

THE PARISH POST

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

CHESHIRE, CONNECTICUT
www.cheshirecongregational.org

Volume XXIV

December, 2007

No. 11

Are You Ready for Christmas?

By Dave Buchan
Interim Senior Minister

*“Prepare the way of the Lord.
Make straight in the desert a highway for
our God.”*

(Isaiah 40:30)

In the whirlwind of activity that December brings, there's so much to do – family gatherings to prepare, gifts to buy, cards to send. And during this season from time to time, friends will ask, “Are you ready for Christmas?”

I usually answer, “No. I haven't started my shopping yet.” But there's a deeper meaning to the question. Something more is involved than just the shopping and the cheer and the human warmth of the season. As delightful as that may be, there is something even more wonderful that we celebrate.

What are we getting ready for? How are we preparing?

Centuries ago, the church in its wisdom set aside the four weeks before Christmas as “Advent,” the season of preparation for the birth of Christ. “Prepare the way of

the Lord.” That's the task of the Christian kin this season. We light candles, and sing, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” And we remember in this darkest time of the year how light has come into our world – the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

Continued on the next page

Budget Meeting To Be Held on December 9

A church budget meeting will be held Sunday, December 9. There will be one service at 10:00, with the meeting in the Parish Hall immediately following the service.

All First Congregational Church members are urged to attend. Although our life as a faith community involves much more than dollars and cents, deciding on a working and worshipful budget is an important part of fulfilling our Christian mission.

Child care will be provided.

Are You Ready?

Continued from Page 1

We may want to set up a crèche at home. We may want to renew our worship where the Christmas story is told, where with shepherds of old we can stand in wonder at the amazing grace of God.

Advent begins Sunday, December 2.

On behalf of all our staff – Alison, Joe, Debbie, Roger, Leslie, Judy, and myself – I wish you a very meaningful Advent and happy Christmas.

*In Christ,
David Buchan
Interim Senior Minister*



Call to Church Meeting

A meeting of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, is called by the Executive Board for Sunday, December 9, 2007 in the Parish Hall immediately following a single worship service at 10:00 a.m., for the purposes of:

- (1) Hearing an Update on Good Things at First Church;
- (2) Hearing an Update from the Senior Minister Search Committee;
- (3) Hearing the Report of the Nominating Committee; and
- (4) Approving the Proposed Budget for 2008

Worship Schedule For December

During December, the Rev. Mr. Buchan will preach a series of sermons entitled “Christmas is a Time to...”

Sunday, December 2: Services at 9 and 11 a.m. Dave Buchan preaching on “Christmas is a Time to Prepare.” Blessing of the Crèches. Communion Sunday. Food offerings will be collected.

Sunday, December 9: ONE SERVICE ONLY at 10 a.m. Alison McCaffrey preaching. Church meeting follows.

Sunday, December 16: Services at 9 and 11 a.m. Dave Buchan preaching on “Christmas is a Time to Give Gifts.”

Sunday, December 23: Services at 9 and 11 a.m. Dave Buchan preaching on “Christmas is a Time to Sing a Song.”

Monday, December 24, Christmas Eve: 5 p.m. Children and family service, with Debbie Gravell preaching. 7:30 p.m., service, Alison McCaffrey preaching. 11 p.m., Communion service, with Dave Buchan preaching on “Christmas is a Time to Follow a Star.”

Sunday, December 30: ONE SERVICE ONLY at 10 a.m. Family Service.

Advent, Christmas Events at First Congregational

Candlelight Lessons and Carols Service

On the afternoon of Sunday, December 16, our Senior Choir will lead an annual candlelight Lessons and Carols service in the sanctuary.

The choir will be joined by members of The Greater Middletown Chorale and guest organist Christopher White, a Ph.D. student in music theory at Yale who has given organ recitals throughout the United States.

Mr. White was one of three organists who presented a recital last August to benefit the music program at First Congregational. He will give a short organ recital beginning at 4:00, which will be immediately followed by the Lessons and Carols service. The organ recital will include Buxtehude's *Praeludium in C Major*, Brahms' *Lo How a Rose Ere Blooming*, and Messiaen's *La Nativite: Les Bergers, Dieu Parmi Nous*.

