

The UCOM Story

By Jim Crooks and Aidan Mitchell

The UCOM story is defined by the people that made and ran its programs, and by the change it has caused in people's lives and the Jacksonville community. The founders of United Community Outreach Ministry (UCOM) believed they were beginning a journey of faith. They did not know the direction of their journey, or how they would reach their destination. But they did believe that their God would support them and lead the way.

The journey began in the summer of 1979, Jacksonville Florida. The recently formed Jacksonville Ecumenical Right to Eat Advocacy Board under the leadership of its president, Laura Gordon, and executive director, Ardith Highleyman, met with volunteers from five Southside churches: All Saints Episcopal, Lakewood Presbyterian, Mt Olive Baptist, Mt. Zion AME and South Jacksonville Presbyterian. They discussed the possibility of expanding the city's federally funded Meals-on-Wheels program to Pine Forest, a predominantly black and poor Southside community. On Saturday, September 30th, 29 volunteers from these churches canvassed Pine Forest and identified 31 potentially eligible low-income recipients. Within two weeks, the state agencies had verified their eligibility. Volunteers from the five churches (with Lakewood United Methodist joining shortly thereafter) began delivering meals. Some observers felt that only the Holy Spirit could have moved a governmental agency to respond so quickly to meet this need.

Over the next six months, representatives from these and other churches met with Highleyman and Rev. Gene Parks, minister of the United Methodist Church, to determine how to expand these volunteer efforts on a permanent basis. On May 22, 1979, the informal Southside/Pine Forest Network of Churches became UCOM with Archie Jenkins, then a part time staff member at South Jacksonville Presbyterian Church, coordinating the effort.

The name was important. Should it be the United Christian Outreach Ministry, or United Community Outreach Ministry? All participants at that point were Christian, but a majority chose the term "Community" to welcome broader support later on. Later, Congregation Ahavath Chesed became a member.

The twelve charter churches were Assumption Catholic, Christ Lutheran (later withdrawing to be replaced by All Saints Episcopal), Hendricks Avenue Baptist, Lakewood United Methodist, Lakewood Presbyterian, Mt. Olive Baptist, Mt. Zion AME, St. Mark's Lutheran, San Jose Catholic, South Jacksonville Presbyterian, Southside Baptist and Southside United Methodist.

On July 10, 1979, UCOM members elected their first slate of officers to include:

President: Rev. William S. Thirlwell, Southside Baptist Church
 First Vice President: Pat Blajian, Assumption Catholic Church
 Second Vice President: Vernell Taylor, Mt. Zion AME Church
 Secretary: Sharon Cooke, All Saints Episcopal Church
 Treasurer: Deacon James Thomas, Mt. Olive Baptist Church
 Finance Committee Chair: Bob Gordon, Lakewood Presbyterian Church
 Program Committee Chair: Dr. Jim Burt, Southside United Methodist Church

Shortly thereafter, UCOM's program of delivering meals on wheels under the leadership of Mary Burt expanded to serve homebound elderly and disabled recipients who could afford to pay for their meals, in Pine Forest and across the Southside. Over the next forty-five years, UCOM served close to 500,000 meals to more than 50,000 recipients. Currently Dale Bolton supervises the delivery of an estimate of 15,000 meals per year.

The next major step along UCOM's faith journey came in 1983. A year earlier, the session of Lakewood Presbyterian Church had allocated \$5000 to begin a minority youth employment program (MYEP) in Pine Forest, recognizing the very high unemployment rate among minority youths. The program initially subsidized one-half the cost of the summer jobs which became an attraction for employers. The challenge of raising funds, recruiting young people and finding employers was too big for one church to do alone, so Lakewood turned to UCOM for help. With the support of Katie Davis at the Pine Forest Community Center and volunteers including Vernell Taylor, Rev. Lib McGregor Simmons, Shep Johnson, Henry Jones, Bill Tierney, Jim Crooks and others, UCOM found jobs that year for 35 young people.

