

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Stockbridge, Massachusetts

December 2019 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

Faith is not a spectator sport, instead we bring our faith to life through our choices, our actions, our participation. During Advent and Christmas, that truth explodes beyond the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. We transform our homes with decorations of light and life. We host parties; gatherings of joy.

We attend concerts;
gatherings of beauty.
We send cards;
outpourings of love. We
gather mid-week on a
cold, dark night to the
point where the
sanctuary and our hearts
can barely hold it all in.

As your Pastor, I hope
that as we do it, we keep
Christ in Christmas.

Not just in the words you use to describe the date, but rather the choices you make to honor it. This is a time where expectations can lead to stress when the gift God offered in Bethlehem was the Prince of Peace. This is a time where we can be pushed to measure up to some idealized standard rather than remembering that the heart of the gift on that first day mattered so much more than the setting or decorations. The gift was love – fragile in form but transformative in function. Which brings me to the other way that we often participate in this season – gift giving.

As your Pastor, I hope that we keep the gift of Christ in our hearts as we become gift givers.

The US and the UK will spend over one trillion dollars this Christmas on gifts alone. Karl Rahner, noted Catholic theologian, reminds us that how we spend those dollars matters. To buy in the world economy, he reflects, is almost an impossible

dilemma for people of faith. Invariably some of our money will end up in pockets of those who practice child or slave labor, some will go to repressive governments or companies, still more will contribute to manufacturing practices that are killing our planet. But rather than giving up he says we should bring the focus of our faith to bear in how we make choices.



So, this Christmas as we participate in gift giving, a few thoughts from your Pastor.

Remember the first gift of Christ was given because God saw we really needed it to make our lives better; so, give because the person needs it or because their life will blossom because of it.

Remember too that it was just one gift – an amazing, simple, single gift; and it was more than enough. Remember where you put your money matters. Spend the little more it takes to buy local or make it yourself even if it means fewer gifts. Research where the gift is made, by whom, out of what, who is selling it, and where the profits go – for the perfect gift is diminished if it ends up hurting others or the planet. Sometimes what people need or want most is not something made at all, but instead simple expressions of God's gift – love. Finally remember the first people God shared the gift with were the poor and the burdened, the shepherds; so may your first gifts go to those who most need them most.

This is a blessed time of peace and new beginnings. It is a time of quiet, gentle love given freely in the most unexpected way. May you give and receive in that spirit.

Brent

OUR SHARED LIFE TOGETHER

HAPPY DECEMBER BIRTHDAYS
(Please let someone on the Board of Growth and Fellowship know if we missed your birthday or listed it incorrectly.)

December 3 Glenn Gilbert
Nicole Arrell

December 6 Philip Connor

December 8 Khalil Haddir

December 12 Ted Hornick

December 13 Nancy Fitzpatrick
Anne McKinstry

December 14 Christina Alsop

December 19 Martha Slocombe

December 21 Brent Damrow
Ron Hanft

December 24 Jenna Knauss

December 25 Debbie Goodwin

December 28 Nell Ezequelle

December 29 John Canning
Joe Nicolosi

December 31 Hal Brink

PLEASE REMEMBER THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR PRAYERS:

The family of Lorinda Mazur on her passing, Cindy Ogulnick, Alice Ruffing's sister and family, Sibylle Baier, Diane Vogt, Gary and Corinne Burke, Mary Jane Dunlop, Nell Ezequelle, Stan Osak, Jr., Philip Connor, Ronnie Cunningham's son Colin, Gege Kingston, Barbara Bracknell, Meryle Epstein, Lindsay Hermanski, Jeannie Smith, Natalie Newberg, Arthur Dutil, and Jeanne Fleming.

NEWS FROM AROUND THE CHURCH

REPORTS FROM STAFF, BOARDS, COMMITTEES, AND SERVICE LEAGUE

Sexton News

- ◆ If you notice anything broken or needing attention in the church building, please don't hesitate to contact me in the office, 298-3137, or office@stockbridgeucc.org. A note on my desk works, too.
- ◆ Heating season is here. If you need to bump the temperature up or down for your event feel free to do so. Each of the thermostats will then regulate it back to our standard temperatures.
- ◆ **Please do not use the "hold" feature. Often people forget to take off the hold and we end up heating an empty building for long periods of time.**



Will Garrison, Administrator and Sexton

A brief history of the First Congregational Church Scholarship

In 1985, the Service League asked the Board of Trustees to establish a permanent memorial scholarship account. The Service League pledged an annual contribution of \$2,000 to the fund, which the Trustees would match. It was also hoped that memorial gifts would be made by members of the congregation so that the account would build up more quickly.

