

Methodist Moments

Chicken Soup for the Methodist Soul



*Stories Shared by Members
of the
United Methodist Church of Monroe*

*On the Occasion of the 40th Anniversary
1973 – 2013*

May Your Heart be Warmed!

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Reverend Richard C. Griffin's "The Children's Prayer"

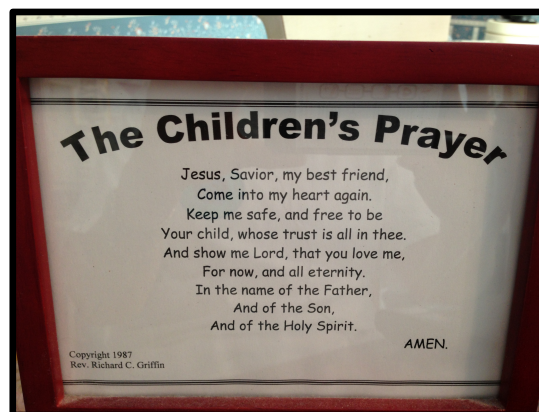
Written by Rev. Richard C. Griffin - Copyright 1987

The following prayer was written by Richard Griffin and he taught it to all the children of the church. Both Amy and Michelle still have a copy of this prayer framed by their bedside and they remember saying it with Rev. Griffin at our church.

The Children's Prayer

(written by Rev. Richard C. Griffin, copyright 1987)

*Jesus, Savior, my best friend,
Come into my heart again.
Keep me safe, and free to be
Your child, whose trust is all in thee.
And show me Lord, that you love me,
For now, and all eternity.
In the name of the Father,
And of the Son,
And of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.*



Shared by: Sheryl Rajpolt, October 2013

Remember when ...

- Ron Burger and Ken Fredeen were singing "All For the Best" from Godspell at a Talent Show? They were talented!
- (I)/we learned from Carol Steiner how to bake our "famous" apple crumb pies?
- Charlie Cornut arrived on Trustee work days with all the landscaping equipment? We sure loved to know he was coming and always had a box of donuts and coffee waiting!
- we had to clean up after the water pipe froze and burst in Gregg Gabor's office? At least he got new lights and carpet!

Submitted by Rose Aiello, October 2013

- you were the liturgist and had to pronounce several of those difficult Old Testament names?
- the cymbal crashed during the Christmas Cantata and made everyone jump?
- we had a very competitive Yankee gift exchange during the choir party at the church?
- we had the old chairs and those tables that weighed 500 pounds apiece?
- Cheryl Etherton received a parking ticket in another town for the exact date/time she was in a prayer study?
- Pastor Gregg's car was hit at a stoplight on the way to the Conference Center? The gentleman in the other car was mortified to learn he had rear-ended a minister's car!
- a certain church youth tried to light the grass on fire at the Relay for Life?
- we found out that most Emmaus youth LOVE bacon?!?

Submitted by Heather Arnold, October 2013

- the Marchants would drive to Boston the day of the Lobster Dinners for the fresh lobster?
- Charlene Denton and Millie Chase would drive to New York for the apples for the apple pies? (Frank's mother lived near an apple orchard.)
- we didn't have a janitor and the families took turns cleaning the church?

- after the first Harvest Festival Carol and Dotti put the proceeds in Carol's freezer till the bank opened on Monday?
- Carol Steiner directed the musicals, Cool In The Furnace, 100% Chance of Rain, Moses and The Freedom Fanatics?
- the church had a bowling team? George Ferris, Rich Steiner, Lee Hossler, Hike Wells and Charlie Fischer.
- the children were asked what famous person they would like to be, and Sam Gray replied, "Donald Trump?"
- the Friendship Circle would always meet at Charlie and Lois Grich's house to work on fair items?
- we had ... a square dance ... a Valentine dinner with a contest for the best decorated table that depicted a song with the word heart in the title, ... a talent contest with "Sisters" Laura and Heather ... "Cabaret" nights in Bridgeport, ski nights at "Mt. Southington," ... retreats?

Submitted by Dotti Hossler, October 2013

- we didn't always have a snowplow contract?? My children and I would drive to church to shovel and Rev. Denton and his family would be there shoveling and ask, "Why are you all here, Gail?" And my answer was, "to shovel, too."

