FROM DREAMS TO REALITY

by Jen Tucci
May 12, 2024



Central United Methodist Church has stood on the corner of Fairfax and Stafford Streets in Arlington, VA since the land was donated by the Ball family in 1906. The cornerstone of the sanctuary was laid in 1923, and the church had two later expansions when construction for an education wing started in 1945, and a decade later a gymnasium was added. Over the decades, in addition to its gathered congregation, the church has shared its space with Kinhaven School, other churches, martial arts classes, yoga classes, zumba classes, twelve-step groups and many other community organizations.

The church is conveniently located across the street from the Ballston Metro Station. It has witnessed the transformation of Ballston from the quiet suburban outpost of Washington, DC to a booming high rise center bustling with shopping, restaurants, government contractors, a growing tech industry, education, and other professions.

At the core of Central United Methodist Church is a feeling of community and strong, committed Christians who express their faith through service and acceptance. Because of the transience common to the area, people remain connected through our communications and prayers. Because the area draws individuals and families from diverse nations, our connections reach not only throughout the United States but also into a number of foreign countries. This has contributed to the diversity of the congregation, and in turn, this diversity has increased the feeling of welcome and acceptance.

Central has taken on different types of outreach, responding to different needs in the community. A few examples from the last decade include collecting school supplies for Barrett and Drew Elementary Schools and *Casa Mariflor*, health kits for the United Methodist Committee on Relief, hydration kits, and toys for children at Christmas to both Casa Marilfor, Dr. Bear's Closet at Children's National Hospital and Toys for Tots. By far, the ongoing work with the homeless and the advocacy for affordable housing in our community has been a dedicated full time mission for Central.

How did Central United Methodist Church find its way into the ministry of serving people experiencing homelessness? How did we arrive at the opening of an eight-story building on our land that includes 144 affordable housing units owned by the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing?

This is an attempt to tell this story which will illustrate the development of a crucial ministry and hopefully inspire others to follow that still small voice inside urging you to respond to a need you may see in your community. This story is the result of many voices, dreams and prayers coming together with the hope of helping our neighbors and our community thrive.

It may have begun with Mary Jean Evans, a lay leader at Central. Through her work as a psychiatrist and social worker, she knew homeless individuals who had recently died from the cold. She took it upon herself to put blankets in her car and on cold nights she would drive around and pass them out where she lived in Georgetown. She was insistent that we need to do something to support the homeless.

Another couple, Paul and Linda Keister, knew Bishop Storey from their time living in South Africa. In March 2007, Bishop Storey was in the US and met with the leadership at Central to discuss how they might use the church building to better serve the community. Bishop Storey suggested a prayer walk in the neighborhood to get a sense of the community and its needs. He also thought our courtyard was amazing and from that idea, we started outdoor concerts on Friday evenings.

Mary Jean's insistence, Bishop Storey's suggestion, and the experience of the prayer walk led Rev. Richard Cobb, Central's minister at that time, and Gene Cross to realize that the work of the church had to be outside the walls of the building.

The prayer walk made it clear that we had an opportunity to serve our unhoused neighbors, so we contacted Rev. Dr. Kerry Kincannon who led Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church with a focus on serving people living in poverty and experiencing homelessness in Alexandria. We wanted to explore what the needs were and talk to him about some of the practical considerations in working with that community.

Rev. Kincannon explained many of the resources that were already available and led us to Leonard Chari at A-SPAN (Arlington Street People's Assistance Network). Leonard was the Acting Director while they looked for a replacement for the previous director. As of this writing, he is still working with this group, now renamed Pathforward.

Leonard explained the situation in Arlington, and he identified many of the resources available. At the time, there was no year-round shelter, so A-SPAN ran the hypothermia shelter at the Courthouse that operated only between November through March. A-SPAN had a street outreach program that was focused on getting people on the street connected to services that could improve their situation. At that time, they operated on the second floor of AFAC's (Arlington Food Assistance Center) building off Four Mile Run. They had a shower, laundry and counseling services. The weakness was that the homeless weren't in that area to a great extent so the outreach ministry was really important.

Leonard said what was really needed was a place that was closer and more accessible to the homeless population. If the church could supply the location and the draw he would supply the outreach personnel to get people connected to the services that were available. This finally seemed like a win-win. The church didn't have resources that could provide the connection, but we certainly had the resources of space and we could provide food that would draw people to the services.

The next step was to get the support of the Kinhaven School located on-site. How would the parents feel about us wanting to invite people experiencing homelessness into the same building as their children? We were able to get support from Kinhaven with the understanding that the program would begin as a pilot. We would start with a 3-month program which would be extended if there were no problems. We had a nervous start, not without some initial scares.

