

THE PARISH POST

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

CHESHIRE, CONNECTICUT
www.cheshirecongregational.org

Volume XXVI

December, 2009

No. 11

Advent: A Moving and Mystical Journey

By Jeff Braun, Senior Minister

In his book “The Mood of Christmas,” the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman writes that “there must always be remaining in everyone’s life some place for the singing of angels... [some sacred place] where the common is shot through with new glory.” For Christians, the manger is that place; Christ’s birth, the occasion; and Advent, our path.

As paths go, none is more mystical, none more profound, than Advent. Our common culture compels us to rush immediately from Thanksgiving Day to Christmas morning. The annual flurry of commercials, catalogs, and sales seek to stoke a lusty consumerism, in which we expend the precious weeks leading up to Christmas acquiring, so that on December 25 there is all the more to tear open.

But we know better.

We know that without Advent’s preparation, without Advent’s contemplation, without Advent’s dramatic sense of *waiting* ... Christmas cannot mean to us what we want and need it to mean.

We know that Advent is not about acquiring things. It’s about stripping away the inessential so that we arrive at Christ’s manger not with gold, not with frankincense, not with myrrh, or their contemporary equivalents. But, rather, with our *greatest* gifts: our confessing minds, our forgiving hearts, and our eyes newly ready for the radiance of God’s love in Christ.

As we celebrate a revived Christmas Fair (on December 5); as we seek to ease the sorrows that many carry with our Advent Service for the Grieving (on December 10); as we celebrate our Christmas Pageant (December 13); as we join on December 20 for both a single 10 a.m. service to say farewell to Debbie Gravell and, later, for Lessons and Carols; and, of course, as our anticipation of Christ’s birth culminates in our Christmas Eve services... in all of this, may we truly make Advent a wending and wondrous, a moving and mystical journey to the newborn Christ’s side.

To a place where God’s love is forever

Continued on the next page

Continued from the previous page

revealed. To a place – a sacred, remaining place – where angels bend low and sing, and our common lives are shot through ... with new glory. The glory of our Lord, made flesh, *among us!*

God's Peace,
Jeff

Church Life Communities

This fall, we launched our new “7 @ 7” church neighborhood dinners in many of our districts, each of which is named for a Biblical town.

“7 @ 7” is shorthand for a small group – maybe seven people, maybe more – gathering at 7 p.m. or so for a shared meal and warm table fellowship. And what a wonderful beginning it's been! Each of our eight hosts added their unique touch of hospitality that helped our church family make new connections and deepen relationships – from age 2 to 82.

Many thanks to our hosts for this first round of dinners: John Afman and Sue Chatfield (Canaan), Nancy Brunetti (Gilead), Ford and Jackie Cole (Shiloh), Chris and Jan Cowles (Jerusalem), Tim and Sharon Graver (Jericho), Mark and Kate Hall (Nazareth), Ken and Pam Euerle (Damascus), and Bob and Donna Mead (Bethlehem).

A new round of 7 @ 7 dinners begins in January; sign-ups are now in the parlor. For more details, please see Alison McCaffrey.

November Worship Schedule

Sunday, December 6: Services at 9 and 11. Jeff Braun preaching. Communion will be served. Food offerings will be collected; the food of the month is peanut butter.

Sunday, December 13: Services at 9 and 11. Jeff Braun preaching.

Sunday, December 20: Single service at 10 a.m. Alison McCaffrey preaching. Farewell to Debbie Gravell, with reception, following the service

Thursday, December 24, Christmas Eve: Services at 5 p.m. (Children's service), 7:30, and 11.

Sunday, December 27: Special single service at 10 a.m.

A Service for Those Who Grieve

Christmas is traditionally a time of gladness and celebration. But for those grieving the loss of loved ones, or those whose family circumstances are difficult, or those facing challenging times, the Christmas season can seem lonely and painful.

On Thursday, December 10, at 7 p.m., we will offer a quiet worship service of prayer, Scripture, and music that lifts up God's presence so that God's word can shine light into life's darkest places. All are welcome. Please see the Rev. Alison McCaffrey for more information.