Throughout the years, the Scholarship Fund has indeed grown, supporting our college students in a more significant way. This year we are able to support five scholarships of \$1,000 each!

Claire Williams

Finance News

Two Notes on Year-End Giving

1. We hope you will be able to complete your 2019 giving in December. However, if we receive any check dated in Dec. 2019 by Jan. 15 it can be included in your 2019 giving report, which you will receive before the end of January.
2. If you are over 70 & 1/2 and have an IRA this information may be useful: The tax law now has doubled the standard deduction and has capped the amount that can be deducted for state and local taxes. Together, this means that for many taxpayers it will be prudent to use the standard deduction rather than itemize deductions. This may mean that you would no longer be able to deduct charitable contributions, such as those to the church.

However if you are over 70 1/2 and have an IRA, you can direct a payment from that IRA to go directly to a charity (like the church) and the amount of the gift will not count as a taxable distribution, as it otherwise would. Thus, one gets the benefit of a charitable deduction (in the form of reduced taxes on IRA distributions) without itemizing. One can use the IRA required minimum distribution (RMD) for this purpose. This information was provided by one of the members of the church, who suggests that if this may apply to you, you should contact your tax advisor or check out IRS Publication 590-B.

Giving Envelopes

Giving envelopes for 2020 will be available in the JE room by Sunday, December 22. If you used envelopes in 2019 you will automatically have envelopes for 2020 unless you let me know you don't want them. If you have not used envelopes but would like them, please sign up on the clipboard next to the envelop boxes in the JE room. All will be on the table at the north end of the room near the piano.

Ron Hanft, Financial Secretary

Church Council and Board of Trustees

Notice anything missing? The leaves! Thanks to the hard-working crew from the Stockbridge Golf Club, who visited twice with serious equipment, the lawns are leaf-free. This work a result of good old-fashioned Yankee bartering: the Golf Club uses the JE Room for board meetings and in return they made the leaves disappear.



People's Pantry

The People's Pantry provides food and toiletries for more than 150 people each week. Each shopper gets their choice of canned goods like soup, beans, and tuna. Packaged goods like cereal, pasta, peanut butter, and rice. Cold items include milk, cheese, yogurt, eggs and a large variety of frozen meats. From Guido's and Big Y and local farms, there is fresh produce and bread. Barrington Bagel donates bagels. Most shoppers take home \$50-\$75 of food.

Many donors including this church provide funds which purchase food from the Western Mass Food Bank and Big Y. Many foods are donated by churches and service organizations, other groups do food drives. At Thanksgiving each family receives a turkey. We plan to do hams for Christmas this year.

This a completely volunteer organization from the

pick up and delivery of food to the Pantry to the bookkeeping.

When we celebrate, our Active Prayer of Thanksgiving on Dec 1, please consider bringing items to make the holidays merrier like baking supplies of flour, brown sugar, jam, and cooking oil. Foods may be brought in any time, not just on December 1 as foods are delivered to the Pantry every Thursday.

Stop in on Thursday, December 5 between 9 and 1 when our church provides the volunteer crew. The Pantry is in the basement of St James Place at the corner of Main and Taconic in Great Barrington. The entrance is opposite CVS.

Anne Hutchinson



The Service League

Well, we're down to the wire and the Monday-morning hustle and bustle is in high gear as we prepare for the Holly Fair on December 7. We'll begin setting up right after the service on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, (volunteers always welcome!) and filling the booths with goodies through the week. Some of the bakers in the congregation will be getting phone calls from Nell Ezequelle asking for donations, and our talented team of greens arrangers will be toiling away at the Grange. There's more - but come and see, taste, and shop - for yourself!

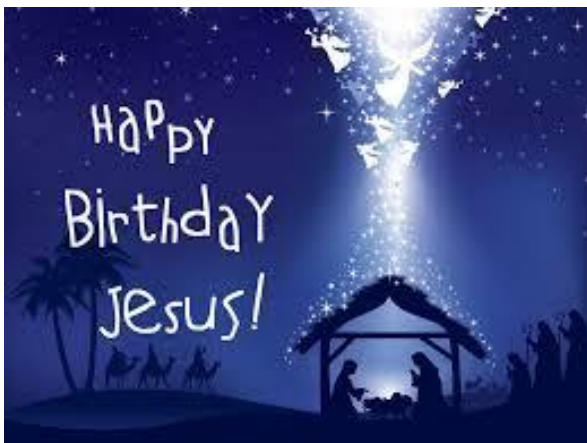
Thanks, as always, for your support. We couldn't do it without you!

