

CONNECTIONS

FROM YOUR PASTOR: LOOKING TOWARD ANOTHER CHRISTMAS

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed ... And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, unto the city of David which is called Bethlehem; ... To be taxed, with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ... And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger: because there was no room for them in the inn.” Luke 2:1-7



I am quite sure this passage is not new to you. It has been read by billions of people speaking thousands of languages over hundreds and hundreds of years. We know this passage. We have heard this passage. We have read this passage. There is something reassuring to know something familiar and expect that familiar “something” to be available as expected. And so it is as we move toward Christmas that we are drawn to the familiar—the story, the traditions, the colors, the music, the candles, even the expectations and obligations we carry are old hat to us. We know Christmas. We can do Christmas.

During that first Christmas, Joseph and Mary were in unknown territory, literally and figuratively, physically and

Mark Your Calendar

December 5, Friday – Decorating the Sanctuary and Church doors for Christmas with wreaths and garlands. Adult volunteers gather at 5:00, with pizza after. Join the fun!

December 7– 2nd Sunday in Advent, Communion Sunday
Deacons Fund collection
Giving Tree set up (see article page 2)

December 13, Saturday – **Free child care** by Confirmation Class, 10 to 2 Fellowship Hall (see article page 3)

December 14 – 3rd Sunday in Advent
Giving Tree Gifts must be returned.
Alternative Christmas Giving in Fellowship Hall, ideas available: Heifer Project, Addison County Habitat, bird and bat houses to support Nicaragua Mission trip.

Meditation led by **Chessy Kelley** after worship service.

Confirmation Class meets after worship service.

December 21 – 4th Sunday in Advent
Children’s Christmas pageant (see article page 5).

Alternative Christmas Giving in Fellowship Hall.

December 24, Christmas Eve
Traditional 4:00 Family Service with marionettes
Christmas Eve Candle Light Service at 7:00. Come and celebrate Christ’s birth with music and a Sanctuary filled with candles. Last Advent candle lighted. Take home your poinsettias after the service.

January – No Connections.
Annual meeting date to come.

emotionally. That first Christmas was unexpected. Even the pregnancy (surprise, surprise) was not expected. Yet from that very unexpected, uncomfortable, unrehearsed, messy and yes smelly (think animal stalls) experience came a gift to the World in the form of God's radical love translated into our language of life.

If we are honest with ourselves, the words — unexpected, uncomfortable, unrehearsed, messy and smelly — are not words that would define the Christmas we are looking for. Are we looking for **just** another Christmas, limited by our expectations, or are we actually looking for **another** Christmas altogether, one that will change the World again as God's love gets retranslated into active ministries of HOPE, PEACE, JOY and LOVE.

May our Christmas experience move beyond our limited expectation and into unknown territory, as we find ourselves giving birth (surprise, surprise) to the living word of God— a word that will not be controlled and quieted, but will be shared as we join Jesus in changing the World one heart at a time, beginning with ours.

May your Christmas be a bit on the “messy” side.

Gary

Mission News: The Giving Tree

On Sunday, **December 7**, a VCC tradition for at least a dozen years will spring to life in a kaleidoscope of sticky notes on the bulletin board in Fellowship Hall---our **Giving Tree**!! On this tree will be 40 gift wishes from neighbors whose Christmas can use a little brightening this year. Each of 20 individuals, adults and children, have been invited to request one “want” and one “need,” described on a sticky note. You are asked to choose a gift wish, make your purchase and return the gift, wrapped and labeled with the sticky note you selected, to the Church by Sunday, **December 14**. Over the years our congregation has always responded with great generosity to this Christmas opportunity. Much love and care has gone into shopping for and wrapping each gift. The Mission Committee thanks you in advance for once more fulfilling the needs and dreams of those less fortunate among us. **Watch for December 7!!**



Speaking of generosity --- the Mission Committee is pleased to announce that \$444 was raised to help the United Church of Christ's Neighbors in Need program. This year the goal for these dollars is to improve literacy throughout the United States.

Mission Committee: Marcia Mazeine, Chair, Mary Ann Castimore, Jan Harrington, Andrea Kerin, Mary Kerr, Alice Maurer, Jeanne Peters, Larry Simino, Mary Jane Washburn

Kathy Barrett - Church Treasurer



Kathy Barrett is a scrapper! What? She enjoys making scrapbooks in her spare time, and even goes on retreats two or three times a year with other scrappers. Her position as Church Treasurer takes about six hours a month, with more work involved during this time of year recording all our pledges and presenting the Trustees with a total on which to base the budget for the coming year. She has ably filled this position for more than 10 years.