Submitted by Gail Mas, October 2013

Memories shared by Rose Aiello

At the time our family moved from Stratford to Monroe in the early part of 1989, we had two boys, age 3 and a newborn. It took me until the fall to begin to find a church home and naturally, since I had been a member of the Congregational church, that's initially where I visited. I then came to the UMC of Monroe and felt right at home. At the time Frank Denton was the pastor and his wife, Charlene, was organist. They were both so welcoming and helped me to decide to join in March 1990. By then I was already singing in the choir (Charlene was very persuasive) and helping in the nursery (my middle son was almost a year old). Then Pastor Denton asked me to chair the Worship Committee! I hadn't served on a committee since high school (15 years or so) and I was a bit intimidated. However, Frank must have seen my capabilities, as I have moved on from that to many other positions in the church, as well as being the current Lay Leader.

Memories shared by Priscilla Bromley

Prison Ministries – 1983

Reverend Frank Denton began my husband's funeral service saying, "I met Richard in jail!" That fact was true. Rev. Frank had initiated pastoral visits to men in the North Street Jail in Bridgeport. Indeed, Richard Bromley was in the jail as a fellow volunteer with other church members. They met each week with an assigned person or in a group setting. Their goal was to tell them about the love of God through Bible readings about Jesus and His teachings. Volunteers were available to answer any questions and give encouragement for their future. Rev. Denton and Richard, with others from local Methodist churches, prayed for and with those inmates for a better and Christian future upon discharge.

Covenant to Care - 1998

Covenant to Care for Children and their families began during the ministry of Reverend Frank Denton. This is a program to assist foster children in Fairfield County with donations from area charitable groups and churches. Foster families receive state monies for necessities. Covenant to Care has the goal of providing extra for birthdays, Christmas, food, school supplies, extras as requested. Meral Prewitt is the organizer for Southern Fairfield County. She works closely with the State Department of Children and Families along with their social workers. This is still an ongoing program with the United Methodist Church of Monroe.

A letter from The Reverend Karen A. Burger

Pastor, United Methodist Church of Mount Kisco, Mount Kisco, NY (present)

Pastor, United Methodist Church of Monroe 1996 - 1999

I have many special memories of the United Methodist Church of Monroe. I remember the wonderful fellowship experienced at activities like the annual apple pie bake and the delightful smell of the fresh apples. I remember the joy in the choir with Debbie Heitzke at the piano and at the helm. Ron and I both enjoyed singing with the choir. I remember the beauty of the sanctuary, seeing deer outside the sliding doors in the lovely wooded setting. I remember dedicated church member Hike Wells riding outside on his tractor mower and stopping by the office to say hello. He gave me a prayer book that he had during wartime and spoke to me about how blessed he felt to be alive when so many around him did not make it. I remember the special bond that Dave and Sue York, Frank and Charlene Denton had with the congregation, and the way in which their love for the people of this church have helped shape your identity and guide your path. Our prayers are with Frank and his family at this time, and we mourn with you that Charlene is no longer with us. I remember Rev. Jeremiah and Lisa Park attending the church with their family before he became a Bishop and his gracious and encouraging words each week in the greeting line. I remember Bible study discussions with Annette Griffith and others, such as Mary Lou Hastings, including Disciple Bible Study classes, which she and I co-led, what an excellent teacher she was as was Don Hastings, who at the time chaired Missions, and I remember lovely weddings and baptisms. I remember the Sword family and their beautiful spirit and the period of time when Beth Sword started a Mom's play group at the church for parents of young children.

When I came to this church, I still had a lot of learning and growing to do. The example of the people here left a lasting impression and was part of that growth for me. I had come from an urban parish just prior to my appointment to UMC of Monroe, and the years in Monroe taught me a lot about the lovely traditions of the country. The congregation had a wonderful mix of people from the East Village Church (such as the Mas family, I believe) and the new church, both transplants from other regions of the country, including Ohio and Texas and North Dakota during my time there, and persons who had their roots in the local area when it was farm country.

I remember the UMC of Monroe as being strong in mission work. The example of Don and Mary Lou Hasting and Deanna Culbert and Annette Griffith and Quentin Brantley, along with many others, have made a difference for people in our country and around the world. We walked together on the CROP Walk, worked together on Habitat for Humanity houses, and encouraged "Alternative Giving" at Christmastime to missions organizations in lieu of Christmas cards.

A few more memories:

1. Working with Cathy Hautala and Cindy Germain with the youth group on a weekly basis and our most memorable event: sleeping out in the parking lot in boxes to simulate homelessness! Wow, what an experience in October with the chill of the early morning!