Margaret Hornick, for the Service League

Arts! Crafts! FOOD!

Maybe I should have started with food and left it at that. The **Board of Christian Education** is hosting an Advent Celebration again this year, on Sunday, December 15th, and it does actually start with food. Please consider joining us for a potluck lunch after the service, and then stay on for a festive time of snowflake cutting, ornament making, and potato printing. There may even be cookies to decorate! This party is known to have been enjoyable for persons of all ages.

Ted Randolph



Art News - *Happy Birthday Jesus*

The children in our church are sharing their artistic gifts for these holidays of Christmas and Epiphany during the months of December and January, on the theme of "Happy Birthday Jesus." The expressions through various art media are on display in the JE Room. Enjoy these wonderful expressions of Jesus being the reason for the season.

Olga Schwede

Intergenerational Worship Combines Christmas and Service

On November 17th Christmas came early. Using the texts of Mary and Joseph homeless in Bethlehem in Luke and Jesus as a refugee in Egypt in Matthew, children's sermons helped us remember the struggles of the holy family at Christmas. Executive Director Jane Ralph of Construct and Literacy Network Board Members Linda Russell and Sarah Boyd then shared stirring testimonials of how those same issues are playing out in the Berkshires and how our church is partnering to address them. Our hope was to use the Christmas story to look at our world in new ways. Equally important though was to look back at Christmas to see how that story is still playing out and what we are called to do in response. With the Kid's choir and the Adult Bell Choir lending beauty to the service and more than 140 people in attendance it was a day of great joy and deep meaning. Each third Sunday of the month we are working to provide worship that includes children of all ages in meaningful and interactive ways. Come and see!



LITERACY NETWORK
OF SOUTH BERKSHIRE



CONSTRUCT
HOUSING FAMILIES. STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY



Giving Tree in the JE Room

Please choose from about 160 tags to provide gifts for adults, children and animals. Sign up on the clipboard. Gifts should be wrapped and returned to church by Sunday, December 8. The very, very last date to bring gifts will be December 16. Thank you on behalf of South County families from Construct, Elizabeth Freeman Center, The Literacy Network and others. Questions? Contact Anne Hutchinson (413) 854-7798

One Small Group Wraps up and Invites Others to Begin

Five people came together for seven weeks. They shared what was going on in their lives as they explored key concepts of our shared faith: God, church, Jesus, salvation, religion, cross and Bible. They found such connection and meaning in those gatherings that they decided to add an eighth week – where over Pizza, salad and birthday cake (see the photo on page 7) people reflected on what they learned about each other and about faith. That is the power of small groups. They build connections that matter.

This group used a curriculum called Animate. Using video vignettes featuring a variety of faith leaders, it welcomes you into open conversations about topics we hear about all the time, but maybe don't take as much time to talk about. When asked what they particularly enjoyed, every person talked about getting to know each other in an authentic way. Each person also learned something about their faith – one was inspired to “think more about how to walk in the steps of Jesus,” while another found the idea that the Kingdom of God is already here compelling, while a third discovered she really wants to read the Bible more.

This is a curriculum that would be equally effective for those new to faith (as some were in this group) and those who have been committed to our faith for a long time (as others were in this group). SO, HERE IS THE INVITATION: create a small group and go through it together. Pastor Brent would be happy to get you started, provide the materials and then the videos and curriculum will take you from there. You can meet at the church or at a home. If one person steps forward just to coordinate, we can get a sign-up list created. If you have a whole group that works too. The ideal size is somewhere from 5-8 people. We chose to meet for one hour which worked fine (although one participant indicated they would have loved even more). If you are interested in being part of this small group or coordinating one – just give Brent a call. As one person commented, “I would highly recommend this course for anyone interested in exploring their faith, connection to God, Jesus, and each other.”

Advent & Christmas 2019

We journey toward Christmas in the sacred time of Advent. Here are some things to make this time peaceful, joyful and meaningful.

Advent Devotionals: These daily readings come from a variety of pastors and leaders within the United Church of Christ (including our own Rick Floyd). They are free for the taking (please share within a household). Booklets are provided by Christian Education.

Advent Wreath: We light candles each Sunday in worship. The liturgy draws from prophetic teachings about living with hope and faith amidst difficulty. We will watch as they burn lower and make room for the lighting of the Christ Candle on Christmas Eve.

Morning Prayer: Wednesdays at 8:00 a.m. During Advent, we will focus on the four themes of hope, peace, joy and love while leaving room for the truth that, for many, this time of year includes difficulty, pain, and loss. The service lasts about 25 minutes and hot coffee/tea are always available.

