

The United Church of Chapel Hill

## Story Book

*To have a story to tell is the most human of expressions. The essence of the Christian faith is our story of Easter resurrection and hope. And it is also true for a church: The stories of its members define it - not merely its past, but its living present.*

*A thoughtful strategic planning process is one that helps an institution take intentional stock of itself before beginning to imagine a hope-filled future. While there are several facets to that stocktaking, one of the most important is pausing to consider the stories of the congregation. To that end, we asked our members to share a brief story about a personal experience that defined UCCH for them. While there are only 30 or 40 of them here, they offer a meaningful glimpse into our church.*

### The Stories

After moving to North Carolina 32 years ago and becoming involved in UCCH, it was very important to me to get to know people in our faith community. Even though there were only about 240 members at that time, it wasn't always easy to become acquainted with one another.

To help church folks meet one another, small dinners of 6-10 people were planned - you would sign up for a particular date and offer to either host or be a guest. We first met some of the people who are still friends of ours through these dinners. Now we are participating in a new initiative called Community Group Ministry, getting to know United Church folks who live near our neighborhood.

There have been other small groups over the years where I have gotten to know people at UCCH and continue to seek opportunities as I find that being in community with one another is an important part of our spiritual journey together.

*Cindy Johnson*

I have been interpreting for UCCH since the church began the La Mesa bilingual services in early 2016. At that time, I was working for Witness for Peace Southeast as its Regional Director. I had been working as a staff member for nonprofit organizations for almost 20 years, and considered doing a career change to interpreting and translating more than once, but had not taken the plunge until then.

Throughout 2016, I interpreted as a volunteer for La Mesa on most Sundays that year, and this was one of the factors that encouraged me to work with others to found tilde Language Justice Cooperative in January of 2017, and to start to earn my living primarily through language work. The intentionally bilingual space that Pastor David Mateo and others have created with La Mesa is in line with tilde's commitment to Language Justice and in creating linguistically democratic spaces. Even though I have changed my career,

I have not changed my commitment to social justice work, and continue to work and fight for change in this country and in my other homeland of Nicaragua.

I have been a member of UCCH for almost a decade, and I am proud to have contributed my grain of salt to the bilingual service of La Mesa, and to be a part of a congregation that believes in and acts on making a change in the world.

*Ron Garcia-Fogarty*

*Mi niñez y adolescencia transcurrieron felizmente en una iglesia bautista, excepto cuando en mis clases de la escuela dominical se creaban mis dudas, ya que por un lado se hablaba del inmesurable amor de Dios y por otro lado, se hablaba de lo malvado que eran los homosexuales y Pentecostes, esa contradicción no la podía entender. Muchos años pasaron sin que yo pisara una iglesia, pero si desde hace 8 años, cuando mi amado Alex Cordova, me comentó de que había encontrado un lugar donde se sentía aceptado sin ser juzgado por su condición, llamó mi atención y aun viviendo en mi extrañable Venezuela, me dije: En mi próxima visita a NC, ire a ese lugar para dar gracias por mi amigo. Nunca paso por mi mente que Dios tenía ese lugar reservado para mí. UCCH ha sido la demostración de que soy la hija preferida de Dios, la demostración de su amor por mí, cada abrazo y cada palabra de ustedes han sido mi aliciente para seguir adelante, son el balsamo que alivia mis extrañables domingo de compartir familiar en Venezuela. La UCCH ha sido la reafirmación de mi fe y de que el amor es la condición humana que debe prevalecer en cada uno de nosotros para ser felices. Dando amor es como recibimos amor. Hoy la UCCH es mi gran familia. Bendiciones.*

*[Translation]*

My childhood and adolescence were spent happily in a Baptist church, except when in my classes Sunday school my doubts were created, because on one hand they talked about the immeasurable love of God and on the other hand, spoke of how evil were the homosexuals and Pentecostals, this contradiction could not understand. Many years passed without my trod a church, but for 8 years, when my beloved Alex Cordova, told me that he had found a place where she felt accepted without being judged by their condition, caught my attention and still living in my extrañable Venezuela, told me: on my next visit to NC, I'll go to that place to give thanks for my friend. I never crossed my mind that God had that place reserved for me. UCCH has been the proof that I am the favorite daughter of God, demonstrating their love for me, every hug and every word of you have been my incentive to keep going, are the balm that soothes my extrañables Sunday of sharing family in Venezuela. The UCCH has been the reaffirmation of my faith and love is the human condition that must prevail in each of us to be happy. Giving love is like receive love. UCCH Today is my big family. Blessings.

*Nubia Rivero Bello*

At the Cameron Ave church we started Wednesday night suppers by bringing bread and cheese and vegetables or fruit to share in the fellowship hall. Maria Palmer had just started with the Iglesia Initiative and I found her grounded witnesses among the group to be refreshing and affirming. After one of the food sharings, we met in small groups.

UCCH was sharing a ministry with a small African American congregation on Wednesdays. Their minister led a discussion that night and though I can't remember exactly what he said, I found his responses to me so affirming; they stayed a long time, even to now. I was anxious about my teaching in the graduate school and he advised me to follow the students. It relaxed me and was a mantra I continued through all my teaching. I can still see that small circle of smiling friends in a children's classroom encouraging me to go in peace.

*Jan Dodds*

Discovering United Church of Chapel Hill was a treasure at the end of a lifelong journey for me! In fact, it wasn't until I was sitting in the Sanctuary and heard those powerful words, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here", that I knew what I was actually searching for and needed for my spiritual growth.

My treasured moments of UCCH are those that I share with the children of our church. On so many occasions, they have taught me how to live out the values that Jesus taught. Once in Sunday School while reviewing the Ten Commandments a very wise second grade boy asked me if it had to be honoring your mother and father since he had two moms. It was in that moment that I knew this was the place I was called to be. I was able to respond with confidence that we believe that God wants us to honor all families and that all people are accepted, loved, and celebrated in God's family. I have observed children writing letters to inmates to remind them that they are loved. I have witnessed children extravagantly welcoming each other and visitors. I have observed children writing messages of peace, love, and welcome in various languages on peace poles so that our whole community would know that they are welcome at UCCH. Children intuitively embody the message and values of Jesus. It is a special honor to spend time with children, and it is in those moments that the grace of God is revealed!

For me, United Church of Chapel Hill also provides an opportunity to truly engage in community with people. People are not just welcomed, but they are celebrated. I believe that our Church is reflective of what we aspire to be as our best selves. We recognize that we are not perfect, but we are a community of people that constantly challenge ourselves to do better, to extend ourselves beyond our comfort zone, and to truly embrace and celebrate the diversity and love that is all around us!

I am thankful for this place and for the people that fill it. It is home to me, and I pray that it always will be.

*Anitra Grove*

In the late 80s, my work often took me to a UNC office that was next door to United Church of Chapel Hill when it was on Cameron Avenue. I would gaze down at all the happy children on the playground who attended Chapel Hill Day Care, which at one time was housed at UCCH. As a young single woman, I imagined a child of my own there one day. A few years later, my son enrolled in the United Church preschool at that same location, and then another son after the church moved to our current site. I later became a Sunday School teacher and both sons were confirmands and participated in youth

group. That first glimpse of happy children at United Church of Chapel Hill has become an enduring memory and the church's effect on my own children and thousands of others will always be its greatest legacy for me.

