

The Spark



Welcome to 2026 and the New Year!

As I pause to think about the reality of the new year, I am reminded of the passage of time and how it seems to accelerate as we age. Have you ever wondered why three months seemed so much longer when we were young? I suspect the reason for this is because when we were in our teens, three months was a much larger percentage of our collective memory than it is when we are in our 60s.

This concept of time is hinted at in the way Jesus's disciples asked him questions that strongly suggested they believed he would return in their lifetime. Fifteen hundred years later, some of the great reformers of the Christian faith (such as Martin Luther and John Calvin) also thought that Christ would return within their lifetime. Today, many of us have grown up with the belief that Christ will return in our lifetime.

As we enter this new year, we might wonder whether 2026 will finally be the year. Of course, none of us can know the answer to that question, and even Jesus said "that day was not known to himself or even to the angels in heaven, but to only the Father".

Rather than focus on when Christ will return, I encourage us to begin this new year by focusing on the reality that he will return. His second coming will fulfill the prophecies that began way back in Genesis chapter 3 and continue throughout the Old Testament, which gives us many pointers to his first coming.

Until that day, let us focus on the reality that time is growing short. We don't know exactly how short, but we do know that every major biblical prophecy of his return has been fulfilled. Let us focus on that he is coming again and that we have a calling and a mission to encourage one another by sharing the good news of the gospel with those who have not yet come to believe.

Together, may that be our mission for 2026 and beyond, until he comes again or he calls us into his presence, whichever comes first.

To God be the glory, and Happy New Year to us all!

Pastor Jim Huber

**January-
March
2026**

**First
Union
Church**

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- **The Recipe Box**
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Women's Association News Sherri Huff

Greetings! The snow came early this year and some of our Snowbirds have flown south or will be doing so shortly. Ladies remaining are invited to take part in various activities to beat the winter doldrums.

The traditional Christmas decorations were placed December 6 with many helping hands. In addition, artificial cedar trees decorated with lights were placed in the planters at the north entrance to add a pop of greenery and sparkle.

On December 20, Marcia Perkins organized a group of 26 carolers, who gathered at the church for a pot-luck dinner and then braved the snow and biting wind to carol at Cedar Cove Assisted Living and various homes. The evening ended with ice cream sundaes back at the church.

To start the new year, there is a Ladies Fellowship and Craft Day scheduled for Saturday, January 10, 9:30 a.m.-3:00 p.m. We'll bring snack-type lunch dishes to pass and whatever our craft obsessions are at the time. Maybe even balancing a checkbook. (Do people still do that?) You can stay all day or for just a quick visit.

The church's first Soup & Sandwich Luncheon for 2026 will be held Thursday, January 15, 12:00 p.m.

These are generally held the third Thursday of each month, January-April. All are welcome. It is a great time of fellowship, while enjoying the wonderful homemade soups and sandwiches!

The next *Cooking with Confidence* class will be on Bread Making on Saturday, January 17 at 1:00 p.m. In October, Claudia shared her pasty-making skills. Learning to make and roll out the perfect crust was an important part of her class. December's class featured Marcia Perkins and her Grandma Strand's recipe for a Christmas tradition of Norwegian Krum Kakes. Claudia shared how it brought back wonderful childhood memories of visiting the Schrader's home and enjoying the delightful dessert. Participants brought recipes to share and spoke about why the recipes were special to them. Everyone went home with cookies. Claudia said participants were learning not only from her, but from each other. She shares a little "recipe" devotional at each class that coincides with the meal they are making.

Please make a note on your calendars for any upcoming activities you would like to participate in.

1 Thessalonians 5:11—Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Adult Sunday School Update

Our adult Sunday School class just began studying the Sermon on the Mount, using a Life Guide Bible study written by John Stott. As you may know, Mike and June Davis lead our Sunday morning class. We have great discussions and enjoy deepening our faith through study and conversation.

We are planning a new twist for February and March this year. When Mike and June head for warmer weather, we will have two different topics for study.

In February, Karen Schaedig will be using the Truth Rising Study from Focus on the Family and the Colson Center to facilitate discussion on how Christians can respond to current challenges to our faith in the secular world. Information on the study and the corresponding documentary can be found at: www.truthrising.com. In fact, if you would like to take part in this study, it would be great if you prepared by watching the documentary before Sunday, February 1.

In March, Dave Hopkins, director of Cedar Bay Camp & Retreat Center, will lead us through a book

in the New Testament, most likely the book of Colossians. If you are considering taking part in an adult Bible study this new year, please join us on Sunday mornings at 9:00 a.m. in the Fellowship Hall. Coffee is available and the fellowship is encouraging.

BUSY MARY-MARTHA CIRCLE LADIES!



Church Budget Update

Rick Wilson, treasurer

It's important for our congregation to know how the church is doing financially. The year-end edition of *The Spark* is a good time to share an update, since we are now four months into the 2026 fiscal year—about one-third of the year. Below is a summary of our income and spending so far. The “budgeted” amounts reflect what we expected to have after one-third of the year.

