

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
OF PUNTA GORDA**
An Open and Affirming Congregation



MARCH 2018 HIGHLIGHTS

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Rev. Mike Ford

You Are Not Alone

I doubt that any of us missed the news in the past week. It has been a very difficult time in the life of our congregation, state, and the country. Whether by chance or not, on Ash Wednesday, which also coincided with Valentine's Day, a young man known by authorities to be emotionally disturbed, walked into his old high school and gunned down seventeen of his former classmates and teachers: Lives again extinguished by violence that was enhanced by the use of an assault rifle, legally purchased.

I am not sure anyone expected the outcome the latest school shooting provoked. The students decided to act. Within hours, angry and mournful high schoolers from around Florida mobilized to take action to stop this from happening again. Within a couple days they staged walk outs and boarded buses for Tallahassee. They wanted to speak to ANY legislator or Governor Rick Scott, asking for a response to this latest shooting. Their cry was, "Enough is enough!" I pray it was heard. Legislators and Scott avoided speaking directly to them. I do know that the students didn't accept that response *(continued on page 2)*.

HOLY WEEK CALENDAR OF EVENTS

The week approaching Easter in our congregation marks a series of observances and services, culminating in the celebration of Christ's resurrection on Easter. Below is the calendar of these events.

***Palm Sunday, March 25 10:00am.* You are encouraged to bring palm fronds from your (or a neighbor's) yard, which the ushers will place on the cross. Palm fronds will also be available at the church.**

***Maundy Thursday, March 29, 5:00pm.* Soup and bread meal, followed by a Tenebrae service at 6:00pm. Please sign up to bring soup or bread, if you wish, on the sign-up sheet at the back of the church. Paper bowls and plates as well as plastic silverware will be provided. You are also welcome to bring your own washable table service, if you prefer.**

***Good Friday Observance, March 30 at 7:00pm.* The movie, **The Passion of the Christ**, will be shown.**

Easter Sunrise Service, April 1 at 7:00am.

***Easter Service, April 1, at 10:00am.* You are encouraged to bring flowers, which the ushers will use to decorate the cross.**



Attendees passed a wooden cross as they arrived at a candlelight vigil for the victims of the Florida school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Since the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida, the students have not given up their insistence that action must be taken. Within a couple days, a nationwide march by students was beginning to form and will happen on March 24. It is named "March for Our Lives!" Members of our church will be marching somewhere with them!

On this past Sunday, the Gospel lesson came from Mark 8:27-38. In this passage Jesus has asked the disciples who the people think he is. They answer maybe Moses or Elijah or one of the other prophets. Then Jesus asks who the disciples think he is. Peter blurts out, "You are the Messiah!" Jesus then orders the disciples to keep that information to themselves.

Next, Mark uses one of his favorite words: immediately. Jesus began to teach the disciples that in Jerusalem he would be shamefully treated by the temple authorities, handed over to the Romans, crucified (murdered), and on the third day, rise from the dead. Peter hears this teaching, and he doesn't like what he's hearing. Peter has bigger plans for the Messiah than death and resurrection. Peter expects Jesus to take over and get rid of the Romans, not be put on a cross and die. That is not what he learned of the Messiah's role as he grew up: God would restore Israel to a place of dominance through the Messiah.

Jesus can only stand so much from Peter. He looks Peter in the eye and calls him evil. He tells him that his mind is on human things and not divine ones. God's plan will not be accomplished by human means. Mark tells us that Jesus rebuked Peter for his insistence that Jesus do things Peter's way. Rebuked is a strong word. No doubt Peter's hair was blown back a bit by the power of Jesus' rebuke.

Jesus then looked around and saw the stunned reaction of the disciples. The crowd gathered around him. He follows the rebuke of Peter with some very difficult words to those there. He said that if anyone wanted to follow him they must deny the self, pick up their cross and follow him. If anyone thinks they will by their own power save their lives, they will be sadly mistaken. If someone loses or gives up their life for Jesus or the Gospel, they will have gained everything. Worldly possessions and power will not save your soul; only God can do that.

