

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Stockbridge, Massachusetts

December 2018 Newsletter

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Over the last few weeks we have been preparing to prepare for the coming of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany.

The Deacons have been scouring through supplies and decorations making sure that our candles will be lit and our sanctuary inviting. The Service League has been ramping up their efforts to get ready for their annual highlight – The Holly Fair. The Board of Music is busy planning a caroling outing. Sunday school curriculums are changing over to get ready for the Christ child and a group of ten adults are committing to a small group. There is much preparation underway to make sure that there are things to do, beauty to behold, and treasure to be found. While primarily external, these preparations matter because they help provide the feeling, the mood, the familiar surroundings that invite our hearts and minds into the true and difficult work of making room for God’s interruption into the world and our lives through the Christ child.

In worship each of the last two weeks, the sermons have hopefully planted some seeds and done some work to help you prepare internally. On November 11 we encountered the story of Elijah and the widow. They were two people facing enormous odds in different ways. Let down by their government and their communities they clung together, found sustenance in miraculous ways, and moved forward into lives of fullness. Ready to give up, these two people instead gave their lives over to God and found new possibility. That is a core part of Advent letting go to let God enter. Then on November 18 we encountered the difficult passage of Mark where Jesus teaches his disciples that pain is coming, that familiar institutions were crumbling, and calamity was all around. Yet Patty preached beautifully about the truth that these were not end signs but rather birth pangs – the opportunity for new beginnings. During such difficulty, she pointed us to hope in Christ like bulbs planted in trust in the fall that they might bloom in the Spring.

Advent is fundamentally a time of active preparation for God’s interruption. Sometimes the depth of Advent comes through despite not because of our preparations for the key to any interruption is that it actually interrupts; it disturbs, it breaks our rhythm...and in this case it is exactly what we need in order to give ourselves over to God and find new beginnings. Thomas Merton mused “Into this world, this demented inn in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited.”

On Sundays we will continue to work to provide the framework, beauty and inspiration for your Advent journey. Worship is at the heart of our community and so in and through that setting we will find the peace, hope, joy and love that are hallmarks of this season. Yet the critical work will also be done between Sundays as each of us engage the world and our faith. I hope and pray for you that you will do the hard work of preparing to be interrupted. That you will give up some of the busy-ness of the season to let God enter in. That you will have the kind of faith in Christ that irrationally plants bulbs into winter hardening soil to experience the joy of spring’s blooms. Blessings on your preparations!

Brent

From Our Pastoral Assistant

Let the little children come to Me; do not get in their way.
For the kingdom of heaven belongs to children like these.
~ Matthew 19:14 (*The Voice translation*)

We think about these familiar words from Jesus as a beautiful indictment of the importance of our children, and of our responsibility to welcome them into the family of God. And we usually align ourselves with Jesus. Certainly, we would have cleared a path for the kids to get to him if we had been there. We are a kid-friendly church after all. There would have been none of that silliness of discouraging them from reaching him. And yet, as fallible humans we sometimes can't see our own foibles or missteps. The truth is that sometimes we actually do "get in the way" of our kids fully engaging with Christ.

My current concern is that we might be getting in their way by not providing sufficient supervision of both Sunday School and the Nursery. We have a great curriculum, and wonderful volunteer teachers, but we desperately need volunteers to help in the classroom. We have a new director of the Nursery as well, Paige Storti, and while she is very good at her job, she can't adequately care for the kids without a helper.

The First Congregational Church, UCC, Stockbridge is committed to creating a safe and healthy environment in which children can learn about and experience God's love, practice loving one's neighbor and self, and can experience what it is to be part of the church community. To that end, we have made a commitment to providing supervision for all activities and programs involving children and employing practices that provide for the safety of both the children and those who care for them. In each class, and care giving space, we try to have a leader and at least one other person to assist.

We need your help in order to create the kind of environment our children need to really learn and experience God's love.

We need your help in order to create a space where kids can practice loving their neighbor and themselves.

We need your help in order to show our kids what it truly means to be a part of the church community.

Please consider volunteering to assist our Sunday School teachers and our Nursery Director. You don't have to prepare ahead of time, and you don't have to be there every week. You just have to be present when you can to guide and love our kids.

If you are interested in participating in this ministry, please contact me at the church office. I am generally in on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Peace, Pastor Patty



From the Organ Bench

We have some lovely musical offerings scheduled for Advent and Christmas Eve...beautiful bells, cherubic children, sonorous strings, tremendous trumpet, and (of course) our amazing adult choir. Our Advent scripture readings pair with my favorite Advent hymns, getting us in the proper mood for a moving Christmas Eve. Hopefully our music will help you capture the spirit of the holidays, and breathe a breath of calm in a season a-flurry with activity. Enjoy the season of preparation!

