

September 27, 2023 | Waynesboro, Virginia | *a newsletter supplement*

“We want to be witnesses to mercy”

First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte seeks to address the mental health crisis.

By Ken Garfield. CHARLOTTE. A trailblazing initiative is helping First Presbyterian Church live up to its watchword, “For Christ in the heart of Charlotte.” Amid the crisis that one expert told church leaders was a “tsunami,” First Presbyterian in uptown Charlotte, NC, has launched a mental health ministry. Many houses of worship avoid the issue. A 2019 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) survey found that 54 percent of clergy and lay leaders say their church is interested in learning more about mental health ministry — yet only 30 percent say they are equipped to do something. First Presbyterian, founded in 1821, its steeple standing tall beside the booming city’s skyscrapers, is doing something.



The church has partnered with Sun Counseling & Wellness in Charlotte to provide two full-time counselors who see clients at the church. Ages 8 and above are welcome regardless of whether they can afford it — church members, those who attend other houses of worship or no house of worship. A crucial part of the mission is to serve the 22,000 people who live in uptown Charlotte and the 100,000 who work there (when they are not working remotely).

Given the need, Juliet Lam Kuehnle of Sun Counseling & Wellness calls the timing of the partnership “divine.” Pendleton Peery, the 1,900-member congregation’s senior pastor, calls it an opportunity from which the church cannot run: “We have a mental health crisis in Charlotte and as a country.”

Since counseling at the church began late last year, therapists Sheba Surratt and Andrea Suarez have seen 100 clients — a range of ages, races and sexualities. Many return for recurring, weekly 50-minute sessions. Eighty percent have received financial help to pay for the sessions, including a few who are experiencing homelessness. Clients have been charged anywhere from nothing to \$200 per session, depending on what they can afford.

Especially as it relates to the most fragile among us, God is in the details. To honor clients’ privacy, the counseling center entrance and waiting area are separate from the church’s main entrance. Parking, always a bugaboo in Charlotte’s Center City, is plentiful and free in the church lot. While clients are welcome to discuss their faith (or lack of faith), this is not pastoral counseling. The priority isn’t intended to guide the hurting and troubled toward Jesus as the answer to their depression, anxiety, eating disorder or whatever challenge weighs them down. **CONTINUED**

Counseling, continued

“It’s not evangelism,” says Anna Dickson, associate pastor of congregational care. Dickson was part of a committee of church members that established the mental health ministry. It is funded by contributions to the church’s 2020 Opening Doors Capital Campaign which raised \$12 million for improvements to the historic church building. In addition to mental health, a portion of those funds are going to global missions and expanding early childhood education. Part of the initiative is working with Sun Counseling & Wellness to offer classes, programs, retreats and more. For example, a series of evening classes this autumn for parents of children elementary-age and younger will explore such challenges as dealing with tantrums and communicating with their child. This effort and others to come will be open to the community.



The lobby of First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte's new counseling center is near the fresco "The Good Samaritan" by artist Ben Long. Photo by Dartinia Hull.

The new counseling center at First Presbyterian Church is in the shadow of “The Good Samaritan.” A fresco depicting the familiar story – impossible to ignore at eight feet tall and 28 feet long – was commissioned by the church and unveiled in 2001 in the then-new fellowship hall. Jesus shares the parable in Luke — how a man beaten and left for dead by robbers is rescued by a Samaritan after a priest and Levite pass him by.

Jesus’ command? “Go and do likewise.”

In his interpretation for First Presbyterian, artist Ben Long placed young shepherds on a hill overlooking the Samaritan caring for the beaten man. Dickson, the associate pastor, calls the children “witnesses to mercy.” When the church needed space for the counseling center, the best spot turned out to be in the shadow of shepherds.

There’s a lesson there, and a mission.

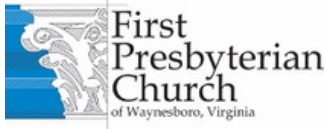
As Dickson said, “We want to be witnesses to mercy.”

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted a denomination-wide initiative on mental health that includes grants for churches, councils and seminaries to establish new programs. The deadline to apply for the next round of grants is March 15, 2024. Details can be found at: www.pcusa.org.

