



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Stockbridge, Massachusetts

December 2020 Newsletter

Dear Friends in Christ,

There is an unmistakable element of surprise that is inherent in Christmas. Presents thoughtfully selected, wrapped up in beautiful packaging, their contents unknown until opening. We go to sleep one night and the next morning wake up to a sense of anticipation and newness – a rush of footsteps on the stairs, shouts of excitement in the air, a sudden jolt of energy to get up and discover what is waiting.

I promise you that no matter how good you are this year at selecting or wrapping; no matter how good you are at decorating or conspiring, you will not achieve the level of stunning surprise unleashed that first Christmas in that sleepy little town of David under the gentle brightness of an unfamiliar star. From shepherds to royalty, from magi to innkeepers something akin to complete and utter astonishment would have been felt on that night leading to ripples still being felt today in places of poverty and power, among wise ones and simple folk just trying to make their way.

Over time we have made Christmas more elaborate and less surprising. We have extended decorations from tiny packages of love to extend throughout the house. Traditions have formed and solidified about everything from what music we listen to, to who gathers together, to what foods are on the table, and to how gifts are opened and what happens for the rest of the day. We schedule church on Christmas Eve and carefully cultivate the rhythms of Christmas day. We routinize what once was a day of utter shock and wonder; a day so full of new sights, sounds, smells, and understanding that Mary in all of her humble wisdom was drawn to simply “ponder these things in her heart.”

This year our carefully laid plans and traditions are threatened by the stresses and change of pandemic and politic. It will not be easy, emotionally or logistically, yet that there is great possibility. This year, things may be far enough beyond the norm or our control that

we need to give in and simply let what unfolds surprise. Don't try to make this Christmas *normal*, let go of what you think you understand about the meaning of this day, and instead allow the utter astonishment of Christmas to re-enter your imagination. Stand beside Mary and Joseph, journey with the shepherds and the magi, listen to the angels sing, let the power of love challenge any sense of power you hold or see running amok in the world. Let go that the gift that God offers in and through Jesus might refocus your heart on what matters, your mind on what is possible, and your life as to your calling and purpose.

The church is re-imagining how we experience both the sacred time of waiting in Advent as well as how Christmas unfolds too. There is much more about that throughout this newsletter. We hope that these new experiences will awaken and offer surprise. There is a beautiful new hymn written by John Bell and Graham Maule called *Who Would Thing That What Was Needed*. I offer the first two verses in closing:

Who would thing that what was needed
to transform and save the earth
Might not be a plan or army
proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think despite derision,
that a child should lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas day.

Shepherds watch and sages wonder,
monarchs scorn and angels sing;
Such a place as none would reckon
hosts a holy, helpless thing;
Stabled beasts and passing strangers
watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas day.

With love and hope, *Brent*

OUR SHARED LIFE TOGETHER

We will be including prayers in the weekly emails, including those gathered in Sunday worship. If you have a name you would like to add, please contact the church office.

HAPPY DECEMBER BIRTHDAYS	
December 3	Glenn Gilbert Nicole Arrell
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	Bruce Wilkens
December 29	John Canning Joe Nicolosi
December 31	Hal Brink

Two Notes on Year-End Giving

1. We hope you will be able to complete your 2020 giving in December. However, if we receive any check dated in Dec. 2020 by Jan. 15 it can be included in your 2020 giving report, which you will receive before the end of January.
2. 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.

2021 Pledges:

If you have not yet turned in a 2021 pledge card, or sent an email to Will or Ron, please do that as soon as possible. It's even helpful to know if you decide not to pledge in 2021 even though you did in 2020. A pledge helps the church community and our outreach programs in many ways. But mostly, we value YOU. A pledge is icing on your cake.

Giving Envelopes

Giving envelopes for 2021 will be assigned to all who used envelopes this year, unless you let Ron know that you don't want them. If you have not used envelopes before but would like to, let Ron know that, and please specify if you want monthly or weekly envelopes. Remember, although you may be

giving monthly now, sometime next year we hope we can renew some form of weekly worship in-person in the sanctuary. But any envelopes can be used throughout the year.