2. The kindness and outpouring of cards and support you gave us when I experienced a miscarriage while pregnant during my third year serving the church. Your love and care made a difference for me us as we healed.
3. Enjoying the lovely walking trail down the hill from the church and the swimming and kayaking at Wolfe Park. Wow, what a beautiful area you live in!
4. Starting a Saturday morning group for artists and musicians to meet together to share their work. Ed Davidson shared with us poems he wrote, and I set one of them to music, calling it the "Palm Sunday Song." The children's choir learned it and shared it in worship. It's hard to believe that some of the people we knew there have now passed on or moved out of the area or grown up, but I imagine they all carry with them experiences of caring they experienced while in Monroe and part of the church family there 5) Working with the Silver Anniversary committee on the 25th anniversary celebration which included a dinner and Christmas tree ornaments (I still have mine!) Carol Steiner was instrumental in planning this celebration and a joy to work with!

I want to encourage you to continue to be a beacon of caring for a world in need, blending seamlessly the "old and the new." Ron joins me in thanking you for sharing time with us in ministry and for your ongoing witness.

Peace and Joy in Christ,

The Rev. Karen A. Burger

A letter from Pastor Janet Denton Chisom

Associate Pastor for Christian Education, Salem Presbyterian Church, Salem, VA

October 21, 2013

Dear Monroe United Methodist Church,

I want to thank you for inviting me to be part of your 40-year celebration. I wish I could be with you, to worship, to see old friends, to be in a familiar place that I have loved for many years. However, I have responsibilities in my own church and community in Salem, VA, that cannot be missed.

Monroe UMC was a great community to grow up in and has meant a lot to me over the years. My mind and heart are stocked full of wonderful memories.

- I remember sitting with my brother, Richard, in the front of the sanctuary each week, where mom and dad could keep a watchful eye on us (although I'm sure we behaved like perfect angels).
- I remember being in "Gospel Animals," a musical put on by both the children and adult choirs.
- I rang my first bells in Monroe, and continued ringing at Gettysburg College, at Bedford Presbyterian Church, at Union-PSCE Seminary, and at Salem Presbyterian Church.
- I can remember many church-wide clean-ups, where we'd work hard at painting doors, or raking leaves, or weeding the bank. Then, we'd gather in the parlor and make huge sandwiches out of lunchmeat and cheese and pickles.
- Hike Wells dutifully mowed the lawn.
- Mrs. Steiner would lead us in singing "Zacchaeus was a Wee Little Man" and "Silver and Gold Have I None" during the Sunday School time. I felt very grown up when I was one of the "big kids" who could sit on the back tables instead of in the chairs.
- I loved walking up the hill after school on Pie Making Day and finding the sanctuary an assembly line for pies. Some of the older men (Mr. Waterman and Mr. Bragaw) would be eating coils of apple peels about as fast as they could peel them. The pies would be baking or cooling in the kitchen. The whole church smelled Wonderful.
- Another wonderful smell was our annual youth cookie bake-a-thon when we would bake thousands of Christmas cookies (the number 250 dozen rings a bell) to fill orders from people at church. The tables would be lined up down the hallway with packages of 24 assorted cookies tied with red and green ribbons.
- I remember hymn sings. Particularly when I was in high school, I enjoyed the challenge of singing in parts.
- Mary Jane Toumine was my choice of people to talk to when I was going through a difficult time as a middle schooler. I don't remember what either of us said, but I do remember sitting on a stool in her family room and having her complete attention. After that visit with her, the world seemed to rotate smoother.
- Mrs. Hastings took me out for a hot dog for my 16th birthday.
- Sally Hastings, and Donna Jean and Ken Fredeen would keep us entertained at Youth Group. We played games, went on hikes, heard speakers, and went to Quinipet for CCYM retreats. I'm still in touch with many of the people whose friendships were solidified because of Youth Group.
- I tried to learn how to drive stick-shift in the upper parking lot. I was never successful at that.
- However, Dad and I were successful at sledding down the hill from the upper parking lot, passing the "Goeth Right" sign, taking a left on Cutler's Farm Road, and coasting all the way to Pepper Street. We would only get in a few runs before the plows would come.
- But, sometimes my job was to help clear the sidewalk on Sunday mornings. One particularly snowy day I put my snow pants on over my pajamas figuring that nobody would come for worship

anyway. We ended up having worship in the parlor with about 15 people ... and everyone commented that they loved my pajamas.