Cathy Schane-Lydon

OUR SHARED LIFE TOGETHER

PLEASE REMEMBER THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR PRAYERS:

Joyce Hovey; Rosemarie; Lindsay Hermanski; Nicholas Swann and all who mourn his death; Aleva Henderson; Anne McKinstry; Jean Damrow, stepmother of Brent; Philip Connor; Mishel Kulibaba Epstein; Cary Quigley; Gail Dunlop, mother of Mary Jane Dunlop; Colin Cunningham, son of Ronnie Cunningham; Gege Kingston; Barbara Bracknell; Betsy Wheat; Ann Underwood; Madonna Meagher; Betsey McKearnan; and Jen Germain.

HAPPY DECEMBER BIRTHDAYS

(Let the Board of Growth & Fellowship know if we have not included your birthday or listed it incorrectly.)

December 3	Glenn Gilbert	December 14	Christina Alsop
	Nicole Arrell	December 19	Martha Slocombe (1983)
December 6	Philip Connor	December 21	Brent Damrow
December 8	Khalil Haddir (2011)		Ron Hanft
December 12	Ted Hornick	December 24	Jenna Knauss
December 13	Nancy Fitzpatrick	December 25	Debbie Goodwin
	Anne McKinstry	December 28	Nell Ezequelle
		December 29	John Canning
			Joe Nicolosi
		December 31	Hal Brink

Help Needed

Dear Congregation,

Casey and I are grateful for your hospitality in making our family feel welcome in your church over the last year. We missed you over the summer as we began exploring where God might call us to live as our work journeys prompted us to sell our home. We've since found a buyer and will need to move from our home in South Lee just after the new year. Recently, Casey and I have found some professional opportunities that may allow us to work in Stockbridge and are looking for a rental home nearby. Casey might teach art at the Waldorf High School and may interview to manage the Lavender Door studio while I consider moving my ecopsychotherapy practice to an office near the Laurel Hill Association properties. If you are so led, please share with us any rental opportunities you might be aware of during this time of year that can be difficult to move in. As you may already know we have 3 young children and no pets, but do have a limited amount of furnishings to bring with us or store.

We thank you for your consideration during the holiday season and we look forward to the possibility of continuing our connection to Stockbridge. Happy Thanksgiving!

The Krawczyk's (Eric, Casey, Willow, Meadow & Arrow)

Service League

Thank you to all who helped with set-up, take-down, baking, manning booths, crafting, cooking, and generally helping with another successful Holly Fair - and a special shout-out to Santa Claus (aka Gene Kalish). Thank you all!

I hope this makes sense; any questions you can call me at 528-6050. Thank you!

Margaret Hornick

Church Art News



As Christmas approaches gifts given and received are in our thoughts. As a Christian, faith is truly our greatest gift from God. What are some other meaningful gifts from God we are blessed with and treasure? As wonderfully diverse artists in our church family please consider sharing a painting, framed photo or sculpture of a gift in your life to be present in our forthcoming December/January church art show. Art work should be delivered on Sunday and Monday, December 9th and 10th in the Jonathan Edwards Room. Art Ideas may include family, animals, nature, inanimate objects, abstract interpretations, etc., with a brief description.

Please contact Olga Schwede during coffee hour or at 413.644.9846 should you have questions.

NEWS FROM BOARDS AND COMMITTEES

Mission and Action

We are very busy with multiple year end projects. Our congregation has stepped up to help our community and the wider world in many ways.

The Christmas Giving Tree is up. Please take a tag or two to purchase gifts for children, adults, cats or dogs. We expect that there will be more than 100 requests on the tree which will be in place on Sunday, Nov 25. Please plan to bring gifts back wrapped with the tag attached on Sunday, Dec 9. All gifts must be at the church by Dec 16. This long-standing gifting opportunity has become an important Christmas tradition for many in our church community.

We recently supported the children of the congregation in Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF. Our goal was to raise \$100 as in previous years we have raised about \$40. We have sent a check to UNICEF for \$200!

Ongoing, we support the People's Pantry in Great Barrington with food, cash and time donations. The food and cash donations on the first Sunday of each month allow us all to provide food for the hungry. We also send a volunteer team to help the weekly Thursday "shoppers". If you would like to help please contact Anne Hutchinson or Jill Fleming. Our designated dates come up every 7 weeks but you can volunteer any Thursday between 9am and 1:30pm.

From our budget, we have donated recently to the Salvation Army to help provide basic needs to the California fire victims. Ongoing we provided funding to several nonprofits which provide services in South county: VIM, Multicultural Bridge and Gould Farm.

We have also just provided some funding for a liaison nurse for South county children and families. Children and families with behavioral health issues often cannot navigate the complex insurance, language, transportation and scheduling barriers to services. A liaison nurse to be housed in MACONY Pediatrics with funding from the school district and many community sources will help to lower these barriers. This model was tested last year at Muddy Brook Elementary School and was very, very successful.

Anne Hutchinson, chair

Deacons

Advent (from Latin, *adventus*, meaning "coming towards") is a four-week season of preparation for Christmas. The First Sunday of Advent (December 2) marks the beginning of the church's year. Advent and Christmas focus both on the past--the coming of Jesus as an infant born into poverty in Bethlehem, and the future--the coming of Christ in glory to fulfill God's loving purposes for humanity. Advent this year comes at a time of anxiety and hope. Many of us are struggling and are afraid for our future. It's not easy to hope when times are bad. Mary, as she waited for the birth of her child into an uncertain world, knew how to live with hope--to believe the promises of God. So Advent is a time when we wait, with Mary, for the birth of new life into a world living in the shadows of death.