In 1984, volunteers saw the potential of a year-round program for youth in Pine Forest. A part-time paid program director was needed to support this expansion of the MYEP. That fall, Prudential Insurance Company offered UCOM a grant to hire Nathaniel S. Washington as the part time program director. He became the answer to prayers. Nat, or Coach as he was known to the formerly segregated Douglas Anderson High School alumni, knew the Pine Forest community well. More importantly, though he lived on the north side, Nat's heart remained with the folks in Pine Forest.

Beginning that fall, Nat Washington made MYEP fly. He recruited all of the Pine Forest churches into UCOM to gain community support for the program. He met weekly with the youth offering outreach programs, fundraising opportunities and job preparation. Over the years, the young people took trips to Florida A&M University, Bethune Cookman College, Edward Waters College and the University of North Florida to learn about college and career opportunities. They sold hot dogs and cokes at Gator Bowl football games to raise funds for their trips. And they learned how to dress, prepare for, and apply for their summer jobs. Meanwhile, Coach found the jobs, assured employers that he would keep tabs on their new employees, and urged young people to call him day or night if they had problems. For 21 years Nat Washington helped youths succeed in their first job experience.

With two programs successfully underway, UCOM responded to the challenge of emergency assistance. Every church along the Hendricks Avenue-San Jose Boulevard corridor received calls for help by phone or in person from people in distress. During the spring and summer of 1986, Rev. Lib McGregor Simmons from Lakewood Presbyterian Church and Rev. Gene Zimmerman from Southside United Methodist Church called UCOM clergy together to discuss the need for a centralized emergency assistance program that provided effective help and eliminated costly duplication of services. The result was the creation of the UCOM Emergency Assistance Program which opened November 2, 1987, under the direction of its part time, paid coordinator, Frances Walker. She too was an answer to prayers, and she made providing assistance her mission in life. Following Frances's sudden death in 2000, Becky Smith became coordinator of the program. Three years later in 2003, the UCOM board appointed Becky its first Executive Director, overseeing all of the agency's programs.

The ESC program began with limited funding and no home. It was another faith venture. Southside Baptist Church donated rent-free an old building on the corner of Hendricks Avenue and Atlantic Boulevard (since replaced by an office building). The Rev. Roosevelt Marell, the UCOM vice president for emergency assistance, refurbished the structure with some extraordinary carpentry work. In the beginning, UCOM provided emergency food, financial assistance for housing, utilities, medical prescriptions and local travel vouchers, and counseling. It subsequently added clothing and kept records to prevent duplication of services. To assist with long range needs the Center networked with other community agencies.

For its first fifteen years, UCOM's emergency assistance program had no permanent home. Then in January 2001, Jacksonville city council member Matt Carlucci attended UCOM's Martin Luther King, Jr., banquet and learned about the agency's ministry to the community. Carlucci wanted to help. He identified a building at 3349 Old St. Augustine Road, built in 1887 by the Philips Congregational Society to serve African Americans living nearby who worked at the Red Bank Plantation. Carlucci partnered with City Council member Reggie Fullwood

to secure a \$117,000 Community Development Block Grant to buy the former church and property. UCOM took occupancy in June, 2001.

Once more UCOM members felt God's grace. Not only did UCOM have a permanent home for its ministry, but the renovated facility also provided a historic link to the church that served the Pine Forest community during the years after the Civil War and Emancipation. At its new location, UCOM serves more than 3000 Southside residents each year with emergency assistance while providing office space for members of the staff.

The programs of community service are only part of UCOM's presence in Southside. The twelve original congregations have grown to 40 congregations, black and white, Protestant and Catholic. UCOM began celebrating Martin Luther King Jr's birthday in 1985 with a community worship service on Friday evening, a youth program Saturday morning in Pine Forest, and a community banquet Saturday night featuring a successful Douglas Anderson High School Alumnus as its speaker. Every year for 20 years UCOM would celebrate Martin Luther King Jr's birthday with worship services and musical gatherings.

