

Welcome to the
March 2025 Newsletter
of
The United Church of Big Rapids



120 S. State St.
Big Rapids, MI 49307
(231) 527-9567

Sunday Morning Worship Service - 9:30 a.m.

The United Church

120 S. State St., Big Rapids, MI 49307

(231) 527-9567 secretary@unitedchurchbr.org



From
*Pastor
Devon*

Hello Friends,

We are nearly through February, which seems to have flown by after a long January! I admire our community for being supportive and present for one another, whether that means showing up for an event or simply making the time to listen and encourage each other. The United Church embodies a spirit of true welcome, passion for justice, and a desire to not only be a faith community but to do whatever we can to strengthen our community at large. You are an encouragement to my spirit and I thank you for continuing to fully invest in our work together.

Entering into March coincides with our journey into Lent and offers us some space to be a bit more intentional about tending to our spiritual lives. I hope you will consider joining one of our studies and attend the special services. I'd also like to invite you to join in on a time of reflection and dreaming on Saturday March 15 from 12:00 pm – 2:00 pm. Our church leadership will be gathering from 10:00 am – 12:00 pm, and we would love you to join us for a time of conversation about your hopes and dreams for The United Church.

If you plan to come just send Julie an email so we know how much lunch we need.

In the meantime, in the midst of what feels like quite a bit of chaos and confusion in our nation and in the world, I encourage you to take a deep breath, sink into the connection and power of our community, and trust that the Spirit will lead us forward.

This Psalm reminds me of such things, maybe it will offer you some refuge today, too:

Psalm 46 (NRSVUE)

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of the city; [b] it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;

he burns the shields with fire.
"Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth."
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Pastor Devon

Pastor Devon's Contact Information

If you need to contact Pastor Devon, you may contact her by phone for pastoral care needs at 231-629-2302. You may also reach out via email: devonherrell@gmail.com. Pastor Devon does have another full time job, so in-person meeting time is limited. She plans to be in the office on Thursdays from 9:00 am - 11:45 am. You may contact the church office to set up an appointment.



March 2025 - Moderator's Message



I mentioned in my last article that we are undertaking some exciting projects and initiatives that are set to enhance our church's spiritual and physical environment.

One of the first exciting projects is the painting of our sanctuary. The painting project includes painting in the narthex and the main hallway as well as refinishing the wood floors and installing new carpet in the sanctuary. This renovation will not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of our church but also preserve the structural integrity of our great church. This project will be a wonderful opportunity to revitalize the area where we gather for worship.

I also encourage you to participate in the discussion on March 15th from 12:00 pm – 2:00 pm led by Pastor Devon on the "State of the Church." We can use this time to share our hopes for the coming months and hear where our leadership is on various initiatives. Please be sure to let Julie know if you are going to be attending so we can order enough food for those attending.

Our church's success relies heavily on the active participation of our members. We need volunteers to serve on the various commissions and the Governing Board. These roles are important in guiding our church's direction, planning events, and allowing the church to run smoothly. We also need volunteers to do coffee hour after our service, provide flowers and help with communion.

Our church plays an essential role in the local community. Our members' generosity, through the donation of both time and money, has enabled us to offer support and services to those in our community in need. As we look forward to the coming year, let us celebrate the many things happening at our church where we can contribute and make a difference.

TOGETHER , WE CAN CONTINUE TO BUILD A STRONG, AND COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITY AT OUR UNITED CHURCH IN 2025.

Moderator – Marshall Henry

Presbyterian Church of Okemos, MI reaffirms baptism vows for a boy named Zach

by Mike Ferguson, Presbyterian News Service

Last month on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, Presbyterian Church of Okemos, Michigan, engaged in a memorable and meaningful reaffirmation of baptism vows for one of its beloved members, Zach, a transgender boy who was originally baptized at the church as a female.

Last month, Presbyterian Church of Okemos, Michigan, held a service reaffirming the baptism of Zach, a beloved member and transgender boy. (photo courtesy of Presbyterian Church of Okemos)



"It wasn't a rebaptism. We were acknowledging he was baptized with a different name. The renaming ceremony was an important part of it," said the Rev. Dr. Lisa Schrott, the church's pastor since 2021.

The congregation "was uniformly supportive and loving for Zach. So many people expressed what it meant" in the life of the church, Schrott said. "The church has been with Zach throughout his whole journey."

