

TIDINGS

Advent 2018

Holy Vulnerability: The Weakness of God



A publication of
First Church of Christ, Congregational
United Church of Christ
190 Court Street, Middletown, CT

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Music Minister, Shari Lucas
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Member at Large, Ann Marie Foote
Deacon Co-Chairs, Anthony Moran & Julie Hurlburt
Deacon Rep. for Exec. Committee, Gabriela De Golia
Office Manager, Kortney Balsamo

Upcoming Executive Committee Meeting Dates:
Thursdays 12/20, 1/17, and 2/21 at 6:30 PM in the Memorial Room

Wish to share an announcement?
Please send it to Kortney Balsamo, our Office Manager, at firstchurchucc@sbcglobal.net by Wednesday each week so she can include it in the weekly bulletin.

Minister's Note

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"The great mystery of our faith is that we get closest to God when we are willing to be vulnerable, when we are willing to say, 'I need somebody else'."

- Father Henri Nouwen, *The Vulnerable Journey*

"I suddenly realized that it was not in strength and power that God was coming to me, but in weakness."

- Father Henri Nouwen, *The Vulnerable Journey*

"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

- Isaiah 6:8

"When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

- Exodus 3:4

"And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

He has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever."

- *Mary's Song of Praise*, Luke 1:46-55

*

Ahhh, it is that time of year again. If you worship the gods of consumerism (which we all do to some extent, let's be honest), "Christmas time" is filled with rushing around, buying presents, holiday decorations, expectations about how it "should" look and feel, all generating some real holiday joy yet often ending in a sugar crash and an empty feeling without the deeper meaning of the season.



I am grateful the liturgical calendar gives us Advent, a season ripe with the anticipation for the deeper gifts the season; the gift of the Christ child, the gifts of peace, hope, joy, and love. This intentional time of waiting prepares us for the birth of Jesus that we celebrate on Christmas Eve together at 5 pm Barn Service and 10 pm Candlelight service in our own sanctuary this year. Some Advent themes that ripple through December are:

- Waiting and anticipating, preparing for the Christ Child with devotional reflection and lighting of the Advent candle to gradually welcome the light;
- Comfort in the darkness and silence;
- Holding a vision of hope for ourselves and for the world, that God can truly break into the mundane and reside with us in our vulnerability.

We hear scripture that tells us of many things, including:

- Peace: that the lion shall lay down with the lamb;
- Equity: that the powerful shall be torn down from their thrones and the Mighty One does good things for the lowly
- Love: that God so loved the world that God sent God's child Jesus;
- Joy: that when we open to these miraculous gifts of humanity pregnant with God, how can we not sing praises of joy to our Lord?

Building off Dr. John Caputo's inspiring message with us on Sunday, November 4th, about his leading philosophical idea 'The Weakness of God,' we will explore this concept in our own context during Advent. Anticipating the incarnation of Christ, we

recognize God's desire to be close to us and to indeed put on the vulnerable clothes of the human condition.

On Christmas Eve, we celebrate that God chose to become radically vulnerable, birthed through Mary. Can you imagine how vulnerable she must have felt giving birth in a barn? It was already going to be tough to give birth at an inn; but at least there would be a bed, warmth, some provisions, and likely other women to help. Mary gave birth instead alongside the animals in the glistening stillness and silence of a starry night, in some ways cast out with the animals, in other ways blessed by their presence. Their abiding gaze and loving witness, unable to help the birth process come along, held space for the Christ Child to emerge.



With anticipation of God becoming a baby during Advent, vulnerability is the name of the game. Mary says “yes” to God’s invitation to bear Jesus, making her incredibly vulnerable. Joseph says “yes” to a pregnant Mary, making him incredibly vulnerable, and God says “yes” to humanity by becoming human, making God incredibly vulnerable as a helpless babe in a barn on Christmas Eve. The holy family flees persecution under a violent King Herod in their homeland, becoming vulnerable refugees. Some vulnerability is imposed: being homeless in the winter or being deported: we don’t choose it, it chooses us.

