



## Decline—or Something Else?

*by Pastor Alan Felton*

The church isn't what she used to be!

For United Methodists, that's been a familiar refrain for many years. The United Methodist Church has, in fact, been in numerical decline in the United States since 1968. While many factors helped to disguise this trend—and its effects were minimized in different ways—a tsunami of rapid change in more recent years has made the verdict inescapable: our beloved church is in decline.

A whole industry has grown up to tell us about our decline and to offer helpful ways to reverse it. Some of what has been suggested to local churches works for a season but is

not long-lasting. Other proposals are simply beyond the reach of many churches due to limited resources. And some recommendations are, to be blunt, just silly and inappropriate if the church is to remain the church.

Meanwhile, our numerical decline continues. The pandemic of 2020 accelerated the trend. There was hope for a bounce back after the pandemic ended, but such has not materialized. Disaffiliation took a big bite out of the size of the United Methodist Church, but we are not alone. All Christian denominations are shrinking in size. Even the faithful who remain in the church attend less and are not as involved as they might have been in past days.

All of this leaves us confused, afraid, and deflated. We long for past days when things looked brighter and when we felt more in control. The things that once worked no longer seem to do so. It is hard to get excited about the future when it feels as if we are caught in quicksand.

But what if, instead of panicking, we took the approach offered by

Dr. Tod Bolsinger, who, in a recent podcast, told of consulting with a church that had 1,500 in attendance before the pandemic but now has about 500 in the pews. Bolsinger asked that church this question: "Do you believe that what God wants you to do is go get back the 1,500, or is God giving you a mission for the faithful 500?"

Think about it. What if what we are experiencing is not decline at all but something else? What if we saw our situation not as the end of the church but as a new beginning? What if, instead of being in decline, we are actually being fitted for a new mission? What if we spent more time wisely using what we already have instead of mourning what we once had?

As the apostle Paul wrote, "I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. . . . I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:12–13). Praise God, who is always good and generous! ■



Benson Memorial United Methodist Church, 4706 Creedmoor Road, Raleigh, NC 27612  
Open office hours: M–Th 9AM–1PM | Available by appointment: M–Th 9AM–4PM / F 9AM–1PM  
Church office: (919) 787-0789

[office@bensonmemorialumc.org](mailto:office@bensonmemorialumc.org) | [bensonmemorialumc.org](http://bensonmemorialumc.org)  
[facebook.com/bensonmemorialumc/](https://facebook.com/bensonmemorialumc/) | [instagram.com/bensonmemorialumc/](https://instagram.com/bensonmemorialumc/)



**Benson Memorial UMC**  
www.BensonMemorialUMC.org/Events/


# JACK CRUM CONFERENCE ON PROPHETIC MINISTRY

**Topic :**

## Christian Nationalism & Faithful Responses

Join us for an insightful conversation on Christian nationalism and how people of faith can respond.

 Sunday, March 23, 2025

 2:00 to 5:30 p.m.

 Fellowship Hall, Benson Memorial UMC



**SPEAKER**

**Rev. Dr. Jennifer Copeland**

Executive Director  
NC Council of Churches



**SPEAKER**

**Rev. Dr. Joey Shelton**

Scholar & Author on  
Christian Nationalism



**SPEAKER**

**Rev. Dr. Lester Ruth**

Research Professor of Christian  
Worship, Duke University



The Jack Crum Conference on Prophetic Ministry is an annual event sponsored by the Methodist Federation for Social Action (NC Chapter) and co-sponsored this year by Benson Memorial's Church and Society Team. Named after Rev. Jack Crum, a tireless advocate for racial and social justice, this conference continues his legacy of prophetic ministry.

**Suggested Donation: \$10  
(Students attend free)**

**Register now at :**

[www.mfsancc.org](http://www.mfsancc.org)



## Manna and Mercy with Rev. Alan Storey March 21–25, 2025

Join us for a transformative few days exploring scripture from Genesis to Revelation through the lens of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Rev. Alan Storey of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa will lead this journey, offering a fresh biblical worldview and tools for interpreting scripture's life-giving message.

### Event Schedule:

#### Hayes Barton UMC

**Friday, March 21** | 5:30–9:00 p.m.  
Dinner and Teaching

**Saturday, March 22** | 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m. | Teaching  
(includes light breakfast and boxed lunch) **Registration required.**

**Cost:** \$40 per attendee, \$15 for students (includes meals and materials) Scholarships available—contact Rev. Molly White at [mwhite@hbumc.org](mailto:mwhite@hbumc.org).