Kathy made Vergennes Congregational Church her church home back in 2001 after having attended churches in Bristol, New Haven and Bridport. She actually attended Sunday School here when she was in middle school. This Church felt like family to her, and we are glad that it did!

One of ten children, Kathy was born in Willimantic, CT in 1950. Her family moved to New Haven, VT, in 1959. She received her BA in Education from UVM in 1972 and got her Masters in Business Administration in 1996. After working for Middlebury College in the Assistant Treasurer's office and for United Way until 1998, Kathy now has her own bookkeeping and tax preparation service.

Kathy and her ex-husband owned a farm in Bridport and experienced the misfortune of a barn fire in 1979, losing only one bull, but it was still devastating. She has two daughters--**Laurie**, who is the branch manager of the National Bank of Middlebury's office here in Vergennes, and **Connie**, who is an accountant for Switchback Brewery. The math gene must be strong in her family.

Having her own business, being our Treasurer and scrapping isn't enough, so she was also on the school board at Mount Abe for fifteen years and currently serves on the New Haven Development Review Board and has been a Selectman there for the last four years.

We are indeed fortunate to have Kathy keeping our books, paying the bills and periodically sending us records of our giving. It can be tricky making sure all the bills are paid and hoping the pledges come in as expected. **Thank you, Kathy, for balancing our books!!**

SHOP - WRAP - OR NAP



The Confirmation Class is offering a special gift to families this Christmas season. On Saturday, **December 13th from 10 am to 2 pm** the class, with adult supervision, will provide child care (free of charge) to any Church family for children ages 3 to 10. If you have a child younger than three, you are welcome to come but will need to bring your own care-giver. Lunch will be provided. So if any Church adults need some to shop, wrap gifts, or just relax for a few hours, please contact **Lisa Bessette** at lbessette1@comcast.net or

238-4120. Any donations received will go toward the Confirmation Class trip to Heifer Project's Overlook Farm in May.

RENEWING HOPE FOR OUR CHURCH

Please take a moment and ask yourself two questions ... When you engage in Church life, do you see yourself as a host or a guest? Are our worship services, programs and ministries oriented toward those who **need** the church rather than those who **are** the church?

For the past six months a small group of Church members, the Next Level Committee, have been wrestling with these and other questions that are vital to the renewal and growth of our Church.

By now you probably know that we joined forces with the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ and the Center for Progressive Renewal through a "Next Level" program designed to examine the vitality of our Church and plan for changes that will affect everyone who attends.



The Committee has been fortunate to work with a consulting minister and co-founder of the Center for Progressive Renewal, **Mike Piazza**. Mike summarized his assessment of the Vergennes Congregational Church and prepared a "Next Level" report that Gary emailed to the Congregation on Tuesday, November 25th. It is also available in hard copy to anyone who wants it. Mike's appraisal is thoughtful and frank, and it stimulated the Committee, Deacons and Trustees into action that will help make us a vital 21st century church for all.

Some of the changes happening soon include:

- New and improved signage in and outside the Church, led by Trustee **Paul Vachon**.
- Sign in attendance pads that will help us get to know visitors and each other better, led by Deacons.
- More deliberate ways to greet, meet, and keep first time visitors, led by Deacons.
- Personalized thank you cards and notes, led by Deacons.
- Create an Outreach Team, led initially by **Alex McGuire**, to look at changes to our website, social media connections (Facebook, etc.), and other ways to extend our mission and Christ's spiritual solace to those outside of our Church family.
- Create a Care and Hospitality team, building upon the good work of the current Hospitality Committee, but expanding its mission with guidance from the Deacons.
- Create a Mission Team that will help the church develop a vision statement that is compelling and can guide our growth and renewal for the future. **Sharon O'Daniel** agreed to initially lead this effort and welcomes others to join the task ahead.

Renewing our Church will mean changes that may seem different and uncomfortable from the way things have always been done. **You are invited to participate and work hard on building a solid future for our Church.**

Next Level Committee: Kathleen Cote, Alex McGuire, Sharon O'Daniel, Rich Strum, David Tatlock, Paul Vachon, in counsel with Rev. Gary Lewis.