Intergenerational Worship/Advent Party: On December 15, we will worship celebrating the Latvian practice of Christingle. Then we will move into the JE Room for our Advent Party (see page 4).

Christmas Eve Worship: With preludes beginning at 6:30 we enter into a service of light and life. We will utilize a lessons and carols approach for the heart of the service letting the story tell itself in word and song. Bring Friends and arrive early!

Christmas Pageant: On Sunday December 22 Tracy Wilson will lead the Stockbridge Festival Chorus, our own Choir and a cast from our Congregation in Ralph Vaughan Williams' *The First Nowell* (see p 9).

If you have any questions about this important season, please call the Church Office.

May this time be a source of healing, peace, and hope for all.

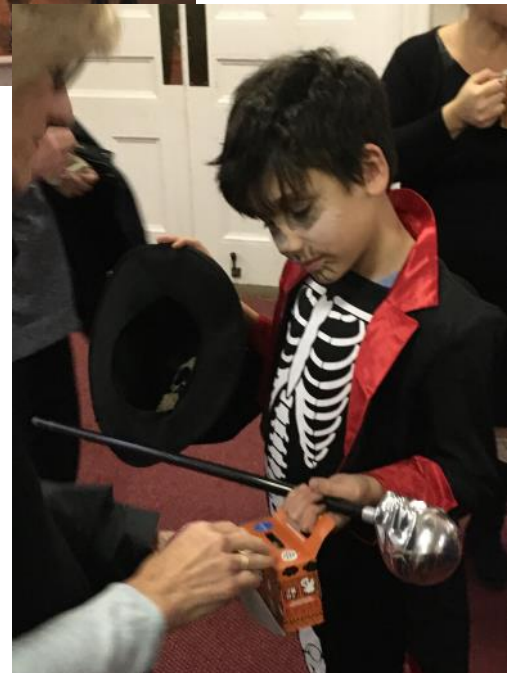


Top: Animate small group gathers for a celebration meal (see page 6).
Middle: Sunday School lessons bring the glories of the Bible to life.
Bottom: Intergenerational worship brings Christmas to November.





Top: Children's Choir rings and sings in worship.
Bottom: Trick or Treat for UNICEF brings joy and raises funds.



And in other news...

In the November newsletter, Pastor Brent encouraged us to share the joy of our welcoming, progressive, Christ-centered church with others.

Patty Strauch's mother Marilyn responded:

Dear Pastor Brent Darrow and Congregation, I am responding to the suggestion you made in the Church's newsletter this month.

The first comment I would like to make to the Congregation is: "YES, PLEASE, do bring your visitors to the United Church of Christ in Stockbridge, MA" You could be depriving them of one of the best experiences in a church they may ever come across, if you do not!

I am a person who is and has been active in the church for 60+ years. When my daughter, Patricia

Strauch, brought me to a service for the first time, the beauty of it filled me with such JOY and Presence of the Trinity that I cried in what I now realize was thankfulness. And that experience has been duplicated every time I come.

Take the risk of offering this opportunity to those who come to your home. Please. Even if their initial visit is not as intense as mine. Your church comes across as a loving, faithful presence, joyful in your service. Please continue to be a light shining in the darkness and don't be afraid to spread hope - just by exposing others to what you have.

I look forward to seeing you all in December. And please if you think of it, give Patty a hug of thanks from me for sharing her newsletters and sermons.

God's blessings, Marilyn Strauch

Board of Deacons

The Deacons continue to discuss ways to make our visitors feel “an extravagant welcome.” There are several places where the congregation can make that happen on a Sunday morning: the parking lot, the Narthex coming in, in the sanctuary during the passing of the peace, in line to greet Brent, and in the JE Room at coffee hour. (Or if you’re like me, a friendly introduction washing one’s hands in the bathroom!)

Lots of places, and lots of ways. A few suggestions, working backwards in location: “Hi, I don’t think I know you. I’m Elizabeth. I like having lotion by the sink in the winter.” With luck, the woman I’m addressing won’t stare at me as if I come from another planet, and will instead offer her name and some remark about how dry her hands get too. Doesn’t always happen that way, but I’m an optimist, and find inane comments a focus for either creativity or analysis of social banality. (The latter, in my comment there.)

In the JE Room, it’s good to try the old social truism we learned at Ann Landers’ knee: “Ask someone about themselves.” Some people don’t want to face questions about employment, family roles, or marital status! Maybe instead a question about their favorite spot in the Berkshires, something they enjoyed in the church service, or the weirdest animal they’ve ever seen in their lives. (That falls in the creativity category, and risks the “another planet stare,” but also has the potential to be really interesting and funny. I saw a Komodo Dragon walking down the beach toward the ocean one time....) Whatever we ask, and whatever we learn, try to remember it *and their name* in case they come back. They’ll remember you as someone who was interested in them, even if oddly so.