What's New With Our Church's Outreach

Malawi Orphan: The Board of Outreach has committed to sponsor one of the children connected with our work with AIDS orphans in Malawi. Our child is named Lillian; she is eight years old. Watch the Outreach bulletin board in the parlor for more information about her.

Microloans: The Board of Outreach has participated in two microloans through the highly reliable loan coordinator KIVA. These loans are to women in India. Information about the loans is posted on the Outreach board in the parlor. The loans are scheduled to be repaid later this year, and the Board will re-loan the funds to new recipients.

Gulf Coast Concert: Those who attended last year's Mission Trip Benefit Concert were treated to a wonderful evening of music and a reception hosted by the Board of Outreach. We are pleased to announce that our own members who are students at the prestigious Eastman School of Music will return this year. Trevor Biggart will bring his classical guitar magic, and Jonathan Allen and his percussion trio will amaze us with their virtuosity. Robin and Jack Sellati will bring us songs from Broadway and our own praise band will have us clapping and singing along. Mark your calendars now for 7 p.m. on Sunday, January 3. This concert is appropriate for children.

Gift Cards Available: Looking for the perfect Christmas or birthday gift? The Board of Outreach has gift cards available

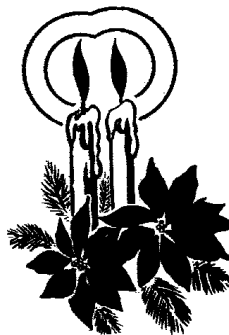
that support our Malawi ministry and our work rebuilding the Gulf Coast. The Gulf Coast cards are available for a donation of \$25, and will note that a gift has been given to cover the cost of one day of room and board for a worker from First Congregational Church as they work to help in rebuilding. The Malawi mission cards are available for the following amounts: mosquito net, \$6; bag of fertilizer, \$100 (share \$20); school fees (one term), \$20; emergency food for three people for a month, \$10; college tuition, \$400/term - share \$40. These cards will be available at the Christmas Fair and at the January 3 benefit concert, or by calling Peggy Allen at 203-272-3654.



Candlelight Lessons and Carols

This year's annual service of Candlelight Lessons and Carols will be held on

Sunday, December 20, at 4 p.m. in the Sanctuary. The service will offer nine lessons accompanied by music to tell the story of Christ's birth through song and word.



Traditional carols, anthems, and hymns will be sung by our Senior Choir and congregation. Please join us in the beauty of a winter afternoon for this lovely candlelight service.

A Goodbye from Debbie Gravell

It is with mixed emotions that I write this final Parish Post article. I am looking forward to retirement and a more relaxed schedule, yet I will miss all of you and the ministry we have shared together.

Over the years that I have been with you, we have had many wonderful ministry moments. This is such a gifted congregation. You all give so much of yourselves, your time and your talent as you serve God in committees, boards, church school, coffee hours, Bible study so many ways I can't even name them.

It has been my privilege to share ministry with all of you. I have loved being the children's minister in this church. There are so many wonderful children and young people who have moved through the classes in Church School. It has been so exciting for me to hear from the children each week share ways they have served God through their week as we reflect together in Chapel.

I looked forward each year to the fourth grade Bible Jeopardy game with the whole family. I loved the expressions on the faces of the parents as they listened to their children answering questions about the Bible and being so excited to be the first to answer.

Each year, the Christmas Pageant seems more beautiful than the year before, with all our angelic children sharing the Christmas story with the congregation. There are so many special memories too numerous to mention; however, just know

that they are all held dear in my heart, as you will all be held dear in my heart.

I leave you in God's good hands and the good hands of the many talented and dedicated individuals among you. I will continue to pray for God's richest blessings on this congregation and especially it's children.

Yours in Christian Service,
Debbie Gravell
Commissioned Minister of
Christian Education



Note: December 20 will be Debbie Gravell's final worship service with the First Congregational Church. It will be a single service at 10 a.m. Plans for this service and the Church School children will come from the Christian Education Board and the Rev. Jeff Braun. Stay tuned.

Important Dates in December For Our Church

- Dec. 5:** Church Fair, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
- Dec. 6:** Congregational budget meeting, noon
- Dec. 10:** Bereavement service, 7 p.m.
- Dec. 13:** Christmas Pageant, 4 p.m.
- Dec. 20:** Lessons and Carols, 4 p.m.
- Dec. 24:** Christmas Eve services at 5:00, 7:30, and 11:00 p.m.