#### Southeast Raleigh Table UMC

**Sunday, March 23** | 2:00–5:00 p.m.

**This event is free and requires no registration.**

#### Benson Memorial UMC

**Tuesday, March 25**

7:00–9:00 p.m. | Discussion

Join Rev. Storey for a discussion on his upcoming book, *The bell, banners, and blasphemy*, about the Central Methodist Mission's bold stand for justice in Cape Town. **This event is free and requires no registration.**

***Don't miss  
this opportunity to  
deepen your faith and  
engage with scripture  
in a powerful way!***

**THE CHURCH**

**SPEAKER**

**REV. ALAN STOREY**

Join us for an evening with Rev. Alan Storey of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. He will share from his book, *The bell, banners, and blasphemy*, exploring the Central Methodist Mission's bold stand for justice in Cape Town.

**Tuesday, March 25, 2025 | 7:00–9:00 p.m.**

**FREE EVENT | NO REGISTRATION REQUIRED**  
Visit our website [www.BensonMemorialUMC.org/Events/](http://www.BensonMemorialUMC.org/Events/)

### About Rev. Alan Storey

*Rooted in the South African context, Alan Storey is a gospel storyteller and a facilitator of personal and political change. Alan's commitment to the Jesus way of justice and peacemaking was tested early in his life when he faced conscription into the apartheid regime's military. He chose to be a conscientious objector. Arrested and put on trial, he faced a likely six-year prison sentence. However, his trial was abandoned midway, making him the last conscientious objector to be brought to trial in apartheid South Africa. Over the years, Alan has been involved in numerous civil society organizations addressing gun violence, racism, state-capture corruption, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, spatial apartheid inequality, sex worker discrimination, and the campaign for a universal basic income. He also spearheaded the transformation of the stipend policy within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Alan holds an honors degree in theology and a master's degree in the philosophy of applied business ethics. He is a recipient of the Rotary Paul Harris Fellowship Award and a fellow of the African Leadership Initiative, part of the Aspen Leadership Institute. [Learn more here.](#)*

# THE 40 DAYS OF LENT



## A SEASON FOR EXPERIENCING GOD UP CLOSE

We often have difficulty slowing down. Our lives are full of busyness. We are on our phones or other devices almost constantly. We rarely find an opportunity to “unplug.” The culture around us tells us that the busier we are, the more success we achieve. And, on the rare chance we do take a break, we often are left feeling guilty about it or, at least nagged by a sense of being left out and falling behind.

Somewhere along the way, we can easily lose touch with God. Yes, God remains present even if we don’t notice, but our inattention to the divine presence will eventually leave us feeling worn out and empty. All of our activities and the many achievements we say we enjoy begin to be unsatisfying. We sense something is missing. But what?

The season of Lent gives us opportunities for self-examination, prayer, reading the Bible, and fasting. We learn our limitations during Lent. Realizing that “we came from dust and to dust we shall return” humbles us so that we move closer toward God. As we continue the journey, our lives stop being filled with busyness that drains us and instead opens us to the possibilities that God offers us.

Our Lenten calendar provides ways to help you focus on scripture reading and prayers during the weeks ahead. We will also have a “Sunday Service Opportunity” that you can do at home and then bring to the church each week. The purpose of this calendar is not to replace one way of busyness with another but instead to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us during this season as we together draw close to God.

One way to do this is by using the calendar found at this link: [bensofmemorialumc.org/lenf/](http://bensofmemorialumc.org/lenf/).

Here is a resource that focuses our self-examination through scripture reading, prayers, spiritual reflections, and mission opportunities. The purpose of this calendar is not to fill your time with busyness but to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us during this holy season.

[DOWNLOAD THE PDF CALENDAR](#)

**THE 40 DAYS OF LENT**

**A SEASON FOR EXPERIENCING GOD UP CLOSE**

We invite you to use this calendar to deepen your spiritual journey during this Lenten season. It includes readings and reflections, and actions you can take to give to our community as God has given to you. Each Sunday we will have a service project for you to participate in as a way to show God's love to others. Full details on these projects and daily reflections can be found on our website at [bensofmemorialumc.org/lenf/](http://bensofmemorialumc.org/lenf/).

