

PCUSA national staff celebrate their inner child on Mister Rogers Day

by [Mike Ferguson](#)

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A 1982 photo of Fred Rogers (Public Domain)

Wednesday's chapel service celebrating Mister Rogers Day drew out the inner child among the national staff of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as they celebrated the

many gifts given by Fred Rogers, the innovative children’s television pioneer and Presbyterian pastor. Rogers was born on March 20, 1928, and Presbyterians celebrate [Mister Rogers Day](#) each year on his birthday.

“Now is the time to put on your cardigan or your inside shoes,” said Carl Horton, coordinator of the [Presbyterian Peacemaking Program](#), who sported both during worship.

Horton called Rogers “a public figure who worked on and off camera for peace and reconciliation, a true pioneer of faith formation in young children. He respected what kids had to say and treated them with dignity, and his kindness was beamed into homes across the United States.”

Horton pointed out that Rogers’s beloved show, [Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood](#), dealt with five “heavy” topics we’re still wrestling with today: education, mental health, racial equality, disability rights, and peace.

Jeff Eddings, associate for coaching and spiritual formation in [1001 New Worshiping Communities](#), delivered a brief homily on “The Theology of Mister Rogers.”

[Pittsburgh Presbytery](#) commissioned Rogers to carry out what Eddings called “a unique ministry” to children through television, which itself was still fairly young in the 1960s.

“Before online churches and hybrid ministries, Fred was the original outside-the-box 1001 New Worshiping Communities church planter,” Eddings said.

As Eddings’ mother used to remind him, “I was part of his community growing up. I’d come into the room shouting, ‘Rogers, Rogers!’” He and his sister would pull out their stuffed animals and pretend they, too, were in the Neighborhood of Make Believe.

As journalist [Bob Faw once observed](#), “The real Mister Rogers never preached, never even mentioned God on his show. He never had to.”

Eddings said Rogers would pray privately each day in the studio, “Dear God, let some word that is heard be yours.” The neighborly theology he embodied came from [Matthew 22:39](#), Jesus’ command to love our neighbor as ourselves—“and everyone is your neighbor,” Eddings said.

A professor at [Pittsburgh Theological Seminary](#), which Rogers attended even while working in children's television, once told Rogers, "We can either be an accuser or an advocate."

"Mister Rogers chose advocate in his own grace-filled way," Eddings said. "Everyone belonged in his neighborhood, and we as a church still have much to learn from Mister Rogers."

Rogers constantly told his young viewers, "I like you as you are."

"We need to start where God starts with us," Eddings said. "We are first and foremost the beloved. We embrace the theology that says, 'We're the beloved in the hands of a loving God.'"

"Stop thinking you're not enough for what needs to be done," Eddings urged the gathered online community. "When we accuse ourselves, it becomes easy to accuse others too." But "God became flesh and moved into our neighborhood to be our advocate. There's nothing you can do to earn that love. When you understand yourself as beloved, you're more likely to see and receive others as beloved."

[A clip](#) from the 2019 film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* illustrated Rogers's ability to empower even a cynical reporter named Lloyd. "Would you do something with me, Lloyd?" Rogers asks as the two are seated at a table in a restaurant. "It's an exercise I like to do sometimes. We'll just take a minute and think about all the people who loved us into being."

"I can't do that," Lloyd tells Rogers.

"They'll come to you," Rogers assures him. "Just one minute of silence." The whole restaurant becomes silent, too. "Thank you for doing that with me," Rogers says after a minute has gone by. "I feel so much better."

Wednesday's worship also included singing [Jesus, Teach Us to Be Neighbors](#). David Gambrell, associate for worship in the [Office of Theology & Worship](#), wrote the text for the 2022 hymn. Wil Smith [provided the music](#), which he named *McFeely* after both the "[Speedy Delivery](#)" character on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and Rogers's own middle name. —Presbyterian News Service