generated international conversation about the changing religious landscape. Her other books include *Tell It Like It Is*, *When Spiritual But Not Religious Is Not Enough* and *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*

She is a nationally recognized preacher, teacher and writer who cares about clergy and congregations.

Originally from Anderson, S.C., she spent her childhood in Asia, London and Washington, D.C., as the daughter of a UPI journalist. She earned a bachelor’s degree from Bryn Mawr College, a master of divinity

degree from Yale Divinity School and a doctor of ministry from Hartford Seminary.

The most recent of the four congregations she has served is First Congregational Church in Dubuque, Iowa. She has taught preaching at Yale Divinity School, Chicago Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago Divinity School.

**There will be a choice** to attend two of four workshops on Friday afternoon at 1:45 p.m. and 3:45 p.m.

Business will include considering/adopting a new Constitution and Bylaws, which have been shared throughout the PNC, revised and discussed through several Zoom meetings.

## The workshops are

- **“Embody the Story,”** led by the Rev. Emily Tanis-Likkel, pastor of Alki UCC in West Seattle. She writes, teaches, preaches and leads from a foundation of embodied spirituality, expansive theology and wonder. The session invites people to use gentle movement and music to explore Scripture.

- **“Church as a Communication Hub,”** led by the Rev. Warren Johnson, pastor of First Congregational UCC in Forks, a small church that has grown by engaging with the community, and the Rev. Gen Heywood, pastor of the Veradale UCC in Spokane Valley, a church that experienced hate crimes leading Gen to speak out for justice and inclusiveness. The workshop looks at practical ways congregations can open their spaces, share resources and build meaningful partnerships that respond to needs.

- **“Voices Rising: What do the youth today want for the church of tomorrow?”** facilitated by the Rev. Va’a Alaelua, Roselynn Savani Gatoloai and Demontrice Bigham with PNC-UCC youth. It presents youth perspectives on faith, belong-



ing, justice and community.

- **“Emergency Preparedness** for Individuals and Congregations,” facilitated by the Rev. Meighan Pritchard, pastor of Prospect UCC, facilitator of the PNC Environmental Justice Team and member of South Whidbey Prepares. She will guide discussion on how to prepare for disasters such as wildfires, earthquakes, tsunamis and floods.

**The deadline** for registering is Sunday, Feb. 8, and the deadline to register for a discounted hotel room is Tuesday, Feb. 10.

“As we look at where the church is heading and invite youth to engage across generations in worship, shared conversation and to share ideas to take back to our ministry contexts,” said Phil Hodson, designated conference minister, inviting congregations and individuals to donate to the youth scholarships at [pncucc.org/donate](http://pncucc.org/donate). “Come and see Christ’s way of living, a better way to be in the world.”

**Donations may** also be sent to Pacific Northwest Conference UCC, PO Box 12427, Mill Creek, WA 98082.

All business sessions will be hybrid (in-person and online), for those who have registered. Limited funds are available to help offset the cost of attending Annual Meeting. Those needing assistance can email Beth at [office@pncucc.org](mailto:office@pncucc.org).

Information on workshops will be published in the Annual Meeting Packet. **The agenda will be posted and updated on the PNC-UCC Annual Meeting webpage at <https://pncucc.org/annual-meeting-2026>.**



# Mercer Island UCC communicates with community

The Congregational Church of Christ set what it thought was a lofty goal of 5,000 pairs of socks for its 2025 Sock Drive for Operation Nightwatch in Seattle, uncertain that it could collect that many.

Communicating with its reader board, word of mouth, presence and a newspaper story made a difference.

**“We collected socks** and funds to provide nearly 9,000 pairs from the congregation and people in the community who left socks in a wooden box outside the door under the eaves,” said Jennifer Castle, pastor there for three years.

She attributes the surge to the help of an article in the Mercer Island Reporter.

“It touched a nerve and was a meaningful way people could give,” said Jennifer, adding that funds were used to buy socks from a sock mill in Alabama.

Operation Nightwatch’s annual Sock It to Homelessness was held on Dec. 7.

The Congregational Church on Mercer Island began the sock drive about 20 years ago. The church has approximately 100 members and is growing, adding 12 new members in 2025.

**“People are hungering** for meaningful community,” she said. “These times feel bleak. We have a reader board with changing messages to reflect our church’s progressive, inclusive values. It kept the Sock Drive before Mercer Island residents.”

With the church located on the main street of Mercer Island, a stable, suburban community of 25,000 on an island between Seattle and Bellevue, many people pass and read the messages, designed to provide encouragement and hope.

