



Since 1991, 117 churches in 29 states and the District of Columbia have received Union Presbyterian Seminary Congregational Leadership Awards.

Presenting the 2015 Award Recipients:

(Judging panelists' comments are italicized)



Eastminster Presbyterian Church of Simpsonville, South Carolina

received this year's W.T. "Tolly" Thompson Award for creatively meeting a vital Christian Education need in the church community. The Drama and Music Program at Eastminster Presbyterian has filled an important need in the church's children's ministry, and has attracted new families to the congregation. Each week during Sunday School hour, children in the program work on new songs and acting skills, preparing to perform during church services and at special events. One parent of several children involved in the program wrote, "I have watched my children grow in their faith by worship through drama and music, and I have had the privilege of watching other children in our church become more confident and expressive. The children of Eastminster are excited to get up early on Sunday to participate in this special program during the traditional Sunday School hour. Visitors are enthusiastic when they hear about the program." As the ministry continues to grow, Eastminster hopes to be able to branch out beyond the walls of its church to use the Drama and Music Program as a form of ministry and mission to the community.

"Sunday School hour is being revitalized with a new approach focused on musical gifts and interests. It will be exciting to see what happens as a result of this effort!"



First Presbyterian Church of Anderson, South Carolina

received this year's Ruthmary and Lamar Williamson Award for Excellence in the Care of the Frail Old.

The Rhodes Respite Care program at First Presbyterian is a faith-based activity program for adults with early to moderate memory impairment from Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. Operating two mornings a week, it is open to anyone from Anderson and surrounding counties who has a physician's referral. This ministry provides a much-needed break to family caregivers, who can leave their loved ones at the church under the watchful eyes of trained staff and volunteers. This allows caregivers to run errands, take care of personal appointments, or simply take some time for rest and relaxation, while being assured that their family members are cared for in a loving atmosphere. Caregivers are also encouraged to take advantage of Alzheimer's support groups that may meet in the community during the hours their family member is attending Rhodes Respite Care. Fred Rhodes, for whom the program is named, was a retired government leader, attorney, and active member of First Presbyterian Church in Anderson. After his wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, he became her sole caregiver. Seeing the need for respite care in the Anderson area, Fred left funds to the church upon his death in hope the congregation would support caregivers of persons with dementia. The primary financial backing for the program comes from Mr. Rhodes' bequest, but Rhodes Respite also accepts donations of money and goods. Volunteers assisting with the program are recruited from among members of the congregation, by word of mouth, and through articles in local papers and newsletters. They undergo dementia and safety training, and receive regular continuing education as they work in the program.

"An exceptional response to widespread needs in both congregation and community...worthy of recognition and gratitude - as well as being a model for others in responding to the urgent needs of older adults, their families, congregations and communities."

"Very impressive in its organization, professionalism, and execution. This is a rare and wonderful program for a congregation to attempt."



First Presbyterian Church of Great Falls, Montana

received this year's **James Goodpasture Award for excellence in ministry to persons with developmental disabilities and their families.** Born out of First Presbyterian Church of Great Falls, Montana, Peace Place Respite Care is a state-licensed program that offers loving care at no charge to all qualified families of children with special needs in Great Falls. Peace Place, a United Way partner, is available three mornings a week and several evenings a month. Each licensed staff member has a heart for young children with special needs, and is trained in daily and emergency care by local agencies and individual families. Nursing students, an EMT and a Registered Nurse are regular volunteers, gaining valuable experience with pediatrics and giving Peace Place families vital support and knowledge. The demands of raising children with disabilities can overwhelm caregivers. Peace Place puts a special emphasis on outreach to the large Native American and military population in the area. The organization focuses on early intervention, reaching out to families under the most strain. In its first three years of operation, Peace Place served the needs of over two dozen diverse families. By providing much needed free-time to caregivers, the program helps promote healthier families and a stronger community, adding a vital part to the safety net protecting and encouraging the most vulnerable in the community.

"An exciting ministry, worthy of recognition."

"I am deeply touched by this ministry's outreach to these incredibly vulnerable children."

"What a wonderful program, and so well-thought-out. What a joy to hear about this!"



Welcome to The Learning Club!

First Presbyterian Church (Clarkston, Washington)

received this year's Sarah Hill Brown Award for Early Childhood Education. The Learning Club, also known as "TLC," is a local community outreach mission of First Presbyterian Church of Clarkston, Washington. The program has been operating for the past 12 years. Its mission is to enhance children's learning in a nurturing environment through cooperative interaction with committed staff and volunteers. Specifically, The Learning Club is an after-school program for children from Grantham Elementary, a Title I public K-6th school located in the neighborhood of First Presbyterian Church. It includes tutoring and mentoring for children from the 1st through the 4th grade. It focuses on at-risk children and students who are falling below their grade level in math and reading, and who do not currently qualify for other tutoring assistance. The Learning Club operates three afternoons a week during the school year. Children arrive at First Presbyterian Church of Clarkston by school bus each day, and the first hour is devoted to a family-style snack and group interaction. The snack period, which is supported by the federal food program as well as donations from church members, is used to introduce children to topics regarding healthy eating. The second hour of the Learning Club is designated for homework and reading time, benefitting from the assistance of over 40 volunteers who each commit one hour a week to provide homework assistance and one-on-one reading time with each student. Once a month, The Learning Club hosts a pizza dinner and craft night for all TLC families. Many church volunteers attend the dinners as table hosts, giving members a time to engage in conversation and build relationships with families involved in the program. Following dinner, everyone works together on a family craft project. The Learning Club was created to help children become successful in their math and reading while developing positive and successful attitudes about schoolwork. The Learning Club is a place where children can feel safe, loved, listened to, and valued for their unique characters and personalities. Volunteers build relationships that will be lasting and impactful.