The Lessons and Carols service will include traditional carols sung by the Senior Choir and congregation, as well as works by Darke, Sumsion, Chilcott, Palestrina, and Rutter.

A featured setting of *There Is No Rose*, by composer Colin Brit, will also be sung. Mr. Brit will sing with the choir as well. The lessons will be read by several members of First Congregational, including members of "Scripture by Heart." A reception will follow.



Christmas Carol Sing

The next Thursday Night Supper will NOT be a supper. Rather, there will be a cookie and punch Christmas carol sing. It will start at 7 pm (not at 6:30 p.m., as usual) on Thursday, December 20, in the Parish Hall. Price of admission will be a plate of cookies, plus \$1 per person, including children.

The Thursday Night Supper committee will provide hors d'oeuvres and beverages. We trust that this will be a stress-free way for the congregation to gather before Christmas for fellowship, fun and traditional carols.

Christmas Fair

Saturday, December 1

In the Parish Hall

10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Do your Christmas shopping,
have lunch, meet friends!

Notes from the Executive Board

At the November Executive Board meeting, there were a number of presentations from active church projects, in addition to budget discussions. Here are highlights:

One week into the Pledge Drive, **Stewardship** reported positive results. New pledges (from members not formerly pledging) are coming in and, based on what has been received to date, the average pledge has increased. A new way of giving, automated-deduction giving, is also being researched as an option.

While nearing completion for this year, the **Membership Verification** Team reported that results to date show approximately 800 members marked as 'active'. An estimated 150 are college students and 50 to 75 are elderly, leaving approximately 550 to 600 truly active members. We feel confident that we now have a more representative accounting of the numbers and status of the members of our congregation.

A special project to look at year-over-year **Attendance** for the past three years was completed. A method is being developed to have the information maintained on a regular basis. This information as well as more information about membership will be shared at the upcoming church meetings in December and January.

The **Bylaws Review Committee** distributed a draft copy of the bylaws with all revisions received to date, with a

request that the Board review these detail. These changes will be brought to the congregation for a vote later.

The **Senior Minister Search Committee** gave an update on the search, as well as some results from the congregational survey.

Five more recommendations from the **Response Team** were closed last month, including the revisions to the Yutes Safety Manual and the Safe and Nurturing Policy. The Board of Christian Education has also formalized a plan for educating staff, volunteers, youth and families about this information. The Executive Board has also created a Safe Church Committee, whose task will be to monitor safety practices throughout the church.

Planning was underway for the **December Congregational Meeting**, scheduled for Sunday, December 9. There will be one service at 10:00, with the meeting in the Parish Hall immediately following the service. In addition to the proposed 2008 budget, updates from the Senior Minister Search Committee and the Nominating Committee will be presented.

Due to the packed agenda last month, other topics were not discussed in detail, but include: strategic planning, Executive Board succession planning, and fund raising requests.

Your thoughts and ideas to improve our church are always welcomed by the Executive Board. Please contact any member of the Board to provide feedback.

There's a Lot Happening at First Congregational Church

Advent Labyrinth: A Walk into the Waiting December 2

The labyrinth is an ancient sacred spiritual tool for prayer and contemplation and a tangible expression of spiritual preparation in this advent season of waiting for God.

One walks the labyrinth in a spirit of prayer, centering the heart toward God.

There is one way in and one way

out, yet one's heart can be profoundly moved through this prayer experience. We will carpool from church at 3:30 p.m. on December 2, to an area labyrinth for a planned walk. For further information, ask Alison McCaffrey.



“Lord, I Want to be a Christian” Women’s Retreat December 8

Women of the church are invited to an all-day retreat in the season of Advent, at Peggy Allen’s home. Join us for this opportunity to reflect and renew as we share in song, story, scripture and each other’s company.

The event is limited to 12 people; a waiting list will be created. Please let Peggy Allen or Alison McCaffrey know of your interest.

‘Pew Pals’

On Sunday, November 11, members and friends entered their pews and were greeted by the happy sight of “Pew Pals” waiting for them, thanks to the work of the Welcoming Team. Pew Pals are little stuffed animals blessed for the ministry of keeping company with the youngest among us (and young of heart, too) as we worship. Sometimes it’s nice to have a warm fuzzy friend with us in church.