In line to greet Brent, see if you can learn their name and therefore introduce them to Brent when you and they get up to shake his hand. The more people who hear the new person’s name, the more likely someone is to remember it. And that can lead to another friendly question the next week: “You’re Suzanne, right?” And if you’re wrong, they get to tell you again, which they will usually do with a smile. At least you tried.

In the passing of the peace, again a basic

communications strategy: “Hi, I’m Elizabeth. What’s your name?” “Larry.” “The peace of Christ be with you, Larry. I’m glad you’re here.” Repetition helps us remember! Try to look at them too. Sometimes that helps the memory. Sometimes it confuses instead, but it’s worth a shot. At least it’s friendly.

In the Narthex, please, please, please try to remember to wear your nametag and encourage any guests you bring or see to make a nametag too. Some of us learn by reading.

In the parking lot, there’s all the usual stuff: weather, car, driving conditions, the golf course, the buildings on either side of the church, the trees, the squirrels, the gardens. Don’t forget the creative potential: I did see a bat once outside the church (and also inside, but I wouldn’t mention that upon initial greeting just in case the visitor doesn’t yet know how adorable bats are.)

Now all this may seem quite prescriptive: what Elizabeth sez we should say. I hope my tone here undercuts that. And I hasten to add that I often struggle, particularly during coffee hour, to find things to say to strangers. (I volunteer for coffee duty in part to escape those slightly anxious moments!) And like you, I enjoy talking to my friends after church. But we miss making new friends, and spreading the love of Christ, if we don’t push ourselves a bit to approach strangers with warmth and kindness. It’s not really very hard—or very extravagant—to encourage someone to join us again.

~ Elizabeth Young



ORDER FORM - CHRISTMAS MEMORIAL PLANTS

If you would like to give memorial poinsettia plants for our Christmas service, please order as soon as possible. The florist has suggested the choices below. You may leave your order, with a check, in the "flower" box in the Jonathan Edwards Room or mail to Jacqueline Hawkins, 50 Glendale Road, Housatonic, MA 01236 by Wednesday, December 12.

YOUR NAME

GIVEN IN MEMORY OF

COLOR (please circle) RED WHITE

SIZE (please circle) \$16.50 \$16.50

Remember: please include payment with your order and make checks payable to The First Congregational Church. Following the Christmas Eve service, you may pick up your plant or leave it for a possible gift to a shut-in. Thank you!

The First Nowell in Full Pageantry! **Sunday, December 22, 10:00 am**

On Sunday, December 17, 1989, our church presented *The First Nowell, a Nativity Play*, with music by Ralph Vaughan Williams and pageant by Simona Pakenham. Kit Baker was the director and Penna Rose was the music director.

The cast was:

Creator: Mim Kasson

Gabriel: Kit Baker

Mary: Evelyn Lockhart

Elizabeth: Suzie Chase

Joseph: Doug Lapham

Caspar: Gordon Northrup

Melchoir: David Lockhart

Balthazar: Jeff Wold

First Shepherd: John Miner

Second Shepherd: Jim McMenemy

Third Shepherd: John Alicea

Baritone soloist: Steven Ziglar

Soprano soloist: Janet Tivy

King's pages: Charles Baldrige, Josh Hall, Emily

Kasten, Shane Miner, Peter Wise

Assistant Angels: Jess Lockhart, Lisa Walker, Sara Willis

Angels: Mary Beautyman, Suzanne Beautyman,

Dawn Brenner, Abigail Lockhart, Shannon

Namislo, Joanna Schneyer, Heather Twing, Katie Willis



Thirty years later, we bring back this pageant with two of the original cast members: John Miner and Josh Hall. We also have some singers who participated 30 years ago: Mary Bertocci, Judy Stafford, Claire Williams, Jay and Terry Wise, Joan Kopperl, Jack Brown, Deb McMenemy, and David Anderegg. Through the combined efforts of the Stockbridge Festival Chorus and the church's CE and Music Boards, we will present the Nativity story in song and poetry, with costumes by Sarah Conly and prop assistance from Michael Deegan.

We are still looking for help handling props, moving people around, etc. If you are interested, call: 413-822-8688. If I've missed anyone who participated 30 years ago, let me know. Dress rehearsal (mandatory) is Saturday, December 21, 9:45 am to noon. Thank you in advance to all participants!

~ Tracy Wilson, Pageant Music Director