

# FirstNews

## JANUARY 2024

### From the Principal's Desk

#### HOW CHARLOTTE'S HOUSING CRISIS AFFECTS EDUCATION AND FAMILIES

In the bustling urban landscape of Charlotte, where skyscrapers tower and economic growth is evident, there exists a crisis – a crisis of affordable housing.

During a recent meeting, Principal Keisha Pride of Westerly Hills Academy, FPC's partner school, shared a heart-wrenching account of Charlotte's lack of affordable housing and its impact on CMS teachers and families. Keisha said, "At least 85% of my staff must work second jobs to make ends meet. I have had many conversations with them in which they share they are working seven days per week and late nights in order to keep up with monthly financial obligations (housing being a major part of that). I have also had several teachers who moved to neighboring counties for lower rental and mortgage rates. While they attempted to remain employed with the district, the commute was not sustainable due to increased gas prices that balanced out the salaries between the two counties."



Teachers from Westerly Hills Academy speak to the congregation during worship; August 2023

Not only is the housing crisis affecting teachers, but it also affects families. "Affordable housing (or lack thereof) is also a major challenge for the families

we serve at Westerly Hills Academy. We have many families who are 'doubled' up to maintain housing. Our population is very transient as families come and go due to eviction and the parents' inability to maintain consistent housing due to the ever-increasing rental rates. To date, we have several families who are considered McKinney Vento (homeless/without stable housing) as a result. We serve several families who live in motels."

When people are forced to abandon Mecklenburg County due to housing unaffordability or to endure arduous commutes because proximity is a luxury they cannot afford, the foundation of our workforce weakens. The quality of life for all diminishes. In the face of this challenge, we, as a community, must acknowledge that our city's problem is our problem.

Guided by the principle to "reflect the love of Christ from the heart of Charlotte," we are called to address the urgent need for affordable housing, ensuring that no family in our midst is left without a stable place to call home.

Visit [firstpres-charlotte.org/advocacy](http://firstpres-charlotte.org/advocacy) for more information about our work against housing insecurity and how you can get involved. ♦

#### Oh, the Places we'll go... in 2024

You're invited to embark on a transformative journey with one of our upcoming group trips. With distinct offerings focused on mission and cultural exchange, advocacy and education, or fellowship and relaxation, each will provide a unique opportunity for spiritual growth.

#### MISSION TRIP TO THE YUCATAN

For those seeking a hands-on mission experience, the March trip to the Yucatan with Accion Ministries provides a perfect opportunity to make a tangible impact. Accion Ministries provides housing

and education through the Merida Student Houses and Mayan Children's Village. The organization partners with Mayan communities, engaging in the construction of churches and homes, and offers emergency relief in times of need. Work alongside our Mayan friends to improve the Presbyterian Retreat Center facilities at Camp Chuburna and the Women's and Men's Student Houses in Merida. (travel March 16-22)

#### CIVIL RIGHTS TRIP TO ALABAMA

In April, members of First Presbyterian and First United Presbyterian Churches will join hands for a poignant three-day journey through the heart of Alabama, exploring the deep history of the Civil Rights Movement. Participants will visit iconic landmarks, engage in meaningful discussions, and share moments of reflection as they delve into the pivotal events that shaped our nation. This trip is an opportunity to honor the legacy of those who fought for freedom and renew our commitment to justice and equality for all of God's people. Join us on this pilgrimage as we continue the journey towards a more just and inclusive future. (travel April 18-24)

#### PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN'S RETREAT

Attendees can expect a weekend of intergenerational fellowship, study, spiritual growth, and relaxation in the serene setting of Montreat. The speaker will be the Rev. Dr. Katie Crowe, Senior Pastor of Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church in Durham and former Associate Pastor for Local and Global Missions at FPC-Charlotte. Rev. Crowe will guide us through an inspiring exploration of our shared faith. There will be plenty of free time for tennis, pickleball, shopping, hiking, exploring, and other pursuits. This retreat promises a harmonious blend of community, spirituality, and leisure—a weekend crafted for the soul. (travel May 3-5) ♦

## Beyond the Bulletin

### AMINISTRY UNFOLDS AT ALDERSGATE

At Aldersgate, a nonprofit senior living facility in Charlotte, a unique ministry has unfolded thanks to the efforts of resident and FPC member Cliff Boylston. Armed with a faithful spirit and a mastery of technology that defies stereotypes, the 89-year-old utilizes an arsenal of four screens, two MacBook Pros, Photoshop, and the Internet to curate special worship bulletins for a small group of worshipers.