**One recent message** was, “If empathy is a sin, sin boldly!”

Once a month, about 15 volunteers stay after church to make about 150 turkey and cheese, ham and cheese, and



**Mercer Island UCC speaks to community with its reader board.**  
*Photos courtesy of the Congregational Church of Mercer Island*

peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Those sandwiches are then delivered to Operation Nightwatch and are given to those who are hungry and unhoused on the streets of Seattle.

**Commenting that** the church is a wedding space for the community—doing more than 20 a year—some with her officiating and some led by others, Jennifer told of a family coming to church on a recent Sunday to check out the space. The parents stayed to help make sandwiches.

The church, which met in a middle school several years be-

fore it built its building in 1969, is also completing a landscaping project. They took \$70,000 out of savings and hired a landscaper to take out the lawn and install drought resistant and drought tolerant plants. Church members have also been donating funds to offset the cost of the project.

The church expects to have significant savings in water.

**In addition, in July** the church will welcome a long-term preschool to use its space.

Jennifer began working part-time at Plymouth UCC in Seattle in 2005, managing volunteers. She eventually became

the full-time director of faith formation. Her work and mentorship of the Rev. Dr. Kelle Brown helped her discern a call to ministry. She attended Chicago Theological Seminary for a master of divinity degree and was ordained as associate pastor at Plymouth in 2021. She was called to the Mercer Island church a year and a half later.

**Jennifer grew up** in San Francisco Bay Area, where she earned both a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in social work. She and her husband, Don, relocated to Seattle, where they have raised children. She first worked in geriatrics, taking time off to raise her children.

**“The draw of the UCC** is for me is its commitment to justice, love and inclusivity. The denomination is not afraid to wrestle with the problems of our time and it welcomes questioning,” said Jennifer, who lives in Bellevue but is active in the Mercer Island community.

For example, calling the Parks and Recreation Department to be involved with a booth at their Pride event, led the church to participate in the community’s Juneteenth, Halloween Trunk or Treat and Holiday Party in December.

**“It’s great to be involved** in the community so people know who we are and what we are doing,” Jennifer said.

Recently Mercer Island UCC participated with the Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian and United Methodist churches in a prayer vigil gathering the community to express their concerns about a scandal at the high school more than 10 years ago that was just revealed.

“It was powerful to have a prayer vigil, and we now plan to do one quarterly,” she said. “People appreciated coming together to pray and light candles, to lament and pray for students, teachers and administrators.

**For information, call 206-232-7800 or visit [ucc-ccmi.org](http://ucc-ccmi.org).**



# Deacon likens giving out socks to washing feet

Giving socks to marginalized people on the streets of Seattle becomes a way to love the people in front of the volunteers and Operation Nightwatch chaplains on the streets every night.

"It's a way to start a discussion," said Frank DiGirolamo, the executive director of Operation Nightwatch. "Giving people socks has become a way to help heal people experiencing homelessness, showing forgiveness and mercy as the start of human relationships."

**Often in his 13 years** of volunteering with Operation Nightwatch as a deacon at St. Monica's Catholic Parish on Mercer Island and in his four years as executive director, still going on the streets, people would ask him—because they could not bend over—if he would change their socks.

"It is like foot washing. Sometimes people have worn their socks so long without changing them that they peel off skin when they take them off," he said. "So we started a medical clinic to care for foot wounds."

"While changing someone's socks, we also ask if they have a safe place to stay," he continued.

**Operation Nightwatch** serves a meal each evening to 150 to 170 people. It has shelters to house 40 men and women.

Mercer Island Congregational UCC is among 95 faith communities in the Seattle area that provide volunteers to help serve the meal. Other UCC churches who support Operation Nightwatch are Fauntleroy, Magnolia and Plymouth. Before it closed, Broadview was also involved.

Many who visit the Operation Nightwatch shelters, meals and other programs are caught in a cycle of chronic traumatization that begets substance addiction.



Deacon Frank DiGirolamo pushes a cart of socks.



Volunteers at Operation Nightwatch receive and sort socks.

*Photos courtesy of OperationNightwatch*

That's where our shelters come in.

"We get 40 men and women off the streets each night and involve them in case management, chaplaincy and a free medical clinic," said Frank.

"We see more young adults on the streets, disenfranchised by traditional programs or rejected by their families," he added.

"We seek to heal people experiencing homelessness with

forgiveness, mercy and human relationships along with housing," Frank explained.