"You were first brought to the waters of baptism with a different name, and we return today to remember God's promises continue with you throughout all of your life," Schrott told Zach that day. "We gather around these waters as a community to mark your name change. By what name shall you be known?"

"He was baptized in the same church as a baby with the name his father and I gave him when he was born," Zach's mother said, "and he reaffirmed that baptism with the name he chose for himself."

Baptism is "about becoming part of a community and being embraced by that community," Schrott explained during the service.

"From the moment my son started his transition to becoming a boy over 11 years ago, our church family has embraced him just as he is, with their whole hearts and without hesitation," Zach's mother said. "When our congregation said in unison, 'We see you,' I thought my heart would burst."

For the reaffirming liturgy, Schrott sought help from the Rev. Dr. David Gambrell, associate for worship in the PC(USA)'s Interim Unified Agency. Gambrell sent several possibilities, and Zach picked the one in which the congregation would affirm to him, "We see you."

"That nailed it for him. It hit on the whole theme that Pastor Lisa was preaching about, that baptism is not just an individual thing — it's a relationship with the community," Zach's mother explained. "The liturgy was really good at expressing that community."

Rebecca Mattern, the church's coordinator of pastoral care and youth ministry, said that during the service and afterward, "I was filled with a sense of the Holy Spirit, an expanded heart for what the church can look like and how welcoming and loving this church has been."

One example: a youth flipping through a church photo album noticed a picture with captions containing Zach's former name. "The wrong name is here. What do we do about that?" the youth asked. The captions are being updated with the permission of Zach and the family.

Zach told Mattern after the service how grateful he was, especially because his older brother was home from college to share the experience. "I was surprised the decision [to participate in the service] was made as quickly as it was," Mattern said. "I had put the bug in his ear a few weeks before and told him and his mom, 'You have all the time you want to make this happen.' Within hours, the family said, 'Yes, we want to do this.'"

Mattern was taken by the volume with which the congregation delivered the "We see you" line.

"It wasn't a shy, 'We see you.' It was a 'Yes! We see you,'" Mattern said. "People were paying attention, and the way people said it was meaningful for them."

"I wonder for those in the congregation who have experiences in their families, how this affects them and their acceptance and ability to articulate it for persons who identify as trans and LGBTQIA+," Mattern said. "What a witness to say, 'God sees you and loves you, and the church does too.'"

Zach's mother said the family "wanted to share this deeply personal moment because right now the world is a frightening place for transgender people. Trans people are being vilified, their right to exist attacked, and many of those attacks are originating from within churches."

"We share the reaffirmation of his baptism to show a different way forward, one that embraces instead of excludes, celebrates instead of vilifies, expresses love instead of hate."

"If you are LGBTQAI and your religion is important to you but you are not embraced by your religious community as your whole self, find another community," Zach's mother suggested. "There are people out there who will see you, too."

Members of the congregation have been reading William Yoo's award-winning book, "What Kind of Christianity." Yoo described in his book how Presbyterian churches and leadership excused and protected slavery, calling the place where he teaches, Columbia Theological Seminary, "wicked," but noting at the time that it "looked and sounded like a church."

"I wonder in the future what we will look back on and see as wicked what now looks and sounds like what a church should do," Zach's mother said. "What are churches doing right now that seem consistent with Christianity that later will seem abhorrent to Christians?"

"So many people after the reaffirmation told us they had tears in their eyes. They thanked him for doing this and told him how proud they were of him," she said. Most of the congregation "knows the science behind gender. You either think God made people this way by mistake, or you understand people are born a different way and you embrace that."

"If you don't understand science, it's easy to be transphobic," she said. "If you understand the science, you have to decide if you will use your religion as a bludgeon."

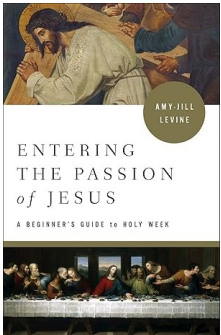
When Zach was about 12, he was writing a position paper as part of a school assignment. He made the argument that "transgender kids need more legal protections," his mother recalled. She asked him to think about the arguments people might make against his thesis. "What about the Christian argument?" she asked him. "He said, 'What Christian argument?'"

"He has [since] learned the term, 'Pray the gay away,' but at the time he was absolutely unaware of it," she said.