Mary occupies vulnerability in two ways: her social position being a lower class Jewish woman in land under Roman occupation, pregnant and unmarried, makes her incredibly vulnerable by circumstance, not by choice. Mary occupies the status of the “least of these,” and her Magnificat song of praise at the annunciation reflects her identity as socially vulnerable, as she calls herself a “lowly servant,” amazed that God chose to pay attention to her. Mary is vulnerable by circumstance because of her various social identities.

Yet Mary also chose to make herself vulnerable by saying “yes” to God’s invitation. Vulnerability by choice, rather than by imposed circumstance, often comes as an invitation from God, to step out of safety and to step into trust. Vulnerability by choice means saying “here I am, Lord” and “I can do no other.”

Martin Luther, one of the spiritual fathers of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, made himself vulnerable by choice by sticking to his moral and spiritual convictions against the Catholic Church and saying in front of the court, “here I stand, and I can do no other.” Moses presented himself saying, “here I am,” at the burning bush, as does the prophet Isaiah and Samuel in the temple. Holy Vulnerability, or being vulnerable by choice, is a radical presenting of one’s self with confidence that God is with you, standing in one’s call and convictions no matter the repercussions, even if the consequence is death itself. We learn through Advent that God invites us to become vulnerable and supports us and loves us as we stand in our call and love. This describes what we are calling ‘Holy Vulnerability.’

This Holy Vulnerability comes by choice, where God invites us to do something that might be risky for the greater good. The Advent season is full of both chosen and imposed vulnerability. The messages of Advent give us hope for a world that centers the vulnerable: where the lion shall lay down the lamb, that the first shall be last, that the powerful shall be torn down from their thrones. Advent also gives us inspiration to put on the cloak of vulnerability by following God’s radical call in our lives. This is Holy Vulnerability: taking a risk knowing God is with us.

The Advent Testimony question of 2018 is this: *How and when does God invite you to become vulnerable, and what do you do with that choice?* When have you received God’s invitation into Holy Vulnerability? How do you respond to God’s invitation into Holy Vulnerability? When in your life has your soul offered a holy “Here I am” to God and community?

Each week, we will hear a different person give testimony on ‘Holy Vulnerability,’ and all of us will be encouraged -- whether we reflect publically or not -- to let these questions prepare our heart for the coming of the Christ Child. May the blessings of the season be yours as we anchor into the deep meaning of this time.

May God’s love and wisdom go with you,

Rev. Julia Burkey

Reverend Julia Burkey
Senior Minister

YOUTH & FAMILIES UPDATE

Greetings, First Church Families,

What a wonderful few months we have had together, during which all of our youth and families have engaged with themes of faith, divine energy, and God through stories of the Bible and fellowship.

In Church School, we have creatively engaged the Joyful Path Curriculum to hear stories and share narratives with one another. We have celebrated the liturgical calendar while also witnessing both parables and the teachings of Jesus. We have grown together as a group through themes of creation, energy, and listening. These beautiful lessons have captivated us in our learning and catapulted us forward toward this Advent Season.

Similarly, the 5th and 6th graders have adapted from the Joyful Path Curriculum to delve further into the lessons and themes engaged with on Sunday Mornings. This year we have brought in Maurice Tiner, a second-year graduate student at Yale Divinity, to lead our 5th and 6th graders on Sunday evenings. He has a passion for teaching youth, with a background in African-American and education studies. Maurice brings years of experience with him and has been a delight to work with. Through his leadership, the group has grown and matured. Maurice has brought love and vigor in his lessons on stewardship, the earth, and God, and it is beyond evident that the youth look forward to being with him. He is equally as excited to spend time with our youth.

In the last three months, the Initiates have experienced a variety of spiritual practices including meditation and yoga. We have learned about the practice of communion and even served one another personally in our time together. Most recently, we are collaborating with Allison Plous to create a mural of faith for the nursery to signify our journey into adulthood and discerning our own faith.

We have also journaled and reflected and are continuing to create and journey together. This is a beautiful time of transition and joy and it is always such a pleasure to spend time with each of your families. Thank you for the opportunity to serve with each and every one of you. I look forward to where the rest of this year takes us.