Celebrating Stewardship Sunday

Thanks to the culinary skills and giving hearts of **Diane Tracy** and **Shelley Shackett**, the annual luncheon after worship on Stewardship Sunday (November 23) was a true feast of thanks. The tables were festive, balloons were flying from the ceiling, and no seats were empty, with some 75 of the Church community there to savor the famous corn casserole, salads, other casseroles, and even gluten free dishes (plus cake of course). It was a delicious and spirit-filled way to thank everyone for pledging to keep our Church building solid and our missions vital. So far this year the pledges are up by \$3,000, so **thank you all again for your support!!** If you have not pledged yet – you can certainly do so by sending in your pledge card or filling one out at Church (look for the cards in the pews) or by contacting **Kathy Barrett** directly at klbarrett@gmavt.net.



Sunday School News

November was a busy month for our Sunday School. We had between 12 and 16 students in attendance. All have been involved in a variety of activities ably led by **Carolyn Tatlock** and the Grade 1-3 team of teachers. Mission Sunday found the kids making leaves of gratitude to place on a large tree on a bulletin board in Fellowship Hall. They also made Thank You notes to give to anyone they chose. The highlight of that Sunday was baking and decorating cookies for the residents of the John Graham Shelter in Vergennes. The Wonder Words for November were "Grow with God" and the Bible story was the parable of the mustard seed. On November 30 the kids enjoyed another yoga session led by **Chessy Kelley**.



During December the Sunday School will focus on the birth of Jesus. The annual Christmas pageant will take place at the end of worship service on December 21, so invite your family and friends. There is always room for any child to participate as an angel, shepherd, lamb, and more. There will be **NO Sunday School on December 28**, though child care will be available.

We are now in the midst of the "new" curriculum, and we have an idea of how the students are responding to the content and engaging in all the activities in both the large group and classroom. I value your input as you listen to your children talk about what they like or don't like. Please pass along their observations. We want the kids to feel welcome and involved as they move forward on their faith journey. Thank you!

Donna Lalumiere, Christian Education Coordinator

DEACON DOINGS

As Deacons we continue to look at the ways in which we **WELCOME, RECEIVE,** and **CONNECT** with one another. We are “buddying” up with Janet Price to provide enhancement of our downstairs/back door greeting of visitors.

Have you ever wondered who that new person is sitting in the same pew as you??? Ever forget the name of the person sitting in the same pew as you??? Soon we will be introducing **Attendance Pads** in every pew. This will help us to know who’s there and, equally important, who’s missing. We are committed to reaching out to both.

The Book Store is back in business, just in time for gift giving or treating yourself. Soon we will be offering a charming set of note cards that were crafted by our very own Sunday School children under the guidance of **Jason Fearon** (husband of **Sharon O’Daniel**, father of **Grey** and **Petra**).

The Deacons recently purchased copies of “Tear Open the Heavens,” a wonderful Advent Devotional booklet. These are our gift to you. May they nurture and inspire you during this Advent Season.

Board of Deacons: Cherie Vachon, Chair, Grace Burkins, Kathleen Cote, Secretary, Mike O’Daniel, Treasurer, Barb Ouimette, Rich Strum

NEWS FROM THE TRUSTEES



The Trustees have been busy addressing property and maintenance issues. The wood trim on the outside of the Church has been repaired and primed, thanks to **Jim Collier**. It is now ready to be painted next spring/summer. The front door of the Manse has been reconfigured for a safer emergency exit for Evergreen School and more security for both Evergreen and the Church. The exit lights are now working, and the parking lot has been relined.

In the months to come we will address some of the items that the Next Level Committee has recommended, such as better signage. We hope to make the church look more welcoming and help first timers navigate our rather confusing interior (when you enter from the rear, where is the Sanctuary?).

Two Trustees worked with the Stewardship Committee to explain all the great works that the Church is involved in, to explain the need for pledging, and to encourage people to pledge. It is time for the Trustees to build a budget for the next year and your pledges---the amount of money we can count on---are what drive how the budget is developed. Please give pledging prayerful consideration.

Thank you.

Board of Trustees: Connie Simino, Chair, Randy Hawkins, Sharon O’Daniel, Jim Ouimette, Diana Rule, Paul Vachon

Your editors, **Alice Maurer** and **Jeanne Peters**, welcome all suggestions for the newsletter. Content is due by the 20th of each month and everyone has a chance to comment on their copy before publication. Thank you all for past and future help. There will not be a newsletter in January.