- Mr. McGough challenged the HS Sunday School class to re-enact the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25) and make our \$100 bill grow. I worked throughout the year to bake bread and rolls, while others sewed or fixed cars or tie-dyed CROP Walk t-shirts. In the end we were given the freedom to donate the money, including the \$100 starter money and what we made, to the organization of our choice.
- I loved that I saw Mr. York both at school and at church (and I was always his tie critic). It was special, too, to know Mrs. Hastings as both a teacher and someone at church.
- Mr. Davidson surprised me with a cake on my 18th birthday and a party after church.
- My walls in college had a number of cards and pictures that were sent to me with some extra words of encouragement from Mrs. Sword.
- It was important that when I was ordained as a Presbyterian Pastor in 2006, quite a number of Monroe UMC folks showed up to the service in Bedford, NY.
- And it was equally important that many people from Monroe UMC came to Mom's memorial service in September 2012 ... a testimony to her leadership and friendship.

My memories could continue to run on. As I'm typing this, an Avery and Marsh song is running through my head:

A church is not a building.
A church is not a steeple.
A church is not a resting place.
A church is a people.

I am the church!
You are the church!
We are the church together!
All who follow Jesus,
All around the world,
Yes, we're the church together!

I am thankful for the 15 years (1981 – 1996) that we spent at Monroe United Methodist Church. I am thankful for your ministry to me and our ministry together. I am now serving a Presbyterian Church in Salem, VA, but I do fondly and appreciatively remember that the church is a people, and we are the church together.

Blessings for the next 40+ years.

Sincerely,

Janet Denton Chisom
janetchisom.spc@gmail.com

A letter from The Reverend Sherry Driscoll

Pastor, United Methodist Church of Monroe 1999 - 2003

Dear Members and Friends of the UMC of Monroe:

Congratulations on 40 years in ministry! Ken and I are unable to attend the celebration service as we were in New York and Connecticut in mid-August for the interment of my parent's ashes. It is impossible for us to make another trip at this time.

Ken retired from IBM after almost 40 years of service in mid-July. He is trying to figure out what to do with all the time he now has in addition to playing golf.

Our 6-year old grandson, Gabriel, lives with his mother in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Our son Shawn, who works for IBM, and his wife, Jessica, are moving to Tampa, FL in the near future and are expecting their first child in mid-April. Our son, Ryan, who works for Accenture, and his wife, Stephanie live in Fuquay-Varina, NC and are expecting their first child in late May.

I work for a free lunch program two mornings a week. I volunteer as a screener at the Sandhills/Moore Coalition for Human Care one morning a week. I also volunteer weekly at the Moore Free Care Clinic. This fall I have been leading a study group at the Southern Pines United Methodist Church where I attend. I serve as the co-chair of the Outreach Committee. My church supports some 20 outreach ministries, both locally and abroad. I plan to travel to Zimbabwe next September to visit the 90 orphans our church has "adopted" through the Zoe Ministry Program.

I have fond memories of Apple Harvest Festivals and the Art Auctions. In fact, 2 paintings from the latter hang in our living room. It was an accomplishment during my ministry to move the pastor's office, the church office, and the parlor to the opposite end of the building. I am sure the pastors and secretaries, who have followed me, appreciate the added space and privacy. I remember walking through the streets of Bridgeport for the annual CROP Walk – usually with a group of confirmands who couldn't understand why they were required to do this. By far, the most important memory, though I have is of the good friendships that I made during the course of my ministry – many that continue today.

May God's blessings continue to be upon the ministry of The United Methodist Church of Monroe!

Your sister in Christ,

The Rev. Sherry Driscoll

Memories shared by Bill Florin

If I could use just one word to describe the United Methodist Church of Monroe and its people, it is “welcoming.” Carin and I moved a few times since we were married and before settling in Monroe over eight years ago. After every other move, we went church shopping but never stopped at the first. That was until we came here. We found our way by following those blue road-side signs and never left.

On that first visit, we were greeted warmly by several people. We were invited back. People took time to get to know us and Emily, who was only about a year old at the time. Sheryl Rajpolt was among those who made us feel wanted and welcome here.

When Daniel was born, Betsy and Carl Sword were at our doorstep with a chicken dinner. Where else does that happen? UMC of Monroe is our home and we feel blessed to have found it.

A letter from The Reverend Kregg Gabor

Pastor, United Methodist Church of Hyde Park, Hyde Park, NY (present)

Pastor, United Methodist Church of Monroe 2005 - 2013



The United Methodist Church of Hyde Park

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The United Methodist Church of Monroe
515 Cutlers Farm Road
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October 21, 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Congratulations on your fortieth year of ministry on the hill of Cutlers Farm Road in Monroe! You all should be proud of the years of faithful service and commitment that you have given the wider Monroe community as a family in Jesus Christ. I know that my family is happy to be accounted as part of this community for eight years, and we continue to pray God's blessings to be with you all for not just forty years, but until God's Kingdom victorious is a reality!