If you can, please pick up your envelopes at the church. They will be available in the office after December 1, just inside the rear door on the hallway counter. After Jan 1, we will deliver or mail out your envelopes to you. Questions or comments? contact Ron Hanft: rphanft@yahoo.com or 413-232-4179

From the Church Office

Hurrah! The church now has fast internet connectivity throughout the building. Jon Geldert no longer has to string a wire from the manse to the sanctuary for livestreamed services. Thanks to Jon and the crew from Anteris Solutions for their work on this project. If and when you're in the building, fire up your smartphone and use the password "Welcome" to test out the Wi-Fi. Next up for me: working with Comalli Electricians and an electrical engineer to finish the upgrades to the emergency egress lighting. Thanks to architect Karen Hunt for her work on this project.

Following the guidelines set by the state, and reinforced by rules set by the church's re-gathering committee, we are offering space to a couple of groups: Al-Anon and NA. We are glad that we can help these groups in these stressful times.

I will be on vacation December 19 through January 3. The church building will be **closed** from Christmas Day through January 3.

Board of Deacons

The Deacons have been working with Pastor Brent to help design and develop a new way to celebrate Advent and Christmas within the restrictions of COVID safety. We're excited about the plan, hope you will enjoy it, and encourage you to participate in the services fully—by helping to decorate trees at home and at church, by watching the livestream each week of Advent (which starts early this year, on November 29!), by driving by the church during December to see the “hugest” Advent Wreath in progress, and exploring the labyrinth that structures the wreath and “holds” the Candle-Trees.

We hope that you will connect your home celebration with the church celebration, not only have matching ornaments, but also light an Advent Wreath at home, sing loudly the hymns and carols that Noah will play on Sundays, and listen to and reread the Bible stories about angels, shepherds, animals, parents and newborn baby—and then the Magi from the east. We believe that our weekly focus on the meaning of Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy will buoy us all in the dark nights and cold days of December.

We have faith that Christmas will come. As the end of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* reminds us, “It comes, it comes!” We have faith that Christmas will comfort us, even if it also makes us cry as we remember Christmases past, as Scrooge does. We have faith that the meaning of Christmas—the great gift of the Christ Child—will transform us yet again, allowing us to draw near to each other in spirit and share our love, wealth and prayers with the world.

~ Elizabeth Young for the Deacons

Service League

I spoke too soon! At our gathering on November 6th, we were once again outside, basking in a last lingering bit of summer with soaring temperatures and soothing sunshine. But, wait - it is the Berkshires, after all, so that didn't last long, and we met in the JE Room once again on November 13. Anne Hutchinson took advantage of that last outdoor fling to work on a project she'd started, rejuvenating the bench in the median strip. She wire-brushed and sanded off all the accumulated grime and gave it a drink of linseed oil. Depending on that famous Berkshires weather, it may yet get finished this Fall. Or not.

Like everyone else in Pandemic-world, we talked about how to stretch our dwindling resources to be

able to continue supporting causes we've contributed to for years. Food pantries seem to be doing fine right now, so we're concentrating on agencies such as Construct and Elizabeth Freeman Center, that address women's and families' needs, And we'll continue to support the Backpack Project at Muddy Brook, and the Church's scholarship fund, to the best of our ability. Meanwhile, thanks to those who've supported us with the purchase of **jams and jellies**. You won't find us on Yelp, but one satisfied customer did say, "That's the best orange marmalade I've ever tasted." If your appetite is whetted, you email me at mhhornick@gmail.com. And don't forget those **scrubbies and catnip mice!**

With Thanksgiving in view (rearview, when you read this) we brought items for the **People's Pantry** that could make the holiday a bit more festive for families and individuals struggling against serious odds. Those included colorful napkins, candies and nuts, And we all signed up to shop for the **Giving Tree**, which is always a satisfying way to connect with the community. We know from past experience that these small individual actions, when combined through the Church's infrastructure - **Thanks, Mission and Action!** - really do make a difference in our community.

~ Margaret Hornick, for the Service League

Board of Christian Education

We are busily preparing for Advent. We continue with video Sunday School lessons and are looking forward to sharing the stories of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany complete with journeys by donkey, hosts of angels, and wise visitors from afar. These epic stories are perfect for shortening days when we need to be staying at home.

As ever, there are Family Resources on our website – just click on “Livestream Page” at the top of the homepage. There you will find *Bible* readings, video lessons, songs, crafts, and coloring pages for children of all ages.