*Kitty Dalton*

### Embracing our Hidden Selves

I first came to United Church of Chapel Hill around 2010 with my husband, Ron and son, Camilo. We had moved back in 2008 to the United States from Nicaragua, where we had lived for five years. We had never found a church in Nicaragua and I was excited to find one. We first were living in Pittsboro and looked in Chatham County. We tried seven different churches – everything from an evangelical Spanish-speaking congregation to Quaker and several in-between. Through the search, I became clearer on what I was searching for:

- a) Open and affirming for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer persons (LGBTQ);
- b) Racial diversity and a commitment to racial equity; and
- c) A good children's program.

It turns out that is a hard combination to find. After searching for several months, I felt so discouraged that we took a break. In the meantime, we moved to north Chatham County, 15 minutes north, and so we realized that we could expand the search. A co-worker invited me to UCCH. The first Sunday we attended and heard Rick preach on the importance of welcoming everyone; met Susan Steinberg and used those fun bags for children; heard about the commitment to LGBTQ; and about Iglesia Unida (the Spanish language service at the time) – well I was sold. We had planned to visit a few other churches, but I told Ron that I didn't want to go anywhere else.

What I want to share about my story is why these things are so important to me. I have come to realize that I am carrying around some hidden identities. In a deep way, UCCH welcomes me and those hidden selves and helps to bring them love and encouragement to come forward.

First the wonderful children program – I wanted something wonderful and nourishing for our beautiful son Camilo. I am grateful for such loving support of children in the church. What is not always obvious is that Camilo was born in Nicaragua; his first language was Spanish and is an immigrant. I also have lived the immigrant experience in Nicaragua – granted it was an experience that carried with it white and American privileges. Still I understand the frustration of not speaking the language; being treated as not very smart because my Spanish was third-grade level even if my thinking was not; feeling isolated and not feeling at home in either country. For these reasons, I am so grateful for La Mesa service and community. I feel at home there and among kindred spirits. My immigrant experience and Spanish-speaking self can come out to play with my friends there.

Secondly the racial diversity and commitment to racial equity – when I was in my 20s, I attended a racial equity workshop by the *People's Institute for Survival and Beyond*. Talk about a paradigm shift - my view of the world was forever changed. After that, I went on to work in my church, Foundry United Methodist Church, on the Race, Religion and

Culture committee and racial equity issues in the church. We uncovered the racist history of the predominantly white church and we reached out to our sister African American congregation, Asbury United Methodist Church, and we held a series of classes on our shared history. The events culminated in a Service of Repentance for Racism at Asbury and a Service of Reconciliation at Foundry. Through these experiences, I grew as a person and built a family of people committed to addressing institutionalized racism in our world, starting with the church. I am deeply grateful that UCCH has the Sacred Conversations on Race group; regularly hosts Racial Equity workshops; and is committed to racial equity in all we do. A past self, one that fell into the shadows with the day-to-day burdens of life, has another opportunity to step into the sunshine.

Finally the commitment to welcoming and affirming LGBTQ people – many years ago I was in a committed same sex relationship for several years. I didn't have a label for my experience at the time as I was following my heart. After that relationship ended, I met and fell in love with Ron and we moved to Nicaragua, a predominantly Catholic country. It became easy to not talk about it, as I am a private person and it felt like no one's business. I want to thank Ian for his example, of being out as a bisexual. It has made me want to learn more and bring more light onto another hidden self. I am still in that process of learning more and I look forward to doing that at UCCH. I am so grateful that UCCH is a place that welcomes all of me, both my visible identities and my hidden ones. Thank you again for the opportunity to share my story.

*Millie Brobston*

I think one of the hardest aspects of this project is telling just one story, but, when I had been a member of the church for about a year, I lost my mother to multiple myeloma. When I arrived at her wake, three hours from Chapel Hill, I was quite surprised to find Pastor Jill there to greet me. She sat with me and talked with me about who my mom was, how she lived and died and how my family was bearing up. When I came back to church people asked me how I was doing and talked about how they felt losing their own moms, or about the loss of other loved ones to cancer. I received numerous cards from the pastoral care volunteers. The generous outpouring of similar experiences helped me feel that I was not suffering the loss alone and that people understood what I was going through. I don't know if it's possible to express I how much this has continued to mean to me.

*Karen Demby*

Most of you know or you expect that our congregation is filled with people with special talents who are willing to give of their time, when called upon, even at awkward times.

This it was during my time as assistant and full moderator. It took many people hours and hours of time to help to prepare our church for a transition. I could write 60 separate statements for the 5 years I was honored to help our congregation. However, my story I want to share first occurred after my term. I left office in June 2017. I had a prostate biopsy in July. On August 14th I learned I had prostate cancer. My world shifted, as if on an axis, to turn inward, to study books, journal articles, and talk to many doctors with so many procedures. There is not agreed upon best approach to treat prostate cancer... there are many. I never felt so lost. I let Susan know I had the diagnosis and asked her

to pray for me. I asked her to share it with the congregation and spoke to Aly who, then, was in charge of Pastoral Care coordination. And then, I was blessed at the first level of blessing: my call to feeling the blessing of others for my well-being. I received notes, cards, and letters; from people I knew but didn't not regularly speak to or work with during the transition. "I will pray for you." "I pray God will guide you." "We love you and pray for your health" and so many more.

Perhaps you can sympathize, if you've not been diagnosed with cancer that you enter into a spiral of thought, worry, concern, confusion, stress, that wakes you in the night with doubts, things to do, and dead ends that empty your soul. I was amazed at the power of these words, one or two sentences meant so so much to me. I asked Aly, how it was possible people who heard a small update in worship would result in the outpouring for individually written message that filled my heart, filled my soul, made me feel there was something more than my worries. She said she had an email list. I asked, "please, would you put me on that list?" That is when I received my 2nd level blessing. I got my first email from Aly: A list of people, their names and addresses. And, then...I prayed. For one, then another, then another. And a miracle happened. At night, I started adding these people and all my family by name, to my prayer, sending a message to God to look out for others, by name, by affliction, and asking for God's blessing. And then I entered my 3rd blessing. I asked Magda if we had some card, I could send. We did, and I picked up more at the Alternative Christmas. I wrote the name on the envelope. Done! I wrote the name of the person, "Dear....". Done!. I sat at my desk and struggled to write something, anything, to someone in hurt and needing healing. Then, I turned to my poetry, to my experience, and I spoke to a person I didn't not really know as if I did know them. I shared my most precious hopes as vividly as I possibly could, so they could hear them screaming off the page and urging them to trust God was by their side, even more than I was, by my writing. That night, I prayed for each person I wrote to. That night, I stopped worrying about myself. That night. I learned to trust in God. Days later, my choice of treatment was easy. It wasn't me. It wasn't the Doctor. I had God and God's people by my side, arm in arm, in sickness and health.

I still struggle to lift myself out of my "woes", but I learned, through the United Church of Christ, that caring for others as yourself is not only a commandment, it is freedom, joy, and a peace that passes all understanding.

*Doug Zabor*

My peripheral vision took in the information quickly: long black robe and Birkenstock sandals; my mind registered 'Like this combination.' Jill Edens sat down right next to me to chat before the 8:45 service 2 years ago. I had learned that UCCH had a Bible study class and I had come to ask if I could attend. 'Of course you can! Gosh we're slipping since we hadn't made that clear!' She had to get on to 'her job' so we didn't chat long. This was the 13th church I'd visited in an attempt to find a church home in this area; actually I had already joined a very nice one thinking that that would be as good as I could get.

As I looked around, I thought, wow, these people don't look like what I'm accustomed to seeing at the other 12 churches: no seersucker suits or cute little dresses, just whatever's clean and on top of the pile: I like this look! I loved the quotes from different

philosopher's in the bulletin referencing the sermon and the scripture readings. The music was lovely and I couldn't believe that it was the congregation that got to sing the 'trifold Amen'. Everyone was very friendly; in fact I waited to ask for a permanent name tag because more people would introduce themselves to me if I wore a paper one.