Around 2008/2009, the church started offering coffee, juice, doughnuts, and sack lunches to those who came. We purchased doughnuts from 7-Eleven. A-SPAN's outreach folks put the word out to the community. Paul Keister, Richard Cobb, Steve Barham, and Gene Cross were the initial staff. Hilary Donovan and Betty Dwyer made up the lunches. (These women were making sandwiches for the homeless prior to this time. They would send the sandwiches to A-SPAN to distribute.) Leonard was there from A-SPAN to keep order and help.



Pat Barham

For perhaps the first year or so this worked well with a few members stopping by to help from time to time. We considered it a really good day when we handed out 20 lunches. We got to know the people we were serving. We had seen many of them in the area and came to realize that our homeless friends were hiding in plain sight. We listened to their stories. We helped where we could. We had a funeral or two for those who died on the street. We called 911 when we found them barely alive, sleeping on the steps waiting for us to open. Often we had young women who were coming not only for the food but because it was a safe place for them to sleep in our fellowship hall.

As we gained experience with the people who were on the street, we began to work with A-SPAN to lobby for a full-time shelter and Homeless Services Center. We attended public meetings and spoke of our experiences. We met with elected officials and supported activities that would create a year-round support program.

In addition to helping establish a full-time shelter, the connection to services and the work with other nonprofits, governmental agencies and private organizations has helped connect more than 300 individuals to housing. Rep. Jim Moran was instrumental in assisting to get housing vouchers for veterans. He visited one Friday morning to demonstrate his support and to get a sense of the issues and needs for veteran support.



Jeanie Cross

One Good Friday, Jeanie Cross came to help with the breakfast. She promoted the idea that for less money than we were spending on doughnuts we could provide a healthier hot breakfast. She arranged at her work place to start working 10-hour days so she could take Fridays off and be our cook for the hot breakfasts. As the number of those attending on Fridays grew, our staffing needs grew, and we added several volunteers to the kitchen and serving staff.

The food demand grew, and AFAC began supplying produce, eggs, and chicken. We started getting regular meat donations from a resident in the neighborhood. A Girl Scout working on a badge arranged for us to pick up a donation of day-old bakery goods from Heidelberg Bakery each Friday. At its peak we had as many as 250 people on a Friday morning; many were coming from DC. A guest from New Jersey passing through the area told us we were known for having the best soup kitchen on the East Coast.

Offering a hot meal on Friday morning necessitated prep time on Thursday evenings. A group of young adults became regular volunteers on Thursdays. They came to prep breakfast casseroles for Friday mornings and then would have dinner together. Support also came from community businesses like Panera, Trader Joe's and Starbucks who donated items for breakfast. As we realized that so many people were coming and that we couldn't manage the volume, we felt we needed to pare back the program a bit. We started a sign-in that required people to indicate that they had at least slept in Arlington the night before. That also gave A-SPAN a list they could use for outreach.

In early 2007, a developer approached Central's Pastor, Rev. Richard Cobb, with the offer that we sell the development air rights, knock-down the church and allow the developer to build a high rise where the ground floor would hold our new church. Our church building was gathering a growing list of expensive repairs, termite damage, failing systems, and challenges to code compliance that would be very expensive to repair and modernize. The list of expenses had grown quicker than we could respond. We began to realize that the costs of bringing our church up to code and fixing the serious structural issues were more than we could manage with the resources we had.



Rev. Richard Cobb

The developer's offer captured our attention. In July 2007 a building committee was formed by members of the congregation to explore the idea. This building discussion began at the same time our Friday morning breakfast partnership with A-SPAN launched in 2010. This key moment marked the convergence of our collective calling to serve people without housing with a way to carry out this mission work in a building that was up to code and able to support our expanded mission. This dream sparked a project that would take us through nearly two decades of work to see the reality of our new building which was consecrated to the glory of God on May 12, 2024.

The building committee of dedicated volunteers persevered through many challenges, changes in developers, and endless meetings with professionals, advisors, and county administrators, to finally land on the plan that fit with our vision. In May 2013, the congregation met with the building committee to discuss and brainstorm what we would keep from our old building and what we would like to see in the new building. Each person's idea was written on a Post-it note. That day the wall bloomed yellow with our hopes and dreams.

In August 2013, the building committee toured Clarendon Baptist Church which had undergone a similar redevelopment with a ground-floor church and affordable housing on the upper levels. It gave the committee a frame of reference for what was possible as well as a valuable discussion of lessons learned from the Clarendon Baptist folks.