We also are working on an Advent Calendar as a daily resource for adults and families. The calendar will contain daily readings, meditations, crafts, and activities for sharing hope, peace, joy, and love with our community. In these days when we cannot be physically present for each other, we are hoping this will help us stay connected and focused on the message of the season.

~ Diane Piraino for the Board of Christian Education

Advent and Christmas Plans

Advent and Christmas are gathered seasons – we come together to do all sorts of things in anticipation and celebration of the coming of the Christ Child. Perhaps more than any other time of the year, Advent and Christmas are filled with traditions that stretch back as far as anyone can imagine. This year we know is and will be very different.

A large group of folks here at the church have been engaged in imagining and wondering. We have endeavored to let go of what has always been long enough to allow something new, yet very familiar to emerge. There are a few pieces of our approach that we want to share:

- We will be intentionally bridging the distance between the church and your home and between each of our homes – bringing elements to Sunday worship from people’s homes while also sending things from the church to engage you while at home.
- We will be focusing intensely on the four themes of Advent: hope, peace, joy, and love.
- We will be sending out an electronic weekly devotional on each of those themes. For those who need a printed copy we will have them here in the office.
- We will be sharing ways to help you get out – get out of your worries, get out of your homes (where possible) and get out of any ruts, fears, or worries that hold you.



A centerpiece of this approach will be our joint creation of a giant (think 54 feet in diameter) advent wreath on the church lawn. We have been partnering with a number of merchants including Windy Hill Farm, Wards, and Comalli Electric to lay out a design that stretches from the walk-way in front of the church to the edge of the tree lines. The candles will be formed from large trees adorned with purple lights (and of course one with pink for joy) while the Christ candle in the center will be an even larger tree decked out in white lights. As the season of Advent progresses, we will light the trees even as we light the candles in worship. On Christmas Eve we will light the large tree as part of our worship. Thanks to the Deacons, Christian Education, Trustees, Growth and Fellowship, as well as Sarah and Michael Deegan for bringing the project to life and light. Here is what we ask of you:

- In this packet you will find four sheets of waterproof paper. We ask you to help us decorate those trees by decorating these ornaments. You can color them, write a prayer on them, offer a quote or anything that you think brings the particular theme to life.
- We invite you to attend streamed worship on Sunday as we explore each of the themes and then to make your ornament later on that Sabbath day with whatever inspiration comes your way. Full instructions, including the date by which they should be returned to the church are on each sheet. Questions – give the office a call.
- We are including a second ornament for each theme so that you can decorate one for your home/tree too.
 - Come to the wreath to walk through the wreath, see the ornaments, take a gift home with you, and let the season fully come to you. The lights on the trees will go on each evening at 5:00 p.m. and remain on until 9:30 p.m. More information about Christmas Eve worship will be forthcoming soon. The Website will be a great source of information for this season which will be very different and yet is about the same thing – God’s great inbreaking of love that changes the world in most unexpected ways. Come and See!



Get Ready to Be Called

Part of being church is the joy of connecting to one another, becoming a family. We each find different things in the church where we discover truth and relationship. Those things are harder during this pandemic when the simple reality of gathering is complicated.

As we enter into Advent, winter, and this new wave of the virus; we want to know how you are doing, what you need, and how we can help. One of our newer members, **Paul Rix**, who is also part of our Board of Christian Education, has volunteered to dedicate time each week to help us do that.

He will be using a space here at the church to make phone calls, to listen to you, and to ask a few questions. We hope that you will welcome his call, be honest about how things are going, and share with us any ideas you have. He will share what he learns with staff and lay leadership so that we can make the kinds of changes that will help us be church in the months to come. He will be reaching out beginning in December. You can also call the church office and we can schedule a time that works for you to talk with him. We are so grateful to Paul and hope that you will welcome his call and help us learn.

Photo: Paul with Anna Duhon and their daughter Adrianna.

Virtual Carols

Are you looking for a way to share in spreading Hope, Peace, Joy & Love and connect with families this Advent season? Video your house members singing a favorite Christmas &/or Advent carol & email it to us. Please send a very short, informal video, using your cell phone is great, of 2 minutes or less via email. Just prop up your cell phone video camera so that it can see all of your house members singing and imagine that you are out caroling for a verse or chorus of that carol you love so much. These will be presented for families at the Sunday School Family Resources link found on the church Livestream

Worship page and possibly shared with senior living facilities & nursing homes if there are enough carol clips.