I feel these words may seem harsh to us as well. Our society puts great emphasis on power and possession. We need not search very far to see who the world honors: those with the greatest wealth and political power. It is easy for us to fall into the trap of saying, "Well, that's how the world works. We'd better get used to it." That's called living down to the status quo. Jesus proclaims another truth to us. Basically, I believe he says faith takes risks. Risk taking makes us a little nervous. We might encounter power that wants us to toe the line and will be darned sure to see that we do! Faith takes risks.

The students in Parkland and across the country need to know that someone has their back when they're standing up to the powers that be. Attempts have already been made from the top to silence the voices for change. The NRA has reared up and preached the same old, tired message that has kept us frozen for two decades: "They're coming to take your guns away!" Every time the talk comes around to sensible gun laws, they try to instill fear in us. For too long we have listened to that crap and accepted their premise!

Our country and some of the powers that be are rising to fight back that rhetoric. Large corporations have ceased their affiliation and protection of the NRA by withdrawing special favors for NRA members. Daily, the news reports yet another of the props holding up a relatively small group of people who are NRA members (five million nationwide or less than 1.5% of the population of our country). Support from politicians is being diminished, and those who accept NRA support are being pressed to give up that support. Senator Marco Rubio received \$3.3 million worth of free endorsement advertising from the NRA during the 2016 election. He and Representative Tom Rooney received \$10,700 each in direct donations to their campaigns from the NRA super PAC.

In response to this wave of sensibility that is sweeping across the nation, our very own Leadership Team considered showing support for change as well. Several months ago, I asked them to consider a policy that bans firearms on our campus. Practically speaking, it is a gesture. However, it makes a strong statement that we favor a sensible approach to stopping gun violence. In addition, it was considered to support the students in their declaration that "Enough is Enough!"

Last week, after much considerate and thoughtful exchanges, they voted to adopt a gun free zone policy for our church (*see Moderator's Report below*)! The vote was not unanimous. The dissenting votes were not an objection to the policy, but a concern about the safety of our church once the public sees the policy enacted. It is a very reasonable concern. It is a risk for faith that the Leadership Team decided to take. I must admit that I was pushing hard for its adoption. I felt strongly that we needed to make a statement that will be heard.

I'll end this rather long treatise by telling you what happened this past Sunday as I preached from Mark 8:27-31. Near the end of the sermon, I told the worship community of the policy that had been adopted by the Leadership Team and of some of the concerns expressed by members. I ended by asking that they give us feedback about the decision to make this a gun free zone. The reaction began slowly but picked up speed quickly. One by one, the congregation rose and applauded the decision. It seemed to go on for five minutes. It was a thrilling moment and in direct support of our Team for their bravery and thoughtfulness in the face of risk! To be sure, it was not a unanimous standing ovation. That makes me even more proud of our church. We have room for conversation and to consider what all of this means.

Today, I am still numbed by the overwhelming support our church showed for this stand we take. Sometimes faith takes risks! Praise be to God!

FROM YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

MODERATOR'S REPORT – Judy Minier

Special Announcement: In December, your Leadership Team considered the idea of a policy related to firearms on church grounds. We specifically stated the idea as:

"It is the policy of this church that firearms, of any sort, are not allowed on this entire property, including the parking area, even if the individual has a valid permit to carry. This policy does not apply to law enforcement personnel."



Action on the matter was tabled at that time. Following the shooting in Parkland, FL, the Leadership Team voted to implement the statement as policy going forward. There was a great deal of thoughtful discussion as we deliberated the matter before the motion was passed. We felt it is important to take

a stand as a matter of moral and spiritual principle, particularly when the congregation applauded the idea of giving support to the Stoneman Douglas High School students in Parkland as they work to encourage the government to implement more effective gun laws.

We are a stronger and more united church going forward!

Spring is in the air. I have been pleased to see amaryllis blooming in our neighborhood along with a lot of other trees also blossoming. Even in Florida, we note some change of seasons! Hopefully, your allergies are not in full bloom, too.

Recent Events and Upcoming Opportunities

1. **St. Vincent DePaul Collection Box** is now available for your cash and check donations to the food bank. The box is near the wheelbarrow and convenient for you to drop in your contributions. Remember, the cash that you submit, goes a lot further than providing a box of cereal or a jar of peanut butter. One dollar donated translates into \$7 worth of goods when SVdP purchases items for their food pantry! That is a whopping 7 times the value of our usual food donation. Please consider giving cash as a wonderful option to support this worthy cause. Neoma Remiger will continue to collect the cash donations (and food items) for weekly delivery. Thank you, Neoma, for being our connection to this helpful organization!