The editors of our Advent study book, "Watch for the Light," have this to say: "Though Advent has been observed for centuries, most people today acknowledge it only with a blank look. For the vast majority of us, December flies by in a flurry of activities, and what is called 'the holiday season' turns out to be the most stressful time of the year.

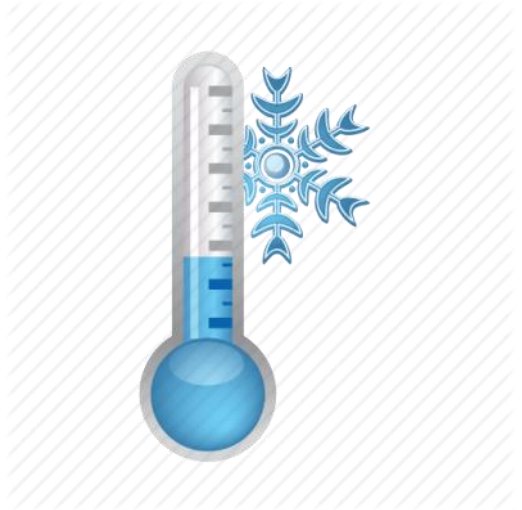
"Even we who genuinely love Christmas often lose sight of its point. How many of us, content with familiar traditions and feelings of goodwill, forget the dank stable, the cold night, the closed door of the inn? How many of us share the longing of the ancient prophets, who awaited the Messiah with aching intensity thousands of years before he was born?

"We miss the essence of Christmas unless we become mindful of how Christ's birth took place. Once we do, we will sense immediately that Advent marks something momentous: God's coming into our midst. That coming is not just something that happened in the past. It is a recurring possibility here and now. And thus Advent is not merely a commemorative event or an anniversary, but a yearly opportunity for us to consider the future, second Advent – the promised coming of God's kingdom on earth." (Submitted by Cindy Brown)

Growth and Fellowship

Ten thoughts on being a greeter in winter from David Anderegg

1. It's not always freezing cold. Maybe God will favor you with warm weather on that day you signed up for.
2. Long underwear is a lot more high-tech and effective than it used to be. No more scratchy woolies! It's sleek, lightweight and no one will ever know you're wearing it.
3. Usually, the coffee hour folks have already made coffee for the choir and you can snag a cup to keep you warm.
4. Brent's warmth and enthusiasm are infectious: when he comes outside to join you, his smile raises the air temperature by at least a few degrees.
5. Make a mental note to sign up in the summer next time.
6. When it's freezing outside, there are some congregants who could really use a hand going up the steps, so why shouldn't you be the one to help them?
7. 22 degrees Fahrenheit is not that cold; it could be worse. It probably *is* worse in Alaska. Thank God you go to church in Stockbridge and not Anchorage.
8. Don't forget Saint Martin! He's the patron saint of mendicants and, interestingly enough, also geese; he's the one who gave half his cloak to a homeless beggar. If you say a special prayer to Saint Martin he will send a warm wind your way, as he always does on Saint Martin's Day.
9. Too bad Saint Martin's Day came and went in November; maybe Saint Nicholas?
10. The warmth you create in the hearts of your church family will keep you warm for a long, long time. So sign up, and make it a warmer world. Amen.



Financial Secretary Two Notes on Year-End Giving

1. We hope you will be able to complete your 2018 giving in December. Any check dated in Dec. 2018 and received by Jan. 15 will be included in your 2018 giving report, which will be sent before the end of January.

2. If you are over 70 1/2 and have an IRA this information may be useful: New tax law 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 using the standard deduction may be more beneficial than itemizing. 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.

Ron Hanft, Financial Secretary

EVENTS AND HAPPENINGS

Advent & Christmas 2018



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.

Advent Party: On December 9, from 11:30 to 2:00, Christian Education will host this event as part of our preparations. With shortening days and the dropping temperatures, stay and celebrate where it is bright and warm in the JE room after worship. We will have a potluck lunch and then some Christmas crafts. Join us for food and fellowship and then make wrapping paper and ornaments. There will be activities for all ages.

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. Then, at the end of worship we will go out joyfully with Joy to the World. Bring Friends and arrive early!

Christmas Pageant: On the Sunday after Christmas (December 30) we will hold a “pick-up” pageant featuring angels, shepherds, wise ones, donkeys and of course Mary, Jesus and Joseph. Costumes will be ready for children of all ages, no rehearsal will be needed, and it is a perfect time to invite friends along for the joyous service. We will sing beloved Christmas carols and reflect on the meaning of Christmas.

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.

OUR LIFE IN PICTURES

Lake Mahkeenac Radio Theater



New Members Jim Erwin, Elizabeth Evans, and Elizabeth Young



Trick or Treat for Unicef

