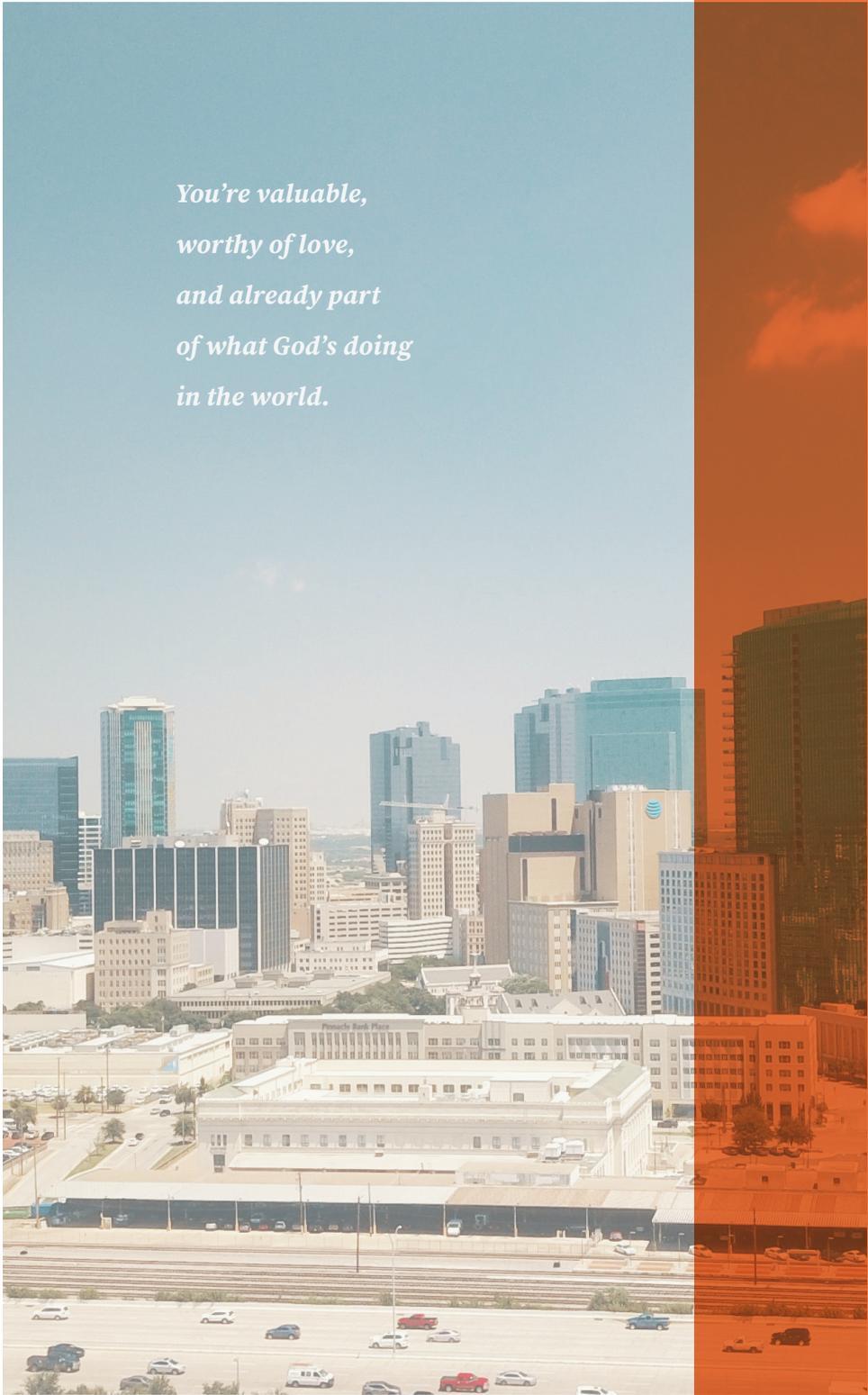


*Spring 2022*



*Ministry Stories from  
University Christian Church*

*You're valuable,  
worthy of love,  
and already part  
of what God's doing  
in the world.*