Income (Giving and Other Revenue)

- General Giving: We expected \$86,100 and received \$85,653. This is only \$447 less than planned.
- Missions Giving: We expected \$13,854 and received \$11,810, which is \$2,044 below budget.
- Investment Income: We expected \$3,923 and received \$3,497, which is \$426 below budget.

Spending

- Church Operations: We planned to spend \$86,100 but have spent \$96,487 so far. This is \$10,387 over budget.
- Missions: We planned to spend \$13,854 and have spent \$13,506, which is \$348 under budget.

What These Numbers Mean

Overall, church income is very close to where we expected it to be at this point in the year, which is encouraging. However, there are a few important things to keep in mind.

In September and November, we saw some dips in giving. In December, several large year-end gifts helped bring giving back up. Some of these gifts were connected to Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) tax planning, which was explained in a note recently placed in mailboxes.

While these gifts were a blessing, part of this money represents giving that normally would have come in over several months. That means we may see lower monthly giving later in the year. In simple terms, we experienced a boost now that could lead to a dip later. Because of this, we will need to watch giving carefully over the remaining eight months. The budget was created very carefully, using last year's actual giving as a guide. One of the biggest questions when setting the budget was whether giving would remain at the same level as last year. We prayed that it would, and we continue to trust God as we move forward.

Why Spending Is Over Budget Right Now

General spending is currently over budget, but this is mostly due to a few large, one-time expenses.

- In October, the church paid its annual insurance bill—\$9,367—all at once. This covers the church

buildings, the van, workers' compensation, and liability insurance.

- In September, the church also gave a one-time gift of \$20,000 to help Cedar Bay Camp & Retreat Center with a critical septic system project. Through a matching gift program, that \$20,000 became \$40,000 for Cedar Bay.

Because these were one-time payments, overall spending should come down in the coming months, although snow plowing may continue to be an exception!

Missions spending is right on track, but missions giving is currently below our monthly goal. The church made a big commitment this fiscal year by increasing missions giving from 8% to 15% of the total budget. This allowed us not only to continue supporting existing missions, but also to add new ones, including Samaritan's Purse, Cedar Post, Rafiki, The Promise FM, and Berean Mission Alliance. The congregation supported this decision when the budget was approved. As you hear testimonies and watch videos about these missions, please prayerfully consider supporting them through your giving on Missions Sundays.

Looking Ahead

Our budget reflects our desire to share God's Word through missions, support our community, care for our congregation, invest in youth, and maintain our historic church building—the “Grand Lady.” We will continue to watch the budget closely as we move through the remaining eight months of the fiscal year, trusting God to provide and guide us.

LADIES' ADVENT TEA



Thank you, June Davis, for organizing our wonderful Advent Tea so willingly and joyfully each year.

Christian Education Update

December has been a wonderfully full month for Christian Education here at First Union. Our elementary Sunday School children blessed us with a beautiful performance reminding us of the true meaning of Christmas.

Our Middle and High School students also had several opportunities to share the message of Jesus' love in meaningful, hands-on ways. One highlight was participating in the **All About Jesus guided walk** in Cedarville, where they joined local volunteers to help create a peaceful winter experience that invited visitors to reflect on the life of Jesus and His extraordinary love for us.

Another powerful opportunity came through **Operation Christmas Child in Chicago**. Our youth helped sort and prepare Christmas boxes destined for children around the world. Together, they helped process **37,788 gift boxes**—enough to fill two shipping containers bound for Guyana and three more headed to Haiti.

To close out the month, our High and Middle School youth group joined other members of First Union Church for an evening of Christmas caroling, sharing joy and music with residents throughout Cedarville and Hessel. Thank you for faithfully supporting our youth ministry and helping provide opportunities for our young people to serve wherever God calls them to be **His hands and feet**.

Christy Cloud-O'Hare



Some of our teens working at the Samaritan's Purse distribution facility outside of Chicago in December, 2025

Thank you from Cedar Bay

Cedar Bay would like to thank everyone for supporting our ministry efforts at the camp. Because of your generosity, we were able to host and share the love of Jesus with 75 international students and families during the week between Christmas and New Year's. These guests represented seven different countries, and it was a joy to welcome them. We are also grateful for the 13 volunteers who came alongside our staff to help meet the needs of our visitors.

We are looking forward to a blessed and busy 2026. Our winter events begin with the Men's Winter Retreat, January 23–25, where attendees will enjoy a fantastic time of indoor and outdoor activities along with meaningful fellowship. Next, we invite couples to reconnect and refresh during our Faithful Marriage Retreat, February 13–15. We'll round out the season with our Winter Blast Youth Retreat, February 20–22, giving junior and senior high students the chance to enjoy fun winter activities, build lasting connections, and grow in fellowship.

If you'd like to participate in any of these events, we'd love to hear from you. You can find details about these and all of our upcoming opportunities at CedarBay.us or by calling 906-484-2294.

Thank you again for your continued support.

Cedar Bay Staff



The Children's Sunday School program on December 21st was enjoyed by all.

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The Spark

Creating intentional followers of Jesus Christ