9:00

Date	Thou Art	Red Sea Prod.	Desert Tales	Gospel Games
Dec. 6	Week Off	Grades 5 & 6	Grade 2	Grades 3 & 4
Dec. 13	Grades 3 & 4	Grade 2	Week Off	Grades 5 & 6
Dec. 20*	Single service Worship	Single service worship	Single service Worship	Single service worship

11:00

Date	Thou Art	Red Sea Prod.	Desert Tales	Gospel Games
Dec. 6	Worship	Worship	Worship	Worship
Dec. 13	Grades 5 & 6	Grade 2	Week Off	Grades 3 & 4
Dec. 20*	Single service Worship	Single service Worship	Single service Worship	Single service Worship

Christian Education in December

In December, students in the Church School will learn the story of Jesus' birth as seen through the eyes of Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah.

Thou Art, Room 8: We will look at Advent from Elizabeth's and Mary's points of view; tell their stories, look at the role of women at that date and time, and more. We will create a scrapbook/birth announcement. In Thou Art, we will print the Magnificat in a calligraphy-type font and decorate the border and large letters while they learn about Mary's song of praise.

Red Sea Productions, Room 9: Children



will recreate conversations from the Bible stories in Luke 1, including: Zechariah and the angel, Mary and the angel, Mary and Elizabeth. Children will also imagine conversations that are not part of scripture: Zechariah trying to explain things to Elizabeth, Mary's conversation with Joseph, Elizabeth explaining things to Mary's mother. Children can assign names to probable feelings held by the people in the Bible.

Desert Tales, Room 10: Children will watch the opening scenes of "Jesus of Nazareth," which includes the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth. They will dramatize the words of the Magnificat. We hope to videotape the children and play it back.

Gospel Games, Room 11: Children will play games to sort out the similarities and differences in John and Jesus' birth, and between John's and Jesus' mothers.

Christmas Pageant

This year, our Christmas Pageant will be “Twas the Night Before” by Rachel Olson, directed by Linda Milton. It will be held Sunday, December 13, at 4 p.m.

This wonderful annual event features the talents of our Children’s Choirs and our Church School children presenting a traditional telling of the Christmas Story. All are welcome and encouraged to share the afternoon with us. From the tiniest angels to the three kings, we invite you and your families to enjoy the mystical tradition as presented through the eyes of children.

A reception hosted by the Christian Education Board and the parents of the cast will follow the pageant. In the event of snow, an announcement from the pulpit on Sunday will identify any changes in date or time.

The schedule:

Pageant day: Children in the pageant need to arrive at 3 p.m.

Dress rehearsal: All children in the pageant must attend the dress rehearsal on Saturday, December 12 from 9:30 a.m. to noon.

Reminder to cast (speaking parts only): A blocking rehearsal will be held Friday, December 4, from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. in the Sanctuary. Please be aware that we will be restricted to the sanctuary, as the setup for the Church Fair will be in progress in the other rooms.

Stepping Stones – A Fun Group

Stepping Stones, our fifth and sixth grade youth group, meets on the second Friday of each month from 7 to 8:30 p.m. in the Parish Hall for fun and games and some mission work.

In November, we made s’mores, played a couple of very funny games, and had a great time getting to know each other better. Linda Milton led us in our mission project by showing us how to make cards with stencils and stamps. We made many beautiful cards that will be used by our ministers, deacons and outreach volunteers when visiting members and friends. We learned an important fact: Mission work continuously happens *within* our own church as we reach out to *each other* with support and encouragement in difficult times and with joy and acknowledgement in happy times.

On December 11, we plan to go on a caroling field trip. We will meet in the Parish Hall and then head out for an evening of caroling. All you need to bring to the December meeting is a fun attitude, your voice, and a signed transportation permission slip. Afterward, we will come back to the church for hot cocoa and Christmas cookies. It will be a lot of fun!

If you have never been to Stepping Stones, please join us. There are always new faces, and everyone is welcome. If you have been to Stepping Stones, we look forward to seeing you again and ask that you invite a friend.