In 2014 Rev. Richard Cobb retired and Rev. Sarah Harrison-McQueen was appointed to serve at Central United Methodist Church with the specific task of leading us through the development and construction process. Like all complex projects, the journey has had challenges: developing a design to incorporate so many needs in a single acre site, securing financing, planning to build immediately adjacent to a Metro tunnel, and honoring the rich history of the property while making way for the congregation's vision.

In 2015 the church issued a request for proposals to developers. That summer the congregation spent 90 Days in prayer to support the work of the building committee as they reviewed proposals, interviewed developers, and prepared to recommend a developer to the congregation to approve. That fall we selected a developer who would help us launch a new 501c3 that would own and operate the affordable housing part of our property. To pay for our pre-development costs we took out a loan from the Virginia United Methodist Development Company. This loan allowed us to complete the site plan approval process with Arlington County in 2017. Our "From Dreams to Reality" capital campaign successfully raised enough funds to continue our work to completion.



From Dreams to Reality Commitment Sunday
May 14, 2017

Our attempts to win the competitive 9% low-income housing tax credits were unsuccessful in 2017 and 2018. This caused our building committee to review all of the options to select the next right step on our journey. We closed the new 501c3 and selected a well-established non-profit housing developer as our new partner to help complete this project. The Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing saw a path towards successfully financing this project. This required the congregation to contribute $4 million to the project financing using “From Dreams to Reality” campaign funds.



County Board Member Matt de Ferranti, served breakfast at Central UMC on many Friday mornings. His commitment to our vision for affordable housing, space for Kinhaven School, and church space for Central UMC gave us vital County Board support when we needed to make changes from our 2017 approved site plan to fit the new plan with APAH as our development partner. Following the approval of our updated site plan APAH was able to successfully secure all of the financing needed and we finalized our partnership in 2021.

By July 2021, the old building was empty and ready for demolition. Central’s congregation began meeting in the former Arlington Forest United Methodist Church located a mile from Ballston. Central shared the church with the First Vietnamese American United Methodist Church which culturally enriched our congregation.

During the time we were out of our Ballston location, church volunteers gathered food to share with our community partners. We did weekly food rescues from The Potomac School in McLean, Target, Panera Bread, Heidelberg Bakery, Rockland’s in Alexandria, and We The Pizza. These donations all went to the shelter or were used as part of the Friday morning sandwich-making party. Calvary UMC in Crystal City added their Project Sandwich, enhancing the value of the program. We also worked with *Casa Mariflor* on the distribution of food and clothing for those who need it.



Gene Cross



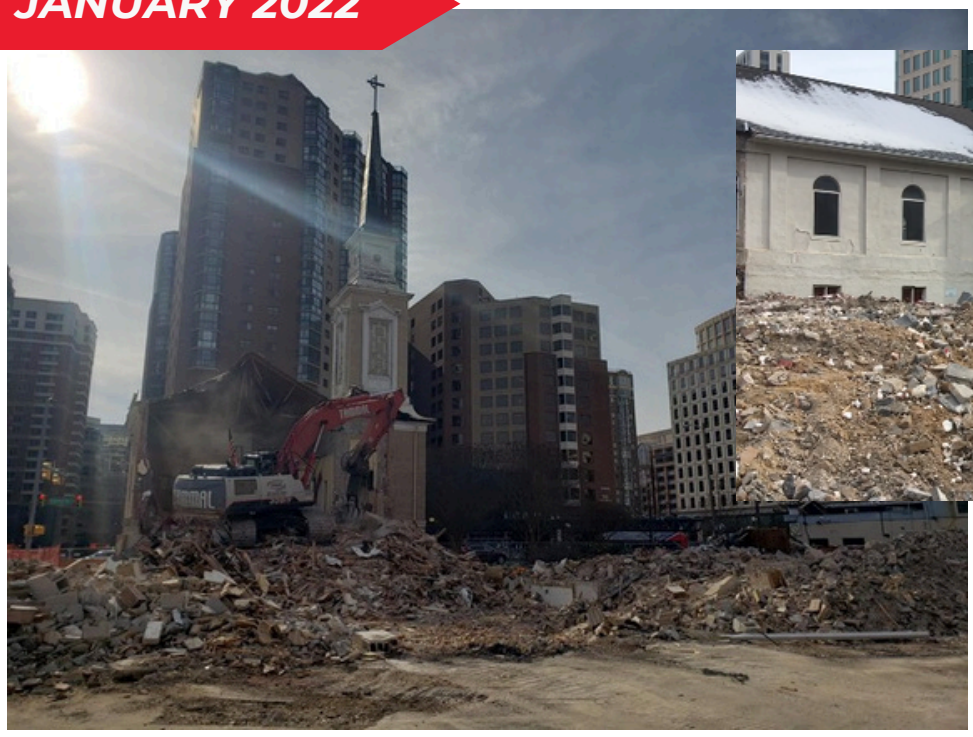
Jeanette Morris



2021 Ceremonial Groundbreaking
Photo by Lloyd Wolf, courtesy of APAH

Project financing closed on December 9, 2021 with groundbreaking soon following. As the old church was demolished, much of the material was recycled for use in other projects. Easter 2022 was marked by a huge empty hole where Central United Methodist Church once stood. The old building was long gone and the excavation for the new foundation was underway. It felt like a powerful metaphor marking our waiting and journey of faith.