Frank feels privileged to be inviting people to help out as a way to change society.

"There is something profound and simple about a pair of socks," he noted.

**The deaths** of Frank's mother during his first year at Grove City College in Pennsylvania and of his father after he graduated ingrained in him a commitment "to love the person in front of you while you have the chance."

He started a career in business, coming to Seattle in 1998 to work in the administrative offices of Starbucks and realizing in 2007 that he was called to serve his parish, St. Monica's, as a deacon. He was ordained in 2012, working as coordinator of parish and outreach ministries.

**For Frank, going out** to the streets, offering socks is the means to open conversations that invite people to share their desires and frustrations, and to listen to their stories about their hopes and hungers.

Operation Nightwatch has a full-time director of outreach, Disciples pastor Michael Cox, and two part-time street chaplains who walk in given areas of the streets with 12 volunteer street ministers, men and women, mostly lay.

Frank said he visits the churches like Mercer Island to share the street stories to draw gifts of socks, funds and volunteers.

"We rely on 1,000 volunteers over the year to serve the nightly meals," he said.

Each December, Operation Nightwatch holds its annual Sock It to Homelessness open house as a target time for congregations and agencies that have collected socks for them.

**For information, call 206-890-4536 or email [frank@seattlenightwatch.org](mailto:frank@seattlenightwatch.org).**



## The 'sock guy' sees generosity as a spiritual practice

At the Congregational Church at Mercer Island, Terry Pepple has become known as the "sock guy" or "sock king" because he is the one who organizes the annual sock drive for Operation Nightwatch for more than 20 years.

He was serving on the Social Outreach Committee which had a relationship going with Operation Nightwatch which offers shelters, counseling and meals.

"When we started, we would give them a few hundred pairs," said Terry.

Then by chance he learned of sock mills in Fort Payne, Ala.

Terry, who started his career as a flight attendant with Pan American from 1980 to 1988, and then worked more than 30 years leading sports tours until he retired during Covid, was on a business trip in 2016.

Curious about the lost baggage center he had heard about in Scottsboro, Ala., he decided to drive there from Atlanta when he had a six-hour layover between flights.

He drove through Fort Payne and saw a sign saying, "Sock Capital of the World." He saw that many of the 150 small sock factories in the town were boarded up.

So he looked it up and found that the mills had been put out of business by competition with factories in China. He contacted one of the manufacturers and, since then, has used monetary donations given in the sock drive to buy socks there.

In 2025, the Congregational Church of Mercer Island's goal was to top the record of providing 5,167 pairs of socks in 2024.

"This year, people brought and we bought 8,857 pairs of socks to provide for Operation Nightwatch," Terry said. "Last year, I had to borrow a neigh-



**Terry Pepple, Jennifer Castle and Diane Calvert show about one-tenth of the socks collected.**

*Photo courtesy of the Congregational Church of Mercer Island*

bor's truck to take 11 cartons to Operation Nightwatch. This year we had two orders of socks shipped there directly."

Someone in an apartment complex in Issaquah had heard of the drive. They had been collecting socks and looking for a place to give them.

In addition to promoting the sock drive to the community this year with messages on the church's reader board and a big sock banner beside the sign, he said a Mercer Island Reporter story helped spread the word so more people in the community dropped donations in a box outside.

"Many left notes saying, 'Thank you for doing this!'" Terry said

Terry grew up on Mercer Island and found the Congregational Church in 1990 when he and his wife, Lisa, were married there. They still attend there, even though they moved

to Normandy Park in 2024 and winter in Phoenix.

"We felt welcome and kept going. When we are not in town, we can go on Zoom, along with some others from South Africa and Great Britain," he said.

**In addition to being** the sock guy, he's also the toy guy. Previously he did the sock drive in November and the toy drive in December. This year the drives were a week apart.

The church does a toy drive for the Atlantic Street Center Christmas toy store. For the holiday assistance program, the center collects toys.

The Mercer Island church collects funds, and Terry is among those who go shopping for toys. The center sets up the toys in rooms and families come to shop.

He has helped with that for 20 years.

**Donations to both projects** are also inspired by the empha-

sis of the pastor, Jennifer Castle, on generosity as a spiritual practice.

"I believe in that and I believe in radical kindness," Terry said. "We need that today. It will not solve all the problems of the world to give someone a pair of socks, but it's direct, local and immediate impact we can see.