Email video clips to Jill Wheat at songsailormusic@yahoo.com If it is too large a file for regular email, there are other ways to get it to us. Call or email Jill with questions or for help sending video clips. 413-274-5108 Please try to email in your carol by or before 12/6/2020.

Photo: Intergenerational Worship, December 22, 2019





Halloween Spooktacular!

It was a terrific—and not too scary—Halloween happening on the front lawn. Thanks to Don Eaton, Holland Brown, Don and Charlotte Rodgers, Jo Ann Levitt, Michael and Sarah Deegan, and the Service League. A shout-out to Jake Damrow for decorating the signs. Minister of Music Sandor Szabo played spooky music on the church organ, broadcasting to the lawn. Sandor also arranged for dancers of Berkshire Pulse to interpret some of the music. And who are those folks dressed up in their Halloween finest? (Hints: the Wheats, Jake and friend Allyson, Michael and Sarah, and Corinne)



Thank you!
Taft Farms donated two carloads of big pumpkins. (The leftover pumpkins went to feed the pigs at Hancock Shaker Village.)



Church Family News

Mark Bachman and Madonna Meagher proudly announce the birth of their second grandchild: a baby boy, Milan. Born to Jessica Bachman and her husband Denis Korolev, joining sister, Star Baker Zina Koroleva! Born October 26, 2020 in Edmonds, Washington

Melody Schwede admires her new Thanksgiving toy.



*The First Congregational Church, UCC
PO Box 825
Stockbridge MA 01262*



December 2020

Pastor: The Rev. Brent Damrow – bdamrow@stockbridgeucc.org

Minister of Music: Dr. Sándor Szabó - (on leave)

Administrator: Will Garrison – office@stockbridgeucc.org

Financial Secretary: Ron Hanft – rphanft@yahoo.com

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www.facebook.com/stockbridgeucc

Sunday Worship: 10:00 a.m. *Online*

Wednesday Morning Prayer: 8:00 a.m. *Online*

Thursday Morning Prayer: 8:00 a.m. *Gathered*

Office hours: 9:00-1:00, Monday - Friday

Holiday Gift Program

The Giving Tree is gathering gifts under its virtual branches! They range from Good Night Moon to warm clothes to pet food. All are going to families identified by our community partners.

If you haven't had the chance, check out the online giving page (accessible via link sent in recent emails) or call Will in the church office to discover what gifts remain to be purchased.

Mission & Action has reached out to area social services agencies to provide gifts to families in need. As in prior years, we try to provide each person with three gifts (an item of clothing, a household item or a toy, and a book). Gift cards (CVS, Big Y, Price Chopper) are also terrific.

December 2020

The First Congregational Church, UCC, Stockbridge

<i>Sunday</i>	<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>	<i>Saturday</i>
Pastor Brent's office hours by appointment, call church office.	"Advent Wreath" on green lit daily 5:00pm – 9:00pm	1	2 Morning Prayer 8 am Bible Study 1:00 pm Church Council 7:00 p.m.	3 Gathered Morning Prayer 8:00 a.m. <i>JE Room – registration required</i>	4	5
6 Worship 10:00 a.m. <i>online</i> Avent 2 - Peace	7 Service League 12:00 noon	8	9 Morning Prayer 8 am Bible Study 1:00 pm Christian Ed 5:00 pm Mission & Action 5:30 pm	10 Gathered Morning Prayer 8:00 a.m. <i>JE Room – registration required</i>	11	12
13 Worship 10:00 a.m. <i>online</i> Avent 3 - Joy	14 Service League 12:00 noon	15	16 Morning Prayer 8 am Bible Study 1:00 pm Trustees 5:30 pm Deacons 6:30 pm G & F 7:30 pm.	17 Gathered Morning Prayer 8:00 a.m. <i>JE Room – registration required</i>	18	19
20 Worship 10:00 a.m. <i>online</i> Avent 3 - Love	21 Will out through 1/3/2021	22	23 Morning Prayer 8 am Bible Study 1:00 pm	24 Christmas Eve Services TBA	25 Christmas Church closed through 1/3/2021	26
27 Worship 10:00 a.m. <i>online</i>	28	29	30	31	Online worship is at stockbridgeucc.org	Calendar is subject to change. Please check the church website for updates.