With gratitude,

Pastor Mahogany Thomas

Pastor Mahogany Thomas
Minister of Youth & Families

IMAGES FROM OUR 350th ANNIVERSARY





**** 350th ANNIVERSARY VIDEO RECORDING IS NOW AVAILABLE ****



First Church 350th Anniversary Celebration
A musical and spiritual celebration of the First Church in Middletown, Connecticut. An inspiring institution for...

Our entire 350th celebration event can now be enjoyed again and again thanks to the wonders of technology and the Internet! Watch a recording of the symphony piece, Vision of Our Ancestors, and more by visiting <https://bit.ly/2Py6WHq> or our YouTube channel. Enjoy!

TRUTH & RECONCILIATION UPDATE

The last couple of months have been a sacred time for the Truth & Reconciliation Committee and, we hope, the entire congregation. It has been a time of discernment, truth-telling, discomfort, and healing.

In anticipation of the 350th Anniversary we celebrated on November 4th, the committee spent nearly two years looking at the ways in which our church has been complicit in systems of oppression. Given that our congregation has recently engaged in intentional ministries surrounding issues of gender, ability, mental health, environmental justice, sexuality, and more, we sensed that issues of race, while explored in the past, had not yet been adequately addressed. It continues to be a “growing edge” for us.

Through our research, we realized our ancestors in faith had been complicit in the forcible removal of indigenous people and the institution of slavery. We learned former ministers held slaves and many congregants benefited financially from racist systems. And we recognized that, while this all happened in the past by people who weren't related to us, our larger community is still filled with suffering caused by the oppressive institutions our church helped create. This gives us pause.

As Christians, we are called to act on injustice and suffering from a place of healing, transformation, and accountability, just as Jesus did in his time. To this end, the committee has been working to guide the entire congregation towards awareness, truth, and healing with regards to systemic racism. We crafted a liturgy for the November 4th morning service that touched on the violent parts of our church's past and our dedication to steering the church on a more just course. Additionally, we made a statement during the afternoon event which denounced the violent actions of our ancestors while simultaneously acknowledging our own continued complicity in the systems we seek to dismantle. These declarations were powerful beginnings that helped usher us into a new era for the church. We intend to remain accountable to our larger church and Middletown communities with regards to these justice-seeking efforts.

There is much work to do, and we will be keeping the church updated on possibilities for involvement and growth in the coming weeks, months, and years. If you wish to get involved, please speak to any member of our committee. Wherever you are on your journey towards racial justice, we invite you in.

Blessings,

The Truth & Reconciliation Committee: Vickey Allen, Rev. Julia Burkey, Gabriela De Golia, Kevin Finefrock, Dionne Raines, Ann Percival

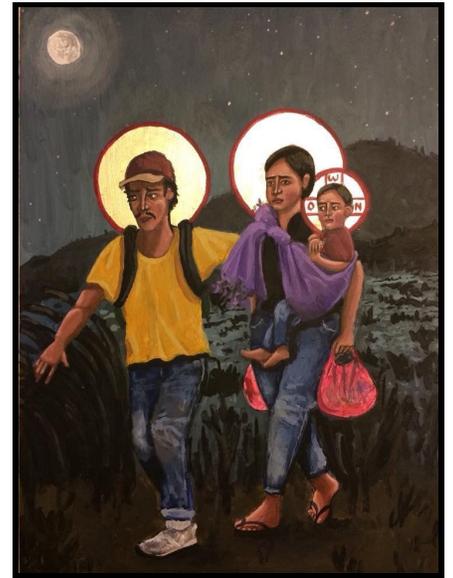


Image: “La Sagrada Familia” (Kelly Latimore), depicting the Holy Family as refugees

OUTREACH UPDATE

Beyond Our Walls: Building Connections in the Community

The holiday season is always the busiest time for the Outreach Committee, so we'd like to take a moment to let you all know what we've done this fall and what's coming up during Advent!