**"It may seem like a small** thing, but it gives us a visceral connection. I think of it as a hug," he described, telling of his conversations with Frank DiGirolamo about the work with people at Operation Nightwatch.

"We are doing our small part. It's fun for me and keeps me connected with the congregation," Terry said. "Kindness in incremental steps will make the world better. We need more of it."

**For information, email** [terrypepple@msn.com](mailto:terrypepple@msn.com).



# Trustees decide on drought resistant landscaping

A magnolia tree dedicated to a former pastor, rhododendrons, mahonia trees and Japanese maple trees are being moved to different locations on the grounds of the Congregational Church of Mercer Island as part of relandscaping the property near the church to replace lawns with drought resistant landscaping.

The goal, said Diane Calvert, chair of the trustees and a member since 1987, is to save money from watering and landscaping.

Last year the water rate increased 18 percent. This year it will rise 8 percent and next year another 8 percent.

"Raccoons and crows dig up the grass sod every year looking for grubs," she said. "Every year we have had to replant the grass. We needed a landscaper to come every week to mow.

"We talked to our landscaper who said came up with plans for a drought-tolerant yard," she said.

The plan includes planting new trees, different plants and transplanting plants already there.

"Our landscaper calls it moving the forest that is behind us to the front," said Diane, a retired nurse, who grew up in Omaha and lived in Spokane several years before moving to Seattle in 1970.

The landscaper and his crew finished the job in December, so the only grass is along Island Crest Way, the main street of Mercer Island.

Now in two large areas adjacent to the church there are 17 excelsia cedar trees that are six-foot and 14-foot. They will grow to 30 feet tall.

Other plants include calla lilies, camelias, iris, short ferns and ground covers like vinca, hellebores, oxalis, oregana, lip-pinella, fragaria philoensis and fragaria vesca.



Several views of the plantings around Mercer Island UCC.

"There will not be immediate savings. It will take perhaps two years for the plants to establish a strong root base so they need less water," said Diane. "Then we will need landscaping services just monthly rather than weekly and we will be doing less watering."

The total for the project was \$70,000 which came from savings, with expectation that the savings will be recouped, and from donations of members who purchased specific trees or

plants for specific amounts, like \$300 for ground cover, or different amounts for a six-foot or 10-foot tree.

Some of those gifts are in honor or memory of someone and will be recognized by a plaque on a stake in the ground near the plant.

Drought landscaping the yard is not the church's first or only venture in environmental action and consciousness raising.

Diane said that eight years ago the church put solar pan-

els on the roof. In the summer months, power generated by them for the church means they pay for only a \$23/month service fee from May to October.

"Our church is environmentally aware," she said. "We recycle what we use and compost the yard waste. We use compostable products for receptions and dinners and encourage those who have weddings to also use compostables."

The church also participates in Ridwell, a Seattle program that takes products to recycle that are not picked up in the city's curbside program.

It picks up products like plastic bags, plastic film, batteries, textiles, old clothes, light bulbs, corks, metal bottle caps old jewelry, chargers, eyeglasses and medicine bottles.

Members bring items to the church, and one member sorts them in bags that are put out in a box for Ridwell to pick up weekly. Ridwell has local business partners that wash, sort and process items for reuse or recycling.

The program keeps waste out of landfills. The church pays for the service.

Every few years, the Congregational Church of Mercer Island will arrange a recycling day for a recycling company to park a truck outside the church and spreads the word for people in the community to bring electronics—computers, TVs, cell phones or other types of recyclables. It's usually filled in three to five hours.

Members not only attend presentations on the environment and conservation but also share information on environmental actions they are taking at the church's booth at local street fairs and events at parks.

"Our church is energized to do our part for the environment," said Diane.

For information, email [di-anec0529@msn.com](mailto:di-anec0529@msn.com).



# Outdoor Ministries teams explore ideas for camps

Mark Boyd, executive director of outdoor ministries for the PNC, reported on upcoming retreats at Pilgrim-Firs and N-Sid-Sen, which include the Men's Retreat, Youth Midwinter Retreat and several Giving Back Camps on both sites.

**"What does it mean to be the church today? What is our role as men? How can we better tell our own faith stories and join others in telling theirs?"** are three questions framing discussion for the PNC Men's Retreat, Thursday, Jan. 29 to Sunday, Feb. 1 at Pilgrim Firs at Port Orchard. The retreat gathers men from throughout the PNC for a weekend of deepening connection, exploring faith, fellowship and fun.

The weekend is preceded by a day of silence starting at 7 p.m., Thursday and begins at 5 p.m. Friday, running through 11 a.m. Sunday.