AUTUMN

OUR WORSHIP CHANNELS

CLICK ON THE LOGOS



Music Notes for October 1

WORSHIP THIS WEEK:

PSALM 25:1-9:10

MATTHEW 21: 23-32

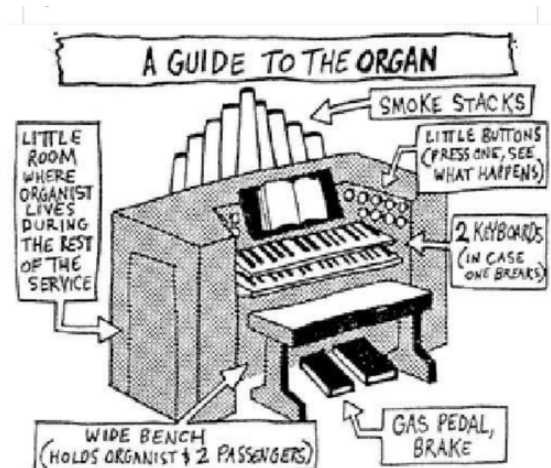
SERMON: 'PUBLIC OPINION.'



October opens with World Communion Sunday, and we will mark the global occasion by singing music that amplifies the message. The opening hymn will be *Brethren, We Have Met to Worship*, also known as HOLY MANNA, and the closing hymn will be *Loaves Were Broken*, known by the tune name BEACH SPRING. The anthem will be *In Remembrance of Me*, with text by Ragan Courtney (b. 1941) and music by Buryl Red (1936-2013). It is a musical setting of Jesus' charge to his disciples at the Last Supper: heal the sick, feed the hungry and pray for the time that God's will is done.

First Fridays Concert Series

With our return to worship the Sanctuary, it is time for the fall season of **First Fridays**. Roger will play his 33rd (!) First Friday program on October 6. The free concert at 12:15 will be followed by a light luncheon, generously provided by the church. We are so grateful to FPC for supporting this community endeavor!





Smyrna Presbyterian Church

BETTER TOGETHER

Bible Study

**MONDAY,
OCTOBER 2**

1:00-2:00 p.m.

COME OUT AND JOIN
WESTMINSTER'S DCE, JOHN TINDALL,
AND EXPLORE TOGETHER
THE GREAT STORIES
AND THEMES OF THE BIBLE.

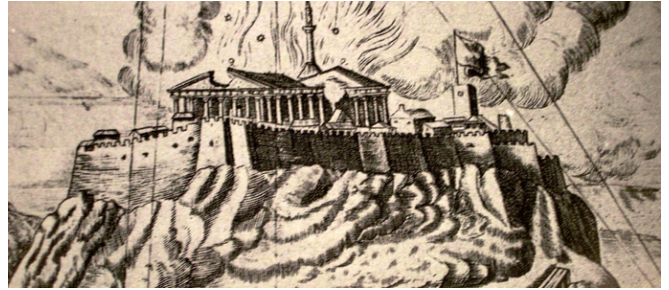
This Week in History.



President Dwight Eisenhower orders the National Guard to enforce racial integration of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas.
September 24, 1957

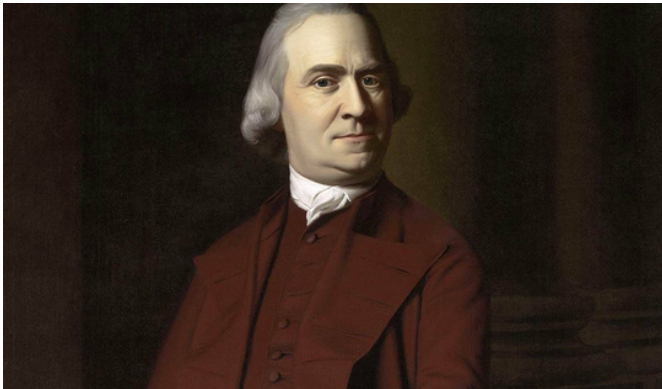


Spanish explorer **Vasco Nunez de Balboa** finds the Pacific Ocean after crossing the Isthmus of Panama, claiming the whole thing for Spain.
September 25, 1513



The Acropolis is bombarded by the Venetian army attempting to oust the Turks, who were storing gunpowder in the Parthenon. The resulting explosion would cause heavy damage to the ancient Athenian temple.

September 26, 1687



American revolutionary leader and beer mascot **Samuel Adams** is born in Boston, MA. A passionate, vocal leader, he would serve as a delegate to the First and Second Continental Congresses, sign the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation.

September 27, 1722



Portuguese navigator **Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo** enters San Diego Bay, becoming the first European to see California.

September 28, 1542



Congress establishes the **United States Army** with 1,000 enlisted men and officers.

September 29, 1789



Actor **James Dean** is killed in a car crash in California at age 24. Although he made just three major films, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *East of Eden* and *Giant*, he remains one of the most influential actors in Hollywood history.

September 30, 1955