As I look back on our time together there are two areas that I celebrate with you. First there is the life of our family lived in your midst. Emma literally grew up in Monroe. Her first moments going away to school were right there in her church home at Kiddie Campus. Through the care, concern, and love that she experienced in these early years at UMCM she began her journey into being the young lady that she has become. In your midst she had so many grandparents and brothers and sisters. Monroe will always be "home" to her, the place where her first memories were made. Emma will always have nothing but fond feelings about the UMC of Monroe and all the people there. Laura and I thank you all for being such an integral part of her life.

But you also helped us grow as parents. You walked with us through the sprained ankles and a broken arm. You included us in the lives of your families so that we felt very comfortable with all of you. We felt embraced by the community and loved by each one of you. UMC of Monroe is truly a family friendly place to be.

So our family grew in blessings under your care, but I feel that I personally and professionally grew while a part of your fellowship. We weathered our share of challenges and hurdles. There were national events that stretched our faith beyond ourselves as we looked to find hope in the face of hurricanes, earthquakes and floods. There was tragedy on our doorstep that challenged our definition of evil and called for us to reach out in goodness. There were floods in the office, and passing of staff.

We made it through the “great recession” and the financial challenges with which we were confronted by faith, commitment and solidarity. Even as resources shrank, you all held together as family. At a time when churches were loosing their Sunday Schools and all their youth, we managed to maintain our church school attendance at a level of two to three times that of churches much larger than our own, even more remarkable as the public school system in Monroe saw its enrollment plunge and found it necessary to close one of its schools.

In all of this the folks at UMCM managed to use the challenges we faced as springboards to increase faith and discipleship. We wrestled together trying to discern God’s hand and call as we walked forward. I know that I would be far less able a pastor had I not spent eight years in Monroe in your midst. I never felt insecure or unable to trust the people about me, but always able to lean on them for help and advice as we tried to make sense and discern God’s calling for us as a church. There is not a day that goes by that I do not thank God for each one of you and the input you have given in developing me as a pastor. You will all remain an integral part of my ministry and who I am in Christ.

VBS, the Harvest Festival, Easter Week, Easter Egg Hunt, Shrove Tuesday, book studies and all of the other fellowship opportunities in between were just the icing on the cake of a vital congregation in Jesus Christ. I know that God will continue to bless you all. I know that as you continue to reach out to your world in faith and joy, God will use UMCM in powerful ways for His glory and praise. May God bless and keep you. May God prosper and protect the wonderful family that I and my family feel privileged to always be a part of, the family of UMCM.

Yours In Christ,

Kregg

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kregg', with a stylized, cursive script.

Memories shared by Laura Gabor

UMCM MEMORIES

by Laura Gabor

Learning, laughing, singing, sharing, praying, praising, always caring.
Scripture reading, many crafts, story telling, many laughs!
Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23, hand print leaves and growing trees.
Funny skits, silly songs, Sunday morning sing-a-longs.

Prizes, games and bounce house fun, children's corner here we come!
Apple peeling, pie baking, pork pulling, fritter making.
My fair ladies, crafts and more, cheese and pies and gifts galore.
UMCM Harvest Fest, so much work I need a rest!!

Dunkin' Donuts, lemonade, playground fun on sunny days.
Soup-er bowl collecting money, yearly skit was oh so funny!!
King's Pantry, friends sharing, mini-missions, always caring.
Emmaus walk, relay for life, crop walk, we're serving Christ!

Bell ringing, carol singing, Christmas night by candlelight.
Trim a tree and decorate, at Christmas time we look so great!
Pageant practice, decorations, lots of help for preparations.
Angels, shepherds, Joseph, Mary, find the baby she will carry!!

Choir singing, trumpets ringing, hosannas praising, palms are waving.
Seder dinner, watch fire, last supper, Gregg is tired!
Holy week we walk with Christ, thank Him for His sacrifice.
Easter breakfast, spring has come, 1,000 eggs and family fun!!

Summer fun at VBS, many children are our guest.
Songs, snacks, Bible setting, stories, games, and we are sweating...
Puppet shows, crazy songs, happy mem'ries will live on.
Vacation Bible School, please live out the golden rule!

Talent show, game night, behind the church we take a hike.
Birthday cakes, mac and cheese, see the children climbing trees.
Fellowship at coffee hour, taking home our Easter flowers.
Faith Weavers, Faithful Friends, hope that we will meet again!