<b>MARCH 5</b> ASH WEDNESDAY Reading: Psalm 51 Meager Meal: 5:45 p.m. FH Worship Services: Noon & 7 p.m.	<b>MARCH 6</b> Reading: Psalm 5 Service Opportunity for next Sunday: Make an encouraging card(s) for a "mom-to-be" at the women's prison. Drop them off at the church.	<b>MARCH 7</b> Reading: Psalm 25	<b>MARCH 8</b> Saturday's Selah (Based on Psalm 25) See today's reflection here.
<b>MARCH 9</b> SUNDAY SERVICE PROJECT: CARDS FOR MOMS-TO-BE Bring to church your cards for the moms-to-be at the women's prison.	<b>MARCH 10</b> Service Opportunity for next Sunday: Collection for Family Promise of the Triangle Cleaning supplies and mattress covers are high on the list!	<b>MARCH 11</b> Prayer Practice: Play using Lectio Divina—reading, meditating, praying, contemplating. Learn more here.	<b>MARCH 12</b> Reading: Psalm 23
<b>MARCH 13</b> Weekly Wisdom (Inspirational quote by Howard Thurman) Read it here.	<b>MARCH 14</b> Reading: Psalm 34	<b>MARCH 15</b> Saturday's Selah (Based on Psalm 34) See today's reflection here.	

# THE 40 DAYS OF LENT



## SUNDAY SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES

Every Sunday during the season of Lent, there will be a special opportunity for you to serve. There's something for everyone and for all ages, and you can decide to do one, a few, or all of them—it's completely up to you. Check out the information below to see how you would like to serve. If you have any questions, contact our [Minister of Families and Outreach, Cortney Babajtis](#). And as always, take pictures and tag us on Facebook or Instagram. Use @bensonmemorialumc and #bensonmemorialumc to tag us on social media when sharing your experiences!

### **Sunday, March 23: Cards for Springmoor Life Care Retirement Center Residents**

During the week, spend some time creating an encouraging card(s) for a resident at Springmoor Life Care Retirement Community. Need supplies? We've got you covered! Just come to the narthex the Sunday before (3/16) and pick up any materials you need. Bring your completed card(s) to the narthex on Sunday, March 23, or the church office during office hours (9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., Mon.–Thurs.).

### **Sunday, March 30: Clothing Drive for Jeffreys Grove Elementary School**

Many children at our partner school lack access to well-fitting, weather-appropriate clothing and shoes. By donating new or gently worn items, we can help ensure that every child feels comfortable, confident, and ready to learn. We are collecting children's clothing (sizes 4T–14), and children's tennis shoes of all sizes. All donations should be in good condition—clean, gently worn, or new. Bring your donations to the narthex on Sunday, March 30, or the church office during office hours (9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., Mon.–Thurs.).

### **Sunday, April 6: Donations for North Raleigh Ministries**

Check out this list to see the currently most needed items for the pantry:

<https://northraleighministries.com/pantry-donations/>

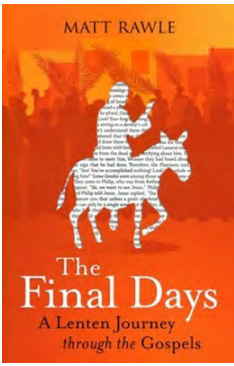
Bring your donations to the narthex on Sunday, April 6, or the church office during office hours (9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., Mon.–Thurs.).

### **Monday, April 7: Serve Your Neighbor**

Choose your own service project. Come up with a way that you/your family can serve your immediate neighbor(s). Take a pic and tag us on Facebook or Instagram. Use @bensonmemorialumc and #bensonmemorialumc to tag us on social media when sharing your experiences!

These service opportunities and more Lenten ideas are listed at [www.BensonMemorialUMC.org/Lent/](http://www.BensonMemorialUMC.org/Lent/). Visit today!





## Join Our Bible Study!

### *The Final Days:* *A Lenten Journey through the Gospels* by Matt Rawle

taught by Pastor Alan Felton

**Wednesdays at 6:45 p.m. and  
Thursdays at 10 a.m.**

Continues through April 9

Lent is a time for careful examination and humble reflection. One of the ways we engage in self-examination is through the study of Scripture. Reading the Holy Word brings us closer to God and prepares us for Easter. *The Final Days*, written by Matt Rawle, leads participants through a study of Jesus' Passion as recounted in the four Gospels. Each one offers slightly different insights and revelations about Jesus' journey to the cross. These differing accounts don't diminish the truth of Jesus but instead reveal it in more detail and with important nuance.