JANUARY 2022





OPENING THE CORNERSTONE

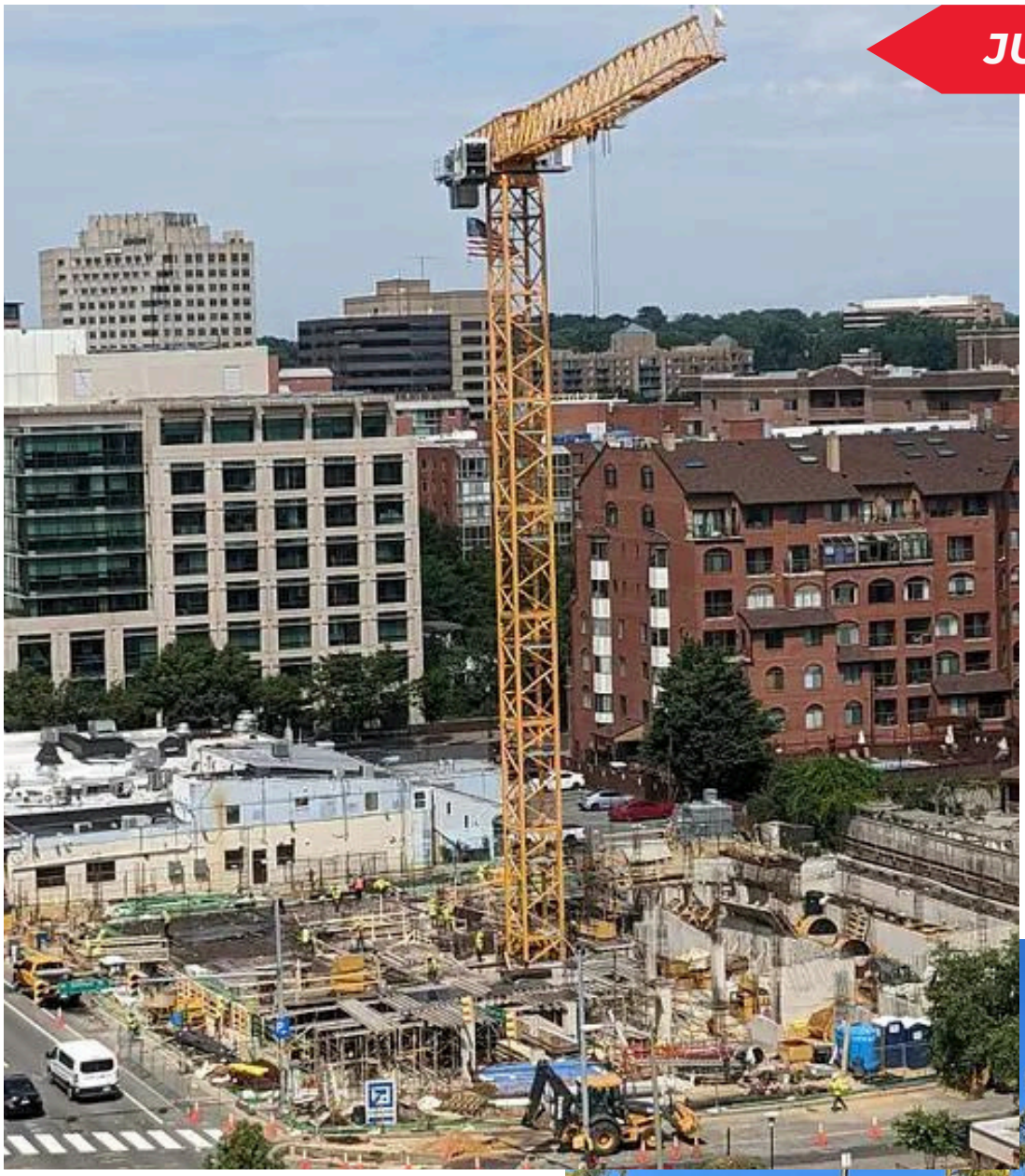






REMOVING THE STEEPLE





JULY 2022



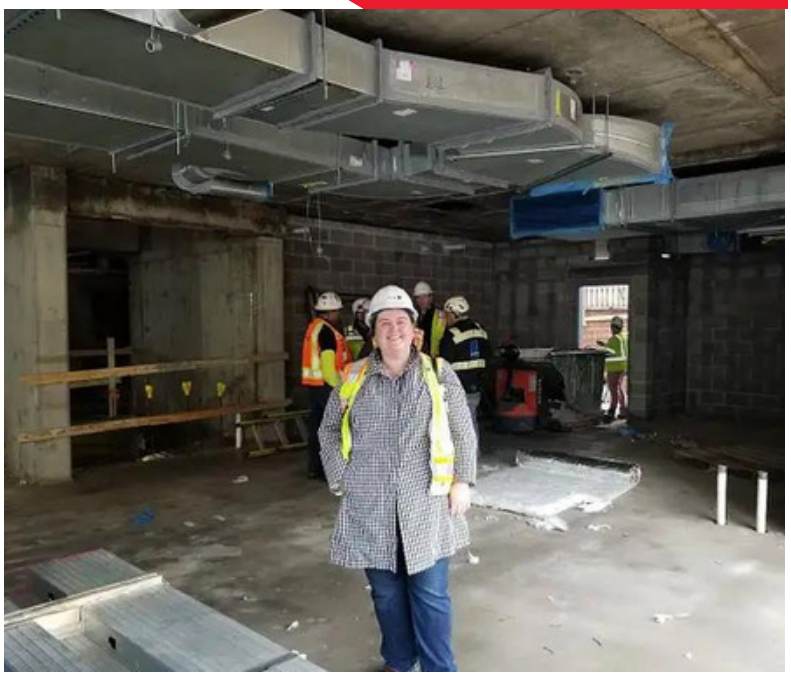
OCTOBER 2022

DECEMBER 2022





Sanctuary



Kitchen

MARCH 2023



Team members from Davis, DCS, KCM, APAH, and CUMC

MARCH 2023



Sanctuary

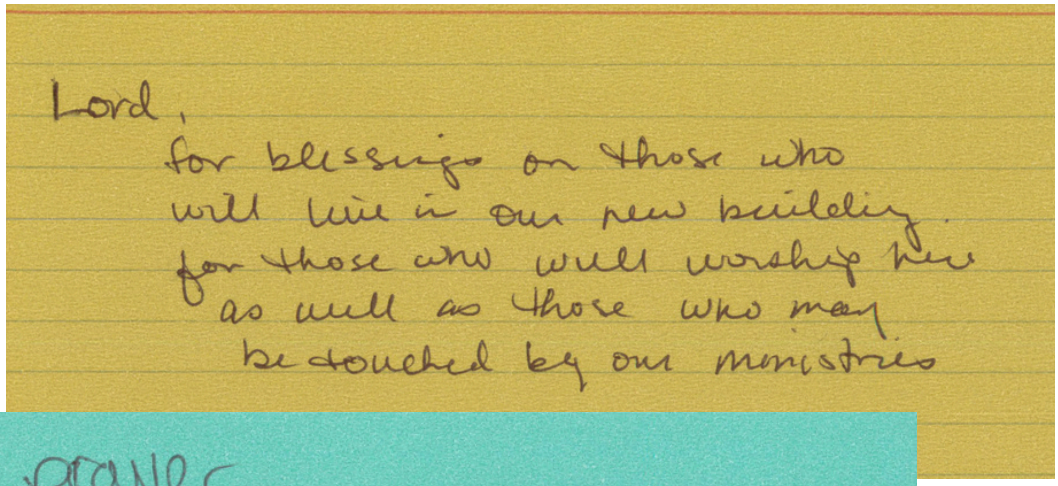


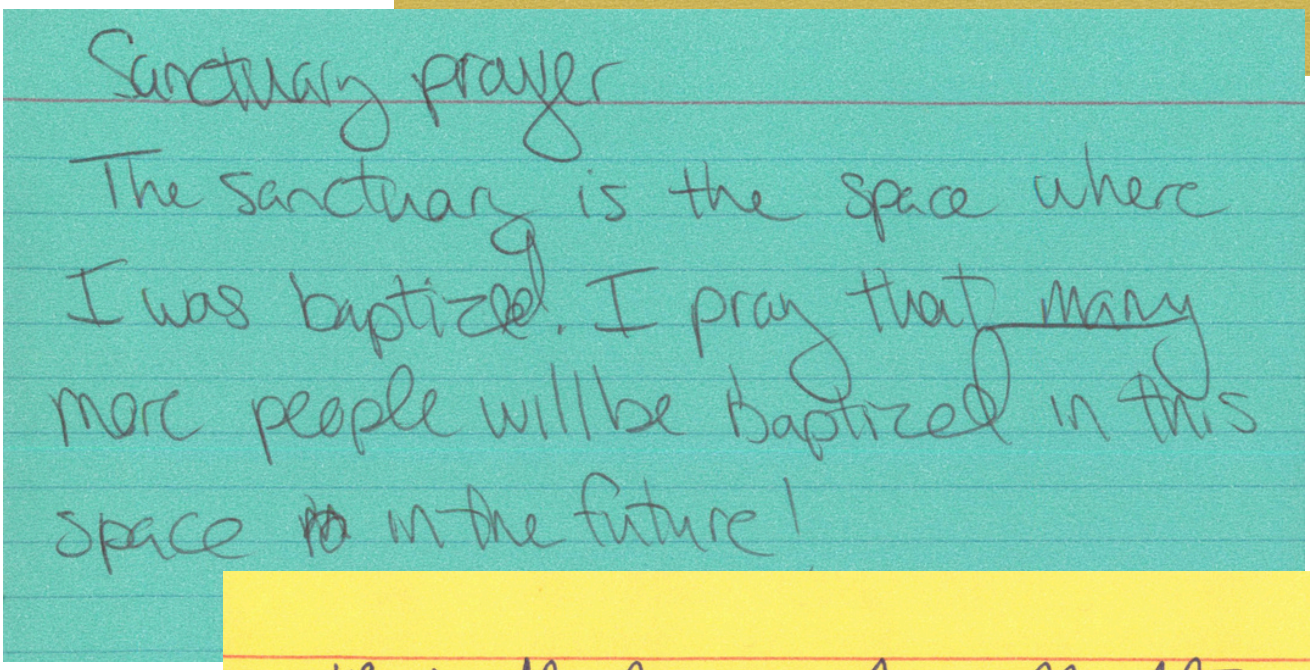