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*Stories of*  
**MORE**  
*Healing, Wholeness, and Hope.*

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# HOME

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## *Responding to God's Call*

*By Meg Pitts*

Through my work as a flight attendant, I was able to be a part of 7 humanitarian relief flights transporting Afghanistan refugees once they arrived in the U.S. to refugee camps in the U.S. following their escape from Afghanistan. On these humanitarian relief flights I saw the anguish these families were experiencing. These weary travelers, many with very small children and even newborn babies, were leaving the only home they knew to seek safety for their family. Many didn't speak any English and were about to be introduced to a world very different than the one they knew. My heart hurt for these families as many left with just the clothes on their backs. I felt in my heart that God was calling me to continue helping them following the completion of the humanitarian relief flights. I signed up to be a volunteer for Refugee Services of Texas (RST) and completed their volunteer training.

With the large influx of refugee arrivals in Fort Worth, and lack of housing available, RST asked if

anyone could temporarily house a couple of larger refugee families as they looked to secure housing. I first asked my husband if we could temporarily house them, but I knew our home would not be big enough to accommodate such a large family. I then wondered if UCC might be willing to temporarily house them. I got in touch with Jessica Vacketta and then the ball was set in motion. UCC said,

***“Yes, we will house them.”***

Little did we know that our temporary housing situation would turn into 106 days!

It was with overwhelming joy that I was able to meet the Mohammadi family on the first day of their arrival at UCC. I was extremely excited to meet them and welcome them to our church, which would serve as their temporary home until more permanent housing could be secured. Upon meeting them I could see their hesitation and nervousness not knowing what this next step in their journey would be like. They had lived in limbo in a refugee tent camp for



*Pictured from left to right: Muzamil (5), Hasibullah (12), Hikmatullah (18), Niamatullah (16), Modaser (10-months), Mursal (20), Zuhail (10), Subhanullah (18), Samira (16), Anisa (mother), and in front Abdul Wali (father)*

almost two months now. It has been quite a transformation watching them from that first day arriving at UCC, to becoming familiar with our church halls, the staff, the friendly faces they would ultimately call their friends, enjoying outings to the Fort Worth Zoo and a TCU football game, many grocery shopping trips, hosting their own extended family for a meal in the third floor youth kitchen, smiles, laughter, hugs, greetings, learning English from volunteer teachers, to starting school and finally moving into their very own home.

I know the Mohammadi family will never forget the generosity and kindness given to them by the congregation of UCC in their first

few months of being in the U.S. I am so very thankful for the friendship and bond we all have created with the Mohammadi family and look forward to creating more memories with them.

*Meg Pitts joined UCC in 1991 and has worked as a flight attendant for Southwest Airlines since 2005. She is married to Jim and they have two children, Preston and James, a puppy named Teddy, and a passion for helping those seeking refuge.*



***“I am proud that our church stepped up and undertook this commitment. I’m glad that I made a contribution. We found a way to do God’s work.”***

– Dave Martin



Meg Pitts not only took the lead on collecting and organizing household donations, she and Kelly Hanley coordinated the big move from the church to the Mohammadi’s new home.

***“The opportunity to serve by helping the Mohammadi family is the perfect example of why our family made UCC our church home two years ago. To see the outpouring of support over the last several months for complete strangers is love in action.”***

– Chandry Manzke



Volunteers and staff beat out the winter storm to help the Mohammadi family move on February 2nd and 3rd.

***“Working with the Mohammadi family was truly a case of ‘It is in giving that we receive.’”***

– Monty Phillips



“Go Frogs” became one of the English phrases the children quickly picked up.