The leaders are Kerrie Dunne, Kate

Continued on the next page

Continued from the previous page

Hall, Mark Sprankel, and Steve and Joyce Mulholland. If you have any questions, ask any of these Stepping Stones leaders or call the Mulhollands at 272-0140.



News of the YUTES

Thank you to Deb Kelleher and her leadership in the Bells of Hope event on November 1. The YUTES were glad we were able to participate and have our eyes opened to the many youth our age that do not have a family to call their own. Other events we've enjoyed recently include our first lock-in of the year.

We have a couple of events in December we are looking forward to. We'll be traveling to the First Congregational Church in Simsbury for a concert on December 6. "Lost and Found" will be performing in a musical style they dub "speedword". We will have our annual Christmas caroling trip on December 13. Keep an eye on our web site for details for these events.

We will not have meetings on December 20 or 27. Enjoy your Christmas break! Regular meetings will resume on January 3.

Many thanks go out to the resource adults and other team members that give of their time and energy to make our events possible!

*Todd Skrzyniarz
Director of Youth Ministry*

Fundraiser for Steve

Steve Prichard, son of Roy and Betty Pritchard, was diagnosed with synovial cell sarcoma in February 2005. He has been in a continuous battle with this terrible disease ever since. His leg was amputated below the knee, he has had many surgeries and ablations, and he has undergone multiple chemotherapies and radiation treatments.

While Steve, his wife, and two little girls do have Blue Cross/Blue Shield, they are responsible for 20 percent of most of his expenses, including the costs of prosthesis, experimental treatments and supplements. Because of the incredible expenses the family has incurred, the Pritchards are organizing a fundraiser.

It will take place Saturday, January 30, 2010 at 7 p.m. at the Waverly, 286 Maple Avenue here in town. It will feature hors d'oeuvres, a wine tasting, silent auctions, and a chance for the family to reunion with you and thank you for your generous support.

If you can't be at the fundraiser, the family welcomes donations made out to the Steve Pritchard Sarcoma Fund and sent to Stacey DeAngelis, 300 Fenn Rd., Cheshire, CT 06410.

Come to the Christmas Fair!

The First Congregational Church Christmas Fair is greatly expanded this year, both inside and outside the church. The fair will be held on Saturday, December 5, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

For the first time, Christmas trees and wreaths will be for sale on the Church Green. Also new this year will be a Children's Christmas Corner, where youngsters can buy inexpensive gifts for family members, decorate a cupcake and/or a gingerbread house, make a gift,



listen to a Christmas story told by a well-known Cheshire storyteller, and talk to Santa Claus. There will also be a

“cookie walk” in which shoppers purchase a container, then fill it with a variety of homemade cookies they choose. There will be a silent auction of themed gift baskets.

Many Christmas Fair favorites, enjoyed for years by fairgoers, will continue this year:

- An expanded food booth with teacher gifts, baked goods, breads, jams and jellies, pecans and fair-trade coffee;
- Granny's attic, with old and new gifts, linens, candles, antique jewelry, and other treasures;

- Old and new Christmas decorations and ornaments;
- Fair trade handcrafted gifts, jewelry, baskets, and more from artisans in third-world countries. (A portion of the purchase price provides poverty relief.)
- Poinsettias;
- Silent auction of original artwork by parishioners.
- And lunch with the church's signature dish, homemade corn chowder.

We are asking for donations of any of the following to help defray costs: Candy for decorating the gingerbread houses; plastic bottles from liquid CoffeeMate (the 16-oz. size is best) for the snowmen; any Christmas-patterned material scraps or felt for the snowmen; craft supplies (glue, glitter, construction paper, stickers, etc..) for the pinecones and cards. Also, new or nearly new items for our shopping table—costume jewelry, neckties, candles, note cards, mugs, knickknacks. If you are a teacher with a closet full of ‘teacher gifts’; you don't know what to do with, this is a perfect place to donate them! We also need empty small boxes suitable for packaging the gifts; jewelry or tie boxes would be great.

A box will be in the Parlor for your donations, or you can see Beth Ross, Joellen Jason, or Jan Garthwait.

Volunteers are needed from 9:30 to 12:30 and 12:30 to 3:30. If you can help, please call Susan Hostage at 203-272-3664 or Martha Lape at 203-272-9327.