"I'm an old engineer (will be 90 in February) living with my loving and lovable wife for 66 years and our (also old) dog Suzy," Cliff shared. After graduating from Auburn University, he worked as an engineer and spent 45 years as an expert witness assisting trial lawyers defending lawsuits against outdoor power equipment manufacturers.

Surprisingly, this is where his aptitude for technology and design was founded, as a need arose for creating graphic displays and editing images for use in trials. "I taught myself how to use Photoshop tools along with vector drawing apps. My work was certainly not up to pro-level (and still isn't), but it was good enough to help win trials back then and make church bulletins more interesting now."

Due to his wife Lil's health, the couple cannot easily attend worship in person. "She wanted more fellowship with other Presbyterians instead of just the two of us watching the TV at home," Cliff explained.



The Aldersgate Presbyterians traveled to Uptown as a group to worship in person; December 2023

Together with FPC members Kitty Ray and Dave Quackenbush, Lil started the group affectionately called the "Aldersgate Presbyterians." They began worshiping together in October of 2022 via FPC's TV broadcast and later via livestream.

Today, 12 to 15 residents gather each Sunday, and among them, you will find several FPC members, including Bob Brown—a sixth-generation member—and his wife, Dora Lee. Cliff wondered, "Without Lil's disabilities, would God have given us the Aldersgate Presbyterians?"

In February 2023, after a few months of regular worship with the group, Cliff had an idea to put his design skills to work and enhance the Sunday bulletin. He's been doing it weekly ever since.

First, he sets the tone with the bulletin's

front cover by adding a full-page image of stained glass. He replaces the pen and ink church on the cover with one of four colored versions he's created. Inside, meticulous details unfold, with paintings carefully selected to align with the weekly scripture, transforming

each bulletin into a visual masterpiece. His attention to detail extends to the numbering of pages, revision notes, and a chronological list of past bulletins. Occasionally, you may even see some whimsical elements added, which give a glimpse at Cliff's

jokester side, like when he photoshopped Rev. Pen Peery into an elf costume dancing on the church lawn!

Behind the scenes, though, Cliff's dedication is evident. He explained, "More time is spent searching the Internet for artwork than photoshopping and manipulating the stuff into something that can be printed. On average, it takes about six hours to put everything together and print it." Though each bulletin takes time, it's a thoughtful investment in bringing beauty and meaning to the virtual worship experience.

As a long-time leader in the Presbyterian Church (USA)—teaching Sunday School, serving as an elder, being a representative to the Atlanta Presbytery and a Commissioner to the General Assembly, and even preaching a layman sermon—this new endeavor has been a welcome challenge for Cliff.

Ministries such as the Aldersgate Presbyterians demonstrate that some truly extraordinary things can happen where faith and technology intersect. Under the thoughtful leadership and creativity of Cliff Boylston, the mission continues one carefully crafted bulletin at a time. ◆

*"The pastoral staff has been very supportive of our group. They have met with us, had lunch with us, and served us communion."*

Cliff Boylston

### ADVOCACY MINISTRY FOCUS

#### Equity in Education

"Have we forgotten that our Title I school third graders were showing proficiency/mastery levels at less than 10% only a few years ago for both reading and math? You wouldn't tolerate that for your child," FPC member John Tate writes. "This is the land of opportunity. And we know it takes hard work by all: Our students, their parents, and the professionals charged to ensure learning is taking place in the classroom. Let's work to make that playing field level for all our kids. If you don't want any of this for our community's kids, then stay the course. For the rest of us, it's past time to act."

Advocacy Ministry's Education Subcommittee works to identify and remove barriers to equitable access to education. Equitable education means giving every student access to the resources and educational rigor they need regardless of race, gender, language, disability, family background, or family income. FPC works closely with our partner school, Westerly Hills Academy, to live into this mission. If this is a cause you feel strongly about, you can get involved in the work of this subcommittee or volunteer in one of many ways at Westerly Hills (tutoring, serving in the food pantry or school store, helping at events). Learn more about our mission for equitable education by scanning the QR code. ◆