The program will be led by the Rev. Phil Hodson, designated conference minister, who will guide participants in reflecting on the questions through conversation, worship and fellowship.

The planning committee includes Charles Torres, Don Jenkins, Hans Dankers, Jim Gaudino, Larry Kiriluk, Paul Withington and Rick Russell.

**For information call 360-876-2031, email [mark@pilgrimfirs.org](mailto:mark@pilgrimfirs.org) or visit <https://camp.pncucc.org/event/pacific-nw-mens-retreat>.**

The PNC-UCC Midwinter Youth Retreat will be held for youth in grades six to 12 from 4 p.m., Friday to 11 a.m., Sunday, Feb. 6 to 8, at Pilgrim Firs.

The team designing the high school program are Aislynn Crane from Admiral and Bruce Wilson from University Congregational UCC. The team planning the junior high program are Kelsey Beebe who is in a four-way covenant ministry and Michelle Sinnes of Sha-



**Mark Boyd reports on his first few months as executive director.**

lom UCC in Richland.

Through conversations, laughter and time in nature, the retreat encourages reflection, renewal and connection around the theme "In the Wilderness."

**March 23 to 29 will be a Giving Back Camp (aka Work Camp) at Pilgrim Firs with opportunities to begin building a new storage barn for the camp tractor, finish outdoor lighting**

at the labyrinth and do building, cleaning, painting, raking, power washing and brush removal.

**At N-Sid-Sen,** Mary Lu Hubbe of Westminster UCC in Spokane will lead a Textile Retreat from 4 p.m. Thursday, March 26, to 11 a.m. Sunday, March 29, with opportunity to sew, knit, weave, crochet and chat while working on a project. There will be a group quilting project.

For information, call 509-375-3040.

**Post-Easter Clergy Retreats** at Pilgrim Firs and N-Sid-Sen are both Friday to Sunday April 6 to 8, to give sabbath rest time to clergy after the Easter season. The event is free for clergy and their partner/spouse.

**An Eco-Restoration Weekend** is set for April 10 to 12 at Pilgrim Firs for a time of ecological restoration to help sustain the site by protecting forests, trails and buildings by removing invasive species, creating wildfire barriers and doing ongoing trail work.

Mark said this includes removing such invasive species as holly that digs its roots deep, so it takes over and scotch broom that spreads fast.

**The Women's Retreat** for the PNC will be Friday to Sunday, May 15 to 17, at N-Sid-Sen near Harrison, Idaho. It is a time for renewal, faith, fellowship and fun for women, trans and cis, and non-binary people.

**There will be a Giving Back Camp (Work Camp)** June 14 to 20 at N-Sid-Sen and another one Oct. 4 to 10, in addition to recent informal work camps for painting Spirit Lodge and more, and others March 23 to 25 and April 10 to 12.

Mark added that partner groups are filling many of the weeks.

**For information on N-Sid-Sen events call 208-689-3489 or visit [n-sid-sen.org](http://n-sid-sen.org).**



## Downed trees from winter storm are being removed

A fierce, 18-hour wind-storm on Wednesday, Dec. 17, included a microburst that damaged a swath 60 feet wide and 400 yards long through N-Sid-Sen. It damaged an area from the chapel, across the volleyball and basketball courts up the hill to cabin 8, reported Randy Crowe, volunteer manager at the camp.

**The storm toppled** about 40 trees, pulling up root balls of about 25 of them, dislodging cabin B from its foundation and causing roof damage to Forrester Lodge, the nurse's cabin, cabin A and cabin 8. About four benches in the lakeside chapel were smashed. Four big trees northeast of the Ford Cabin fell, blocking the trail to the canoe beach.

**"Along with that** we have had some fir trees that were dead and dying because of root fungus that spreads as long as they are there, so we have had them taken out," said Randy on Jan. 16.

That day, an independent logger who has worked with N-Sid-Sen was there taking down more than 12 trees with root fungus along with dragging the storm-downed trees with a skidder to a loading area at one end of the parking lot for a logging truck to pick up.

"He used a skidder that could go anywhere and wrapped cables around the logs to drag them to the loading pile," Randy described.

**The logger had taken** out two loads of 32-foot-long fir and pine logs, some three feet across. Randy estimated there would be about five more loads. The entire salvaging was expected to take seven days.