*Soon the guests became the host, inviting the staff and members to share in traditional Afghani meals.”*

*“My favorite part of serving was spending time with the younger kids who probably had the biggest language barrier. Even though we didn’t always understand each other they were always smiling and happy playing games. We didn’t even need words to enjoy being together.”*

*– Joseph Hartley*

*“I had the pleasure of working with the older Mohammadi children in ESL lessons. As with many teaching experiences, I learned so much from my students. In particular, they demonstrated grace, gratitude, generosity, and courage as they navigated their new environments and situations.”*

*-Jana Nolan*

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## *A Conversation with Outreach Chair Kelly Hanley*

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### **What motivated you to help?**

As I heard about the Mohammadi family taking temporary shelter at UCC, I was reminded how this family, and so many others, left everything they had and came to the USA to start over in a place they had never been. Something so foreign to me was now in my world. The more I learned about the family, the more fortunate I felt as I helped alongside so many others to give them a new way of life.

### **Why do you think this type of work is important for us to do as a church?**

From the first day this family arrived at UCC so many stepped up to share their blessings and their gifts and talents. I believe it is important for us as a church to help others. The act of service can only make us stronger and I believe the Mohammadi family gave that to UCC.

### **How did serving impact you?**

It was an honor to work beside many UCC members to establish a home for this sweet family. The family's constant gratitude toward anyone who assisted them was very reassuring we were making a difference in their lives.

### **Is there a certain story or experience you would like to share from your time working with the Mohammadi family?**

Once the Mohammadi family had a home to move into we planned to begin the move in process on the first of the month. We had allowed for time to inspect the property and organize their new home, but with the impending weather forecast we made the decision to move up the move-in date by two days. We immediately put out the word to the many volunteers who had signed up to help. Volunteers adjusted their schedules and made it all happen. From meeting at the church to load the many donated items in the rented U-Haul and cars; to coming to the house to help build furniture, stock the kitchen, and make many beds. The generosity was overwhelming!

*Kelly Hanley has been a member of UCC her entire life and currently serves as the chair of our Outreach Ministry Committee. She is married to Bill and they have three adult children, Abby, Trip, and Kate, and a beloved dog named Kooch. She serves on many community boards and is always looking for ways we can collectively serve our neighbors.*

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## *By the Numbers*

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**DAYS**  
**106**

number of days the Mohammadi family stayed at church

**MONTHS**  
**6**

number of months from when they fled Afghanistan until they settled into their home in Fort Worth

### *Congregational Generosity*

**38**

*Financial Donors  
(around \$15,000)*

**115+**

*Volunteers donating time or items*

**12+**

*Regular volunteer shoppers*

**5**

*ESL instructors*

**20**

*Innkeepers*

**7**

*Truck drivers*

**12**

*Transportation providers (school, shopping, medical appointments)*

**5**

*Refugee families served*

While we have helped the Mohammadi family the most and know them best, because of your outpouring of generosity we have been able to offer a variety of support, from temporary housing, to furniture and clothing, to four additional refugee families.

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# MENTORS

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## *A Heart for Students*

*A Conversation with Kay Higgins*



*Kay Higgins has been an active member of UCC since she moved to Fort Worth in 1977. In the Chancel Choir since arriving, Kay has served UCC in a number of leadership roles. She is married to Keith Spalding and they are parents to two adult children--Mary Katherine and Christopher--as well as 4 fur babies: Molly, Simon, Ava, and Hannah.*

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After completing a career in education including 43 years as Associate Dean of Student Development at TCU, Kay Higgins retired in December 2020 and began to think about what comes next. “I knew I wanted to begin service in the community as soon as I was retired. I considered several opportunities but had not committed when Jessica Vacketta called.” Kay learned that UCC was beginning a new mentoring ministry with the fourth grade class at Alice Contreras Elementary. Jessica asked Kay if she would be willing to serve as the on-site coordinator for the 2021-2022 school year. Kay agreed and began

recruiting mentors. The response was phenomenal—more than 100 church members signed up.

“The spirit and faith of UCC members explains why recruiting mentors was not difficult,” Kay said. “We are people who feel called by God, in gratitude for God’s goodness and love, to do more for God’s children young and old. When our senior minister leads by example, promoting mentoring from the pulpit, people respond.”