We helped physically nourish our neighbors many times:

- On September 16, we served 109 of our famous meatball grinders for **Sunday dinner at the St. Vincent de Paul soup kitchen**.
- On October 24, First Church participated in the **Amazing Grace Soup Challenge**, a fundraiser for Amazing Grace Food Pantry, hosted by St. Vincent de Paul Middletown. We made lentil and barley soup, and Pastor Julia was one of the "celebrity" servers.
- In November, First Church collected cans of cranberry sauce to donate to the **Middletown Community Thanksgiving Project**, a community-wide effort to give low-income families a delicious Thanksgiving dinner. First Church was asked to contribute 200 cans to the 1,000+ baskets that were going to be made. Between physical cans brought in and money donated in the green envelopes on November 4, we were able to give 252 cans. Thank you all!
- On November 16, Middlesex Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA) hosted **CT Immigrant Forum: Building a Community of Allies**. First Church donated \$100 worth of food to feed those attending the forum. The leftover food was donated to Unidad Latina en Accion (ULA), a grassroots organization that defends the human rights of immigrants and workers in the greater New Haven area, for a reception they were hosting the next day.

We're also using our treasure to "create more good in the world," as our mission statement lays out for us. As you may know, anything given during offering in the green envelopes (located in the pews) is distributed to local organizations to support their work in the community. The Outreach Committee chooses these organizations based on a quarterly theme. Quarter 2 (Youth) was given to the **STEAM Train**, a Middletown-based organization that creates opportunities, for marginalized communities to learn more about the STEM fields including camps for youth and apprenticeships for adults. We decided to combine Quarter 1 (Homeless and Hunger) and Quarter 3 (Nourishment) and **donate \$2,000 to St. Vincent de Paul Middletown** to contribute to the Amazing Grace Challenge, a fundraising initiative to receive a grant from the city of Middletown in support of the Amazing Grace Food Pantry. Additionally, we held a special collection to **support victims of Hurricane Florence**. Because of your generosity, we were able to send \$250 to the UCC Disaster Ministries' Emergency USA Fund. Quarter 4 will go to supporting our holiday ministries.

As Christmastime quickly comes upon us, we will be contributing to the organizations we've supported in recent years. To the **Solnit Children's Center**, a psychiatric facility for children ages 13-17 managed by the Department of Children and Families, we donate twelve "welcome baskets," a basket stuffed with toiletries and small gifts given to youth when they enter the facility. To the **Eddy Shelter**, an emergency homeless shelter for single adults run by the Connection, we donate 55 pairs of wool socks for them to distribute to their clients. We also donate twenty-five \$25 gift cards to Walmart to the **PILOTS Program**, a federal supportive housing program that is run locally by the Connection, to be distributed to their clients. Our friends at **St. Vincent de Paul Middletown** host a holiday party mid-December; we will donate 24 one-pound boxes of chocolates and five \$20 Stop and Shop gift cards to help their guests have a brighter holiday season.

This year, we will be participating in **Disaster Restoration Services' coat drive**. There is a collection box in the office; bring any coats you have in. DRS will collect them and have them cleaned before distributing them.

And, as always, we'll have our **Giving Tree** this year! Instead of helping one large family, we are supporting two smaller families this year. Each is a single parent with two daughters. We will have a tree available with tags, each with a specific gift from the families' wish lists. Please remember to get a gift receipt, especially for clothes! If the clothes that you purchase don't fit the family, it's easier to exchange them for something that fits better with a gift receipt. Presents will be due by December 16. Thanks in advance.

Julie Hurlburt will once again be organizing the **Christmas Day Dinner**, hosted at First Church! Stay tuned for announcements as the date comes closer.

Looking forward, we will be serving breakfast at the St. Vincent de Paul soup kitchen twice during the warming center season, which runs from November 19, 2018 to March 31, 2019. Currently we are scheduled to serve on January 20 and February 24, but we have requested to switch January 20 for another day because that is the date of the midyear congregational meeting! Stay tuned for updates.

Thank you all, and blessings during this holiday season!

The Outreach Committee

Vickey Allen
Linda Choser
Cheryl Fogg
Julie Hurlburt
Jen Ide
Sharon Lundell
Catie Olinski
Jan Palmer

Vision Fund Update

Pledge campaign: To date, we have received over \$640,000 in pledges from 102 families, plus from fundraisers like Sips & Slates. Based on indications from pledge forms, the expected donations will have the following timing:

2018	\$293,335
2019	\$142,193
2020	\$142,192
2021	\$62,697
TOTAL	\$640,417

Donations: To date, we have received \$250,529 of actual contributions from pledged amounts. **Vision Fund statements were sent to 72 donors the first week of October.** No one has notified the Vision Fund that they cannot make their pledge commitment.

