

**First United Methodist Church of Belmont  
2024 Pastor's Report**

***The United Methodist Book of Discipline requires the pastor to submit an annual report to the District Superintendent at Charge Conference, reporting on the ministry of the church in the past year. Pastor George's 2024 report was shared in December and can be read below:***

Our scripture focus for 2024 has been Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, a letter which, you know by now, is comprised of Paul's deep, heartfelt prayer for the church in Ephesus. For most of 2024 I have imagined him praying the same prayers for us in Belmont, my favorite being the prayer he prays in Ephesians 3:17-19: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

We wonder how we are to comprehend that which cannot be measured or contained before realizing Paul really means something more like "grasp" or "hold on to." No matter what comes our way, we are to hold on to this love of Christ and fullness of God that is beyond the limits of our knowledge or measurement. That is surely what we have done in 2024. We have held on to the love of Christ, becoming more like him for our community and beyond.

If you think back, 2024 could have been a year of division and discord for our church. General Conference met in May, making important decisions about who can be welcomed and included in United Methodist congregations. The summer and fall saw our nation engaged in a highly divisive election season, putting stress and strain on even the strongest relationships. While we are not all in the same place on any of these issues, I am proud that our church has held on to what matters most: the love of Christ that surpasses our knowledge or understanding.

Letting go of what is *not* important, we have been able to reach beyond our walls in powerful ways. In 2024 we launched three new mission ministries. We have partnered with Christ UMC in Charlotte to support Room in the Inn, providing meals and shelter for our unhoused neighbors in need. We have partnered with Dahlia Grove to launch a weekly community café, offering delicious meals and fellowship to anyone in our community while also supporting women who are rebuilding their lives after significant trauma. And we began Soup for the Soul, offering home cooked soup to anyone who needs it. Quart after quart has flown off our freezer shelves, blessing members and friends alike. In addition to our ongoing partnerships, we have added 3 new local ministry grant recipients and 2 new formal partnerships with global missionaries of the United Methodist Church.

As I think about this growth, the word that stands out is partner. We are finding ways to partner with others in our community and beyond to make a difference. One very special

partnership is our growing friendship with Hood Memorial AME Zion Church. I'm so proud of our church for taking the chance to partner with Hood and transform a beloved tradition like our annual Trunk or Treat into a new, community festival off campus in the Reid Park neighborhood. It is an indication to me that we are indeed holding on to the things that matter most, allowing God to move us in new directions.

We will need this kind of discernment even more in the years ahead. Our Strategic Planning Team began this work in 2024 and will continue in 2025. At the invitation of Bishop Carter, we have participated in a cohort of "First Churches" in Western North Carolina, benefiting from workshops and trainings and the guidance of a gifted facilitator, the Reverend Rene Wilt. Much of 2024 was devoted to listening, both within and outside our church, to understand our current context. An initial finding that excites me is a clear desire from those we've heard from outside our church for the kind of ministry and mindset we are embracing together alongside a clear awareness within our congregation of a need to do more to share and witness to who we are and what we are about. There are many people who want to be part of a church like ours. They just don't know we're here and what we're about. By God's grace, we can fix that.

2024 has also been a year of incredible tragedy. So many of our family members and friends in Western North Carolina have experienced unimaginable devastation in the wake of Hurricane Helene. We have responded as we always do, faithfully and generously—preparing over 140 flood buckets, twice the number of our usual fall production. Our missions team is in conversation now about how we will continue to support the work of United Methodists to restore and rebuild in 2025.

All of this is possible because we are truly a generous church. Giving year over year is up slightly and our income is right in line with expenses. We continue to make great progress in repaying our construction loan to the United Methodist Foundation. Thank you for your generosity! Since our last Charge Conference we have received 19 new members and our total membership stands at 637.

On a personal note, I will remember 2024 as the year the church's parsonage burned and our family lost our home. I will also remember it as yet another time in my years serving among you in which I have depended so much on your generosity, grace, understanding, care and compassion. You prove again and again that our values are more than words on a page, and I am grateful. Your kindness has helped me and Catherine and our family hold on to what matters. Our gratitude is beyond words.

It goes without saying that so much of what we're about is possible because of our incredible church staff. We've been blessed in 2024 as Quanna McAlister joined us as Director of Youth Ministries and Margie Ligon transitioned to a new role as Director of Missions. We have an incredibly gifted, professional, talented team at First UMC. They are a blessing!

We do not know what 2025 holds and for many of us it already promises to be a year of much uncertainty. I'm reminded of what became our unofficial motto through the COVID-19 pandemic: "No matter what, we are still the church together." As my mentor and friend Bishop Will Willimon once said, "We are the church, not because we've got the building built and paid for, not because of the choir or the organ, the preaching, or the various activities. We're the church because even to us, Christ has come and given his gifts of spirit, mission, and forgiveness, commissioning us to go into the world and do what he did."

The mission remains the most important thing for First United Methodist Church of Belmont. So let us hold fast to that love which surpasses all understanding and "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever! Amen." (2 Peter 3:18)

Respectfully submitted,  
George Ragsdale,  
November, 2025