Each Pal is different, just like us, but each wears a tag that reads: “Hi, I’m a Pew Pal. I can keep you company as we worship. I can stay here, or you can take me home with you. If you do, please love me the way God loves you.” Some Pew Pals went to church school that morning, then came back to their pews in the sanctuary for the next Sunday. Some went to their new homes. One is being mailed to a child away at college.

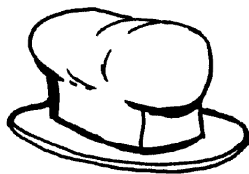
The Welcoming Team encourages ongoing donations of Beanie-Baby type stuffed animals or other small stuffed animals to replenish our supplies for our pews and to have extras available for young waiting hands. There is a box outside Alison’s office to receive them.

Thank you for your help with this ministry of hospitality to our young ones.

The Welcoming Team: Peggy Allen, Pam Euerle, Mark Hall, Martha Lape, Alison McCaffrey, Matt McCaffrey, and Jane Montgomery.

Lessons and Carols Cranberry Bread

Once again, in conjunction with the Lessons and Carols service on December 16, we would like to offer hospitality to all who come by giving a small loaf of homemade cranberry bread. More than 150 loaves were baked last year, and were enjoyed by members and visitors from our community.



A sign-up sheet, recipes, and pans are available in the parlor. Baked loaves are due back by Thursday, December 13. A wrapping party will be held Thursday evening, December 13, to ready them for giving.

Church Thursdays

This month's Church Thursday will be a Christmas carol sing on December 20. (See article elsewhere in this issue for details.)

The next all-church dinner and gathering will be January 10. Donna's Dinner Team will once again take charge of the meal planning, and Cindy Wright will offer a presentation on Ethical Wills.

Unlike a legal will, an ethical will is a written or recorded expression of what one values most in life and of life lessons learned for the benefit of future

generations. Recording the memories, stories, values, insights, and special wisdom held most dear can be the most valuable gift given to family and friends. Cindy has previously led "Legacy Writing" small groups here, and has received training in the field of helping others in this newly developing practice of articulating and recording their ethical wills.

Women's Bible Study

All women of the church are invited to Women's Bible Study, held Wednesdays at 10 a.m. in the parlor. The facilitator is Debbie Gravell. Please feel free to join at any time. The group uses the Life Guide Bible Study Series – Book of Hebrews; the cost of the Bible Study Guide is \$4.50. Please call Debbie Gravell in advance if you need child care, and she will try to arrange it.

Caring Crafts Ministry

The Caring Crafts Ministry will celebrate their talents and gathering for fellowship during their annual Christmas dinner on Monday, December 17, at 6:30 p.m. at Anthony Jack's Restaurant, 30 Center Street, Southington. All those who have made items for the church are invited. It is a pay-as-you-go dinner, and everyone is asked to bring one wrapped crafty gift priced around \$5. Please call Donna Mead (203-248-9576) if you plan to go, so she can make reservations for you.

Church School Happenings for December

Celebrating Volunteers

Kindergarteners are eager spiritual learners. They love to hear Bible stories and do crafts. Our volunteers in the Kindergarten class at our 9 and 11 church school hours spend time creating a lesson to meet the hungering spiritual needs of this age group. They minister to our Kindergarteners through their creative lesson preparation, gathering of creative props and materials, developing age-appropriate crafts and especially their love of the children.

When you see our Kindergarten teachers, please thank them for their ministry to this age group.

Thanks to Laurie Hart and John Adesso, our wonderful team of Kindergarten teachers at the 9:00 church school. Thanks to their helpers, Kate Hall and Julie Hart. Thanks to Aislinn Walters, Stephanie Canada, Stephanie Turner and Chelsea Clouse, our wonderful team of Kindergarten and first grade teachers at the 11:00 church school. Their ministry to our children is so special.



Church School For Preschool 3 to 1st Grades And Nursery On Dec. 9

There will be a single service at 10:00. Classes from 9 and 11 church schools will be combined. Teachers and helpers in those grades who are scheduled for that day are asked to come for the 10:00 hour and plan to teach together.

Debbie Gravell will send an e-mail with further details about that day.