"Then volunteers will be coming to help clear out the branches by the summer. The logs have been drawn off the basketball and volleyball courts, but we still can't see the courts because of the branch-



**Top shows tree that fell against cabin 8. The middle photo shows a root ball that dislodged cabin B from its foundation. The bottom is the logger dragging out a log by the house.**

Photo Courtesy of Randy Crowe

es," Randy said.

The insurance adjuster had just come a few days before and Randy was waiting to hear what insurance coverage there would be so he could start with repairs.

**He summarized that** there was damage to the Forrester Lodge roof that had temporary repairs. The skylight in the manager's house had the frame torn and one layer of glass was broken, but the second layer of glass was holding out rain.

Cabin B was shifted off its foundation, but the stump beside it had to be removed to open the door and assess damage before reestablishing a new foundation under it. There was damage to the roof and eaves of cabin A, the nurse's cabin and cabin 8, but there appeared to be no structural damage.

"We had to get the logs out before we could start repairs to the buildings," he said.

Then an excavator will need to come in to remove the root balls that stand eight to 10-feet high and are not only an eyesore but also a safety concern if kids climb on them.

**Meanwhile, \$31,000** of the \$50,000 gift from Broadview UCC closing is being used to paint the bedrooms, halls and kitchen of Spirit Lodge—with the help of volunteer teams—and to install new carpeting and flooring in the bedrooms, halls, bathrooms and kitchen.

**Giving Back (Work)** Camps through the spring will bring volunteers to clean up N-Sid-Sen grounds and prepare the facilities for the full season of UCC retreats and camps, as well as for use by partners.

The first retreat is Feb. 8 and the camp is half full in March, mostly full in April and booked fully from May through September, said Randy.

**For information, call 208-689-3489 or visit <https://n-sid-sen.org>.**



# Registration begins for 2026 summer camps

Registration is now open for camps at Pilgrim Firs Camp and Retreat Center at Port Orchard and N-Sid-Sen Camp and Retreat Center on Lake Coeur d'Alene for summer 2026.

**At Pilgrim Firs**, there will be two camps July 5 to 8. They are You & Me Camp for children in grades one to four with an adult family member and Kids Camp for children in grades two to four.

**At N-Sid-Sen**, the UCC camps begin July 12 to 18 with Intermediate Camp for grades five and six and Junior High Camp for grades seven to nine.

The week of July 19 to 25 includes three camps sharing the space at N-Sid-Sen. Senior High Camp for grades 10 to college is the full week. You &

Me Camp is July 19 to 22 for children in grades one to four with an adult family member and Kids Camp for children in grades two to four is July 22 to 25,

**The other two UCC camps** at N-Sid-Sen will be Family Camp July 26 to Aug. 1 and Camp Together from Aug. 2 to 8. Both are for all ages.

As the website says, "camp is about connecting face-to-face with cabin mates and caring leaders. It is a safe place to try new things, learn about God and grow as a person."

The theme for the 2026 camp curriculum is the same as Midwinter Youth Retreat, "Into the Wilderness."

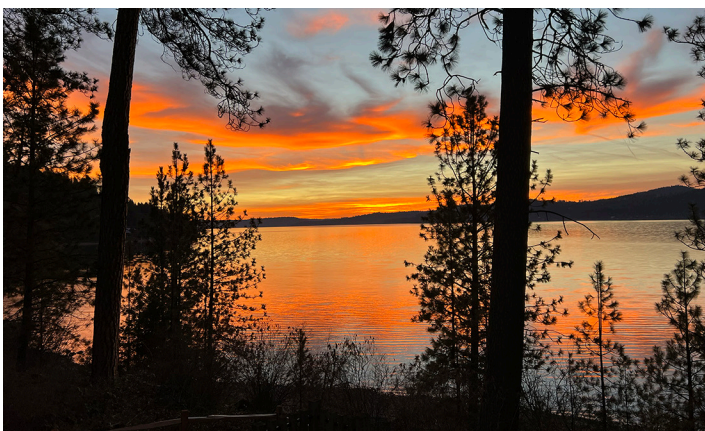
**For information, visit [pilgrim-firs.org](http://pilgrim-firs.org) or [n-sid-sen.org](http://n-sid-sen.org).**



Windstorm debris will be cleared and damage will be repaired before the summer camp season begins.



Above is a photo showing the devastation on the ground and below is a sunset reminding N-Sid-Sen friends of the ongoing beauty in the midst of that.



A fresh coat of paint and newly carpeted floors at Spirit Lodge will greet a group from Washington State University who will use the lodge for a retreat in February.