2. **Baker Street Children's Clothing:** Sandy Nogaj, Neoma Remiger, and Marty Buckingham have volunteered to assist with our annual collection of children's clothing for the Baker Street



Center in association with the Punta Gorda Woman's Club. Over the years we have been one of the sponsors to provide children in need with play clothes for the spring/summer months at the Center. This year, we are being asked to collect only GIRLS' outfits. The sign-up sheets are on the back table as usual. Please buy your outfits soon. **Our deadline is Sunday, March 11.**

3. **Seeking individuals to take on leadership roles.** The LT is looking to find a team to support a potential Discipleship Chair and committee members to support Cathy Ann Colson with Stewardship responsibilities. We need these filled to keep worship operating and to keep our facilities in good shape. Associate Members are welcome to serve in the Discipleship role and with Stewardship – please let me or another LT member know if you can step into one of these roles.
4. **Updates to our website.** Jim DeGood is bringing us along on our website fix-up, clean-up project. Check it out and let Jim know if you have any suggestions or ideas to help improve it even more. A lot of new people in town rely on the internet when they church shop, especially with Easter coming, so we need to put our best foot forward! Thanks, Jim.

Ongoing Goals and Matters under Consideration:

1. **Plan for the replacement and upgrade of the eastern section of the church's roof,** which leaks badly during the rainy season. This issue has been put on hold for some time, and we are approaching a critical situation needing immediate attention. The LT is looking into a Capital Campaign to kick start the project, so stay tuned for more information to come!

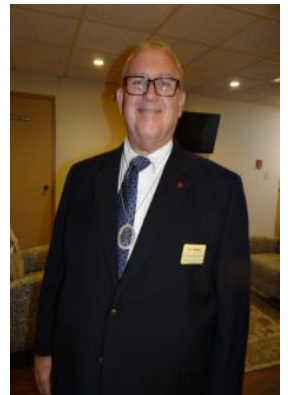
2. **Upgrades of our very dated air conditioning system** with modern wall-mounted, energy - efficient units. We spend a lot of money cooling the building and could do so with less cost if we upgrade our system. This will be tackled as we find ways redefine our approach to cooling, one of our biggest bills during the summer.
3. **Complete an in-house, updated church directory** by late spring with photos, names, and contact information. We are looking for volunteers to take photos so that we can get this started. Please let me know if you can take pictures and would be willing to help compile the directory!
Thank you.

Next LT Meeting: The March Leadership Team meeting takes place on Tuesday, the 13th from 3:30-5:30 p.m. Remember, we are here to support our Pastor, our church ministries/responsibilities and operations, and one another in the congregation. We welcome your input about what we are doing, how we are doing, and what we should be doing. Please see any of us if you have questions, concerns, or suggestions about how we can more effectively manage our resources or make our church more responsive for our members and the community we serve.

A thought for the day: ""We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." Winston Churchill

MINISTER OF MUSIC - Tim Sperber

Men and women today are still inspired to write hymn texts. Some compose new tunes for their texts, and some add their words to familiar tunes we have sung in the past. This month we are using one of the texts written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, a Presbyterian minister. She has written many hymn texts addressing the issues of our time. After hurricane Irma we sang one of her hymn texts "O God, We've Prayed in 'Wind and Rain.'" This month we are using her text, "If We Just Talk of Thoughts and Prayers."



I was saddened when I went to her website and saw Gun Violence as one of the topical indexes of her hymns and eight hymn texts were listed under that subject. While in college and seminary, I never thought I would see that topic in a hymn index.