"An impressive ministry with what appears to be a successful history since its beginning twelve years ago. The program shows an excitement and freshness which leads me to believe that it will continue to be a meaningful ministry of this congregation."

"Obviously meets a real need in this community."



Nor’Kirk Presbyterian Church of Carrollton, Texas

received this year’s Al Dimmock Award for excellence and congregational involvement in the **empowerment of older adults**. Among its varied outreach ministries, Nor’Kirk Presbyterian Church has established a dynamic new program called Hope for the Homebound. The church reaches out directly to senior citizens in the area who are below the poverty level and who lack their own transportation. Volunteers visit them regularly to learn about their needs and food preferences, and then bring them groceries on a monthly basis. Hope for the Homebound volunteers also respond to an array of other needs, including home repairs and household tasks.

“Shows an admirable spirit of service to the surrounding community.”



Westminster Presbyterian Church (Buffalo, New York)

received this year's Katherine Hawes Award for its effective youth ministry that engages youth in all areas of the church's mission, extending beyond the church into the community and the world. Working with Rural Community Action Ministries, Westminster Presbyterian Church organizes an annual week-long mission trip to Hartford, Maine. Staying in Hartford Community Church, the youth find that each day brings a new opportunity to help people in need. Many of the homes in the small community are owned by elderly residents who are unable to meet the physical demands of maintaining their homes or who cannot afford the upkeep of housing exposed to harsh Maine winters. Each year, Westminster youth participants help secure a "wood bank" for residents of Hartford and surrounding communities. This is a vital service, since many of the residents can neither physically cut their own wood nor afford to buy enough for the winter. The group has a goal of cutting and stacking at least ten cords of wood during each mission trip. They also undertake many other tasks to help people in need. Fundraising for the mission trip is a key need, and youth in the church participate in many fundraisers throughout the year, including baking 150 homemade pies to sell in November! For the past five years, Hartford Community Church has also sent its own group of youth to Buffalo in reciprocation for Westminster's help in their community. The Maine mission trip is a life-changing event for those who attend, and helps transform youth into Christian leaders, allowing them to step the boundaries of their own community.

"Exciting and exceptional – I am particularly impressed with the partnership with the two churches' youth groups sharing mutual ministries in both communities."

"40 years? Wow! Two generations of teens and adults now see mission work as a natural part of Christian life. This is a wonderful record. And the reverse trips from Maine to Buffalo--beautiful!"



White Rock Presbyterian Church (Los Alamos, New Mexico)

received the Elinor Curry Award for its ministry of outreach and social concern that addresses the call of the church to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God,” and in so doing changes the congregation. White Rock Presbyterian Church currently assists many self-help projects on the Navajo Nation through its partnership with the House of Fellowship (HOF), a small Navajo Indian congregation. According to the Navajo Nation Planning and Development Department (using U.S. Census data from 2010), more than one-third (38%) of the Navajo Nation tribal members are classified as “severely poor.” Many families live in a cycle of poverty, struggling with high unemployment, substance abuse and substandard housing. The House of Fellowship, under the leadership of Fred and Lorraine Thomas, offers people hope. HOF ministers to community members through the use of their own strong Navajo language and culture and through side-by-side mentorship. The House of Fellowship uses a self-help model of assistance for the community, and invites the members of White Rock Presbyterian Church to help assist with this work. Since 2009, White Rock Presbyterian Church and the House of Fellowship have jointly sponsored dozens of ventures, including hauling wood and splitting wood for needy families, building ramps for people with disabilities, laying foundations for homes, framing houses, completing roofing projects, delivering food, cleaning sheep corrals, and funding college scholarships. Between 2009 and 2015, at least 40 current and former White Rock congregants of all ages have worked directly on such projects on the reservation, with about 16 members of the House of Fellowship reciprocating by providing assistance in Los Alamos/White Rock. This total amounts to between half and two-thirds of each congregation. Members of White Rock Presbyterian Church have had the opportunity to learn directly about another culture, to participate in new styles of worship, and to make life-long friends among Navajo Nation tribal members.

“This is an outstanding model of intercultural ministry! Unlike most outreach ministries, the relationship between the two partners is reciprocal. Leadership, giving, and receiving are fluid and born out of mutual respect. Those involved are not just learning about another culture, they are stepping inside of it and being transformed by it. We have a lot to learn from this one!”