Zach's mother thanked the Rev. Len Scales and Slats Toole for creating the reaffirmation of baptism liturgy that Zach selected, the Presbytery of Lake Michigan "for supporting our church's use of the liturgy," and our pastors and congregation at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos "for seeing and loving my

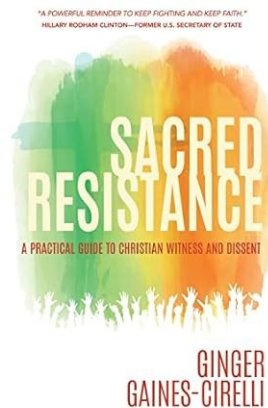
Lent begins on March 5

The Lenten season begins on March 5 with our Ash Wednesday service here at the United Church. Worship will take place at 7:00 pm. There will also be Lenten study opportunities as well as community ecumenical services during Holy Week. Read on for more information!



The first of two Lent studies will be here at the United Church beginning at 7:00 pm in the Parlor for six weeks beginning on TUESDAY, March 11. This study will continue until April 15. The book may be purchased on Amazon. Please contact the church office if you need assistance in getting the book.

"Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week," by Amy-Jill Levine.



The second Lent study will be hosted by the First United Methodist Church both in person and via Zoom. The study dates will be on THURSDAYS beginning on March 6 until April 10. The book may be purchased on Amazon. To register for the Zoom session email your name to register@ummecosta.org with "Sacred Resistance" as the subject. Registration is not necessary to attend the in person session.

"Sacred Resistance: A Practical Guide to Christian Witness and Dissent," by Ginger Gaines-Cirelli

Worship times for Lent/Holy Week:

- Ash Wednesday, 3/5 - 7:00 pm, United Church
- Palm Sunday, 4/13 - 9:30 am, United Church
- Maundy Thursday, 4/17 - 6:00 pm, United Methodist Church (worship and potluck)
- Good Friday, 4/18 - 12:00 pm, United Church
- Easter Worship, 4/20 - 9:30 am, United Church


Information about ordering spring flowers and Easter lilies will be shared shortly.



Pub Theology

7:00 pm @ Crankers
Monday, March 24





BOOK SALE

April 11, 9am-5pm
April 12, 9am-2pm

First United
Methodist Church
304 Elm Street

Donation bin locations for gently used books, CDs, & DVDs (no encyclopedias or textbooks):

- Artworks
- First United Methodist Church
- The United Church of Big Rapids
- Immanuel Lutheran Church
- Antlers Fireside Grill
- Conley's Bakery
- CL Pizza Co.
- Canadian Lakes Pharmacy
- Coldwell Banker Lakes Realty
- Mecosta County Commission on Aging and Activity Center

Proceeds fund scholarships for Ferris students.
For more information, call 614-282-4396.

AAUW-Big Rapids Accepting Donations for Annual Used Book Sale

The Big Rapids branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) is collecting gently used books, CDs, and DVDs for its annual book sale. Donation bins are located at Artworks, Immanuel Lutheran Church, First United Methodist Church, the United Church of Big Rapids, Conley's Bakery, Canadian Lakes Pharmacy, Antlers Fireside Grill, Coldwell Banker Lakes Realty, CL Pizza Co., and the Mecosta County Commission on Aging and Activity Center. Please, no textbooks or encyclopedias. The sale will be held Friday, April 11 from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Saturday, April 12 from 9:00 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the First United Methodist Church, 304 Elm Street, Big Rapids. Proceeds fund scholarships for nontraditional Ferris students. For more information, call 614-282-4396.

March is Women's History Month

As we celebrate Women's History Month, we thought we would share a woman of faith who has made a valuable contribution to science and American space history.



Katherine G. Johnson

One of the mathematicians featured in the movie 'Hidden Figures', Katherine G. Johnson was also a longtime member of Carver Memorial Presbyterian Church in Newport News, Virginia. A NASA mathematician and aerospace technologist from 1953-86, Johnson's computations influenced every major space program from the Mercury astronauts through the space shuttle program. Her calculations helped sync the Apollo Lunar Lander with the moon-orbiting Command and Service Module. She was perhaps best known for the work she did in advance of Astronaut John Glenn's 1962 orbital mission.

Worried about glitchy early computers, Glenn asked engineers to "get the girl" — meaning Johnson — to run the same numbers that had been programmed into the computer, but by hand on her desktop calculating machine. "If she says they're good," Glenn declared, "then I'm ready to go." In 2015, President Obama awarded her the Medal of Freedom when she was 97, calling her "a pioneer in American space history."