## FINANCE TOWN HALL

**Sunday, March 23  
10:00 to 10:45 a.m.  
Fellowship Hall**

Got questions about how the church spends money? Want an update on the recently approved 2025 budget? Come out on Sunday, March 23 at 10 a.m. for a presentation and discussion led by our Finance Committee. Gather in the Fellowship Hall and be informed.

## Call for Nominations: Lay Equalization Plan for Annual Conference

In 2021, our annual conference adopted a [Lay Equalization Plan](#) to guide the nomination and selection process for at-large lay members to our Annual Conference. The purpose of this plan is to ensure an equal number of clergy—both active and retired—and lay members participate and vote in our NC Annual Conference. This plan calls for the district superintendent, in partnership with the district lay leader(s), to nominate professing members from within their district as at-large members for participation in the NC Annual Conference meeting.

From now until March 28, we are actively receiving Lay Equalization Plan nominations. Nominees may be submitted by pastors, congregational lay leadership, or through self-nomination. You may also submit a nomination on behalf of someone else if you have spoken with them and they would like to be considered.

You are welcome to submit more than one nomination. Remember, this is a nomination in addition to the name(s) you have already elected at your annual Charge

Conference. All nominations will be reviewed by our Conference Board of Laity, and all nominees will be notified by April 12, 2025, regarding their status—either elected or alternate.

**Please [submit all nominations](#) by  
11:59 p.m. on March 28.**

We encourage you to share the nomination form with anyone who might be interested in serving. We ask both pastors and laity to help us seek, encourage, and ultimately send lay members of every age, gender, and ethnicity to Annual Conference as we work together for our conference and for the glory of our Savior.

Please note that elected lay members will be responsible for their own travel arrangements and accommodations. There is no funding available from the district or conference for travel, meals, or lodging. College Hill Suites at East Carolina University offers very affordable lodging for lay members attending Annual Conference. Housing information and Annual

Conference 2025 details will be available online starting Thursday, March 6.

We are seeking committed and willing hearts to serve as at-large members to Annual Conference. Thank you in advance for helping us ensure that our decision-making members are as creative and diverse as the God who created us all!

—John Hall, NC Conference Lay Leader



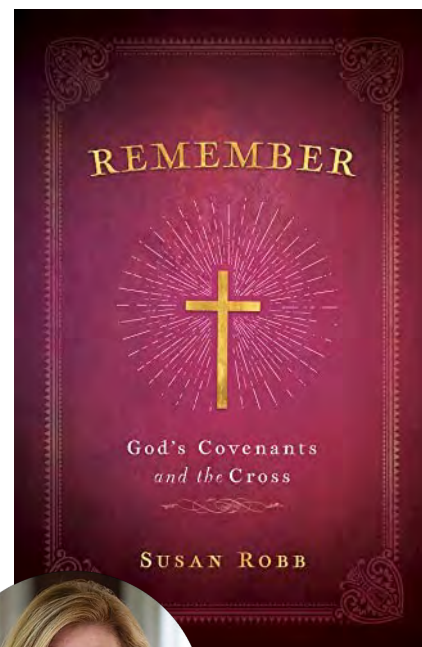
## New Pathfinder's Class Lenten Study: Exploring God's Covenants and the Cross

The Pathfinders Sunday School Class has recently begun a Lenten study titled *Remember: The Covenants and the Cross* by Susan Robb.

Susan Robb is the senior associate minister at Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, where she has been part of the church staff for 17 years. God's call to ministry led her to pursue a Master of Divinity degree at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. She graduated *magna cum laude* in 2006 with an award in homiletics. Susan's area of expertise lies in writing and teaching Bible studies and exploring the idea of listening to and responding to God's call.

God's covenants throughout the Old Testament reveal the character of God's promises to the people of Israel. In this study, we will examine God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, followed by the new covenant established on Maundy Thursday. The Lenten story culminates with an examination of the cross as another example of God's promise for a new world.

Susan Robb will help us learn more about the fundamental lessons of the covenants through a mixture of biblical history and personal stories. She will also provide a foundation for understanding God's promises throughout history and the role of Jesus's passion and crucifixion in the history of the covenants.