KCM, APAH, and Davis staff

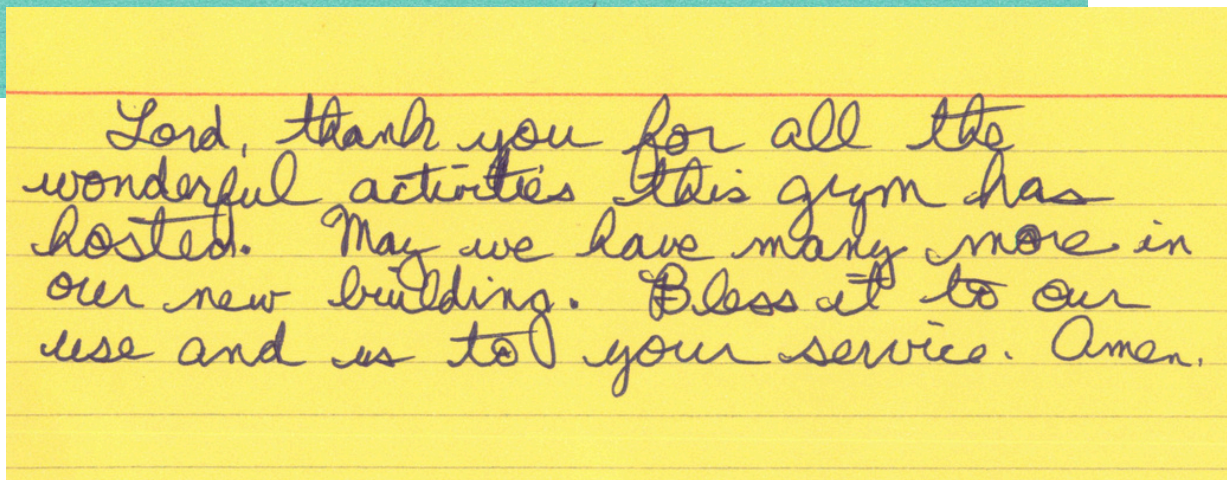


Kinhaven School Director

During our 2017 “From Dreams to Reality” capital campaign we had a series of prayer stations throughout the church. At each prayer station, we provided index cards for visitors and church members to write prayers and well wishes that pay tribute to our past and embrace the future God has gifted our congregation. The index cards were saved and placed in the wall of the new sanctuary in the chancel. Below are a few images of the 49 prayer cards that are now incorporated into our new sanctuary.







Thank you, CUMC. This sanctuary was where I was baptized, met a group of wonderful people, + truly began to understand my path w/ God. I look forward to seeing everything the new building will bring + the love it will touch.