In 1988, one of UCOM's founders, Archie Jenkins, reflected upon the shortage of trained nursing assistants in the community to provide support for the elderly, infirm or disabled residents. He then tagged in Nat Washington. As a result, in the fall of 1988 UCOM began a joint venture in Pine Forest with Florida Community College of Jacksonville training adults to become nursing assistants. Since then, almost 400 adults have upgraded their skills and their wages in the nursing assistants program directed by Coach and then would fall under the purview of UCOM's Executive Director

Later in 1988, UCOM joined with Church World Service to initiate the first CROP walk in Jacksonville where three-fourths of the funds raised go to combat world hunger, and one-quarter goes for local emergency assistance. Two years later, UCOM sponsored a fall concert of sacred music by participating UCOM churches to bring together congregations and raise additional funds for emergency aid. UCOM also participates with the National Conference for Community and Justice (formerly National Conference of Christians and Jews) in its annual Thanksgiving service that began in 1918. In 2002, NCCJ presented Nat Washington with its annual Humanitarian Award for his extraordinary services to the Jacksonville community.

In 2005, the Bridge of Northeast Florida took over the Minority Youth Employment program from Nat Washington, who then retired after 21 years, with Tanzy James working as the program coordinator. UCOM stopped reporting its numbers in 2009 and the MYEP was merged with BridgeWorks; the Bridge's other youth employment program. Nathaniel Washington passed away in 2019, after years of working for UCOM, volunteering, and advising in different capacities. Each year at UCOM's Annual Gala there is now a "Nathaniel Washington Award" that is given to honor extraordinary friends of UCOM.

New programs continued to be developed as new needs arose. In 2014 the Executive Director Heather Mauney created UCOM's Summer Nutrition program, where children that rely on free lunches during the school year are able to receive the same over the summer. In 2016 Mauney started UCOM's Breakfast with Santa event, where neighborhood families get to meet and take photos with Santa, enjoy a breakfast meal, and then get to pick a present from Santa.

In 2017 the Executive Director Sara Mitchell oversaw the interior of UCOM getting a makeover with industrial food shelves donated by Metro Diner. Under her leadership, UCOM would secure more local grocer partners, grow capacity by adding a concrete pad and better curbside parking for clients, adding a trailer and a freezer truck generously funded by Sunoptic Technologies and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Humanitarian Grant. And the addition and then expansion of an external cooler and freezer building, which now allows the storage of upwards of ten pallets of fresh fruit, vegetables, and frozen meat. Mitchell has overseen

UCOM's expanding partnership with Feeding Northeast Florida and the TANEF program. Mitchell oversaw UCOM's first gala in 2019 to celebrate UCOM's 40th Ruby Anniversary and secured grants to expand existing programs to better serve neighbors in need. Under her leadership, UCOM's staff expanded from 2 part-time staff to 5 full-time and 2 part-time.

In 2020 the Covid pandemic drastically changed UCOM's procedures. To prioritize safety, neighbors stayed in their cars outside and everything was brought to them. Sara Mitchell and a few dedicated volunteers like Gerry Kistka (awarded for his contribution during UCOM's 2022 Gala) came in and worked during the pandemic to make sure people were fed whether through UCOM's Pantry Program or the emerging Nutritionally Secure Seniors Program. This shift to curbside assistance would stick even after the lockdown ended, allowing more people to get their food in a streamlined drive-through with the option to stay longer and receive case management. During the Covid lockdown, 600 hot meals were delivered three times a week for people stuck in their apartments or shelters with no food.

Those 600 Covid meals would also lead to a shift from busing seniors to UCOM, to UCOM bringing food to them. In 2023, UCOM was awarded a Florida Blue Foundation's Food Security Grant to fund the newly formed "Nutritionally Secure Seniors" program, where mobile mini UCOM pantries are brought to different nearby partner Senior Apartment Complexes twice a month.

The faith journey of UCOM congregations has been a response to God's call to feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked, teach children, and reach out to people in need. For forty-five years, UCOM has served God in Jacksonville's Southside with faith, hope and love. UCOM is the cup of sugar you ask for from your neighbor, because UCOM is neighbors helping neighbors.

The End, for now.

