

# FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Stockbridge, Massachusetts

## February 2019 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

Liturgical seasons serve as the chance for interruption and change. They creep up and insert themselves inviting attention, reflection and transformation. Of all the seasons that call us to consider new ways of living, Lent is perhaps best known. It is a time where we are called to consider the life of Jesus and how his way of life is an invitation to life – to the kingdom that has drawn near. During Lent people often either give something up to remember his sacrifice or take something on to remember his service. It is a chance to try something out for the forty days of Lent and see how it leads to new life at Easter.

This year I anticipate that we will be using Lent for an intentional interruption into our shared church life. I say “anticipate” because Council will meet on February 6<sup>th</sup> to formally approve what I am about to share. We have been working on this for more than one year, we have been talking about the logistics of it within individual Boards, and a plan is coming together that is within the spirit and scope of what Council has supported in previous meetings. In conversations with our Moderator Deb McMenamy, she and I thought it wise to share this experiment with as much advanced notice as possible.

Jesus was often called “teacher.” In Matthew and Luke, the first part of each Gospel contains extended teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain. Jesus taught in synagogues and from boats. People like Nicodemus came to him with questions and great crowds flocked to the wilderness to learn. And, of course, Jesus made it clear that not only were the adults to learn, but so too were the children – “let them come unto me” he said.

We value learning here. Last year more than 60 different adults participated in at least one extended study. This year already 24 different people have been part of three different opportunities. We are developing our Sunday School programs and youth group activities to honor the promises we make in baptism – to teach our children our faith. We want to continue doing so. We also know that worship is at the heart of our shared life. It is the time we come face-to-face with Jesus and live into the truth that we are his body here and now. We have learned that both are critically important to nurturing the faith of our children and to fostering a connection that will serve them well as they grow.

Numerous recent studies have indicated that there are unintended and negative consequences from the practice of removing children from worship even for such a holy purpose as Sunday School. It turns out that for children, simply being in worship – listening, watching, being, and experiencing forms critically important connections between mind and heart. It turns out that for children, the process of listening to word and prayer, the act of singing hymns of joy and lament, and even simply being in the presence of God and loved ones fosters connections to faith that run deeper and encourage a life-long interest and passion for faith and learning. It turns out, unfortunately, that for far too many children, removing them from worship even for Sunday School means that when Sunday School ends, so too does their connection to and participation in church. It turns out that both learning and worship are important and reinforce one another.

This is where the experiment comes in.

(over)

**For the six Sundays in Lent, we will be altering our Sunday schedule to offer both learning and worship opportunities for all ages.** We have already been planning and anticipating how the change might affect the people of our congregation. During those six weeks, we will have structures in place to listen to you and how you are experiencing the change. Following those weeks, we will return to our regular schedule for Easter and the rest of this program year. We will also review our collective experience to see how it felt, how it went, what we learned, and to then make any decisions regarding the future. In general, we anticipate education beginning around 9:30 a.m. with worship moving back to 10:30 a.m. The detailed schedule will be released as soon as Council affirms it.

Each morning we will have coffee available throughout the morning. In addition to Sunday School classes and our Adult Lenten Study (see the information later in the newsletter). We will have space in the J.E. Room to sit, relax, read the paper and be in community with one another.

We are asking you to participate fully in this experiment so that we can understand both the blessings of this approach and the challenges. We promise to listen to you, learn from you and contemplate together what we learn from this experiment. We have worked hard to anticipate the challenges that might arise especially for a congregation as diverse as we are. Like all experiments we anticipate that there will be complications we did not anticipate. We ask for your patience and your forgiveness. We are trying something out for the forty days of Lent to see how it might lead to new life and connections for children of all ages.

If you want to talk about this in the coming days, please give me a call. Better yet, come and sit and chat over tea or coffee.

Peace,

*Brent*

## **From Our Pastoral Assistant**

### A Word of Deep Gratitude

I arrived on that Sunday afternoon with just a few knots in my stomach. I had prepared well for this gathering but couldn't shake my nervousness. The name alone - "Ecclesiastical Council" - was daunting. It garnered images of the Inquisition, or at the very least, controversial debate. And yet it was none of these. My experience was far from daunting. No one tried to debate or interrogate. In fact, it was one of the most affirming experiences I've ever had. But it wouldn't have been so if not for the members of this church. You have supported me through the whole process with your prayers and encouraging words. You have shared the love of Christ with me in such tangible ways, and I am so very deeply grateful. As I stood before the Berkshire Association of the UCC I was comforted by the friendly faces of those who were able to attend, and I stood with confidence because of the way this church has affirmed both my call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament and my call to become officially connected to the United Church of Christ. Henri Nouwen wrote that "...the Christian community is not a closed circle of people embracing each other, but a forward-moving group of companions bound together by the same voice asking for their attention". We do not live our faith in isolation as individuals, but join together to support and challenge each other as we listen for God's voice and seek to do God's will in the world. Thank you for joining with me on this journey of faith. Thank you for both embracing me, and moving forward with me, as we listen for the voice of God together.