A letter from The Reverend Donald Hoff

Pastor, East Village Methodist Church 1963 - 1966

October 7, 2013

Thank you for reaching out to me as a former Pastor of the East Village portion of the Methodist presence. I have appreciated for many years how rich a Methodist tradition exists at the historical core of the town of Monroe.

Personally, our family history is now indelibly linked the community, even through it was three short years. It was my first full time parish, I was ordained Elder, I preached my 7 sermons there, and two of our three children were born while serving there.

I can still remember the names of many of the members after 47 years, although some have passed on. Along with that, I will try to remember and share a shorter version of stories and experiences of both former congregations, now united. There are some photos I will scan and provide for your congregation's archives.

In a brief biographical sketch, I'll try to provide some information, putting some detail on my life post-Monroe, and how I consider it as a springboard for the almost 1/2 a century ministry which followed.

Raised in an inner-city Methodist mission, in Brooklyn, involved in gang activities, literally bailed out of a jail with church funds, redeemed and restored to an environment and culture which was a radical departure. The embrace and care of the congregation taught me what seminary couldn't.

I could never imagine what was in-store for me following my first appointment. The Lord, looking at our mistakes, faults and foibles, has a clear and certain way of saying " "I can do something with that"

In a thumbnail ... my rewarding ministry continued for me, on a very unexpected path. Leaving Monroe in 1966, we have made our home in this community of Elmira, New York. I was appointed to an Ecumenical Urban Street Ministry, 3 years in duration.

Following that, my Appointment Beyond the Local Church was for 23 years to a specialized ministry with court-appointed troubled youth and their families through a New York State agency. While I served 8 congregations both rural and urban, during the 27 years, I earned a Masters in Social Work at Syracuse University, studied in Sweden, and was appointed as a representative to the United Nations Congress on Social Defense (Criminal Justice), Geneva, Switzerland. At that same time I taught Social Work and Criminal Justice at Elmira College. I have asked from time to time: "What is a Brooklyn boy doing here?"

While I retired, for the 3rd time, 7 years ago the United Methodist Church has opened doors to us in missions. For the past 24 years my wife Donna and I continue to be active and working in ecumenical missions in Guatemala. We have also taken work teams to Mexico, Guatemala and

Nepal. This is our 10th year, working 3-4 months a year with the Methodist NOMADS (VIM) work teams in widow's housing and Disaster Relief.

And we are not done yet. The Lord has blessed us with abilities, health and strength. Donna and I are both very active and well, one day apart in our forthcoming 76th birthdays. I bike about 2,000 miles a year, and recently biked 76 miles for my 76th birthday. Wonder if it might have to do with clean living and breathing the rarified air of my first parish in Monroe?

Pastor Don
26 Dry Run Road
Pine City, NY 14871
donaldhoff@gmail.com

A letter from The Reverend Louis Leone

Pastor, United Methodist Church of Monroe 1978 - 1981

Dear Friends at United Methodist Church of Monroe:

We are so happy to be included in the 40th anniversary celebration of the United Methodist Church of Monroe, if only be it by letter and not in person. Barbara and I send our greetings and prayers as you continue this journey of faith together with confidence that the years ahead will be as fruitful and rewarding as years past.

I have now been retired for almost five years having served twelve years in my last appointment as Associate Pastor and Pastoral Counselor at the United Community Church in Sun City Center, Florida. Barbara is also retired from her positions as administrative assistant and school secretary in the Florida public schools.

We are fortunate to have ended our working careers in a retirement community that offers clubs for just about every interest along with a few golf courses and facilities for swimming and other kinds of exercise.

As for family – our son, Peter, is preparing for retirement from the military after a twenty-year career in the Army with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He is married and has two sons ages 13 and 9. Our daughter, Jennifer, is the Medical Staff Services Analyst at a large hospital. Both of our children live in North Carolina and so we have made many trips to the Tar Heel State to see them.

We left Connecticut in 1981 for Florida which means we have been away from you for 32 years. That's along time! But I can still envision in my mind the lovely setting in which the church stands and the building nestled in among the trees. And as I envision that scene, I remember one Sunday morning in the fall of the year as I stood behind the pulpit about midway through my sermon for the morning, the congregation facing right looking out the windows. I was sure I'd lost their attention and so I preached harder. A few turned back but most were still looking out the windows. I finished the service in a down mood only to learn later that a large buck had come out of the woods and was walking along the drive in all his stately majesty. I'm sure there's a parable in that story, but I'll you figure it out.

I'll close by saying again that we wish you all God's blessing for all the years ahead.

