



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Stockbridge, Massachusetts

February 2020 Newsletter

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last month I wrote about something that I was trying to start and shape my days differently. Given some time in Maine I have been able to lean into this new approach more fully. Rather than starting my day listening to NPR's *Morning Edition*, I have been listening either to some gentle music or podcasts. In particular, I have been listening to the podcast *On Being with Krista Tippett*. (Of note, in the period I came back from Maine to be with this church and to allow Jake to return to school, I noticed that this new habit slipped a bit amidst the obligations and clamor of work life and familial responsibilities. I share that because I have noticed a difference in my perspective when I have slipped and to acknowledge that any change no matter how even demonstrably good can be hard to navigate and sustain initially).

Krista's approach is to speak with someone who has a particular insight that has emerged out of their calling. Her podcasts have a strong faith foundation largely exploring not just the insight, but also how it all plays out in choices made, relationships formed, and communities shaped. She interviews a wide variety of folks from numerous religious traditions and vocations. Often the interviews take place in public forums and the podcast concludes with questions from the audience.

Having heard the podcast, I have subsequently explored the writings of the guest to go more deeply into their experience. That process has informed both my approach to Christmas Eve (through the lens of Serene Jones) and Epiphany (through the lens of Father Greg Boyle). I have found it all to be an expansive process of opening my thinking and wondering. I have been deeply moved by the

implications for relationship and community. I invite you to join me in these next few months hoping that you might be opened and moved too .

Here's how: gathering to explore their wisdom in relationship with one another. I invite you to be part of a monthly small group. We will follow a schedule that invites participants to listen to a selected podcast and read a book written by the guest. We will spend two hours together. During that time, we will eat a

meal together to build relationship.

Then we will talk about what we have encountered. Our discussion will be less of a study and more of a dialogue naming the ways we may have been opened or the possibilities for our lives and the relationships we claim within and beyond our church. I will be limiting the size of the groups to eight. We will try hard to accommodate all who are interested.



We will start with Father Greg Boyle and his work with Homeboy Industries and the gangs of LA. We will then move to Serene Jones and her deep reflections on grace and its import. We will close with Shaine Claiborne and his communities of grace and connection in Philadelphia. More information can be found on the sign-up sheets that are in the JE Room. Please, if there is anything causing you to hesitate, call and talk to me. Don't let any barrier stand in your way.

I look forward to this amazing time of Epiphany as we remember how Christ lived his life and see a new road opening before our very eyes.

Peace and Blessings,

Brent

OUR SHARED LIFE TOGETHER

HAPPY FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS
(Please let someone on Growth and Fellowship know if we have not included your birthday or listed it incorrectly.)

February 1 Ann Brink
 Rick Floyd

February 4 Steve Blanchard

February 10 Claire Williams
 Senta Brodeur

Ellen Lahr

February 11 James Fairbrother

February 12 Les Freeman IV

February 13 Julia Lewis
 Betsy Wheat

February 15 Amy Freeman
 Logan Higuera

February 17 Thomas Wheat

February 23 Kathleen Opperman

February 24 Sophie Randolph

February 26 Jim McMenemy
 Patty Fox

February 28 Lilly Hassmer

PLEASE REMEMBER THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR PRAYERS:

Helen McCormick, Russ Fadding, Cindy Ogulnick, 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, Betsey McKearnan, and Jeanne Fleming.

NEWS FROM AROUND THE CHURCH

Sexton & Administrator News

- ◆ In the category of "other duties as requested" was the recent investigation of the church's bell. Eugene Burns, a self-described passionate fan of church and lighthouse bells made by the Meneely Bell Foundry (1826-1950) in Watervliet, NY, called to ask about our bell. As it was a nice day, and not wanting to rummage through the books in the history closet, I decided to climb the steeple to look for myself. Mr. Burns was happy to learn that we indeed have a Meneely bell. Note: The Children's Chime Tower also has Meneely bells.
- ◆ 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.