With much love,

Patty Fox

# ***OUR SHARED LIFE TOGETHER***

## **PLEASE REMEMBER THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR PRAYERS:**

Joyce Hovey; Rosemarie; Lindsay Hermanski; Aleva Henderson; Anne McKinstry; Jean Damrow; 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; Jeanne Fleming; and Jen Germain.

### **HAPPY FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS**

**(Please let someone on the Growth Committee know if we have not included your birthday or listed it incorrectly.)**

**February 1     Ann Brink  
                    Rick Floyd  
February 4     Steve Blanchard  
February 6     John Kingston  
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 McMenamy  
                    Patty Fox  
February 28    Lilly Hassmer**

## **Service League**

Now that we've recovered from the Holly Fair, we're starting work bees again, with the Summer Fair in view. Anyone who likes to do crafts (knitting, sewing, etc.) or any of the other associated chores (pricing, packing, etc.) or would just like to come and socialize, is WELCOME, any Monday morning, 10 - 1, in the classroom. Also welcome are those forgotten treasures you may unearth during Spring cleaning, downsizing, or general clutter-taming. We'll put them to good use in Grandma's Attic, for which we collect goodies year-round. Thank you!

Margaret Hornick

## **Church Art News**

Our church Art Show for the month of February will be by John McKinstry. His art work will be on the theme of "Birds as God's Gifts," consisting of numerous acrylic paintings of beautiful birds. John wishes to spiritually cheer, lift and refresh us with the beauty and song of birds around us yet to be discovered through his artistic gifts. Enjoy these wonderful paintings in the JE Room until early March!

Olga Schwede

## **Prayer Shawl Ministry**

Our quiet ministry of prayer, fellowship, and encouragement continues even though Mary Hoeltzel is off to Florida for the winter. We are few in number and meet once or twice a month, but the production of prayer shawls continues. In the past year, we surpassed our hundredth shawl given to others in support during hard times or celebration of life passages. Our time together is spent catching up with one another, following a liturgy of spoken prayer, remembering those who have received shawls, and silent prayer while knitting. If you wish to join us in this ministry (including "remotely" as Joan Nimmo did recently), let me know. Terry Wise 298-3620

# ***NEWS FROM AROUND THE CHURCH***

## **Deacons**

### **Kidpower is Coming!**

During Lent, we are trying a cool experiment that separates Sunday school and worship into separate hours, with Sunday school for both children and adults. This will enable our children to join us for the entire worship service and participate more fully in the worship life of the church (with child care available for those who need it at any point during the service).

The Deacons are very excited to be joined by children and youth to help us with our deaconly duties in worship, including reading Scripture and receiving the offering.

So stay tuned for more detailed info on our Lenten journey, which begins on March 10 and goes through Easter Sunday, April 21. Kidpower is coming!

Submitted by Cindy Brown, Chair of the Board of Deacons

## **Moderator's Report**

Churches are organizations like so many others; we have utility and maintenance issues, expenses, income statements and annual budgets. Of course, we are different from other non-profit groups that proliferate here in the Berkshires because we are a church: a faith based religious organization made up of people whose purpose is to live in relationships and represent the goodness of God's love. Ask somebody why they come to church, and you will get as many answers as the people you ask: the fellowship, the sermon, the music, the peace, the comfort, the support, the coffee, the building...and the answers go on and on. At this Stockbridge Congregational Church, we are blessed to be a church community that is growing – one of only two churches in Berkshire County. This growth doesn't happen because we wish it; it happens because we make it happen by providing a welcoming atmosphere with stimulating programs in a comfortable and attractive space – plus we have most excellent pastoral leadership.

Because we are a church community, we assume the fiscal responsibility for our buildings, programs and professional staff through our annual pledges, gifts and investments. Our budget is determined by assessing our needs and counting up what we receive to present a responsible plan that keeps our church not only running but thriving. The budget process begins at each Board where their needs are carefully – and prayerfully - evaluated before being submitted to the Budget Committee and then the Council for approval. There are no spendthrifts in these groups; all expenses are carefully checked and justified. Board and staff expenses are fairly predictable but recent years have found the costs of maintaining ageing historic buildings and grounds a little less predictable. Maintenance lines on this budget now reflect a more accurate amount based on previous years and have increased to reflect this reality.

So, is our proposed 2019 Budget exactly balanced? Well, not exactly, but is it a reasonable budget with realistic expense lines based on past performance and unplanned giving during the past four years. During that time budgets presented at these Annual Meetings have not exactly balanced in January but have closed the gap by December. We expect the same this year, after all, *we are* a faith-based organization.

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah McMenemy, Church Moderator [adapted from Annual Budget Meeting report]

## Thanks!

Martha Slocombe, one of the recipients of a Church Scholarship, wrote the following thank-you note, and included a picture of her family.