The Bible study class was fascinating, although these days I have a hard time making it at 7 am. At my third class, I re-introduced myself and said 'I'm new' and Lee Sorensen said, 'You're not new, you're part of us!'

And that's the way I've felt ever since. I'm grateful for stimulating classes and conversations that challenge me to keep growing. I'm grateful for a church that always has food. I'm grateful for good sermons and great music. And even though, as a life long Presbyterian, I'm still confused by how things operate, I'm grateful to be part of a huge group convinced that 'God is still speaking.'

*Midge Coward Williams*

Music brought us to UCCH, the Fellowship drew us in, and the people are what have kept us here.

In 2014 our long-time church home took a "hard right" by joining the Evangelical branch of the Presbyterian denomination. We had grown increasingly uncomfortable with the direction, and this was a tipping point. At about the same time, my brother's wife (Patricia Gallivan) began encouraging us to come hear her sing in the United Voices of Praise. She assured us "You'll be inspired by the music and think you'll really like the church." She was right.

We began visiting UCCH in 2015 and quickly realized that the music WAS inspiring, but so were the people. The 30-minute drive from Mebane was worth it every Sunday. The 10:00 am gathering in the Fellowship Hall was an important magnet for us. It was a "user-friendly" place to meet the members, and we were always greeted warmly. The Fellowship revealed so many signs that UCCH should be our church home: We learned that Rinnie Orr grew up 30 miles away from Tim's small hometown in Wyoming. Lisa met a like-minded geriatric social worker in Bill Crittenden. Tim saw many familiar faces of co-workers at RTI. Rick and Jill Edens were constantly introducing us to people and everyone was just so welcoming!

As we continue our journey with UCCH we are committed to helping our church become a more connected community of believers

*Tim and Lisa Gabel*

Our family's most memorable event at UCCH was the 2017 Civil Rights Walk that included a visit and presentation at the Silent Sam statue before it was torn down the following year. At the beginning of the walk we visited St. Joseph Christian Methodist Church and studied the photographic murals on the curbside walls. These murals illustrate how the protestors were met with violence and hatred. We discuss how African

American people were not allowed to freely walk on UNC campus until the late 1960s and how those brave protestors fought for everyone's rights in our town of Chapel Hill. We chose to attend UCCH because of its deep acceptance and the sharing with others the joy of Christ's love to all people. Our family has continued this commitment by participating in the local Crop Walk for Hunger plus serving and making meals for the ICF kitchen. Our family is active in the Youth Choir, Youth Group, Community Groups, Faith and Family program, attending La Mesa services, MES Board and assists with the running of the Soundboard.

*The Wagner / Verinder Family:*

*Julie Wagner  
Dylan Verinder  
Zion Verinder  
Ezekiel Verinder*

This August we will be sending our oldest, Luke, off to college. As most parents of teenagers experience, time seems to accelerate, as our children get older. These days, when I watch Luke and his younger sister Maya move confidently through UCCH's halls and sanctuary, I am reminded of how they have always felt safe and loved here. We have been members of this church for over ten years now, which means a lot of their "firsts" took place at UCCH. This is where they met some of their closest friends, had their first opportunities to speak in public and where they tested their voices in song. I love the memory of Maya standing alone in the back of the church starting off a Christmas Eve service with the first solo verse of "Once in Royal David's City." I cherish the image of Luke as a comical Dave, preparing to fight Goliath in the church production of "Dave – The Musical." I felt both pride and sadness for our kids as they joined thousands of other youth last year in Washington DC for March for Our Lives.

At UCCH, the life of our family is surrounded and supported by our brothers and sisters in God's family. Trying to raise good kids in troubled world, I could not be more grateful for this beloved community.

*Saritha Vermeer*

One recent January, Saritha and I agreed to chaperone the Blowing Rock youth retreat in the mountains of western North Carolina. I didn't know a lot of the kids well before the retreat, but during the retreat sessions and in our free time, I got to know several of the kids better. I was really moved by their stories – one boy talked about his worries about failing out of school; another shared about her parent's divorce; a third confided about a friend who was considering suicide. I was also blown away by their talents. In the evening show, several kids played music, shared their poetry, and told stories. The high point of the trip for me was our sledding trip on the final morning. We assigned groups of four kids to each car and headed out for our adventure. The three girls and one boy in my car were initially a bit quiet, but quickly warmed up as we drove through the mountains, appreciating how the morning sun reflected through the crystalline ice encasing every tree branch. Around every turn, we got more excited about the sweep of shimmering trees against the deep blue sky. At one particularly dramatic overlook, the kids demanded to stop the car so that we could jump in the snow and take group

pictures. This trip was a tangible reminder that we are all part of God's family – and our work is to create sacred spaces where we can share our stories, have fun, be awed by nature, and help each other become more ourselves. When we first signed up for the trip, we thought would be a good opportunity to spend quality time as a family. However, the unexpected blessing was forming new relationships with the youth in our expanded UCCH family.

*Dan Vermeer*

Once upon a time, a middle-aged entrepreneurial woman was teaching and finishing graduate school at Kent State University. Trusting in a Divine nudge, she decided to move to Chapel Hill.

She drove south in April 2006, with only two days to find an apartment in NC (where she didn't know a soul, nor did she have a job). She found an apartment at the last minute, signing a lease Saturday evening. Too tired for driving back to Ohio, she stayed in Chapel Hill one more night.

Sunday morning, on a whim, she visited United Church of Chapel Hill. Rick Edens and United Voices of Praise welcomed her. The pipe organ introduced one of her favorite hymns. The sermon rocked. So did coffee hour, as she met friendly, helpful people. She felt affirmed, renewed, and no longer a stranger when she left UCCH for her drive back to Ohio.

After she moved to Chapel Hill in July 2006, the middle aged, entrepreneurial woman church-shopped a bit, but it was no contest: UCCH was -- and is -- the right place for her still-unfolding spiritual formation story.

*Julie Mitchell*

Before moving to Chapel Hill in 2013, we worshipped in a classic, white clapboard church, 200-years-old, in the center of our New England town, along with the other proverbial “frozen Chosen” in our congregation. So, United Church Chapel Hill was a rather startling change in all the ways that do not matter. It did not take us long to recognize that UCCH would be a wonderful new church home. Our autistic daughter, Jennifer, volunteered to read at the Christmas Eve Service soon after we arrived in town and the Rev. Susan Steinberg embraced the offer without hesitation. We listened with delight and big smiles as Jennifer participated in the Christmas Eve service in our new church. No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you and your daughter are welcome here.

*Jean Anne and Peter Barnes*

It's another wonderful day teaching in Sunday school, but today is a bit different because I'm filling in for third grade rather than the usual fourth and fifth grades. The lesson is *Doubting Thomas* and after reading the scripture I and my colleague begin to discuss

Jesus' appearance, first to the women, then to some of the disciples, then finally to Thomas. "Wait!" one little Karen girl exclaims. "You mean Jesus died and was buried, but he came back in person to show himself?" "How could that be?" "Who moved the rock?" "He died didn't he?" Taking deep breaths we attempted to tackle that one, but with little success. We approached it at various angles that we thought a third grader would comprehend, but that expression of 'No way!' lingered on her face. We wanted her to somehow have that Aha! moment with a simple computation of our feeble explanations. But alas, that seemed not to be the case. Her questions ebbed and we went on with the class. Ultimately we came to essence of the lesson and talked about faith and what it means. I always remember a line in one of my favorite movies "Miracle on 34th Street". It goes like this: "Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to." So when words failed me I offered that to the class. A pensive pause from everyone was followed by a huge exclamation from that little girl, "Oh, I get it! Even though Jesus coming back to life is hard to believe AND we weren't there to see it, we must believe it because we have faith!" Right! Wow! That connection was powerful for me and hopefully for her as well. This is why I love teaching Sunday school and this is why UCCH is such a wonderful environment for our young and young-at-heart minds.