The church building is being utilized every day by various organizations and committees. Thank you for keeping the church office informed of meetings that you will be hosting in the church **prior** to the meeting. This allows the calendar to be kept up to date and the custodian to be informed so that the room is ready for your use.

The generosity of the congregation to open up the building to those that have need of a place to meet is greatly appreciated throughout the community!!

Project Starburst – Keeping the Pantry Filled!

Project Starburst would like to thank the United Church members for their continued support of the pantry on a regular basis and are thankful for their participation in the “keep the pantry filled” project. The demand from families needing assistance continues including both returning families and new ones.

Soup was identified as the “food of the month” for February. Soup can be a real staple for many families. An update will be provided next month but the bin is filling and the generosity continues!



And the “Give to the Pantry” program has identified **noodles** as the “food of the month” for March. Noodles or pasta of any kind can provide families with options for a variety of meals. Noodles/pasta is always added as a “staple” for families of all sizes and ages.

MISSION/SOCIAL ACTION COMMISSION:

The Mission/Social Action Commission currently meets on the second Wednesday of each month at 4:00 pm in the church parlor. Our meetings are open, and anyone interested in the work of the commission is invited to attend. Virtual attendance can be arranged by letting the commission chair, Dee Van Horn

(email: deevanhorn44@gmail.com) no later than the Friday before the scheduled meeting.



The Mission Commission continues to support the local organizations/charities that carry out our mission to help the members of our community who face food insecurity, the need for safe and affordable housing, safety in their day to day lives within the community (whether it be from personal crisis or from voices of discrimination). We encourage all of our Church members to support these organizations in whatever way they can; whether it be through financial donations, support of specific events or as volunteers. Your commission members encourage you to visit the links below for each organization to learn more about them and their needs.

Project Starburst - <https://projectstarburst.org/>

Our Brother's Keeper - <https://www.obkshelter.org/>

WISE - <https://wiseagainstviolence.org/>

Mecosta County Habitat For Humanity - <https://mecostahabitat.org/>

Pride Big Rapids - <https://www.pridebigrapids.org/>



PROJECT STARBURST SOUPER SUPPER ANNUAL FUNDRAISER - MARCH 19, 2025

Members of our community need help now more than ever. Project Starburst continues to experience a high demand for food. During the fiscal year from October 2023 – September 30, 2024 they served over 473,155 meals to families in Mecosta and Osceola counties. Join Project Starburst on March 19 from 11:00 am - 3:00 pm at Three Girls Bakery in Big Rapids for a yummy bowl of soup and bread along with a dessert – all for \$20 for adults and \$10 for youth. Tickets are on sale at Three Girl’s Bakery, Project Starburst, online at projectstarburst.org prior to and on March 19 or from Church members, Alice Bandstra and Dee Van Horn. For any questions, please contact Project Starburst at 231-796-5342.



7th Annual Souper Supper

Presented By: **project starburst** & **MICHAEL O'KEEFE PROPANE**

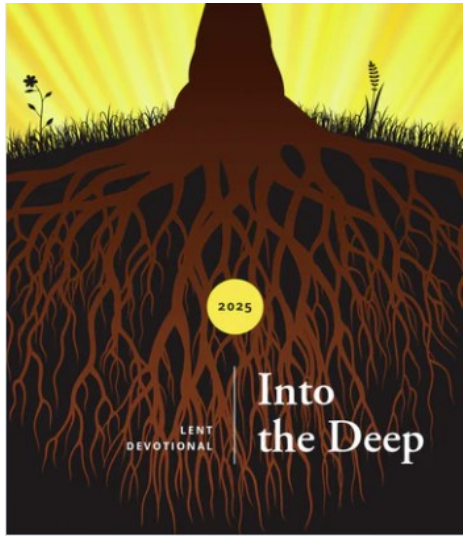
Tickets **\$20**
Ages 6-17 \$10
5 and under Free

Warm up this winter season and join us for a soup and bread dinner to benefit Project Starburst!

Wednesday, March 19, 2025 11am-3pm
Three Girls Bakery in downtown Big Rapids
106 N Michigan Ave.