In addition to mentoring, other members promised to pray faithfully for mentors and children. “Others told me, ‘As soon as I retire, I’m there!’”

As COVID numbers began to rise with the opening of school, Kay learned that monthly mentoring for the first few months would be virtual. “Until I found out just how much technological knowledge I would need, I thought the on-site coordinator role was a ‘no brainer.’” Kay and her mentors worked in partnership with the non-profit Academy 4 organization to train and prepare for monthly mentoring online. In March, the monthly



On the first Friday of every month, mentors meet at Alice Contreras Elementary to mentor 4th grade students as a part of the Academy 4 program.

mentoring session finally moved to in-person. Children and mentors alike were thrilled.

Why is fourth grade the optimal time for mentoring? Fourth graders are still young and impressionable, but they are beginning to understand and work with complex concepts. In addition, they still appreciate adults.

“These fourth graders haven’t found out yet that grown-ups aren’t cool,” Kay said with a smile.

Kay said she appreciates the work of Academy 4 to match congregations with public schools and provide the training and curriculum that teaches children the building blocks of leadership.

*“Combining energy, expertise and financial resources across multiple organizations make sense. We don’t need to have our name on the ministry to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.”*

“It’s easy for me to be excited about working with children,” Kay said. “My mother taught third grade for 30 years. I grew up ‘teaching the trees’ in our yard after school. It’s OK if you aren’t comfortable with children—there are thousands of needs and people to love. Find that population which calls you to serve and do it!”



Mentor Chad Cline meets with a 4th grade student.

More information on our ministry partners:

Read about Academy 4 at [www.academy4.org](http://www.academy4.org)

Get to know Alice Contreras Elementary School at [www.facebook.com/AContrerasFWISD/](https://www.facebook.com/AContrerasFWISD/)

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# STUDENTS

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## *A Bold New Vision for Student Ministry Gets Underway at UCC*

*Welcome Back, Alison!*

In the fall of 2021, Rev. Dr. Russ Peterman laid out a new vision for ministry to students from sixth grade through college. He discussed the importance of providing students now and those yet to come with an exciting, engaging, inviting place “where they can have their souls shaken alive and their hearts turned towards God.”

“I promise to do all that I can to have one of the most dynamic ministries to students around where they will be given not answers, but a safe place to question, wonder and discover the presence of God within them,” Russ said. “You have my word and commitment.”

Once the vision was cast, UCC designed a new team to lead ministry to students. Two new positions were created—a full-time Director of Youth Ministry and a full-time Director of College Ministry—who will be led by UCC’s Minister to Students.

After an extensive search in 2021 that spanned six months, UCC has called Reverend Alison Fitzgerald to assume

the position of Minister to Students. Some may remember Alison’s time at UCC from 2012-2016. While she attended Brite Divinity School, Alison served UCC as Assistant Minister to Middle School before becoming Assistant Minister to High School. After completing her studies at Brite, Alison accepted a call in 2016 to serve as Associate Minister of Children, Youth, and Families at Ankeny Christian Church in Ankeny, Iowa.



*Rev. Alison Fitzgerald is returning to UCC to become the new Minister to Students. Alison was an Assistant Minister to Middle and High School at UCC from 2012-2016.*

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Alison is a graduate of Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Social Work. She earned a Master of Divinity degree from Brite Divinity School. She was ordained into the Christian Ministry in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in May 2016.

During her time at UCC, Alison created lasting relationships with parents, students and other members of the UCC family. She is excited to come back to meet new people who have joined as well as see some old, friendly faces.

“The people were so absolutely wonderful and the congregation is fantastic,” Alison said. “I loved the staff, the congregation and the youth. It was really hard to leave UCC because I had built wonderful connections with people. I think that has always been my favorite part of ministry—building relationships.”

Alison is excited to return to UCC on May 1 and do what she loves most—working with students. Husband Alex, a dog and two cats will accompany Alison to Fort Worth.