*John 20:29 "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

*Chip Baker*

My wife, Stephanie, and I are very recent new members. We arrived at UCCH when I became the Executive Director at Johns River Valley Camp after thirty years in parish ministry. We were a family moving through transition and I was a person in transition.

I was immediately aware that this community of faith was also embracing the joys and challenges of moving into new moments of their life together. Courage and hope were in the air as this church looked into a future it could not see but in faith knew that much of its story was still to be told.

We are excited to be in this journey toward a place unknown but filled with promise. The bravery of our new church family to embrace change in a spirit of hope inspires us to believe that we too will find joy in this new chapter of our lives.

*Phil Hardy*

I arrived in Chapel Hill like a cardboard cutout fleeing a forest fire. My heart, my confidence, my trust were singed and sere. I had built up in Nashville a very specialized educational program that no longer needed a builder nor even, I was told, a well-paid maintainer. Of all the law schools in the country at that moment, only UNC needed that kind a builder. That new call was a blessing, but one my spouse in crisis rejected. So I feared losing not just my Vanderbilt colleagues and Nashville lifeline church family but also my wife and son. It's an unspeakable mess, I thought, because I felt too heartsick to speak and couldn't imagine anyone bearing to listen. But I was not empty-handed. A crumpled paper had a name jotted on it by a church friend in Nashville: Susan Steinberg.

Susan showed me around United Church. Down among the children's classrooms I began to suspect God's presence, bending space-time around me, tilting me toward

here. Susan at least wanted me here. And soon so did Sheas and Paganos, Breisches and Boormans, Jody and Henry, Jill and Rick. Within weeks I was—fittingly, I thought—on a wind-buffeted ridge at United Church’s Blowing Rock retreat. There I heard fierce honesty from Cely, Ingrid, and others, and no one chided me for arriving frazzled and leaving early. My life was breaking like ice; may that, I prayed, be a sign of spring, or at least of hidden embers of hope. Rick helped me consider a truth too bleak to consider, and from my tired eyes scales began to dissolve, leaving me clear-sighted, crying in the back of the sanctuary, lining up with sad eagerness for healing prayer. My son and his mother eventually arrived here, she to her own shore and he to Jenny’s musical care, right when she needed to start a youth choir and he needed to join one. And I too entered the choir room, where Raleigh showed me a seat; Doug greeted me in a familiar Midwestern way, Mary dished out advice, and Betty gave me a hug. The mess, I learned, wasn’t unspeakable, just god-awful. And a god-awful mess has in it, at least, God. Though I arrived feeling dreadfully alone, Jesus understood: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus wasn’t alone, and neither was I. United Church made sure I knew that.

Looking back from today, I see hints of resurrection, as though I were in a chrysalis, being deeply broken apart, and out of the brokenness being reconstituted with tiny, invisible wings to help me stand straighter both now and on the day when, as the Commas once sang with Jill on violin beside us, “I’ll fly away . . .”

God bless you, brothers and sisters, and thank you.

*Craig Smith*

I came to UCCH and made the decision to join for one simple reason... I love my son with all my heart.

When Thomas was a sophomore at UNC-CH, he came out as a gay man to my husband and me one weekend during a visit home to spend time with our dogs.... and us. During the ensuing conversation, he mentioned that he had saved up some money "just in case" because he was aware of what had happened to other kids when they came out to their parents. Some parents had cut all college funding from their children and had disinherited them. This broke my heart and we reassured him that our love for him was, is and would always be unconditional.

After this, I knew that I could no longer attend the church our family had been a part of since Thomas was a very young child. I knew that I could no longer worship in a place where my son would not be loved and cherished as the child of God that he is.

Around this time, Bill and Cely Chicurel talked with me about UCCH, so I decided to visit. As I walked into the sanctuary that Sunday the first person I saw was Ross Pipes and he was wearing a black UCCH polo shirt with the lettering in rainbow colors. And I saw Ernie Kraybill. Thomas had been quite ill when he was born and Ernie had followed him in the Special Infant Care Clinic for 2 years; he had taken good care of me as well. I knew I was in the right place and that God had led me to this church.

So, I came to UCCH out of love and respect for my son, but I've stayed because this church has ministered to me and challenged me to live out my faith in a visible way.

And because I found a community of people who cares deeply about social justice, racial equity, the LGBTQ community and trying to live and minister as God's people in this frightening and very scary world.

I only hope that someday I can make a difference in someone's life in the same way that this church community has changed mine.

Thank you for the opportunity to tell my story.

*Jane Landreth*

As a UNC graduate student in 1980, I lived on McCauley Street in Chapel Hill with a new apartment mate. My apartment mate had begun attending United Church of Chapel Hill on Cameron Avenue, and was rehearsing an Easter cantata with the choir - then 10 members strong, including a hired tenor! My roommate asked me to sing with the choir for the Easter cantata, and as I was missing singing with a choir as I had all through school and undergraduate years, I agreed.

Growing up, my family rarely attended church, but when we did, it was a Congregational church. My nervousness at participating with a church choir was attenuated by the denominational affiliation, and I was welcomed to the United Church choir for the Easter Cantata. I was happy that the choir sang from a small balcony behind the congregation – I could sing and hide at the same time. However, I was fortunate enough to first encounter United Church in the second year of Jill and Richard Eden's ministry. I was impressed by a woman co-pastor and, evidencing his remarkable ability to put names to faces, after one introduction, Rick would greet me by name. Hiding wasn't really an option!

So.... Over the summer of 1980 I kept dropping in on summer services. The first Sunday morning I ventured downstairs into the small sanctuary, trying to decide where to sit, an elderly couple sitting near the single center aisle turned to me, smiled and stood [no small effort for the man with two canes] and moved over to make room for me. Irene and Everett McNair had enfolded me. *[Look them up, a lifetime of service to others and moral leadership, including civil rights and protesting the US involvement in Vietnam]*. The McNair's embodied the practice of the extravagant welcome. My continued attendance was cemented by the welcoming message that "seekers" were as welcome as "believers". To be honest, almost 40 years later, I consider myself a "seeker", but a better informed one! I credit the Edens with instructing and challenging me throughout their ministry. The support of the church community as family has been something I have valued without measure. The United Church family has been integral to my [now 37 year] marriage to William Barnett, the birth and raising of my four children [UCCH pre-school, Sunday School and youth group volunteers and confirmation class!] and the hard times of coping with the diagnosis of Friedreich's Ataxia for two of my children, the financial stresses of progressive illness and the death of my oldest son at age 22 in 2007.

Music has been the undergirding focus of my life with United Church. From the first Easter Cantata, to taking on the [originally named] Children's Choir started by Emily Weingarh around 1987, directing for 20 years with much help from very talented accompanists [long term commitment by Barbara Wildemuth] and parent volunteers. I

especially enjoyed staging musicals [as evidenced by the framed t-shirts and posters in the music room] with the [next name iteration] Junior Choir. Nothing gives me greater pleasure than witnessing and listening to the Youth Choir as it grows and develops under the direction of Jenny Anderson.

I have been singing with the Gospel Choir from its beginning as an outgrowth of Jill Eden's doctoral work related to African American churches. I have been privileged to sing and travel with this group, enriched by the relationships I have enjoyed with the choir members.