Child care will be provided for the budget meeting by the Executive Board. Please plan to pick up your children and move them to the child care room after church school.

Consult the church bulletin for the room number.



Blessing of Family Crèches

Does your family have a favorite crèche (manger scene) of Mary, Joseph, the animals, the wise men, the shepherds and the baby Jesus you place in your home during the holidays? If not, why not consider buying one this year, and starting the tradition of placing it in your home.

We are inviting families to put their names on their crèche and bring it to church for a special blessing during the service on the First Sunday in Advent, December 2.

Please bring the crèche on Saturday, Dec. 1 by 4 p.m. and place it on a table or ledge in the sanctuary. Please also place a tent-like card with your family name and any special facts about your crèche.

Alison McCaffrey and Debbie Gravell will place the crèches around the sanctuary for the service the next day. The blessing will take place before the children leave for church school.

Church School Schedule for 9:00

Date	Thou Art	Red Sea Prod.	Desert Tales	Gospel Games
Dec. 2	Grades 2& 3	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 4
Dec. 9	Grade 4	Grades 2 & 3	Grades 5	Grade 6
Dec. 16	Grade 6	Grade 4	Grades 2 & 3	Grade 5
Dec. 23	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 4	Grades 2 & 3

Church School Schedule for 11:00

Date	Thou Art	Red Sea Prod.	Desert Tales	Gospel Games
Dec. 2	Worship	Worship	Worship	Worship
Dec. 9	Grade 4	Grades 2 & 3	Grade 5	Grade 6
Dec. 16	Grades 2& 3	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 4
Dec. 23	Grade 6	Grade 4	Grades 2 & 3	Grade 5

Bible Journeys For Grades 2-6: This workshop rotation Church School program is for children and youth in grades 2-6 this fall. Children will know what workshop they will go to by the schedule above, the bulletin or the Bible Journeys Board in the hallway across from Room 8. Grades 3-6 will go to class when dismissed from the church.

Grade 2 at 9:00 service only will leave for Chapel in the early part of the service. After Chapel, they will go with their Shepherd to their Bible Journeys workshop. Parents may find their children in the classroom listed in the bulletin at the end of Church School.

Please note that on December 9, there will be a single service at 10 a.m., with a combined church school held during the service. Children will report to the classes listed here for Dec. 9.

Bible Journeys teachers and shepherds scheduled for Dec. 9 for both church school hours are asked to come to the 10:00 service and plan to teach as a team.

**Have you remembered
First Congregational Church
in your estate planning?**

More Church School News

This month's theme is Birth Through The Eyes Of The Wise Men.

Thou Art: Room 8

Students will learn about the star that they wise men followed to find the baby Jesus. They will create two star ornaments, one to keep and one to give away.

Red Sea Productions: Room 9



For grades 2-4, the teacher will act out the story of the

Magi who came from the east to find the Messiah. For grades 5-6, the students will recall the story they remember from the Bible and then act out a modern day skit of Jesus born today. Discussion will be held on all grade levels about the story.

Desert Tales: Room 10

Students will view the video "Jacob's Gift" based on a story from Max Lucado. They will receive glow-in-the-dark stars and continue to learn the memory verse for this month printed in glow in the dark ink.

Gospel Games: Room 11

Students will play an action multiple choice game to help them remember the details of the Magi story.

The Christmas Pageant

This year, the pageant will be a "Traditional Christmas Pageant" adapted from a play by Nancy Seale. It will be held Sunday, December 9, at 4 p.m.

A dress rehearsal will take place Saturday, December 8, from 9:45 a.m. to noon. A blocking rehearsal will be held Saturday, December 1, from 3 to 4:30 p.m. Line rehearsals will take place Sunday, Dec. 2, at 10:30 a.m. sharp.

Signup sheets went out through the church school November 11 for younger angels, shepherds and sheep. Please return them as soon as possible to Debbie Gravell. Adults are needed to help with rehearsing the speaking roles and helping the younger children on the day of dress rehearsal and the play. Please speak to Deb Gravell if you are able to help.

Christmas Eve Family Service – 5 p.m., December 24: Debbie Gravell will lead this service. Children will be invited to participate in the telling of the Christmas Story. Join us with your family and consider inviting your friends and neighbors.