Will Garrison, Administrator and Sexton

New Adult Small Groups *On Faith and Being*

Monthly Meetings February - April

As described in Pastor Brent's letter (front page), we will gather to engage some of the leading voices of our time around issues of meaning and living. Each month, group members will be asked to listen to an *On Being* podcast and read a work by the person interviewed. We will then gather for a meal and discussion engaging each other through open dialogue. Sign-up sheets and more information in the J.E. Room. Questions? Contact Pastor Brent or visit www.onbeing.org

Annual Budget Meeting

To the Congregation:

There is a lot of talk these days about gratitude. How taking time to be grateful and appreciate the goodness in our lives can be an effective antidote to situations in the world that could overwhelm us with despair, if we let them. I completely buy into this. Given a choice, I am much more eager to contemplate a beautiful day, the good health of my family or the joy of friendship rather than the news from Iran, Australia or Washington. Every Wednesday at Morning Prayer we take time to name aloud to God and each other, things we are grateful for. It is a wonderful way to start each day and an easy exercise because there are so many things for which to be grateful.

When I consider this past fiscal year in the church, gratitude rises to the surface. Church attendance keeps rising and our membership list keeps growing. In this day and age, we are something of a marvel – one of only two growing congregations in Berkshire County. These new members and friends, along with our already strong church family, have pledged to the Church in a way that has allowed the budget committee to present a completely balanced budget for the first time in many years. This budget even includes a contingency fund in the checkbook that allows funding those occasional emergencies – something our Treasurer has wanted for a long time.

As a Church we can certainly be grateful for the high quality and commitment of our professional staff starting at the top with our most divine Pastor Brent and including our multitalented Administrator/ Sexton Will Garrison, and our super-organized Financial Secretary Ron Hanft. We are truly blessed to enjoy the dedication of each one of them and I am most grateful.

At this point I would like to express gratitude to our Treasurer, Chuck Gillett. He has assumed many roles during his 40+ years in the Church: Trustee, Stewardship Chair, Deacon and Moderator. But without a doubt the job that he has defined and maybe that has even defined him has been that of Church Treasurer. He has been keeping the records, balancing the books, planning the future, chasing our debts (and debtors!), reining in our requests and finding a way to fund our dreams. He has worked closely with our administrators, auditors and accountants and done it all with wisdom and good cheer. Chuck is a very professional “volunteer” and we have been graced for a very long time by his significant skills. I am most grateful.

I am pleased to continue in service to this Church and am particularly grateful to the Church Board members and members of our Church Council.

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah McMenamy, Church
Moderator

To all members of the First Congregational Church
of the United Church of Christ
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

In accordance with the Bylaws of the Church, I
hereby call the Annual Budget Meeting of the
Church for Sunday, February 2, 2020 at 11:00 a.m.

The business to be transacted is as follows:

To act upon the budget for the fiscal year 2020

To act upon any other business that may legally
come before the meeting.

Patricia Strauch, Clerk

Art News

Enjoy the latest art, showing in the JE Room, early February to mid-March. The theme is “**God’s Winter Blessings.**” Check out the list of the church’s artists, posted with the artworks.



The Service League

Now that the Holly Fair is safely (and successfully) behind us, it's back to work in the Sunday School classroom, which is transformed into a sort of year-round Santa's workshop every Monday morning from 10 - 1:30. There's coffee, almost always some yummy baked goods, and great conversations and fellowship. What's it all about? It's about preparing for our Summer and Holly Fairs, supporting international relief efforts with much-needed supplies, planning church events, and much more. But don't take my word for it - drop by and see for yourself. All are welcome, no prior experience necessary!

Margaret Hornick, for the Service League

The People's Pantry will be open on Monday evenings beginning February 3. The hour from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. is in addition to our longstanding Thursday Pantry from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.



Our church is a major supporter of the Pantry with food, funds, and volunteer teams. The additional shopping day will allow us to meet more of the South County food needs. Shoppers who work or do not have access to a vehicle during the day may be able to utilize the evening hour. We also will be able to tap a new pool of volunteers who are not available during regular working hours.

The food insecurity in South County continues to grow with wages shrinking and living costs rising. We hope to provide some relief with access to healthy foods on an ongoing basis.

For more information or to volunteer, contact Anne Hutchinson volunteer.peoplespantry@gmail.com or visit thepeoplespantrygb.org



Our Sunday School teachers: Cindy Brown, Casey Jones, Ken Ward, Elizabeth Evans, Anne Hutchinson, Ted Randolph, Diane Piraino, and Jill Wheat.

And in other news...

Born to Emily Kalish and Alan Jeffries a son, Liam Nathaniel Jeffries-Kalish on December 5. Emily is the daughter of Gene Kalish and Anne Hutchinson. Emily, Alan and Liam are at home in Pelham, NY and all are very well.