With the support of the UCCH Church Council, the invaluable support of Melanie See in painting sets, hanging lights and performing when pressed, orchestras recruited and rehearsed and directed by Bob Lawton, and the very deep talent pool of the United Church community, I staged Broadway musicals with UCCH Players casts of as many as 80, as fund raisers for the Friedrich's Ataxia Research Association [FARA] The productions of Carnival, Anything Goes, Fiddler on the Roof and The Music Man raised just under \$250,000 for FARA.

I look forward to the future of United Church of Chapel Hill, taking my lead from Irene and Everett McNair, to extend an extravagant welcome to all seekers and participate in the example and practice of striving for justice and succor for all persons.

*Paige Barnett*

UCCH is an extraordinarily musical church and has been for a long time. I began attending church in 1973 to sing in the choir. This has been a deeply rewarding part of my life. Jenny Anderson, Director of Music, is a gifted soprano and marvelous choir director. I have been on three European trips with the Chancel Choir, organized by Jenny. The 2017 trip to Germany was very special for many reasons and is the subject of my story.

The composition of this choir was unusual, consisting of people from the Chancel Choir, the United Voices of Praise, the Youth Choir; and others. This grouping contributed to the unique sound and appeal of the choir. Two talented young soloists (Sophie Eskenazi and Maggie Johnston) added a poignant quality. The contribution of gospel members and director/keyboard artist Charles Bradshaw was immeasurable. Finally, Jenny Anderson's tireless efforts in organizing the tour, accompanied by her pianist/organist husband Alex, produced an extremely successful and satisfying choral experience for choir participants and audiences as well.

An exciting feature of the trip was staying with host families in two communities. Hosting provided an opportunity to learn about life in Germany in a warm and intimate setting. The first stop was with our sister church in Cologne-Pesch. Our congregations have exchanged people many times. Our second home stay was in the tiny former East German town of Burgscheidungen. Our host families in both places opened their homes and hearts, giving us food, drink, lodging and friendship that we will cherish for the rest of our lives.

Another interesting feature of the trip was the opportunity to visit many beautiful and historic places. 2017 was an especially fascinating time to visit Germany because it was

the 500th Anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Catholic Church in Wittenberg, thus launching the Protestant Reformation. Our trip included a number of stops important in the life of Martin Luther.

Our visit to Burgscheidungen epitomizes this amazing trip. After a long bus ride across Germany, our hosts met the bus, whisked us to homes where we would be staying, and immediately made us feel welcome. Four of us were in a huge, 3-story stone house, which had originally been a school. We sat first at a large wooden table in the backyard, where Christoph, our host, gave us a lively tutorial on German beers. Most are made from wheat, but the finest, he declared emphatically, were made from Barley. He invited us to choose one of the beers on the table, getting our visit off to a spirited start!

The next day we visited Naumburg, a medieval town with an impressive cathedral (Dom of Peter and Paul) begun in the 13th c. Like many medieval towns in Europe, Naumburg is charming and colorful. That evening we gave a concert at an old stone church in Burgscheidungen. The church was packed. The congregation loved the music and begged for an encore. After singing, we walked down the hill to a park where the town treated us to a BBQ with generous quantities of beer, wine and camaraderie.

In the morning, our hosts drove us to the nearby town of Gleina to sing in a worship service, our farewell performance of the trip. We sang a number of gospel songs. Gospel music stirs emotions and invites participation/inclusiveness in profound ways. After the concert, the congregation stood up, clapping and swaying, clamoring for more. A joyous, impromptu songfest of unrehearsed music ensued. Regina Gale sang first, with a moving rendition of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow", followed by Eugene Farrar's "Though the Storm Keeps on Raging in My Life, I Know That There Is Hope". Soteria Shepperson completed the session with a moving song-and-spoken-word piece. Charles Bradshaw accompanied the singers with the unassuming ease and brilliance that characterize his direction of UVoP and jazz combo. The congregation watched in delirious wonder. The lady pastor began beating a drum and one couple (Soteria's hosts) danced at the front of the church. A potluck dinner in the yard of the church followed this spontaneous feast of music, a fitting finale to a marvelous trip.

Music is an integral and beloved part of the ministry of our church and has filled my life with joy for 46 years! This trip made an indelible impression on the lives of all who participated and is a splendid example of the impact that this church has had on the congregation and community.

*Dave Otto*

My life with United Church has been intimately entwined with the building itself, the "Light on the Hill". Not long after Bonnie & I joined UCCH, I was asked to chair the Building Committee, which involved many months of wrangling over whether to rebuild the small unsafe sanctuary on Cameron Ave. or to choose a new location to allow for growth. After a miraculously tie vote, an expert from UCC headquarters was brought in, and we decided to grow.

My next 2-3 years were consumed by the building. Fortunately, I had a wonderfully diverse all-volunteer committee, among them a realtor, an architect, a construction supervisor, a musician. The crucial question was "What do we want UCCH to be down

the road?" Modern or traditional? How large a congregation? Composition of the membership? Focus on worship? Education? Fellowship? Open to outside groups?

Thankfully, we selected an architect who, although he had never built a church, excelled in listening to our needs/wants and translating them into a building.

I was on the phone nearly every day after that, dealing with problems, often uttering strong expletives - after hanging up. At one point we had to painfully cut \$1 million off the cost estimate. At another, we discovered the sanctuary had been designed to hold 300 people in 18-inch wide seating; to change to a more reasonable 22 inches, we needed a larger room. Again a miracle: a member agreed to pay half the additional cost, and the congregation raised the rest.

As our deadline of Easter 2000 approached, I started to panic. The contractor appreciated the significance of the date, doubled his workers and had the building ready for "temporary occupancy" by Good Friday. It was worth all the worry, sweat and tears. I went to all 3 services Easter morning as we celebrated our new home, dedicated to the glory of God and to the service of the community.

*Tony Armer*

I sometimes tell first-time visitors to UCCH, "Don't wait as long to come back as I did." I first visited as a college senior in the spring of 1969. I returned for a second look in 1984. Much had happened in the meantime, including a few years away from Chapel Hill. Most significantly, I had become a husband and father, looking for a spiritual home that would affirm and nurture our inter-faith family.

I found this support at UCCH. I also found a congregation that was rooted in Bible-based spirituality, which manifest itself in active involvement in a number of social concerns. I would not have been comfortable in a church that lacked either of these characteristics.

For me, UCCH is not defined by a specific experience, but rather by a continuing series of experiences over the past 35 years. I did let 15 years pass between the first and second visits, but only one week between visits 2 and 3.

*John Becton*

When Cely and I first came to United Church, we felt like refugees seeking asylum from an authoritarian theocracy. Although we loved and were loved by our church family, the clergy and administration viewed our participation in the life and ministries of the church as contrary to the pastor's "personal agenda". When we questioned this disturbing idea, we were met with accusations of insubordination and sentiments of disinterest. Furthermore, Cely's leadership in Christian Education was seen as inappropriate and a threat to pastoral authority.

Prior to these events, I was particularly disturbed with the United Methodist Church's position concerning homosexuality as being "incompatible with Christian doctrine". Our local church went so far as to deny the gay son of a prominent family a Christian funeral and burial in the family plot. The discussions that took place made it impossible to view

both sides of the situation without mean-spirited criticism. Since both Cely and I have friends and family who are gay and lesbian, we felt that we were through with being forced into submission to the church and felt a clear call to leave.