The following is her hymn text for "If We Just Talk of Thoughts and Prayers" for your prayer and reflection:

If We Just Talk of Thoughts and Prayers

*If we just talk of thoughts and prayers
And don't live out a faith that dares
And don't take on the ways of death,
Our thoughts and prayers are fleeting breath.*

*If we just sing of doing good
And don't walk through the neighborhood
To learn its hope, to ease its pain,
Our talk of good is simply vain.*

*If we just dream of what could be
And do not build community
And do not seek to change our ways,
Our dreams of change are false displays.*

*God, may our prayers and dreams and songs
Lead to a faith that takes on wrongs,
That works for peace and justice, too,
Then will our prayers bring joy to you.*

ENDOWMENT TEAM – Bill Ringelstein

The Endowment Team has recommended and the Leadership Team has approved a distribution amount for 2018 from 2017 earnings. We have received several applications and more are expected as we move to fund those outreach elements that mean so much to so many. On Sunday, March 4, the Endowment Team presented Jim DeGood of our Social Justice Committee with a check for \$1,500 for the Fair Food Alliance. As additional distributions are approved, we will be making presentations during the announcements prior to worship services.

From Kathy Rivadeneira -Endowment Team

One of the most important things to communicate about the Endowment Team is the great relationship our church *via our Endowment Team* has built within the community. Uniting with other church ministries makes us stronger.

As an example, we provide bike locks for the Edgewater Bicycle Ministry, which provides the bikes, and together we spread love and caring for others. I reached out to Edgewater for the first time back in August when I learned that one of my students rode his bike to our school open house. He was so excited to come to school that he arrived that day even before the principals and was waiting for them to unlock the gate. His bike didn't have a seat or brakes. He wasn't wearing a helmet. When we told him we were getting him a bike, he was thrilled but was very worried about it getting stolen. We reassured him that it would come with a lock.

In December, I heard that we had a couple of kids from our school family that really wanted bikes for Christmas. Edgewater Church came through again and provided two more bikes for these kids.

The boy who got the first bike asked me the last day of school where I got his bike. He said that his cousin was a nice kid and he thought he deserved to have a bike, too. I found out from one of our vice principals that he gives his cousin a ride to school every day on his handlebars. I am in the process of getting yet another bike for that young man, also from Edgewater.



The bikes are a truly amazing gift but what it really allows me to do is to build relationships with my students. These kids really don't have anything. In the past, they have had behavior problems and failing grades. I have witnessed a huge change since the bike donations. Now, there are respect, pride, and love. Grades are improving, and behavior is so much better. It just takes love. And sometimes love has two wheels and handlebars.

TREASURER – Melissa Brown

Operating Financial Results January 2018	Actual	Budge	Variance
Donations and Other Income:	\$15,600	\$14,250	\$1,350
Expenses	12,049	13,582	1,534
Net Income	\$3,552	\$668	\$2,884

Thank you to everyone who donated during the month of January. We were able to generate a surplus of \$3,552, which will be banked and used in the lean months to come. February financial results aren't available yet, but hopefully, we will have similar results.

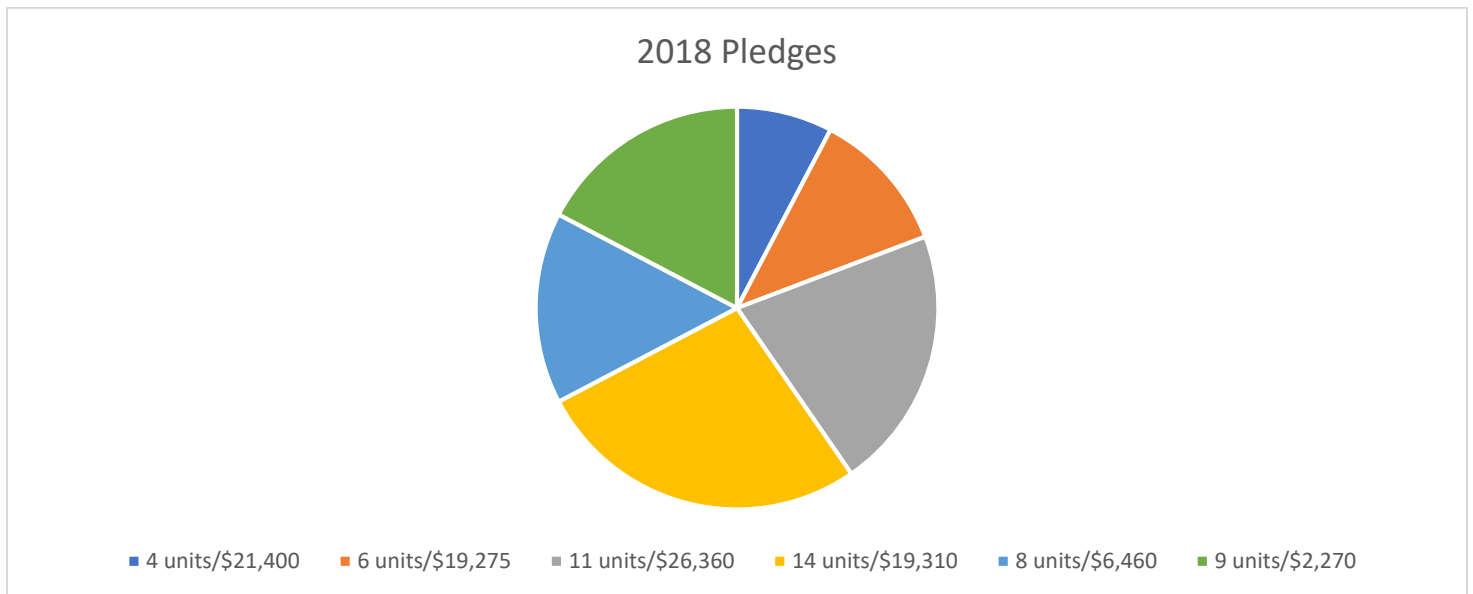
They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and as a treasurer, fancy graphs and pie charts would be the obvious choices. However, the chart below details the appropriate forms of giving. Please note the item in the lower left. Bet you never thought about giving something like that! Our Monday counters will appreciate the taste treats!