Family Service – Sunday, Dec. 30: There will be a single service at 10 a.m. Nursery care will be available. The service will be geared to children and families. The Rev. Dave Buchan will share a short seasonal message, and Debbie Gravell will invite children to participate in a Children's Moment.

Giving First Fruits

Here's more from the book *Ask, Thank, Tell*, by Charles R. Lane, which is being shared by the members of the Board of Stewardship:

In earlier times, when most people lived off the land, Thanksgiving was a harvest festival and a payday. Once a year, the Puritans could count on the crops coming in and giving thanks for the bounty of the land that would see them through the year. It was a payday in a big way.

During those harvest festivals, people gave thanks for the bounty of the land and returned thanks with a portion of their harvest to support their churches and clergy. They didn't wait until the spring to see what they had left over to give back to God and the ministries of the time.

Likewise, we in modern times are asked to give the 'first fruits' of our labor to God in thanks for the generous gifts we experience in our lives. The envelopes that many people use to make a weekly offering provide a structure and a plan for giving. People who 'pay God first' find that there's enough left at the end of the pay period to cover the needs of their households.

Most folks receive income more frequently than once a year. Following the example of giving 'first fruits' is a way to manage finances faithfully, and with good results both for the giver and those who receive.

As of November 11, there were 288 'first fruit' pledge units in the congregation

– families who have made a faith commitment of finances even before they have received their income. All who participate in the life of this church are asked to follow their faithful example.

It's never too late to make a pledge of faith and money.



Christmas Cookie Sunday

The Fellowship Committee is pleased to announce that Sunday, December 16, will be Christmas Cookie Sunday at the coffee hours.

Please bring a plate of your favorite Christmas cookies, and (unless it's secret) the recipe to share.



Covenant to Care

Thank you to the Adesso family for a number of girls clothing items for winter. Pants, coats, sweaters, shirts, and dresses were delivered recently for a four year old.



If You're Hospitalized...

If you or a member of your family is in the hospital, please remember to tell First Congregational Church.

Federal privacy laws make it impossible for the church to find out if a member or a friend of the church is hospitalized simply by asking, the way it was done in the past.

Ministering to those who are ill is an important part of our system of parish care, but we need your help!

Senior Minister Search Committee Survey Summary

The Senior Minister Search Committee (SMSC) conducted a survey of the congregation during September to ascertain the opinions of the congregation about certain characteristics desired of a new Senior Minister. In addition, a number of factual questions were posed to help the committee to accurately assemble the current profile of our church. All members and friends of the church were asked to share their opinions.

Congregants had access to the survey in a number of ways. All members of the congregation were mailed a paper copy of the survey, but in the interest of accuracy and speed of response, all were encouraged to fill out the survey electronically through a link on our church's website. In addition, those who attended services or were physically present on the church's premises could find a copy of the survey in the sanctuary, in the parlor, in Parish Hall, or by the church office.

In all, nearly 300 surveys were completed by people of all ages. They arrived in both written and electronic form. In general, the survey revealed that we are a diverse congregation with many opinions. Nonetheless, certain patterns emerged:

What are the most important qualities of a Senior Minister WITHIN our Church? Most respondents pointed to these needs: to work collaboratively with other church staff; to make pastoral calls on people in hospitals, nursing homes, and

those confined to home; to work effectively with youth.

What are the most important qualities of a Senior Minister OUTSIDE our Church? Most encouraged support of our church's wider ministry; building relationships with other churches in the community; and actively working to bring new members into the church.

What are the most important personal qualities for a Senior Minister in our Church? Most people sought a person with deep faith and convictions; one who is compassionate, caring, and sensitive; and one who is emotionally secure.

When asked, "*Would you want the Senior Minister to have a vision for our church and guide us toward this vision OR be guided by a renewed vision as determined by the congregation?*", opinions were nearly evenly split and a number of people wrote in that they would have liked to select both.

The question "*What is most important to you about the way a minister preaches his/her sermon?*" showed that our respondents desired someone who is spiritually moving and inspirational as well as being challenging and thought-provoking.