The first Sunday that we attended United Church happened to be the 15th anniversary of the church's Open and Affirming position on Homosexuality. The Reverend Michael Piazza was the guest preacher and I could hardly contain myself. How could we have been just across the street all this time from this incredible haven of social justice? We had definitely arrived at home in our search for a faith community that practices what it preaches. Needless to say, we couldn't join soon enough and become involved in the myriad of ministries available to us! We were touched deeply when Rick and Jill Edens came to visit us and asked that we allow the church to minister to us for a while.

It's now been more than 10 years since we first arrived at UCCH and we continue to be amazed at God's work in the leadership and membership of the church. The Sacred Space Art Studio and open kiln inspired Cely to further her work with art as a means of praise, worship, and spiritual growth. Her love of education is met with leadership in the Sunday morning Spiritual Growth class and Adult Education Board. The Music Ministries enables me to join like-minded brothers and sisters in honoring and glorifying our beloved Creator. My mind is constantly challenged by reading and scripture study groups, while my spirit is moved by work with the Board of Deacons as well as participation in the Open and Affirming Ministry and the Sacred Conversation on Race.

Cely and I can experience fulfillment of our spiritual gifts of hospitality and community building through the new Community Group Ministry. God is carefully at work cutting, faceting, and polishing our lives. It is clear that no one thing defines us! So where will we be five or even ten years from now? I think the answer is quite obvious — The United Church of Chapel Hill, a growing wheel with an ever-increasing number of spokes!

*Bill Chicurel*

I was middle-aged when I joined United Church of Chapel Hill (UCCH), it was the first church I was ever a member of as an adult. Prior to joining, I had considered myself to be a very healthy person in most aspects of my life. I spent a lot of time on my career, my physical wellbeing, my social life. I was intellectually curious, and I was very disciplined about my finances and saving for my retirement, but my spiritual health and wellbeing were lacking for sure. Frankly, I had kind of given up on religion. I was raised in a very religious family and attended a religious school until the 9th grade. I also attended a Christian college and taking religion courses and attending religious services were a very important part of my college life. But as a young adult I also became aware of my sexuality, and I knew enough about mainstream Christianity to know that people like me, lesbians and gays, were not welcome in churches. Or, we may have been welcome, but only if we denied our sexuality, denied our identity.

When I started attending UCCH now more than 10 years ago, I was amazed, surprised and delighted by so many things including, although it sounds silly now, that there were women ministers! I learned that UCCH was marrying gay and lesbian couples and baptizing their babies. They were putting solar panels on their roof, welcoming the Interfaith men's shelter as a neighbor, participating in Moral Monday protests in Raleigh,

and were very committed and passionate about racial and social justice. I noticed and felt the radical hospitality at UCCH, I felt welcomed.

One of the first adult education programs I participated in at UCCH we read *The Heart of Christianity* by Marcus Borg. The book and the discussion that followed made a very deep impression on me. It helped me learn about a new and emerging Christianity, one that was less concerned with ridged doctrines and beliefs, and more concerned with transforming ourselves and our community to be more God focused, focused more on loving what God loves, toward bringing the Kingdom of God to earth. That was the first of many books that I was introduced to at UCCH. Books, and ministers, friends, music, worship, service, prayer, giving, all the things that are part of the rich life of UCCH. All these vital things necessary for helping me attain and maintain my spiritual health, all these things for which I am so grateful.

*Jill McArdle*

How do you write about 19 years living life as part of a community in one or two paragraphs?

One of the hardest things I've lived through at United Church is when Linda Frank died suddenly in a car crash in April 2010. Linda was a soprano in our Chamber Singers group that I was singing in at the time (and still to this day). Her death was very sudden and it was an emotional toll to the group. The year before that, I had sung with her in our February Follies the song, *Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better*, with Milo accompanying us on the piano, and we had so much fun doing that. Linda could sing the very high notes and took voice lessons. She also wore socks with colors along with our all black clothing, which inspired me to remember that we can always be ourselves. After she died, the Chamber Singers group sang at the funeral. We were honored to do so, but it is extremely difficult to sing when you are crying.

I remember too when Suzanne Hotte died. She had been a part of our handbell group for many years together with her husband, Bob Hotte. We played handbells at her memorial service and placed a single rose in a vase in front of what would have been her spot. It's a little easier to play bells instead of sing when you are crying, but you still have to be able to see the music through your tears.

We have had many joyous occasions at United Church too, and made many friendships of every level. We have made lots of music, played softball, hiked the mountains around Blowing Rock, put palm fronds on the beach on Palm Sunday as part of the young adult group, carved pumpkins, been a part of United Church Preschool, led games at Vacation Bible School, held potlucks, given concerts, and experienced a journey of faith that we treasure, all due to the personal relationships that we have built as a part of this church. Our daughter, Gabby, grew up with our church as her second home. She was baptized here in 2006 when she was over 1 year old, and this coming Sunday, May 12, she will be confirmed as an 8th grader. The journey continues!

*Kaselehliia Sielken*

Looking back, it is clear that my faith was an integral part of my growing-up years. Sundays spent in the Catholic Church that my parents and grandparents had attended for decades clearly shaped an introduction to Christian values for me that still informs decisions I make today. Nonetheless, as a young adult, I felt myself growing away from our church, where I knew my identity was not welcome. When I would attend a family wedding, I somehow sadly knew that I would never be married in the church; in fact, I never dreamed that I would ever be able to marry at all.

When I first started attending UCCH in 2001, it was hard not to feel disloyal to a lifetime of Catholic upbringing. Over time, however, I cautiously found myself start to embrace UCCH ... there was no pressure; no strong-arming ... but there was the knowledge that I would be accepted as my true self with no judgment. By the time I was fortunate enough to meet the woman who Rick and Jill Edens would marry me to twice (once non-legal, and then once when it became legal), I was at peace with my decision to join UCCH.

My dad used to say that all of the most important things in his life had happened in our hometown church (examples include weddings, baptisms, and funerals). Indeed, many of mine happened there also. When I go back now and attend a service, I can almost see my grandmother and parents sitting in the pews, and it is both comforting and bittersweet. So here is where I find myself: I can be a member of UCCH while not letting go of my hometown church. Each church community has informed my faith and values, and each has been important to my family and me. The inclusive spirit of UCCH has helped me see this.

*Lydia Lavelle*

Standing in front of the altar at Fisher Memorial United Holy Church, behind the first row of sopranos, I prayed hard that Charles' lively intro would morph into something I recognized. Please, Lord, let it be something I know!

United Voices of Praises welcomed me with open arms and voices. As a classical musician, though, I was frequently lost. Raised in the great white north (in more ways than one!), I was completely unfamiliar with this most powerful worship music known as Gospel. Third Sundays at United Church were a revelation. I was amazed by the joy and the intensity of our multi-racial gospel choir and wanted to experience that music-making for myself. I knew that it would also be a window into my husband's childhood and would give me a visceral insight into the call and response, and the improvisatory power of the traditional African American church.

What I could not have anticipated was the close sense of community within the choir, and the deep abiding faith of its members. It has been a lesson in worshipping with your whole self, body and soul, and letting your emotions as well as your intelligence inform your devotion to God.

Finally, now, I'm confident of my place in UVoP, and sure that, whatever Charles dishes up, Vera will help us navigate. And, at the very least, I know that congregants at both Fisher and UCCH will clap along and appreciate the praise we offer.

Just as I found my comfort zone as part of UVoP, a fresh challenge arose with La Mesa band. It all started last summer when Pastor David asked if Henry could play trombone

with the band. Since I was bringing Henry, well, it seemed that I could also help by singing. With pop and contemporary worship music, some in Spanish, and with new and changing instrumentalists every week, this was another opportunity to stretch in a completely new direction. Thanks be to God for Milo's leadership, as he shapes us into a more consistent and effective force for worship.