Shalom,

Lou and Barbara Leone

Memories shared by Sheryl Rajpolt

New Neighbors introduced us ... I remember when we moved into our house on Pheasant Lane in Monroe in July of 1997. Our cul-de-sac neighbors were Mike and Kathy Nissenbaum and Steve and Pam Moore (both active families with the UMC of Monroe). Amy was 2.5 years old at the time and we were wanting to find a church "for her". Our new neighbors invited us to an end of the summer/start of Sunday School picnic at the church and Amy was so excited because she thought church meant hot dogs and playing on the playground. She soon met the preschool Sunday School class teachers, Rich and Lorraine Wagner, who welcomed her into the 3-4 year old class (even though she was a little young). From that Sunday and for the next 16 years, we've been attending the UMC of Monroe with both of our girls feeling welcome and loved by both God and their extended church family. At the age of 3, Amy hadn't yet been baptized. I was concerned that she was too "old" ... however we soon met Leigh and Russ Gray who were also new to the church and looking to baptize their sons, Max and Sam. On Mother's Day of 1998, we celebrated the baptism of Amy, Sam and Max (they were so cute holding hands at ~3, 4, and 6 years old) and I think Leigh and I were the happiest moms in the church that Mother's Day as our children were christened together! When Michelle was born in 1999, we realized that God had brought us to the UMC of Monroe in preparation for Michelle's birth and her many heart/medical challenges so that we would be surrounded by the loving support and prayers of our church family ... without whom, we would have never survived! We all feel that our UMC "family" (past and present) have represented God's presence in our lives when we needed it the most ... and as a result, he's also worked through us to bring his loving presence to others.

Another memory ... The Nissenbaums started a tradition of taking in church family "orphans" who didn't have local extended family in the area for Thanksgiving dinner. Even though John's parents live about 1.5 hours away, they usually spend Thanksgiving with us, so we didn't really feel like orphans, but that didn't stop the Nissenbaums. One year, they invited all 6 of us (our family and John's folks) to join them and Dom Turro (an older senior gentleman in our church) for Thanksgiving dinner one year and it was great! After the Nissenbaums moved to Ohio, they inspired us to try to continue the tradition and we invited others in our church family to join us for Thanksgiving the following year. We didn't get too many takers, but eventually we connected with the Arnolds (whose extended family were all in the midwest) and we've been celebrating the holidays with them ever since ... not only Thanksgiving, but Easter and Christmas too for at least 8-10 years and it's been great! Pass it on!

Another memory ... FaithQuest changed my life. I'm not sure of the exact year, but I think it was around the Spring of 2001, Rev. Sherry Driscoll (pastor) and Ken Fredeen (lay leader at the time) proposed a "leadership Bible study" called "FaithQuest." I was one of several "new" leaders along with several "established" leaders of the church who were invited to join (I think there were about 10-12 of us in all). It was scheduled for about 2-3 hours every Monday night with prep (Bible reading and some thoughtful preparation) prior to each session. With two kids and a full time job, I declined the invitation knowing that I wouldn't have the time for this commitment. I remember Rev. Sherry telling me that everyone has the time, but not everyone chooses to prioritize this particular commitment over other ones. She also described the program as learning from Jesus's leadership style and applying it to our lives and work in the

church (which appealed to the business side of me). I missed the first week (and maybe even the second week), but then I somehow overcame my "BibleStudy" fears and commitment worries and joined the FaithQuest team. In addition to leadership learnings, I developed deep relationships through our sharing of team joys and concerns and really catapulted my faith journey to a new level. Through the process, Ken Fredeen became my spiritual role model as I wanted to grow to his level of faith someday. Not long after the study concluded, Michelle faced her corrective heart surgery and she (and I) spent 5 weeks in NYC as she went through multiple medical procedures and many trials and tribulations. My evolving faith certainly helped me through those weeks and knowing that our church family was praying for us was a huge comfort to us all! We have drawn on that faith and support of our church many more times since then ... and our faith journey continues on.

Shorter memories...

I will never forget the day that Rev. Karen Burger came to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in NYC unannounced when Michelle was 1 year old and going through her first heart surgery. I'm not sure how Karen knew where to find us, but she just showed up at Michelle's room and asked if she could pray with us. After about 15 minutes of prayer and comfort, she left. It was such a selfless act that meant so much to us to have our own pastor with us. (Had she asked us in advance, we would certainly have said not to bother to make the long trip, but she didn't ask ... she just came to be with us ... and it meant so much).

I remember when Dale Spencer realized that our massive church cross on the wall behind the altar was made of painted styrofoam ... and he was so inspired to replace it that he and his dad created the beautiful wooden cross which hangs there today. We miss the whole Spencer family (since they moved back to NY), but we always think of them when we see that beautiful cross! Thanks!