*“I’m so passionate about this work because youth and college students are both in such formative times in their lives. They are asking the questions that most adults don’t,” she said. “I love this age because I get to watch them grow. Student ministry is about being able to sit together and during a time of formation try to understand what they believe. I like being in a relationship with the kids, knowing what they’re passionate about, and helping them discern what they’re called to.”*



*Besides coffee, Alison is a big dog lover. Her dog Barnaby is pictured above.*

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## *Breathing New Life Into College Ministry*

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UCC is pleased to welcome Dr. Lauren Sierra as the new Director of College Ministry. Lauren is part of UCC's bold new vision for Ministry to Students.



*Dr. Lauren Sierra's passion is listening to people's life stories and worldview journeys, so we might come to understand each other's beliefs and humanness a little more completely.*

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Lauren earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and Secondary Education in 2008 before receiving her Master of Arts in Theological Studies in 2013. She was awarded a Doctor of Education in 2019. Before joining UCC, Lauren taught English as Second Language in Ethiopia, served as College Minister at Sam Houston State University, and taught World Religions at Covenant Christian Academy. Lauren was also an independent consultant and researcher, studying secular students' worldviews.



*Dr. Lauren Sierra converted a van in September 2020 as a cost-friendly way to drive around to conduct her research. She finished her renovations in December 2020 and started her journey.*

Lauren's graduate research focused on college students' spiritual journeys and their perceptions of the Christian faith. The reason she loves research is because it leads to a deeper understanding of beliefs and human nature.

"I want to provide students a safe place to ask questions, to be intellectually vulnerable, to imagine what it's like to believe something other than what you believe," she said "It's about empathy for people and their journey in life and creating space for deeper, life-giving conversations with people face to face."

Lauren is passionate about helping students learn and grow in their faith.

One of Lauren's favorite stories from the Bible is from the Gospel of John, where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. She uses the story of Lazarus, and the resurrection of Jesus, as inspiration for her work.

"The first time I read John, I was gripped by the idea of the resurrection. I want to be part of ministry where Jesus and the power of the Spirit breathes new life into students," she said. "This is what I want to do with my life. Where there is hopelessness, I want students to experience hope. Where there is lifelessness, I want them to experience life, where there is death, I want them to experience resurrection, because that's what Jesus did and I want students to be in that story."



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# INNOVATION

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## *Despite the Obstacles, Remarkable Leaders Reinvent Ministry During Covid*

Across two years of pandemic ministry, a favorite word for anyone serving in any capacity at University Christian Church was “pivot.” We learned together how to keep volunteers safe while we served our congregation and our community. We learned new ways to meet needs and be the church in the world. Recently we asked our ministry team to describe the innovation and collaboration that became an everyday event at UCC.



*Pictured from left to right: Rev. Jessica Vacketta, Rev. Dr. Todd Prickett, Rev. Shannon Moore, and Rev. Kera Watts speak on overcoming obstacles in ministry during a pandemic*

### **From Shannon Moore, Senior Associate**

Room 207 was filled with people from UCC, local congregations, and even folks from as far away as Round Rock. It was February 2020, and we were hosting a training session about the benefits of Congregational Care Ministry -- a ministry in which lay leaders are retrained and commissioned

to be ministers in the area of care. Pandemic shutdowns moved our application and interview process online, but we ended up with an amazing first crop of Congregational Care Ministers (CCMs) at UCC.

Over the past two years, this group of CCMs has lovingly walked with folks through seasons of grief, illness, and loneliness. They have

celebrated with new parents and provided encouragement for young families. Even when they weren't able to physically be with the people they were caring for, they learned to pray with others over the phone, in emails, even in text messages. They also supported each other through illnesses and COVID fears, and they supported me when I lost my father early last year. The circle of care at UCC has expanded significantly with the addition of our CCMs. We could not do this ministry without the organizational skills of Michelle Groom, our Congregational Care Coordinator. She innovated a branch of the CCM ministry called Congregational Callers — a larger group of laypeople who make regular contact with homebound members and the hospitalized.