4/30/17

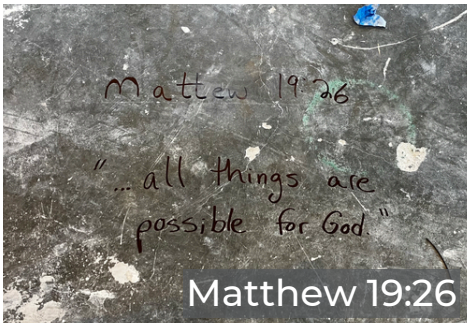


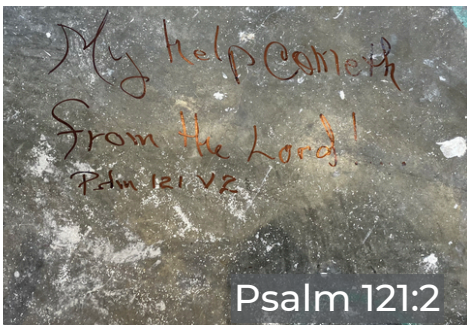
Prayer cards placed in the wall of the chancel
Beside the cross stained glass

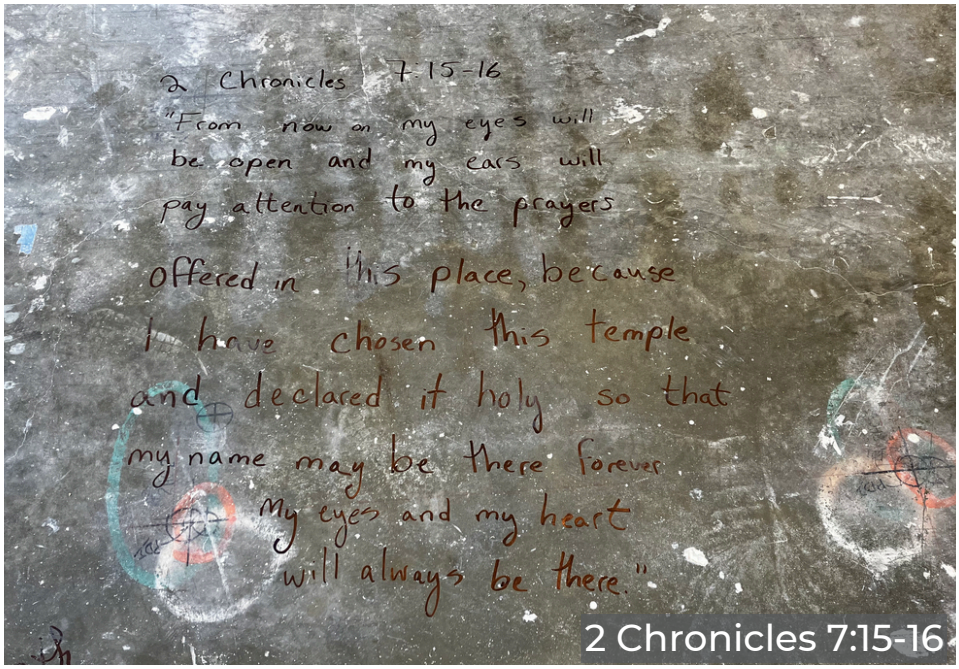
WRITING SCRIPTURES ON THE FLOOR

Love, light, hope, and faith
Unseen prayers, words to hold
All who worship here

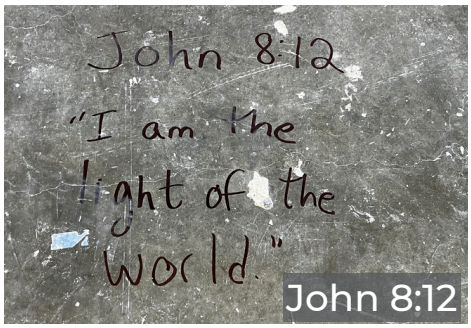
Haiku written by Jen Tucci
in honor of writing scripture verses
on the floor of the sanctuary 12/22/23
before the carpet was installed on
12/28/23.