If you would like an easy and cost-free way to contribute to the church, you can set up an automatic payment through your bank by using electronic banking. Payments are mailed from your bank to the church. If you would like to pursue this form of payment, please be advised that the address that should be used for mailing the check is Congregational United Church of Christ, Punta Gorda, PO Box 510838, Punta Gorda, FL 33951-0838. Most banks do not charge for this service—not even for the postage to mail the payment.

STEWARDSHIP

The results are in from our pledge campaign, Journey to Generosity, and our congregation was **very generous**. We received pledges from 52 units (households), totaling \$95,075. Our budgeted revenue for 2018 is \$171,000. The difference of \$75,925 will come from \$7,500 in building use donations and \$68,425 in unpledged contributions. Forty per cent of our projected revenue is unpledged! If you would still like to pledge for 2018, please call the church office at 941-637-8443 or email office@puntagorda-ucc.com and a pledge card will be forwarded to you.



MINISTRY FELLOWSHIP TEAM - *Jan Tulk*

I've had some positive comments on the sign-up sheet. Next month's sheet is in the back of the church. Please consider signing up for a section or two. Many thanks this month to George and Marty Buckingham, Mary Farnquist, Susann Luckenbach, M.E. Pierce-Steele, Dick and Mary Tulip, Bill and Jean Ringelstein, Joyce and Tim Schenk, Carol and John Schmuhl, Glenn and Linda Weaver and Diane and Elden Wick.



We held a memorial service for Ron Frantish on February 21. Thanks to Neoma Remiger for organizing the reception following the service, and to the ladies who supplied the cookies.



Don't forget to sign up for our church picnic, which is scheduled for Sunday, March 11. Lots of good food and fellowship guaranteed!

LIBRARIAN – Sandy James-Nogaj



Thank you, Mary Ellen and Myra, for hosting February's Book Talk Tea. We had a large group this time and discussed many interesting books. The March tea will be hosted by Neoma Remiger at her home on March 9 at 1:00pm. Her address is 459 Valletta Court, Punta Gorda. If you want to carpool, please meet at the church at 12:45pm. Sign up at the kiosk in the back of the sanctuary.

LADIES' LUNCH OUT – Neoma Remiger

The Ladies' Lunch Out will be at Hurricane Charley's Bar and Grill this month and will be on Friday, March 23, at 12:00 noon. If you plan on joining us, please sign up at the kiosk in the back of the sanctuary. We hope to see you.

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

The Living the Questions class meets on Monday from 3:30pm to 5:00pm in Faith Hall. If you are interested in attending, please feel free to join us.

GREAT DECISIONS

Great Decisions classes meet on Tuesdays from 1:30pm to 3:30pm in the library. If you have questions or need more information, please call Lori or Jerry Larson (541-624-5378).