Music, in all its forms, has always fed my spirit here at United Church of Chapel Hill. On Easter Sunday, 2000, Ben and I, along with our eldest son, Benjamin, attended our first service. Ben and I talked about "shopping" further for a church, but we just never did. A large part of what kept us coming back was the music. I am first and foremost a musician, and honestly, I just couldn't join a church that didn't have great music. Thanks to the direction of Jenny Anderson, and the participation of so many wonderful musicians, music here lifts my soul and inspires me every single Sunday.

*Candace Marles*

Having been and continuing to be a 4th and 5th grade Sunday School teacher to 600+ children over the many years (17 at last count) I've been fascinated by, loved and intrigued by the experience of exploring community, that is our Christian faith, with our children and parents alike. A particularly inspiring moment in this joyful journey has been the unbridled joy of our students looking forward to each new lesson and year of learning and sharing. While conversing between services with an adult in the Fellowship Hall, two children running from opposite ends of the hall simultaneously embraced me front and back exclaiming "Mr. Ben, I can't wait to be in your class!" Similar sentiments are repeated each year and every lesson that I have been teaching and sharing my ministry with our wonderful children. I too, am privileged, as our children share back to me their insights from our explorations through the Bible and spirituality. I regularly experience the blessing that is this heartfelt sense of belonging and through the many glorious years of working in true partnership with the wonderful Pastor Susan Steinberg in developing the many facets of our highly recognized UCCH Children's Ministry program.

All the best in peace and fellowship

*Ben Sallard, Jr.*

It was providential that Fred and I (and our two young daughters, Naomi and Erika) ended up at UCC for several reasons.

First of all, we were renting a house right next to the previous co-pastors. Second, someone from UCC who visited our old church in DC recommended it to our pastors who in turn told us. Third, when we saw the rainbow flag and Spanish language service offered, we knew that we had to visit. UCC was the first and only church we visited in Chapel Hill because after the first Sunday, we knew we were in the right place. We did receive an extravagant welcome and soon made connections leading to meaningful relationships. One of the things that stood out for us was the great lengths UCC goes to for children to participate in church activities. Having the rocking chairs in the back row, activity bags and an amazing nursery all contributed to our feeling more comfortable here. We also appreciate that childcare is offered for various programs, especially the Wednesday night series which provide opportunities to go deeper into our understanding

on issues of social justice (i.e. book studies and slaveholder religion with Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove) and build new relationships. Lastly, we really cherished the opportunity to go to Montgomery, AL with other members of the congregation, to share in that powerful experience together and serve as the foundation for future racial justice work in the church and larger community. We are truly thankful to have UCC in our lives!

*Melanie and Fred Joiner*

A trip that still resonates with me is a trip we made to Tegucigalpa, Honduras with Pastor David Mateo, fellow UCCH members and others to a building that housed 16 children who had AIDS, were gay or had lost parents to AIDS. A volunteer lady ran the facility but the place was badly in need of repair with a leaking roof, no interior running water and no washing machine. Hugo, who attends La Mesa and is a contractor, had shipped his tools and he and David arrived early to buy doors, paints, toilets and other supplies. We were very welcome and worked long days installing toilets, showers, fixing the roof, and fixing the well so they had running water. The entire interior was painted. We installed 12 doors, two showers, and two toilets and fixed the roof. A washing machine was donated by a local charity and the lady running the facility was using the machine within an hour of its installation. We developed nice bonds with the people and among our group. I still think that this is one place in the world that we were able to make a little nicer. I still have a close bond with my boss (El Jefe) Hugo and we both attend La Mesa regularly.

*Gary A Boorman*

I've had so many meaningful experiences at UCCH it's hard to know where to begin. UCCH has been a wonderful source of support over the years for me and my family during joyful times such as the baptism of my grandsons, William and James and harder times such as when my parents passed away, and when another of my grandsons, Joey, coped with cancer. I felt the power of the congregation with me.

The church activity I've connected with the most and cherish is singing with United Voices of Praise. This interracial choir is more than just a choir. It's about caring and love for each and every choir member. It has provided an opportunity for others and me in the choir to become friends with folks whose background is very different. Folks from UCCH via this choir get to know folks at Fisher Memorial and they us. I personally have bonded with many people at Fisher, feel loved and cared about when I visit their church. It's hard to explain how meaningful my experience with this choir has been for me. It has been life changing for me. Perhaps our ending chant: "*We are One in the Spirit*" best explains it.

Currently, I am active in La Mesa as well and have gone on several mission trips with Pastor David. Also I love chairing the Visual Art Committee. There's so much more I could say, but that's it in a nutshell.

*Natalie Boorman*

In 1990 I experienced a major loss- the death of a loved one. Though I'd grown up in the Congregational church and actively participated in music ministry (how could I not- I'm the daughter of a church choir director!!), I'd gotten away from church after college and relocation to NC. My grief group counselor happened to be a member of United Church. When I mentioned in a session that I thought I might start going to a church for some music healing (my idea was to sit on the back row and cry while "wrapped up" in the church music), she suggested United Church "because we have WONDERFUL music". I had visited a couple other churches, but then found my way to United Church on Cameron Avenue in early 1991.

I sat on the back row and cried for a short while, and was comforted by the music. But before long, the music program drew me in. I joined the Chancel Choir. Then I also joined the newly-formed Gospel Choir (pre-Fisher), and we all tried together figure out this gospel style singing. I found further musical outlets in productions of *Godspell* (twice!), *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Anything Goes*, helping with several children's musicals, choir tours and on and on. During a very dark time in my life, I found hope and a new beginning at United Church.

*Debbie Travers*

My story is about the role of United Church in my life, not in one dramatic event, but rather, as a place always hospitable to my interests. I had belonged to several Christian denominations, which all emphasized authority, tradition and centralized decision-making. Then in the mid-80's our older son came out to us; we searched for an affirming place, and I learned about UCCH. I also found that there, decisions came from the consensus of the congregation, and they were willing to consider change.

Because of my work in science, I was always aware that biggest problem for all of us is the destruction of our means of living, through war, pollution, or the climate crisis, but in our society attention to it was minimal. However, solutions depended on the actions of human institutions, and I felt helpless to try to contribute to changing any of them. At that time few churches thought about the care of creation. But at UCCH a group gradually formed. We worked together to find ways to suggest activities supporting the care of creation, and most were implemented. The most visible manifestation of this is our solar panel system; the entire church collaborated to achieve this. Another kind of change was also made - installation of a T-coil hearing system; we seek to include everyone.

*Jon Haebig*

Two activities stand out in my memory of our years here at United Church: the ONA process and the fall retreats. They share a common theme of community building.

About a year after we joined the church, it was announced that a Task Force was forming to explore the possibility of becoming an Open and Affirming church (ONA). Our older son is gay, and we were enthusiastic about the church making this move. At the time we were "out" only to Rick and Jill and to members of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). The task force planned sessions for about two years to inform

church members about what this step would mean, to explore their feelings, and to write a covenant affirming our church's support for being an ONA church. Gradually during these discussions, we became more visible and comfortable with church members. When the covenant was adopted by a wide margin, we felt we had a base of support for our activities. We participated in programs at other churches, teachers' groups, and conferences. We felt that the congregation had our backs, and we were glad to be able to tell others that it is possible to be gay and Christian. We could see the difference it made to United Church as well; gay members were increasingly visible, participated more, and the issue had become a non-issue. People who had no known connection to the gay community now had a deeper understanding of it. For several years the Triangle chapter of PFLAG met at United Church. Of course, attitudes towards LGBTQ people have changed greatly since United Church wrote this covenant, but I like to think that our church's participation played a part in this change. It also changed the church.