I've always loved music and was impressed by the church choir, but since I can't read music, I'd never considered joining the church choir ... until Donna Edwards became our church choir director. She was so down to earth and encouraging everyone (and I mean everyone who had any interest at all) to try it out. Once she got any inkling that you might have an interest in singing (or even if you didn't), she would constantly remind you how much she needed you to come out and give it a try. If I recall correctly, I think she even brought food and had a "beginner's night" to come and try singing with the choir. She was so welcoming and convinced me (and several others who joined at the same time) that God would work through us when we didn't have confidence in ourselves. Some of my best friends and most rewarding moments have been as part of the choir ... and I have Donna to thank for "reeling" me in!

I remember Ed Davidson always standing at the back doors of the sanctuary opening the doors for others as a sort of "lead usher." I also remember his original poetry that he would share with the congregation at various times ... and I still have the book of poems that was published of his works. I also remember Ed telling me that he loved when John was liturgist. He especially liked when John would happen to make a mistake during a reading (John doesn't like this part) because Ed said that it made John seem fallible and would then inspire others to want to be liturgists too ... from Ed's perspective, no one has to be perfect to do God's work in our church, they just have to step up and do it! (I often tell new liturgists this story too ... Thanks Ed!)

I remember when Richard Griffin joined us as our new pastor and immediately joined the choir. His booming bass voice often sounded like God Himself! I remember one cantata during Lent (I think) and song that Richard loved ... (I'll get the exact words wrong, but it was something like ...) "can you not stay awake with me for one hour?" when Jesus was praying in the garden and his disciples couldn't stay awake. It made me realize how many times we don't make Jesus our priority. I'm only sorry that Richard had so little time to spend with us. He was a great inspiration to me and is missed!

Pizza & Praise nights ... a few years ago (guess it was probably more like 8-10 years ago), we started a "grass roots" around contemporary praise nights leveraging primarily the "new" (at the time) The Faith We Sing hymnals (and digital copies of the songs). Primarily driven by the Schmalkuche, Arnold, and Rajpolt families, we prepared a collection of songs and utilized Bill's audio/visual prowess to design our first projected Powerpoint charts with the words, digital music played off Bill's keyboard/speakers, and wireless mikes to give the whole praise experience a more contemporary feel. We attracted some of our church members and some friends from the community and we interspersed praise songs with Bible readings and of course, words of prayer and praise. It was usually held on Friday or Saturday nights and we often served pizza afterward (prompting the "Pizza & Praise" moniker). We even took the praise music on the road (with a few patriotic tunes added to the mix) to the UMC Wicke home in Shelton (inspired by Bill's parents who often lead similar praise services for the elderly in their home community). It was a true multi-generational experience with our kids, adults, and seniors all enjoying the service. One favorite memory I have during one of our trips to the Wicke home, as we were setting up the A/V equipment, Amy Rajpolt and Billy Schmalkuche (both probably in elementary/middle school) were sitting together patiently waiting ... when one of the seniors passed by, he asked Amy if Billy was her brother ... and she naturally responded "yes, he's my brother-in-Christ." What a great "UMC family" moment!

I remember fondly Rev Kregg's Lenten services and especially the week before Easter services which were always so inspirational. As the candle representing Christ's journey made its way up the aisle each night, Kregg would describe the feelings and made it real for me (and others). In addition to his readings, he would find great videos to represent key messages in a contemporary and impactful medium. I'll never forget "It's Friday ... but Sunday's a-coming!" I never made it to one of Kregg's Saturday night (Easter Eve) vigils, but I certainly admire his dedication to the daily services that made the journey to Easter so much more personal for many!

A letter from The Reverend Dennis Wagner

Pastor, United Methodist Church of Monroe 1974 - 1978

Sincere appreciation for your invitation to be a part of the 40th anniversary celebration of the United Methodist Church of Monroe. Unfortunately, I will not be able to attend. We have lived in The Villages, Florida since April, 2012. Life in retirement here is very busy and planned with trips and visitors fully six months or more in advance. So, should you know of significant milestones coming up in the future, please let us know as far ahead as possible. I would love to attend!

I hope the 40th celebration is a blast! The congregation and pre-school grew rapidly while I was there from 1974-1978. Can't say I was responsible for that...we all were responsible for that! Some of the most wonderful people in Christ I had the privilege to serve during my forty year career were found at the Monroe UMC. May God continue to bless you all as you continue to serve Him.

Sincerely,

Dennis Wagner