*Dear Claire and the people of First Congregational Church,*

*Thank you so much for your kind scholarship. I feel very blessed to be on this journey and I feel so very honored that you have deemed it important to financially support students like myself. As I work toward completion of my seminary journey, my future in ministry looks bright, but my financial resources have dwindled. Your support has been instrumental in keeping me afloat and preparing me for serving in the church. This year your scholarship has helped to cover my book expenses as well as costs of things needed for interviewing, like a robe bag, professional website domain, etc.*

*Thank you all very much!*

*Peace in Christ,*

*Martha Slocombe*



## Financial Secretary

Giving envelopes for pledges and other gifts to the church are available on the "north table" in the JE Room. If you have not been using envelopes and would like to, please sign up for a box of either weekly (52) or monthly (12) envelopes. Questions? See Ron Hanft, or [rphanft@yahoo.com](mailto:rphanft@yahoo.com).

Ron Hanft, Financial Secretary

# EVENTS AND HAPPENINGS

## Adult Lenten Study

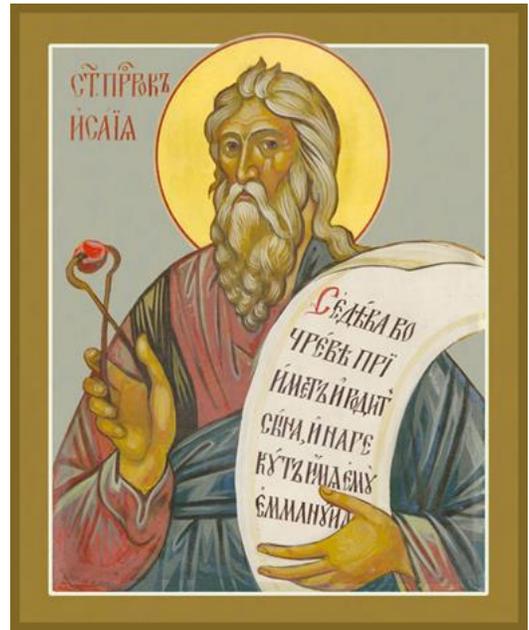
### *The Prophet Isaiah*

Sundays 3/10-4/14

9:30 – 10:15 a.m.

Led by:

*Rick Floyd, Patty Fox and  
Brent Damrow*



Modern work by Archimandrite Cyprion

The Prophet Isaiah looms large in the Christian and Jewish faith traditions. The corpus of Isaiah’s writings spans critical moments at the heart of the collective faith memory. The Book of Isaiah includes writings regarding the times preceding the exile of Israel into Babylon through their return. Marvin Sweeny writes, “The book of Isaiah serves as a theological reflection upon Jerusalem’s experience of threat, exile, and restoration. It takes up fundamental questions of divine involvement in human history.”

Jesus called Isaiah simply “The Prophet.” In Advent, we lean heavily on Isaiah’s writing both that a Messiah is coming and what that Messiah will do. When disciples of John the Baptist inquired as to whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus simply responded saying that the prophecies of Isaiah were coming into fulfillment.

In our study we will attempt to get to know the history and context in which Isaiah was written. We will explore the book of Isaiah, breaking down the writings into the time periods and sections in which scholars believe they were composed. Finally, we will look at the influence of Isaiah both on the ministry of Jesus and the development and ongoing ministry of the church.

We will utilize forty-five-minute sessions on Sunday mornings before worship (9:30-10:15) to introduce the subject matter. We then invite people to sign-up for a discussion session to more deeply probe and consider what was shared on Sunday. Participation in these sessions is highly encouraged although not mandatory. Sign-up sheets for the study and discussion sessions are in the J.E. Room or you can call the church office. The schedule will be:

March 10 – Introduction including the setting and context of Isaiah’s work.

March 17 & 24 – Isaiah Chapters 1-39

March 31 & April 7 – Isaiah Chapters 40-66

April 14 – Isaiah’s influence on Jesus and the Church

Questions? Please contact Pastor Brent ([bdamrow@stockbridgeucc.org](mailto:bdamrow@stockbridgeucc.org) or 298-3137).

# An Open Conversation on Faith and Sexuality

Wednesday, February 20  
5:45-6:45 p.m.—J.E. Room



Recently, a member of the congregation shared a story about how her family was engaging in conversation as one member of the family had recently come out as bisexual and also shared that her close friend is transgendered. She came in to seek advice and to learn about how sexuality intersects with our faith and how to best talk about it in her family. She thought she might not be alone.

Pastors Patty and Brent invite you to come for a conversation. Whether this is part of your family journey or whether you simply want to know more, this is a chance to simply explore. As a result of this conversation, we would see if more formal programs or other voices could be brought in to help. We ask you to RSVP for this event either by signing up or calling the church office. It would be helpful to know if there are any particular areas of interest you have so we can prepare. Questions? Get in touch with either Pastor Patty or Pastor Brent.



Cathy Clark tackling the snowstorm before worship on January 20.

# OUR LIFE IN PICTURES



The Christmas Story,  
presented by the  
congregation in our "Pick  
-Up Pageant" on  
December 30.