Tickets available at Project Starburst, Three Girls Bakery, or online at projectstarburst.org
Contact Project Starburst for more information (231)796-5342

**Lenten Devotion Booklets Available
Go deep for Lent!**



Mirroring the 2025 General Synod theme, "Into the Deep," our 2025 Lent Devotional invites reflection on God's mysterious depths.

As Mary Luti writes in the introduction, "God inhabits the depths of life, love, loss, ecstasy, and pain, God dwells in the profundities of prayer, in sighs too deep for words. God loves the deep."

What courage, what faith, what reckoning, what wonder might find us as we go deep into God's depths this Lent?

Copies are available on the table in the narthex. There are also limited on-line copies available. Please contact the church office for the link.



Don't forget to "spring ahead" on March 9!!

AARP Tax Program Ready to Serve Mecosta County Residents

It's time to prepare tax returns for the 2024 tax year and there is a program in Mecosta County that can help. Sponsored by AARP, this program is designed for taxpayers with low and moderate incomes, with special attention to those age 60 and older.

The program is run entirely by volunteers who assist clients at four (4) centers from February 10 through April 15, 2025. Appointments are usually scheduled for one and a quarter hours and can be completed in a timely manner if the taxpayer brings all the paperwork required to prepare the return.

Appointments can be scheduled beginning January 20, by calling the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). They have a NEW NUMBER for tax scheduling, 231 349-0842, and you can either call or text.

Locations are:

- Salvation Army, Big Rapids – Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., 2/11 through 4/15
- Morton Township Hall, Mecosta – Mondays, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., 2/10 through 4/14
- Morton Township Library, Mecosta – Fridays 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m., 2/14 through 4/11
- Wheatland Township Library, Remus – Wednesdays 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. 2/12 through 4/9

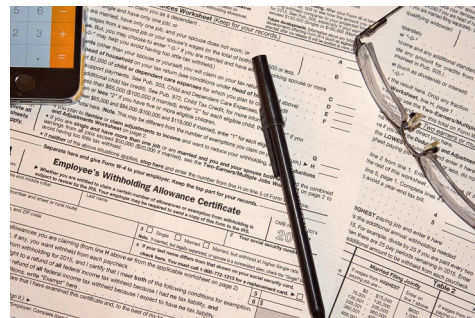
At the time of the appointment, volunteers need to see:

Photo identification and Social Security cards for the taxpayer(s) and Social Security Cards for all dependents are REQUIRED.

- Copy of last year's income tax return – Federal, State and Local
- All W-2 forms from each employer
- Any 1099-R if a pension or annuity is received
- Any SSA-1099 if Social Security benefits are received
- All 1099 forms (1099-INT, 1099-DIV, 1099-B, etc.) showing interest and/or dividends as well as documentation showing the original purchase price of any assets sold
- Any 1099-MISC showing any miscellaneous income
- All forms indicating any Federal or State income tax paid.
- Any unemployment compensation statements, if applicable
- Child care provider information, including name, employer ID, Social Security number
- Any 1095-A or 1095-C forms received.
- Only standard deduction returns will be completed. NO itemized deductions
- No Schedule C returns if they are the primary source of income
- A printed card from the bank showing savings account information, or a blank check are required for direct deposit.

If filing for Homestead Property Tax Credit or Home Heating Credit, taxpayers will also need copies of city or township property tax statements and prior year home heating bills.

With the ongoing changes to Federal and State tax regulations, even simple tax situations can appear more and more complicated. This program stands ready to assist all those in need.



THE UNITED CHURCH

The United Church of Big Rapids
is an
Open and Affirming (UCC) and a More Light Church (PC-USA)

Thanks to the hard work of our O&A Implementation team and many others in our church family, our church is recognized by both denominations as an inclusive church!

<https://openandaffirming.org/ona/>

<https://mlp.org/>



MORE LIGHT
PRESBYTERIANS

You can click on the links above to get more information about what this means to the "outside world." Thank you to all who live out the words in our O & A Covenant!

Date	Name	Date	Couple	Years
3/5	Dave Ellis	3/7	Randy & Linda Vance	33
3/5	Melanie Henry			
3/7	Jan Cassidy			
3/9	Julie Kysela			
3/11	John Berkenpas			
3/12	Alice Dean			
3/15	Julie Cole			
3/15	Karol Hartley			
3/15	Jerena Keys			
3/18	Carlene Gahrs			
3/18	Sandi Morris			
3/22	Linda Rinehart			
3/30	Maryanne Heidemann			



**MARCH BIRTHDAYS
& ANNIVERSARIES**

Enjoy your special day!!