- 30 donors have completed their pledge
- 44 donors have partially paid their pledge (\$278,712 remaining)
- 28 donors have not begun to pay their pledge (\$112,280 in pledges)

Based on commitments, we are hoping to collect \$40-45,000 by year end.

Cash on hand: The Vision Fund has on hand **\$79,235** for projects. We have enough funds to complete the sanctuary renovations, including the approximately \$33,803 remaining on contracts with A. Thompson Allen and Artech.

Projects: Vision Fund Building Committee met on November 9th and approved a vendor for the pew cushion replacement project. The vendor is Waggoners, who did the cushions for South Church. The total cost will be \$24,690. Since this is not part of the original VF projects, we have requested that the cushions be funded from the Bee & Missionary Restricted Fund. Contingent upon funding, the order will be placed this fall with the goal of having new cushions for Easter. The committee includes Suzanna Barrett, Mary Lou Brady, Trevor Davis, Jim and Pam Miller, and Jim Silver.

At this writing, **\$171,294 has been spent by the Vision Fund.**

The **organ refurbishment project** (contract cost \$72,803) is nearly complete. Final contract payments totaling \$23,303 will be paid by year end.

The **sanctuary renovation** is nearly done.

- **Carpet:** Contract with Artech Church Interiors for \$42,000. Carpet installation is complete. Final contract payment of \$10,500 will be paid in November.
- **Pew removal and cutouts; relocation of the baptismal fount:** Contract with Artech Church Interiors for \$18,500 has been paid. Curt Weybright built the structural support for the new location for the fount.

Next projects will include more accessibility projects and the sound system this winter.

2019's project will be either the exterior work or the elevator. The building committee will decide on which project to tackle and start planning work this winter and spring.

In gratitude,

Jim Miller

Vision Fund Treasurer

Bee and Missionary Society Gift

The Vision Fund Building Committee recently committed to upgrading the pew cushions in the sanctuary to go along with recent renovations. The pew cushions were not a part of what we originally raised money in the Vision Fund for, so we are using the Bee and Missionary Society Restricted fund to pay for this improvement.

That got me thinking that many people in the church don't know what this fund is and who the Bee and Missionary Society was.

Who were the Bee and Missionary Society?

Informally referred to as the "Bees", the group had existed since the 1800's. While not a part of First Church, the group was comprised primarily of First Church members and friends of the church. In addition to supporting the church, they produced, collected and distributed supplies to missions both local and international. They carefully managed an endowment accumulated over many years. In more recent years, the Bees activities were more social in nature, but they continued to support the church and other organizations financially. In 2012, they made the hard choice to disband the group due to declining interest and participation.

What is the Bee and Missionary Fund?

When the "Bees" disbanded in 2012, they decided to donate the remaining assets of the organization to First Church. The assets of the Bees were divided into three funds:

1. \$347,717 "Restricted" funds where the church can spend the income of the fund on capital projects relating to church property,
2. \$115,906 Unrestricted funds that the church can use for any purpose.
3. \$38,660 for the refurbishment of the pipe organ.

The total donation in April 2012 was \$502,283, an amazing gift from our friends in the Bee and Missionary Society. **These funds have been used to fund a variety of projects to benefit the church:**

Year	Cost	Project Description
2013	\$6,000	Parish Hall roof phase 1
2013	\$80,000	New heating system and insulation
2014	\$8,800	Parish Hall roof phase 2
2015	\$7,625	Refinish Parish Hall floor
2015	\$11,330	New side entrance door
2015	\$3,525	New Security System
2017	\$5,000	New Fire Alarm System
2017	\$60,000	Replacement windows in the Parish Hall
2017	\$7,485	Repaint the Parish Hall's exterior trim
2017	\$4,288	Digital layout of the church building
2018	\$38,660	Refurbishment of the pipe organ
TOTAL	\$232,713	Total improvements

These were all important projects that we were able to do without fundraising or spending down our endowment, all because to the generosity of the Bee and Missionary Society. Also, after spending over \$230,000 on projects, the funds have a balance today of over \$515,000, more than what was donated in 2012! The funds are conservatively invested similar to our endowment. The Restricted portion will continue to grow over time, due to the rules of the restriction.