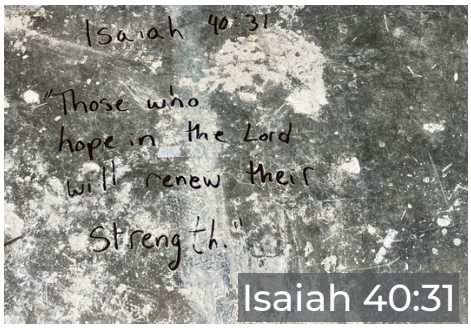


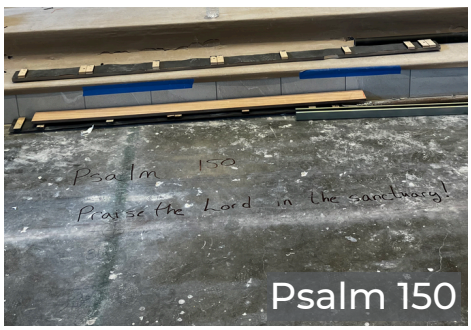














PALM SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICE

MARCH 24, 2024
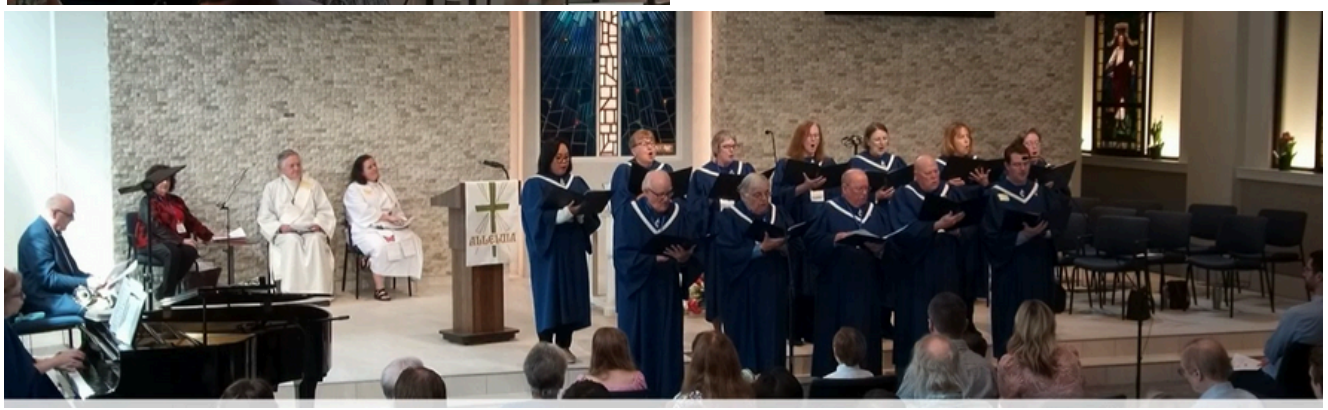










EASTER SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICE
MARCH 31, 2024













GRAND OPENING OF UNITY HOMES AT BALLSTON APARTMENTS

APRIL 15, 2024



Carmen Romero
CEO, APAH



Garrett Jackson
APAH Director of Resource Development and Communications



Senator Barbara Favola with staff from DCS, KOM, Davis and APAH



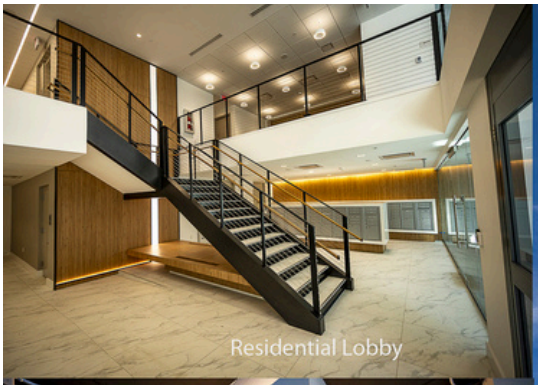
Senator Barbara Favola with staff from Virginia Housing and APAH


apah
GRAND OPENING
CEREMONY PROGRAM
AVAILABLE HERE


4:24 PM


Rich Jordan
Chair, APAH Board









Our completed building blends our mission to create affordable housing co-located with church space to support expanded ministries. The 26,699 square-foot church-owned commercial condominium includes a sanctuary, classrooms, music suite, commercial kitchen, and a fellowship hall. The sanctuary incorporates live streaming technology allowing more options for worship and community use of the space. The expanded Kinhaven space increases their capacity to provide preschool for more children, of younger ages, with expanded hours to provide more services to families. APAH (the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing) owns the residential commercial condominiums that includes the 144 affordable housing units and amenities spaces. The project is a mixture of one-bedroom and larger, greatly needed, family-serving apartments including 24 two-bedroom apartments and 12 three-bedroom apartments.

This journey of faith, time, vision and many, many meetings has gone from a wild idea to a breathtaking reality. What could fill another story are the problems and shortages that seemed like something that would “derail the train” only to have a solution present itself, completely outside of our doing, what some would call the small (and some not so small) unexpected blessings and moments of grace that brought us to where we are now.

We believe that the work of the church is outside of the building. We want to work in the local community and beyond to put into practice what our beliefs inspire. We look forward to discovering what God does in the next chapter of our congregation’s story as we live our mission to worship God, serve others and embrace all.