I am so grateful for each person who volunteers to care for others in our church. It is a true blessing to be part of this incredible ministry!

**From Kera Watts,  
Minister to Children & Families**

Children learn through interactions, experiences, hands on learning, and community. All the key elements for child development were taken away when our world transitioned to virtual-only. Family time in a home was suddenly filled with on-screen

learning time with parents as full-time teachers while still attempting to carry out their own full-time jobs from home. As children slept at night, a parent's work spread into late evenings as this was the only quiet time afforded to accomplish tasks without distraction. Parents and children were exhausted.

Our goal as a Children's Ministry team was to innovate and safely create spaces of interaction, experiences, hands-on learning and community for our families. As we learned more about COVID, we found that being outdoors reduced risk of virus spread substantially. In those moments, all of the playgrounds and outdoor spaces became sanctuaries for children and provided parents a brief reprieve to rest. Playground Faith was our first outdoor innovation, a time of active play on our three playgrounds with scripture, hands-on activities, and community. As adults started worshipping outdoors, in person Children's Worship began. An outdoor program of worship, led by children and based on the foundation of play.

Our first Christmas Eve without an in-person service for families brought about our Outdoor Journey to Bethlehem—a walk through the Christmas story with volunteers

...serving as all the people we encounter in the Christmas story. While baby goats, donkeys, llamas, sheep and cows were the favorites, each child walked away from the experience carrying the light of Christ into the world. Equally meaningful was our Outdoor Holy Week Experience, created to allow parents to journey through Holy Week with their family safely and in community. Thanks to all the exhausted families who were willing to engage in these new innovations in ministry. Families willingly tried new things and trusted us with their children in the midst of uncertainty, recognizing the importance of continued faith development for their family.

**From Jessica Vacketta,  
Minister of Outreach**

In my 12 years of serving as part of UCC's ministry team, I have witnessed members generously share their gifts in incredible ways and yet, over the past two years, I have found myself saying "WOW!" over and over again. Church members and friends have given thousands of hours of their time, and hundreds of thousands of dollars to meet the needs of our community in a season of collective crisis. It was a chorus of "Here I Am Lord;" a community response to God's call like I have never seen before.

Many of our long-standing outreach ministry events couldn't happen as they had in the past, and yet the need was greater, and the tug of the Spirit calling us to do something even stronger. Our Children's Closet Ministry Team came up with Box-It Day to replace Bag-It Night, filling hundreds of boxes with uniforms before school started. School counselors were able to pick up boxes in our parking lot. Our Gifts of Hope chair, and her husband, moved our alternative giving market to an online platform and more gifts were purchased than ever before. While Room in the Inn couldn't happen, our RITI team held multiple donation drives, collecting household items for those moving into secure housing.

Our ministry leaders continued to pivot again and again to meet needs as they arose, asking "How can we make this happen?" while also juggling the changing landscapes of work, home, and school. I can't imagine the stress our health care providers have experienced over the last 24 months; yet, when COVID vaccinations became available, they helped implement two vaccination clinics in our parking lot, with 90% of participants coming from vulnerable populations.

WOW. What a witness to the transformative power of Christ's courageous love.

**From Todd Prickett,  
Minister of Music**

Music has always been an integral component of meaningful worship at UCC. As our worship services moved from in-person to virtual in 2020, the music ministry was provided with many opportunities for us to innovate and pivot as we continued to provide a quality worship experience. Our musicians demonstrated great flexibility and versatility. Initially, vocal and instrumental soloists and small ensembles met to film worship music in the Sanctuary. As the pandemic raged on, choral singing returned through the unfamiliar phenomenon of a Virtual Choir! Chancel Choir members practiced music individually, navigating unfamiliar technology and submitting individual videos that were combined into monthly virtual anthems. More “tech savvy” singers helped those with less knowledge so that everyone who wanted to participate was able.