Please remember and honor the generosity of the women of the Bee and Missionary Society. Minnie McDonald, Evelyn Hickcox, Evelyn Cameron, Thelma Warendra, are still local and active in the church. Others who participated include:

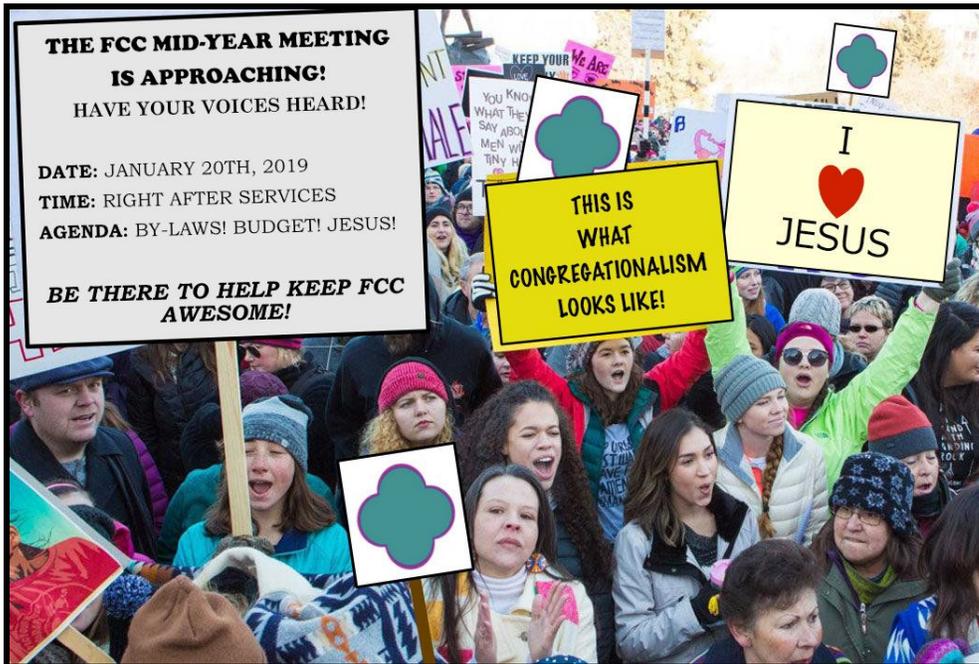
Edie Sherman	Jan Edson
Wanda Hartz	Nancy Wilcox
Betty Barton	Ruth Purdy
Ruth Seagrave	Helen Ciaburri
Millie Paddock	Althea Whalen

CALENDAR OF EVENTS & SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS



- December 1** Holly Fair 9 am-2 pm
- December 2** Advent 1 communion service & Budget Planning Second Hour
- December 9** Advent 2
- December 9** 4pm Candlelight Christmas Concert
- December 16** Advent 3, Mary's Sunday
- December 23** Advent 4, Instant Pageant
- December 24** **5 pm** Christmas Eve Barn Service at Windy Ridge Stable
10 pm Candlelight Christmas Eve Service in the First Church Sanctuary
- December 25** Community Dinner
- December 30** Chuck Bates Storytelling
- January 6** Epiphany
- January 13** Baptism of Christ
- January 20** Mid-Year Congregational meeting

MARK YOUR
CALENDAR!



ANNUAL
**Candlelight
Christmas
Concert**

Sunday, December 9, 2018 at 4 P.M.
FIRST CHURCH IN MIDDLETOWN
190 Court Street
Middletown, Connecticut
Free (donations accepted)

Senior Choir
Celebration Singers
Heart in Hand Bell Choir
Court Street Singers
and singing of carols and Christmas readings
Reception to follow the concert



Saturday, December 1, 2018, 9:00am - 2:00pm

First Church of Christ

190 Church Street, Middletown, CT

Unique Crafts, Books, Baked Goods, Soups, Cookie Walk, Prize Raffle, and MORE!

FREE PARKING! Come Join Us!