Parish Care in September and October

I have not written a report since September and realized it was time to give the congregation an update. I apologize for the delay, and hope you realize that even if there is no report, the “angels” in our congregation have been very busy.

Birth/Baptism – We had one baptism.

Bereavement – The Bereavement Group has been meeting monthly on the last Thursday of every month. After doing this for over a year, it was decided to change the format to ensure all were being tended to in the most meaningful way. If you have suffered the loss of a loved one, please join this group. It has proven to be very helpful to those who attend – no matter where they are on their grief journey.

Cards and Telephone – Letter writers have been very busy, writing 33 cards during the summer and 14 cards in September for birthdays, get well, sympathy, thinking of you and thank you. The recipients were touched by your thoughtfulness.

Meals – There were four meals delivered to two families. The meals coordinator for October and November is Bobbie Porter. If you know of someone who could use a meal during a busy or stressful time, please call Bobbie and she will arrange one to be sent.

Prayer Pagers – Four of our seven pagers have been used. They received a total of 368 calls in the past two months. Thank you all for “buzzing” the people

with pagers, and letting them feel God’s presence. It is comforting to know someone is praying for you during a difficult time. If you, or someone you know, is going in for surgery, or otherwise going through a difficult time and would benefit from knowing that others are praying for them, please call Donna Mead, and she will deliver a pager.

Stephen Ministry – Eight Stephen Ministers tended to 10 care receivers and spent a total of 22.25 hours in September. If you or someone you know could benefit from having a Stephen Minister, call Sue Chatfield at 203-235-6294 or one of our parish ministers for a consultation.

Parish Care Coordinator – Due to computer connection problems since the beginning of the summer, I was unable to enter ministers’ pastoral activity into the church’s system. In October, Jim Louys and Martha Lape spent an entire Sunday afternoon and early evening rectifying the situation. I am happy to report that I am now able to perform this part of my job, and do it very quickly.

I thank my two “angels” for all their time and effort. While not being able to do that part of my job, I was able to assist Alison with the Church Life Community project. Using the office computer, I was able to assign every member of our church a district. Please see the display in the church parlor to locate your street/town to find your district. This will be a

Continued on the next page

Continued from the previous page

wonderful way of bringing a large church into manageable smaller groups in order to keep in touch with each other. The rest of my time was spent coordinating the various ministries to minister to those who needed our services. I spent 37 hours in October.

Donna Mead
Parish Care Coordinator
donna.mead@comcast.net 203-248-9576



Caring Crafts Christmas Dinner

The Caring Crafts group and the newly formed Wednesday Women's Workshop will celebrate the gift of fellowship and the Christmas spirit during their annual Christmas dinner. They will meet on Monday, December 28, at Amber Jacks in Southington at 6:30 p.m.

In the past, participants have brought a small gift-wrapped item that had something to do with crafts – whether already made or an item to work a craft – to be given to someone in the group. It has always been a fun, relaxing evening, especially after the rush of Christmas is over. Please join us if you have ever crafted something for the church. All are welcome.

If you would like to join us, call Donna Mead at 203-248-9576 by December 26, so she can make reservations at the restaurant. Those who would like to carpool will meet in the church parking lot at 5:45. Let Donna know if you will be participating in the carpool.

Notes from the Executive Board

Primary topics of discussion at the November Executive Board meeting were:

A report on the Stewardship drive and Pledge Sunday was given by the Board of Stewardship. This included statistics comparing pledging 2009 to 2010; number of pledges increased; average pledge; number of pledges not renewed. The significant shortfall to the budget was also discussed.

Because pledge dollars are used as a baseline to set the budget, a pledge income figure must be used for the December 6 budget meeting. This is an important figure, because it will translate into what we can and cannot do for the upcoming year. An all-out effort will be needed. The December Board meeting will include the realities of our projected income based on pledges.

Plans for filling the position of Christian Education Director are moving along well. Meetings of a small task force have focused first on the near-term plans, and will next look at the permanent position. Job descriptions will be written, strategy for advertising the position will be developed, and a Search Committee will be created. Communications regarding these activities will be sent out periodically to the congregation. These communications have begun and will continue throughout the process.