When queried "*Imagine that our congregation were able to raise significantly more money than was*

Continued on the next page

Continued from the previous page

budgeted. Where would you like to see our stewardship dollars used?", most pointed to facility maintenance and/or improvement; existing staff salaries/benefits; and debt reduction.

An overwhelming majority felt that the Bible is God's Word, written by inspired people who recorded what they heard and experienced as God interacted with the lives of people.

The Senior Minister Search Committee thanks everyone who made the effort to respond to this survey. Your opinions will help to guide the work of the committee as it completes the church survey, then begins the process of attracting and evaluating candidates.



New Church Library Books

Dreams from My Father, by Barack Obama, a story of race and inheritance

Interpretation-Hebrews, by Thomas G. Long, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching

Interpretation-Psalms, by James L. Mays

The Parting, by Beverly Lewis (newest in series)

(Of interest because of our Malawi connection): *The Sudan Project*, by Melissa Leembruggen. Rebuilding with the people of Darfur – a young person's guide.

Outreach and Mission for Vital Congregations by Dale Rosenberger

Youth Group News

Here are upcoming events for First Congregational Church youth groups.

December 2: Labyrinth Visit. Both groups will take a spiritual walk at the labyrinth in Woodbridge. Meet in the parking lot at 3:30 and return for pick-up at 6:00. Drivers are needed.

December 9: Regular Meeting in the Whiting House with dinner

December 16: Lessons and Carols – no meeting

December 23: Christmas Caroling. Both groups will meet in the Parish Hall at 4:00 pm. We'll travel together by bus and bring the joy of our voices to various members of our church family. Dress appropriately for the weather. We'll return for refreshments and pick-up by 6 pm.

December 27: College night (If you are in college, check the Message Board on the website.)

December 30: No meeting

Senior High Winter Retreat: Our winter retreat for Senior High YUTES is scheduled for January 11 to 13 at Monadnock Bible Center in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. There are only a few slots left, so if you plan to go, get a deposit of \$25 to the church office along with the permission slip as soon as possible.

A **Middle School Retreat** is a possibility if we can get two or three moms or dads to participate. Please let us

Continued on the next page

Continued from the previous page

know immediately if you are an interested parent.

Summer Mission Trip: Our Mission Trip to Wilmington, Delaware, will be from July 20 through 26, and slots are filling up fast. We need your initial deposit by January 6. For details on our entire program please visit our website: www.yutes.org.



We Give Thanks ...

Thank you so much for the flowers and the prayer shawl. As always,, it was a pleasure to visit with Sue Mancinelli, and I was wrapped in the shawl all day. My Dad was a great father, grandfather, and friend to many, who also loved his First Church in West Haven. He will be missed dearly.

Jill & Wayne Gibbs

Just a note to thank you for all the beautiful cards, calls and prayers you have sent my way. So sorry I missed Jim Louys when he delivered a beautiful bouquet of fall flowers – I am so grateful to all of you, and I'm now on the road to a new life.

Sharon Perry

Many thanks to Sue Stevenson and her late husband, Bill, for passing on to us their family Christmas tree. Knowing that our church family will now enjoy this same tree brings Sue much comfort and peace through the Holiday season.

December Lectionary

Sunday, December 2: Isaiah 2: 1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13: 11-14; Matthew 24: 36-44.

Sunday, December 9: Isaiah 11: 1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19; Romans 15: 4-13; Matthew 3: 1-12.

Sunday, December 16: Isaiah 35: 1-10; Psalm 146: 5-10; Luke 1: 47-55; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11.

Sunday, December 23: Isaiah 7: 10-16; Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19; Romans 1: 1-7; Matthew 1: 18-25.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day: Isaiah 62: 6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3: 4-7; Luke 2: 1-7, 8-20.

Sunday, December 30: Isaiah 63: 7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2: 10-18; Matthew 2: 13-23.

Milestones

In the Life of our Church Family

Births: A daughter, Jordan Rylie, to Caitlin McKee and Jay Brys, November 4.

Deaths: Wesley Alexander, October 28. Service was held November 2.

Anniversaries: Nov. 28, Mary and Kenneth Hale (1940); Dec. 21, Jean and Ernest Oberst (1946); Dec. 22, Doris and Frederick Mullaney (1945).