Have Christmas Dinner with us at
First Church, 190 Court Street Middletown

December 25, 12:00-2:00

Celebrate the
JOY*FOOD*FELLOWSHIP
Of the Season

For a ride to the church or to arrange delivery of
your meal

or to Volunteer

Please

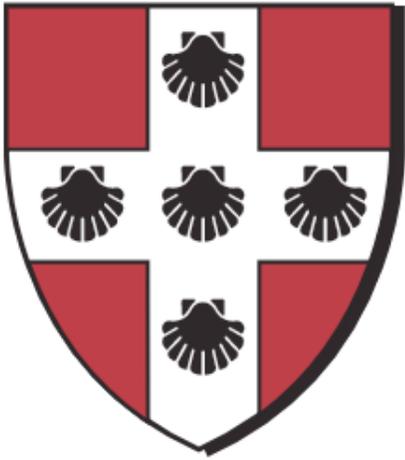
CALL 860-346-6657 EXT 15

Email: Jmhurlburt26@gmail.com

THIS IS A

FREE COMMUNITY EVENT

We need cooked turkeys, pies, cakes, dinner rolls
& cold drinks. Please contact Julie by email or
call the number above.



Mixolydians a-capella group to perform at FCC!

On Sunday, December 2, the Wesleyan choral group “The Mixolydians” will sing during worship. The Mixolydians is a fully mixed vocal ensemble formed with the purpose of performing, proliferating and cultivating an interest in the art of chamber works written for a small vocal ensemble. Its repertoire will range from early renaissance madrigals to lesser known works written in our century, not limiting itself to works from any one continent or genre. The Mixolydians also aims to instate a high standard of the choral art, and to explore new sonic spaces for musical and/or theatrical expression in a continuing search to re-examine choral idioms.

2019 Women’s Retreat: registration is now open!

Dates: February 1-3, 2019

Where: Silver Lake Conference Center

Cost: \$160

The cost includes lodging in a shared room and 5 excellent meals.

Our focus this year is around prayer and healing. The program will be co-led by Rev. Sarah Vetter and Rev. Julia Burkey of First Church. Rev. Sarah Vetter received her MDiv from Yale Divinity School through the Institute of Sacred Music. She has served churches in New Haven, Cos Cob, Weymouth, MA, and most recently she has provided coverage to South Church here in Middletown and the Congregational church in Portland, CT. Sarah is trained in Interim Ministry and Gestalt Pastoral Care. She recently moved to Madison, CT, with her husband Todd (who is the new minister of the First Congregational Church there) and their two children, Matthew (age 10) and Holly (age 8).



Please sign up by contacting Vice Moderator Suzanna at

stamminen@wesleyan.edu. Your registration is complete when you have paid.

Registration fees are due January 5, 2019. Please make checks payable to First Church of Christ and put “Women’s Retreat” in the memo. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to contact Suzanna.

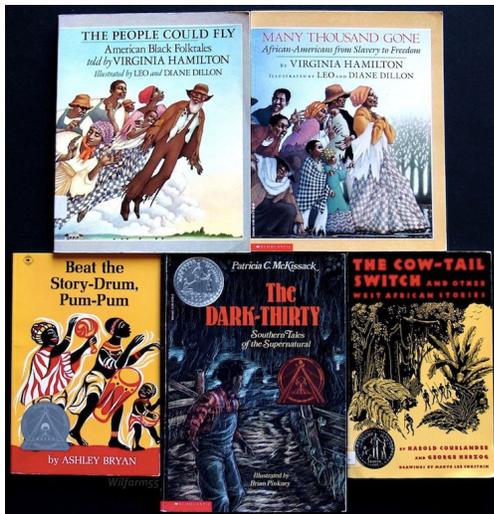
CT-UCC Level 1 Racial Justice Training

Monday, Feb 11th at the Middlefield Federated Church

This "From Tolerance to Unity" training is an eight-hour day where we see unmask racism, create a common language around issues of racism, and inspire people to do more work to eradicate racism. We will spend the day engaging in the Sacred Work, creating a brave space for the conversations to be held. Content will include the Four Realms of Racism and the Inclusivity Spectrum. We will accomplish our work through small-group exercises, articles, videos, music, and much more to develop a firmer understanding of how racism is sustained, maintained, and perpetuated, so that way we can work toward its unmasking, dismantling, and eradicating racism in all its realms. For more details, visit the UCC Racial Justice website at <https://www.ctucc.org/racialjustice>.



“AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN CHILDREN’S BOOKS” EVENT AT RUSSELL LIBRARY

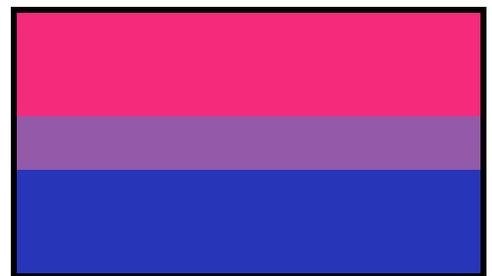


A member of the First Church family, Prof. Bill Foster, will be presenting a special program for Middletown’s Russell Library. **The presentation will take place on Saturday, December 8th at 1:00 pm and is titled.**

A long-time collector of classic children’s literature, Bill will trace the history of images in books that were written by African-Americans and that feature African-American characters. Please join the conversation!

BISEXUAL+ DISCUSSION GROUP

A Bisexual+ Discussion Group is held every fourth Wednesday of the month at 6:00 p.m. at First Church. All are welcome who identify as bisexual, pansexual, queer, fluid, or anyone who is not in the LGBTQ community and wishes to learn more. This is for people ages 18 and up and is led by our Minister of Music, Shari Lucas, who is openly bisexual. So often bisexuality is misunderstood and not discussed, even within the LGBTQ community. All discussions remain confidential. **Upcoming dates are December 26, January 23, and February 27.**



NEW GUIDELINES FOR MAINTAINING OUR SANCTUARY'S BEAUTY

With all the new beauty surrounding us in our sanctuary thanks in part to our Vision Fund renovations, here are some new guidelines for the congregation:

1. **Enjoy the beauty!** Feel the presence of God manifest through the beautiful space. People who have been around First Church for years remark that the sanctuary looks as beautiful as ever. Let's rejoice in this!
2. **Pew accessibility:** there are new pew cut outs for people who need more space due to using a walker or a wheelchair. Do your best to save those seats for people who need them.
3. **Food & beverages:** please avoid bringing food and beverage into the sanctuary whenever possible. We want to honor this gorgeous space by maintaining its current beauty as long as we can. Of course, if you are diabetic, have low blood sugar, or need to feed your kiddo snacks to keep them from screaming their head off, by all means, your humanity comes first! Please simply refrain from bringing open containers of coffee, greasy French fries, or other messy foods into the sanctuary. Water is just fine.

At the end of the day, please use your judgment: we are all responsible adults who love our church space! Thank you for helping us honor our beautiful sanctuary.



CONGREGANT REFLECTION: *A Note on the Process of Our Living*

Dear Church Family,

It has been a little over a month since my being away from Middletown and this hemisphere for sixteen days, ten of them on a pilgrimage, "The Magdalene Mysteries and the Path of the Blue Rose." Among other things, the journey into Southwest France and Northern Spain caused me to consider the effect of "place".

Many years ago while in the Portland kitchen of my friend Nan, I saw a refrigerator magnet that impressed me: "Grow where you're planted". I've found in considering "place" that I've grown wherever I've lived or traveled, even without being aware of it at the time.



Living overseas while growing up and becoming aware of other cultures and religions, as well as making friends who are still part of my life, was vital to my self concept. The places where I was fortunate enough to go to high school and college (Abbot Academy in Massachusetts and Oberlin College in Ohio) were both especially formative. My world has expanded and always will when I visit my children and grandchildren in Maryland and California. Being rooted in the community of Middletown and creating a sanctuary in the living room where I've lived since 1980 has anchored me. Finally, and most importantly, the First Church community has hugely affected me and my outlook toward living.

What about you? Has your life been changed, in an even imperceptible alchemy, by places where you've lived? Perhaps you might give it some thought :-).

Peace to all, and happy musing...

Deacon Lyn Shaw



BENEDICTION

Go out into the world in peace.

Have courage.

Hold on to what is good.

Return no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the faint hearted,

Support the weak,

Help the suffering,

Honor all persons.

Love and serve the Lord,

Rejoicing in the power

Of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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