Susan Robb



SAVE THE DATE!

Easter  
Egg Hunt!

SUNDAY • 4/13 • 12:00 PM

## High School Bible Study: Exploring Prayer in New Ways

Prayer is one of the most important ways we connect with God, but it doesn't look the same for everyone. Some people pray out loud, some journal, some sit in silence, and some pray through music, movement, or art. As we enter the season of Lent, our High School Bible Study group is beginning a special study on prayer—exploring different ways to deepen our conversations with God.

To help guide our study, our youth were given a list of various prayer practices and asked to choose the ones they were most interested in learning about. Based on their responses, we will spend the next few weeks exploring and practicing Art Prayers, Metta Prayers, and Ignatian Contemplation—three unique and meaningful ways to engage in prayer.

All youth are welcome to join us! If you or someone you know would be interested, we'd love to have you. Our group of about 10 meets weekly on Wednesdays at 7:00 p.m. at the Boones' house.

Come as you are, and join us as we journey through Lent with prayer!

## UPCOMING EVENTS

([complete church calendar is here](#))

### Sunday, March 23

8:45 a.m., Worship Service  
9:45 a.m., Sunday School  
10:00 a.m., Finance Town Hall  
11:00 a.m., Worship Service  
11:00 a.m., Livestream Service  
12:00 p.m., Chancel Chimes  
2:00 p.m., Jack Crum Prophetic  
Ministry Conference

### Monday, March 24

7:00 p.m., Church & Society

### Tuesday, March 25

6:00 p.m., Anti-Racism  
Team Meeting  
7:00 p.m., "The Story of the  
Church" with Alan Storey

### Wednesday, March 26

9:30 a.m., Mom's Morning Meetup  
5:45 p.m., Fellowship Meal  
6:45 p.m., Bible Study  
7:00 p.m., High School Bible Study

### Thursday, March 27

10:00 a.m., Thursday Bible Study  
5:00 p.m., Chancel Choir

### Sunday, March 30

#### Fifth Sunday Food Collection

8:45 a.m., Worship Service  
9:30 a.m., Coffee Fellowship  
9:45 a.m., Sunday School  
11:00 a.m., Worship Service  
11:00 a.m., Livestream Service  
12:00 p.m., Chancel Chimes

## ONE WORSHIP SERVICE

**Sunday, April 6, 10:00 a.m.**

On Sunday, April 6, Pastor Alan will be out of town and has handed the reins to Lay Leader Susan Brooks. Susan will be preaching about laughter — yes, laughter, during Lent. There will be one service at 10:00 am, so please join us then to unravel this seeming contradiction.



A playlist? For the season of Lent? A Lenten playlist? What an odd idea.

Lent is often seen as a somber and even silent season. Certainly, there is space for contemplation, for embracing the quiet, for being still to seek out God. Many of us, however, find music a helpful tool for contemplation. So, we offer this playlist as another tool for your worship experience this season. This is preparation work, thinking about making connections, about plumbing the depths of heart and soul, of the community of faith and the wider culture. However you listen, let music be a guide into worship this Lent.

**Click this link to read more  
and see the Lenten playlist:**

[www.resourceumc.org/en/content/  
steadfast-love-a-lenten-playlist](http://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/steadfast-love-a-lenten-playlist)

*Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries, served churches in Indiana and Arkansas and the British Methodist Church. His PhD is from University of Edinburgh in preaching and media. He has taught preaching in seminary and conference settings for more than 20 years. Originally published by [Discipleship Ministries](#). Republished with permission by [ResourceUMC](#).*



### Campus Care

We had eight volunteers at the workday on March 15. We cut back the liriopie at the entrance of the Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall for spring, pulled weeds in the courtyard, and spread mulch from the big pile in the parking lot. Our next workday is April 12. Mark your calendars and join us for fresh air and fellowship! We will be pruning shrubs and spreading mulch and compost.

### FEMA Grant Status

We are continuing to monitor political activities in Washington, D.C., pertaining to FEMA personnel. We have submitted our first package to the North Carolina FEMA office (NSGP), requesting a grant payment for the laminate installation on the windows in the Sanctuary building. We hope to receive this rebate before moving to the next phase of the project, which is much larger. Please continue to watch this space for updates.