Thank You!

Thank you to the many volunteers that help make The United Church a welcoming place for all! Your efforts do not go unnoticed! We're so thankful for the help & time given to the Church to spread God's love.

Want to host coffee hour after worship or provide altar flowers on Sunday morning? Check the sign up sheets on the hallway bulletin board for available dates. No training or experience needed!



Altar Flowers

Remember that you may access our monthly events calendar online from our website, www.unitedchurchbr.org. The calendar is kept up-to-date. If you have questions or would like an item added to the calendar, please contact the church office.



Service Volunteers for February

Thank you for volunteering to serve on Sundays! If you see some empty spaces & would like to volunteer, contact the church office. If you'd like to volunteer in future months, let us know - we'd love to have you! There are also spaces available on the sign-up sheets on the bulletin board to provide flowers or to provide coffee after worship during Fellowship time.

A special thanks to our hard-working media team - Amy Buse, Adam Jewell, Aleah Ritzema, Wayne McKay, and Paul Heidemann who make sure we can all see and hear the service, in the sanctuary and through the livestream and radio broadcasts.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Liturgist</u>	<u>Flowers</u>	<u>Fellowship Time Host</u>	<u>Sound Board</u>	<u>Ushers</u>
3/2	Susan H. Grant		Mike & Linda Rinehart	Mike Rinehart	Julie Kysela, Melanie Henry, Marshall Henry
3/9	Diane Fleming		Sue Boitos Laura Herrell		Maxine McKay, Kay Achterhof, Chuck Achterhof
3/16	Kari Clark	Kathleen Keys Sing	Kathleen Keys Singh		Don Olree, Paul Challender, Jane Grzybowski
3/23	Kathleen Keys Singh		Marshall & Melanie Henry		Maxine McKay, Paul Challender, Jane Grzybowski
3/30	Dee Van Horn			Randy Vance	Jim Bandstra, Alice Bandstra, Paul Challender

We are also grateful for the Spiritual Life Commission for all they do to make our worship meaningful each Sunday.

Joys/Concerns Form Available

On the Cards of Caring table there are some half sheet forms that say "Joys/Concerns." This form is to let you inform the church of any prayer requests or joys that we may be able to share during Sunday morning worship. You may share your own or someone else's (with their permission, of course.) The office can also arrange for a visit or a call from Pastor Devon, if you desire. You are important to us all and we want to help celebrate your joys or listen/act when there is a problem.



Don't forget to sign the friendship pad in the pew on Sunday morning! Encourage any visitors to add their name and address as well. If someone is interested in becoming a member of the church - have them contact the church office!

Are You Interested in Joining our Church Family?

Pastor Devon is working on a New Member Class. If you are interested in attending, please contact Julie in the church office to be added to the list. More details will be forthcoming.





The United Church of Big Rapids is a union of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Church of Christ. It is a congregation that worships together, seeks opportunities to serve others, encourages one another to grow in intellect and spirit, strives for social justice, and fully embraces Jesus' call to love one another as God loves us.



Because we believe God's whole creation is good, blessed, and sacred, we are an open and affirming community of faith. We celebrate persons of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, family structures, faith backgrounds, abilities, and economic circumstances.

As valued members of this congregation all persons are invited to equally participate in the full life of the church - worship, sacraments, ministry, fellowship, leadership, responsibilities, sorrows, blessings, and the continued presence of Jesus Christ.

Our Vision and Mission Statements

Our vision is to honor all children of God through following the ways of Jesus Christ.

Our mission is to celebrate all creation as an active presence in our community, engaging in transformational worship and nurturing families and relationships, as we learn to foster more justice and love in ourselves and our community.

Contacting the Church

The church office is open and staffed Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday 9:00 am - 1:00 pm.

Messages & emails are checked every day.

231-527-9567

Leave a message if no one answers, your call will be returned as soon as possible.

You can also reach the church office via e-mail:

Secretary@unitedchurchbr.org

You can also see videos and keep up with us on:

Facebook: www.facebook.com/UnitedChurch

YouTube: www.youtube.com/@unitedchurchbigrapids.com

Sunday morning worship (9:30 am) is live streamed on YouTube with a link on our Facebook page and also broadcast live on WWBR-FM, 100.9.