MARCH CELEBRATORY DATES

MARCH BIRTHDAYS

March 1	Paula Michael
March 4	Angie Campbell
March 5	Tonya Miller
March 6	Janis Tulk
March 10	Carol Schmuhl
March 11	Bill Klossner
March 14	Anamaria Rivadeneira
March 15	Charlie Salisbury
March 17	Betty Pitcher
March 19	Sandra James-Nogaj
March 22	David Ley
March 23	William Tucker
March 26	Michael Ford



There are no March wedding anniversaries.

Did we miss a birthday or anniversary? Please email the office, and we will try to make sure it doesn't happen again: office@puntagorda-ucc.com



Searching for the Fountain of Youth

Legend has it that Ponce de Leon was searching for the fabled Fountain of Youth when he came to Florida. Well, poor old Ponce didn't find the subject of his search, but today millions of seniors seem to be having better luck.

These days, Florida is often where senior America comes to rest, renew, recharge and, ultimately, retire. And a growing segment of this senior migration is made up of Baby Boomers. The generally accepted definition of a Baby Boomer is someone born between January 1, 1947, and December 31, 1964. The Census Bureau, however, likes to count years from July 1, 1946. No matter which dates you use, there are millions of folks who fall into this category.

The earliest of the Baby Boomers have already passed the half-century mark. And, as they make the transitions from thirty-something to over 50, the Boomers are increasingly worried about changes in appearance, stamina, memory, intelligence: in short, all the things age is thought to diminish.

In fact, the Baby Boomers' focus on growing older is fueling an explosion in demands for miracle cures, potions, elixirs and all manner of remedies to hold Father Time at bay. No wonder members of all branches of science from plastic surgeons to geriatricians, from nutritionists to pharmacists are hard at work to fill the demand for anti-aging solutions.

Unfortunately, countless con artists and "snake oil" salesmen are also concentrating on this lucrative field. Claims range from the ridiculous to the almost-sublime. Advertisements declare "people can raise their levels of anti-aging hormone by listening to specially designed music." Other "sure fire" methods for holding off the advance of time have included everything from Dr. John Willard's Catalyst Altered Water, a bio enhancer (\$ 15 for an 8 oz, bottle), to "colloidal silver," designed to combat 650 different disease organisms. According to statistics, \$2 billion is spent yearly on anti-aging products. Authorities say the overwhelming outpouring of unproven remedies has become the nation's fastest growing health fraud. It's prime time for the old warning, "Buyer Beware."

The Baby Boomers who are currently rushing to respond to all this anti-aging hype will eventually learn what those of us who have already passed 60 discovered on our way along the road of life. We've come to realize that the most effective tools to counteract the unstoppable march of time are a positive attitude about the future and a strong faith in God. Those rock-solid remedies are better than any cream, potion or elixir ever invented. And they're much easier to find than Ponce de Leon's legendary but elusive Fountain of Youth.



VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY



Do you love walking in nature...

enjoy talking with people....

like to surround yourself with art...

have a hole in your life that needs to be filled with volunteering....

have 3-4 hours each week to share?

If this describes you, then you might just be the person the Peace River Botanical & Sculpture Gardens is looking for! We need more volunteers willing to be trained to serve as docents, our Garden Guides, who will share the story of this beautiful sanctuary of art and nature along the Peace River. The walking tour usually takes 1-1 ½ hours for each small group and covers just over a mile. One or two trips a day one day a week is all we ask. For those who might not want to walk that much, we can also use volunteers for our 8-passenger tram that transports our visitors back to their vehicles from the main gate. For additional information or questions, contact Board President, Rev. Bill Klossner at [941-621-8299](tel:941-621-8299) or [941-457-3551](tel:941-457-3551). The Peace River Gardens is located east of I-75 on Riverside Drive off of US-17 at 5827 Riverside Drive. The Peace River Gardens appreciates the support provided by the Congregational UCC Endowment Fund through a gift in 2017 which assisted with the computerization of our new offices. The Gardens opened to the public on October 20, 2017.

REV. BILL KLOSSNER

President, Peace River Botanical and Sculpture Gardens, Inc.

www.peacrivergardens.org

Past President, Arts & Humanities Council of Charlotte County, Inc.

Senior Chaplain, Punta Gorda Police Department

Pastor Emeritus, Congregational United Church of Christ, Punta Gorda