Jim and Deb McMenemy had the pleasure of spending Christmas in the Italian Alps with their daughter Maggie McMenemy and their former exchange student Ben Hesse. This photo was taken on a 5 mile hike up a mountain to enjoying the beautiful views and a thrilling sled ride back to the bottom. Ben sends greetings to “Captain” Carl Bradford and Maggie sends a special shout out to Terry Wise.



Board of Deacons

The Deacons have been talking about time lately. We always have discussion of the Deacons' schedule—who is doing what each Sunday—which is lovingly called “Lest We Forget,” and comes in a weekly email from Cathy Clark, who manages to keep us on track in our various roles each week. But we also talk about time in other ways: the length of the service; the current season in the Christian calendar; upcoming events such as Easter and, in a different way, Pastor Brent's sabbatical. Time is on our minds always, as it is on yours and mine in our everyday lives.

I'm starting to appreciate the Christian calendar as we talk about the changes through the year. It struck me as we reviewed the season of Advent and Christmas at the Deacons' January meeting, that I had really experienced a nurturing and balanced season this year, perhaps for the first time in my life. Advent had felt peaceful, deep, meditative. Not slow, exactly, especially since Thanksgiving was so close to Advent this year. But measured, deliberate.

I was aware of each week of Advent in part because I was a Deacon, and we had various tasks to do each week that focused me on steps toward Bethlehem. Decorating the church for Advent. Lighting the Advent wreath. Contemplating Hope. Then Peace. Then Joy. Then Love at Christmas, which this year I spent in my own home, with my own Church Family—another new experience.

And after Christmas, the pleasure of the next step, Epiphany with the mystery and exotic beauty of the story of the Three Kings. When Brent emphasized that the Magi took a different way home, I realized that this past Christmas, I had taken a different way too, in my own way following a star, with faith and wonder, to a place that was quiet, holy, a station in my spiritual path.

The Christian calendar focuses on journeys. We're going to be on another long, deep and meditative journey as we prepare for Easter. Lent, like Advent, is a measured process; it slows us down to contemplate the holiness of Easter.

Last year, I encouraged myself to take a few new steps during Lent. I had never been to an Ash Wednesday service through my various peregrinations in Protestantism. I told myself, “You can try it. It might be interesting.”

That evening I was surprised to see one small part of the church illuminated, and a small group of people gathered. I slipped into a pew, already aware that peace was entering my body. There were readings, and prayer, and meditative music, and the opportunity to have my sins forgiven, quietly and calmly. Having the ash placed on my forehead with a blessing was a long moment of oneness with God. When I got back to the pew, I felt soft, the way we do when we are able to settle into ourselves, at peace.

Eventually Maundy Thursday arrived, and I required self-encouragement again. Since babyhood, I had never had my feet washed by someone else. I found the prospect embarrassing. Luckily some small part of my brain can be mature: it told me, “Remember Ash Wednesday? You can try Maundy Thursday. It too might be interesting.”

That night, I was surprised to see who had come. People whom I would have thought might have been “too cool for school,” too self-possessed to be willing to take their shoe and sock off and have someone hold their bare foot while pouring water over it and then drying it with a towel and a blessing. People who, like me, are out there in the world, busy with everyday life. Again, the room was dimly lit, and as we each put our sock and sock back on, there was a quiet stillness that allowed me to imagine Jesus and the disciples in the Upper Room, after Jesus had been alone in prayer, coming together in community one last time. The measured steps toward Easter: prayer, ritual, quiet, solitude and communion. Human frailty and God's grace slowly moving toward each other.

The time spent on the journeys to Christmas and to Easter remind us that our lives are sojourns: the meaning rests in the process as well as in the major events. I hope that as Lent wends its way through your life this year that you will encourage yourself to join in the beautiful, calming, measured steps of Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and the many other moments on the way to the Resurrection.

Elizabeth Young, Co-Chair



The Christmas Eve service, with candles, songs, angels, and a sheep or two.





Above: On Christmas Eve, hundreds were enthralled by R. Vaughn Williams' *The First Nowell*, led by Tracy Wilson. **Below:** Baptism of Christ Sunday service on January 12 was intergenerational, and included doves and violist Katie Rumin.





On January 12, we welcomed new members to First Congregational Church. Top row: Paul Rix and Anna Duhon, Barbara Moore, and Becky Smith.

Bottom Row: Brian Hyatt, Cris Raymond, Holland Brown and Don Eaton.

Not pictured: Juliet Emery

Please join in welcoming our new members into the life of the church!