Another activity that was important to us was the fall retreats in the mountains. We have always enjoyed the mountains and went there on vacations. We attended the fall retreat at Blowing Rock for over 20 years. It was a good way to meet other folks and to get to know them in a way that is not possible on Sunday mornings. Through our years of visiting the area, we had walked many trails and collected trail maps. We brought those with us to the retreats and would lead groups on walks and offer our maps and advice about trails. Walking with others in this beautiful country contributed to our feelings of community.

*Mimi Haebig*

Since joining the church in 2000, it has been my privilege to participate in several church trips outside the U.S. including Habitat builds in Guatemala, agricultural projects in the highlands around Yoro, Honduras, but most have been focused on music, with several trips to Europe with the United Voices of Praise (UVOP) and the Chancel Choir. My home stay experiences have been truly special, mostly due to having at least some functionality in our hosts' languages, meaning I got to stay with people with no English and a more limited knowledge of Americans and what life is like here. While this is sometimes problematic (I get to explain stuff I can barely discuss in English (Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, etc.) in another language), it also is a wonderful opportunity to really connect with another person from a totally different background.

On my first UVOP trip in 2003, our first stop was Berlin, and our host church was the Evangelical Church in Kreuzberg, Berlin. While Kreuzberg these days is considered one of the prime cultural centers of Berlin, with a thriving alternative scene (and the center of LGBTQ life in Berlin), in 2003 it was still one of the poorest areas of Berlin, with the highest concentration of immigrants (mostly Turkish). The staff at our host church had its hands full dealing with the social needs of its clients and it was a great opportunity to see how another culture faced these issues. Our host was a social worker on staff at the Kreuzberg church; he was a divorced, 71-year old white male with a Prussian accent and no English. His job seemed to involve mostly looking after his various homeless ("obdachlos") clients; when we weren't rehearsing or doing some official choir activity, we shadowed him as he went around checking up on everybody.

He was intensely curious about us, and we talked endlessly about life in America, politics, race relations, and where we fit in among all the mess. I did my best to explain

my family, my parents' mixed marriage, how my parents' respective families felt about each other (not good), school, being a lawyer. He laughed at my stories, although not so much at my jokes. When he asked about church politics, I told him I was the most conservative person in the church because I believed that there was a place for business in society. I got no smile, no laugh. I asked him the same stuff he asked me, but he did a pretty good job at keeping my questions at bay and I wasn't up to taking his deposition. It can take Germans a while to warm up, and my friend seemed pretty typical.

The last night of our stay, the choir asked to be taken to a real German pub. We finally managed to find one (Kreuzberg is not the place you go to find such things) and after a few pints, he told me his story. I did my best to translate for everyone else, but it was really loud in there. His father was a judge in Koenigsberg, so his family lived a nice middle-class life. They had their own car and did not suffer too many of the war's privations. My friend was twelve in early 1945, and as the Russians closed in, his father came home from work early on a Friday, and told the family they were going for a holiday in the country. They were in Berlin before my friend had any idea that they were never going back. The family stayed in Berlin and suffered dreadfully in the post war period. In the 1950s the family was converted to the Mormon Church. My friend married the Mormon woman the Bishop designated for him, and they proceeded to be fruitful and multiply and had five children rather quickly. My friend looked up at me, took a deep breath, and said "I realized then that I could no longer live a lie, and confessed to my wife that I was gay. She dutifully informed the Bishop, who terminated the marriage, and assigned my wife and children to my younger brother. My brother, wife and children were ordered to have nothing to do with me and I was ordered out of my own house."

He finished his story with a quick summary of finding his way to social work, his mostly unsuccessful efforts at establishing relationships and his efforts to connect with his children and grandchildren (some limited success). With all this, he said he was still satisfied with his life. I was overcome with emotion, both at the story, how he shared it and that he had trusted me to retell it. We hugged (I'm still not used to hugging, but I get that white, black and Hispanic people do this) and cried; I'm not sure anyone else at the table got it, but we did.

*Dan Uyesato*

Last September (2018) I traveled with Pastor David and members of the United Church mission team to Guatemala on my first international mission trip. We spent four days at Otrants, a human rights organization for LGBTQIA+ people and a health clinic, moving walls, reconstructing space, and painting walls. On the first night in Guatemala City, we met with members of Otrants, sitting in a circle, introducing ourselves, and then we listened to their stories. Not only are members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Guatemala not allowed to attend school or hold jobs, they are also targets of extreme violence and most of them have to support themselves through prostitution. "We're not sex workers," one member said. "We have no choice in the matter."

Not to sound cliché, but this trip was an eye opener for me. Since I've been home following the trip, I reflect a lot on resiliency. If being gay or lesbian or a trans person were simply a choice, then why would anyone subject himself or herself to the

persecution these folks experience? There really is a very basic, fundamental call in each of us to be our most authentic selves. I am thankful for this experience that I had in Guatemala, because I have brought this realization back with me in my work and in my relationships at United Church.

Many in our church community themselves are so full of resiliency, that it can be overwhelming. We come from all over, and all of us have deep stories of searching for an authentic voice and life within a very troubling world. This is particularly true of our African American, Latino/a, and LGBTQIA+ sisters and brothers, as well as our refugee families from Burma. As a white, cis woman in this world, it's easy to overlook the resiliency of those who are nearest to me. It took the experience in Guatemala to be more observant in my own church community.

What United Church does right is give all of us a place we can be, where we are welcome and can seek an authentic relationship with God, given who we are and our calling in the world. We all come to United Church for various reasons, but we all are received and welcomed as if we are home. We come, not to judge each other, but to recognize and give witness to a God that loves each and all of us, no matter where we come from and when we arrive.

*Rinnie Orr*

My story involves the life-saving connections I have made at UCCH. Ten years ago, my parents, who lived in Indiana, had various health crises and made the decision to move to Chapel Hill to be closer to me. My mother had a serious blood disease, and the only thing keeping her alive was regular blood transfusions. This meant I had to get her lined up with doctors and an appointment for a transfusion the first week she was here, or she might not live.

I had no idea how to go about this so I contacted Aly Breisch. She gave me the name of a physician in our congregation who could help me, and I was desperate enough to snag him for a conversation about it at our Easter Sunday brunch at church! He helped me get an appointment with a UNC hematologist as well as a regular GP, which she would also need. Because of my church I managed to surmount my panic and accomplish what had to be done.

I will never forget this example of our community helping others. I have, of course, many other stories (don't we all?), but this stands out because of its importance. I will always be grateful to our church for having a health ministry, and to the physician who gave his time on a holiday.

*Dianne Bertsch*

I care a great deal about the prophetic witness of our church, delight in great preaching, and I'm passionate about supporting a vibrant youth program, but, despite the temptation they offer, the story I want to share is about music.

Through the years I've had the privilege to observe, study and worship in many churches. For all their number and diversity, I'd consider only a handful of them as

'great.' Those that were had a few things in common. One of their most consistent commonalities was a great music program. United Church is blessed with one and, for whatever flaws it may have; its quality opens the door to the possibility of greatness every Sunday.

One of the occasions that blessing was granted to me was during the Bach Cantata presentation not too long ago. I'm a big fan of Bach to begin with and I love it when the prelude or postlude is taken from his works. But the opportunity to experience a full cantata in Sunday worship is a gift of the first order. The work of the musicians and the choir under Jenny's able baton was a genuine spiritual moment for me.

My life of faith is constantly searching for insight into the divine. What is God like? What is God's intention for me? How shall I fathom the magnitude and beauty of creation? Music is my constant companion in that wondering and our church offers it to me in delightful ways.

*Nick Carter*