A reminder of dates for upcoming congregational meetings: Sunday,

Continued on the next page

Continued from the previous page

December 6, there will be a Congregational meeting to vote on final budget and Director of Christian Education items. Sunday, January 24, 2010, is the date of the Congregational Annual Meeting ; the snow date is Monday, January 25.



Letters of Thanks

How thoughtful of you to remember our anniversary. We were away for our big day, and came home to find a beautiful arrangement of Sunday flowers and a sweet note from the church. Thank you so much for your kindness.

Daisy and Bill Bissell

Many thanks to my church family for all your kindnesses following the passing of my husband, Bob. My family and I so appreciated all the cards, thoughts and prayers sent our way. Special thanks to all of you who attended the memorial service. Your presence provided such a comfort to us and will be long remembered. My stepdaughter said to me, "Jane, you are so lucky to be a part of this church!" I truly am.

Jane Montgomery

Thank you for the cards and wishes following Bob's father's death. It is very comforting to be enfolded in the circle of love this church provides.

Anne and Bob Giddings

Milestones in the life of our church family

Baptisms:

Trey Jeffrey McCauley, child of Jennifer and Tyler McCauley, on October 18.

Blake Armstrong Poole, child of Mark and Kim Poole, on November 15.

Lia Tao Steskla, child of Brian and Tonya Steskla, on November 15.

Deaths:

W. Philip Giddings, father of Bob Giddings, on October 23.



Lectionary for December

Sunday, December 6: Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 1: 68-79; Philippians 1: 3-11; Luke 3: 1-6.

Sunday, December 13: Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Isaiah 12: 2-6; Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 7-18.

Sunday, December 20: Micah 5: 2-5; Luke 1: 39-55; Psalm 80: 1-7; Hebrews 10: 5-10.

Thursday, December 24: Isaiah 9: 2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2: 1-20.

Sunday, December 27: 1 Samuel 2: 18-26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3: 12-17; Luke 2: 41-52.

Greater Middletown Chorale Performances

On Saturday, November 21 and Sunday, November 22, the Greater Middletown Chorale, directed by our own Joseph D'Eugenio, will perform a concert program featuring music of living American composers. The Chorale will also give two world-premiere performances of works by Connecticut composers Peter Niedmann and Sara Meneely-Kyder.

The Saturday concert will be at 7 p.m. at the Church of Christ Congregational in the center of Newington. Sunday's will be at 4 p.m. at the Zion Lutheran Church in Portland.

The Chorale will also sing music by distinguished American composers Gwyneth Walker and David Conte. Conte's piece "Elegy for Matthew" was composed in response to the death of Matthew Shepard, the gay Colorado college student who was murdered in 1998. A scene from "The Laramie Project," a play written in response of Matthew's death, will be performed by the youth theater of the Oddfellows Playhouse. The program will also feature soprano Adele Paxton and mezzo-soprano Margaret Tyler, two of Connecticut's most popular soloists.

Tickets can be purchased at the Chorale web site, www.greatermiddletownchorale.org, which also has directions to each location, or by calling Rick and Pat Holloway at (860) 526-3648. General admission tickets are \$25; seniors \$20; and students \$10.

Christmastime is Poinsettia Time

... and that means your church's Flower Committee is already turning its time and attention to filling the sanctuary with the color and beauty of poinsettias. Early? Perhaps. But it's now time to order your Christmas poinsettias. You have the option of either picking up your poinsettia(s) after the 11 p.m. service on Christmas Eve, or giving it to someone who's in the hospital or a shut-in. Remember, **you will not be bringing a plant to church.** Instead, please fill out this form to order your flowers. The cost of each poinsettia plant is \$10. Orders must be received no later than December 6. If you have questions, please call Anne McNulty at (203) 271-1377.



POINSETTIAS

To order one or more poinsettias for the Christmas Eve services, please fill out this form and send or bring it to the church office, along with \$10 per plant, no later than Sunday, December 6. Payment must accompany the order.

Your name(s): _____

Telephone and/or e-mail address _____

___ Please give this poinsettia to someone in the hospital or a shut-in

___ I will pick my plant up after the 11 p.m. Christmas Eve service

___ In memory of _____

___ In honor of _____