UCOM Board Presidents

1979-80	Rev. William S. Thirwell, Southside Baptist
1980-81	John Finn, San Jose Catholic
1981-82	no record
1982-83	Sister Nancy Corrigan, Diocese of St. Augustine
1983-84	Sister Nancy Corrigan/Rev. Bill Thirwell
1984-88	Jim Crooks, Lakewood Presbyterian
1988-89	Carolyn Matthews (Etlinger) Lakewood Presbyterian
1989-90	Rev. John Nicolson, Lakewood Presbyterian
1990-91	No President: UCOM Vice presidents shared the leadership
1991-94	Marion Elliott (Bunch), Southside United Methodist
1994-95	Rev. Vicki Thomas, Lakewood Presbyterian
1995-97	Kate Schellenberg, San Jose Catholic
1997-98	Dr. Wayne Wiatt, Southside United Methodist
1998-99	Rev. Mark Wilbanks, Southside Baptist
1999-02	Rev. Mark Griffin, Wayman Chapel AME
2002-04	Dr. Wayne Wiatt, Southside United Methodist
2004	Rev. Greg Pope, Hendricks Avenue Baptist
2004-06	Dr. Vincent Kolb, South Jacksonville Presbyterian Church
2006-08	Rev. Nancy Stiles, Lakewood United Methodist Church
2008-09	Dr. Brett Foster, Hendricks Avenue Baptist
2010-15	Rev. Terry Lucarelli, Lakewood Presbyterian Church
2016-17	Dan Burns, CSX
2018-19	Britt Hester, Hendrick Ave Baptist Church
2020	Don Poag, Insurance of America (IOA)
2021-23	Derek Mountford, Gunster
2024-	Claudio Gosiker

UCOM Board Treasurers

1979-80	Deacon James Thomas, Mount Olive Baptist
1980-84	Archie Jenkins, South Jacksonville Presbyterian
1984-97	Waverly Fant, South Jacksonville Presbyterian
1997-02	Bonnie Redlinger
2002-08	Rebecca Perez, San Jose Catholic
2008-21	Susan Speicher
2022-23	Mindy Menzel
2024-	John Gibson

UCOM Executive Directors

2003-05	Becky Smith, St. Paul United Methodist Church
2006-09	John Schnell, San Jose Baptist Church
2009-10	Janet English
2010	Nancy Callison, Interim
2011-13	Rev. Thomas Allen
2013-16	Heather Mauney
2016-	Sara Mitchell

Meal on Wheels Coordinators

1978-80	Mary Burt, Southside United Methodist Church
1980-85	Carolyn Matthews (Etlinger), Lakewood Presbyterian
1985-03	Henri King, Assumption Catholic
2003-05	Laura Zellner, Celebration Baptist
2005	Ashley Allen, University Boulevard Nazarene Church
2005	Cindy Kampfe
2005-08	Marie Rountree, First Presbyterian Church
2008-11	Vivian Simpson
2011-14	Marty Succi
2015-17	Kristen Peterson
2017-20	Marty Succi
2021-20	Cat Norton
2022-	Dale Bolton

Minority Youth Employment Program Directors

1983-84	Vernell Taylor/Klay Brickell
1984-05	Nathaniel S. Washington, Sr, Bethel Baptist
2005-09	The Bridge of Northeast Florida – Bridge Works Program Tanzey James, Program Coordinator

Certified Nursing Assistant Training/Scholarship Program Coordinators

1988-05	Nathaniel S. Washington, Sr., Bethel Baptist
2005-08	Northeast Chapter of the American Red Cross
2008-13	Carol Marell
2013-16	Heather Mauney
2016-	Sara Mitchell

Emergency Service Center Manager / Pantry Manager

1987-00	Frances Walker
2000-03	Becky Smith, St. Paul United Methodist
2003-07	Debbie Mims, University Blvd. Church of the Nazarene
2007-13	Sandra Hicks, Philips R Cousin AME
2013-16	Heather Mauney
2016-19	Sara Mitchell
2019-20	Liz Edmunds
2020-22	Jackie Johnson
2022-25	Adrian Pulliam
2025-	Anthony 'Tony' Watkins

Director of Client Services

2022-2024	Shannon Kettlehut
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Director of Nutritionally Secure Seniors

2023-	Jennifer Gubat
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