Eventually, we regathered in person to record anthems for Christmas Eve and Easter by spreading out in the Nave of the Sanctuary. Singers reported feeling as if they were singing as soloists the entire time. Yet, their dedication and resolve held fast. One of our favorite offerings was the “Hallelujah Chorus” on Easter Sunday, in which we engaged over 120 church members and friends to recreate this annual tradition by holding up signs with each word printed as a recording of our Chancel Choir singing was played. This Facebook video has had nearly 5,000 views to date!

Throughout these difficult months, choir shepherds also checked in on each other frequently to help prevent anyone from feeling isolated. My admiration for the choir’s resourcefulness and care for one another reached new heights during these long months. I feel so privileged to serve alongside them in this shared music ministry!



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# SERVE

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## *Youth Interns: Doing Ministry in this Time of Transition*

*By Rev. Dr. Russ Peterman, Senior Minister*



In this time of transition as we await the arrival of our new Minister to Students, Rev. Alison Fitzgerald, we have brought on board some young adults to assist with our youth ministry. These four TCU students, all of whom have been involved in youth ministry in their own home churches and regions, have done an exceptional job of working with me to create a warm, fun, and spiritually meaningful environment for our middle and high school youth.

Bainbridge Allen grew up right here at UCC and has been very active in the Youth Ministry program, first as a youth, now as a Youth Ministry Intern. Bainbridge loves this church—and these young people

who call it home. He loves to come up with new, creative ways of getting the youth to think about matters of faith.



*Bainbridge Allen*

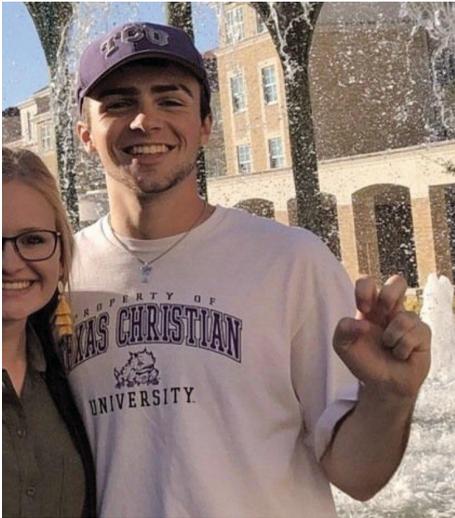
Rayden Hicks is a Religious Studies major from San Angelo. In addition to her studies and work at UCC, she plays on the TCU Club soccer team. It is not uncommon for her to bring her pet parakeet, Bowie, to youth groups!



*Rayden Hicks*

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Austin Hill is a senior Finance major from Dallas. The son of a Disciples minister, ministry is in his genes.



*Austin Hill*

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Ella Johnson is a sophomore from Colorado Springs studying Religion. She's brilliant and sweet, loves all things outdoors, and is also currently serving as the president of the Disciples on Campus group.

From Sunday morning conversations, Sunday evening youth groups, to



*Ella Johnson*

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Wednesday evening Community Groups in students' homes, they have found creative ways to connect with and care for our young people. They've stayed in touch with kids throughout the week, letting them know they are loved and appreciated, and have made sure that church is fun!

During this period when we have been constructing and putting into place a whole new vision for ministry to students, these dynamic, energetic and caring Interns have been the hands and feet of our youth ministry, allowing me to dream and plan and helping me be cool and relevant. I have so loved working with these talented young leaders.

There is one more person who has been a God-send to me—and to UCC—during this time—Joseph Hartley, a recent TCU grad member of UCC. Joseph has poured his heart and soul into Sunday mornings, keeping youth connected, engaged, and growing in

their faith. For bringing fresh bagels and leading engaging conversations, Joseph deserves our deepest gratitude and appreciation.



Joseph Hartley

I'm so thankful for our amazing Student Ministry staff who have stepped up and worked hard to help us navigate the transition to a new chapter in student ministry. I can't wait to see what's next.



*I thank  
my God  
upon every  
remembrance  
of you.*

PHILIPPIANS 1:3





*Seek the Sacred.  
Commit to Love.  
Empower to Serve.*





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