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Herald of Good TIDINGS

*“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’”
~ Isaiah 40:9*

FROM THE PASTOR:

We have entered the advent of Advent, the time of waiting and anticipation, when we journey through the darkness with the brightness of a glowing light to guide our way. Contrary to the way most of us celebrate this season, Advent is intended to be a time of introspection and fasting (yes, fasting!) rather than parties. I suppose that we will be straying from the liturgical intent of this season with our own holiday festivities, while remembering that we are indeed waiting in the dark together. Our church is a rich community, with opportunities to engage with the Advent season throughout for the myriad of feelings that accompany such an experience of dwelling in the dark with a birth on the horizon.

Let me share a few highlights of this Advent season: Our pageant will be an event led by a Jesus Christ Birthday Party before we embody the nativity story - all ages will star in this cast, and even if you are not in costume, expect to be transformed by the witness of the timeless story. We will have opportunity to celebrate and rehearse before the pageant worship, and I

trust that the actual worship will be both seamless and prone to the inevitable foibles of an enthusiastic all-ages cast brimming with Christmas Eve excitement. Don't miss it!

To prepare, we are heading to the movies (Blackstone Valley in Millbury) to see “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever” on Sunday afternoon, December 15th.

Later in the evening on Christmas Eve, as darkness hushes Auburn and your dinner has been served, meander over to our candlelight worship. This Christmas Eve tradition will serve as a twinkling homecoming, an elegant time of scripture and song as we honor the familiar story in new ways revealed to us this year. This is a homecoming, and like all homecomings are, enhanced when you invite your old friends from town and church years past. The candlelight service is the peaceful cap to a glorious night, intended to restore before a deep sleep and the parties of Christmas Day.

Continued on page 3

***December 1st**
1st Sunday in Advent
Communion Sunday with
Deacons' offering

***December 8th**
2nd Sunday in Advent
CANTATA SUNDAY

***December 15th**
3rd Sunday in Advent
featuring the Bell Choir



ADVENT

All Are Welcome

***December 22nd**
4th Sunday in Advent

Christmas Eve —
5 p.m. Family Service
& Christmas Pageant

9 p.m. Candlelight
Communion Service

* These services begin at 10 a.m.



Nathan Minor ~ Dec. 4th
 Alyssa Gervasi ~ Dec. 15th
 Robert "Bob" Davis ~ Dec. 15th
 Rebecca McPherson ~ Dec. 28th
 Lori-Ann Stockhaus ~ Dec. 28th

**ATTENTION ALL COMMITTEES:
 ANNUAL REPORT SUBMISSIONS
 ARE DUE DECEMBER 18TH.**

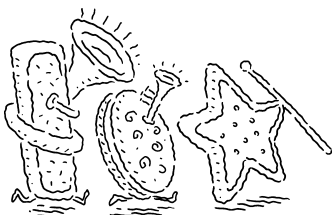
Thank you so much to all who contributed to the coat drive for El Buen Samaritano (The Good Samaritan). The Outreach Committee continues to accept ongoing donations of coats, hats, mittens, scarves and food. Please look for the large, red and black plaid donation box in fellowship hall.

CHRISTMAS



ARRANGEMENTS

made of fresh greens will, once again, be available for you to purchase **PRIOR TO THE WORSHIP SERVICE ON DECEMBER 15TH**. All the greens are gathered locally, so there is no expense involved. All monies taken in will go to the church's general fund. Please keep these in mind when doing your holiday shopping; they make lovely hostess gifts and most are suitable for a table centerpiece. We enjoy making these and hope you will support this small church fundraiser. Judy M. & Cindy D.



Cookie Walk

Our annual **Cookie Walk** will be during coffee hour **on December 22ND**.

Your cookie donations will be greatly appreciated.

Please see the sign-up sheet

in fellowship hall. Remember, this is a Youth On a Mission fundraiser. Thank you in advance for your support with cookie donations and/or purchases.

If you would like to remember our church staff in your seasonal giving, please make checks payable to the church noting who it's for in the memo section and place in an envelope addressed to Lori Stockhaus. Donations to Lori's attention may be placed in the offering plate.



COFFEE HOUR HOSTS:

Dec. 1 The Sharr Family
 Dec. 8 **VOLUNTEERS NEEDED**
 Dec. 15 **Board of Trustees & Prudential**
 Dec. 22 **VOLUNTEERS NEEDED**
 Dec. 24 Christmas Eve - **4 P.M.** coffee hour
 Olivia & Donna Kentley Freeman &
Additional Volunteers Needed
 Dec. 29 **VOLUNTEERS NEEDED**

If you would like to host an upcoming coffee hour, please sign up in fellowship hall or call the church office to have your name added to the list.

CHRISTMAS CAROL SING-ALONG & POTLUCK

As they've done in past years, the Deacons will be delivering Christmas baskets to members of our church family who may be less mobile and/or may be in need of a reminder that we're thinking of them.

We're planning to prepare/assemble baskets on December 21ST as part of the Christmas carol sing-along and potluck get-together. **The potluck begins at 5:00 p.m.**, and we have invited Here We Grow families to join us in the merriment. Jackie Knox will lead us, once again, in a fun time singing Christmas carols (thank you, Jackie!).

Please look in Fellowship Hall for a list of items that are needed for the Christmas baskets and a potluck sign-up sheet.

From the Pastor (*continued from page one*)

Just when you are exhausted and begging to stay in your pajamas lazily, unsure if you can get out of bed after much eating and merry-making, or even if you are struggling with grief during a holiday that demands cheer, that week-end after Christmas can be a tough one to motivate. So, we are making it easy for you! December 29th will be Cozy Sunday, a Sunday of casual worship in Fellowship Hall where you can worship in your pajamas (I have one piece, flannel, footed pajamas that I plan on wearing) or sweats or jeans. Wear whatever makes you cozy! We will sing carols and listen to testimonies, while nursing our coffees and eating brunch together. All ages will gather in Fellowship Hall where you'll find tables set up with activities for kids.

Ultimately, as we journey together this Advent, be on the lookout for the places where you are humbled, called to drop to your knees and pray, encounter awe. Let me know, where the light of Christ has nudged you from the shadows, what you can see of Christmas Day and a new hope beyond.

And after finding those kneeling places, those moments of spiritual connection, please share them! Invite friends and neighbors to church. Stretch out a hand and embrace with a hug. Find such enthusiasm with Christianity that it overflows and you can't help but extend it to others. Our church thrives when we are in love with it and the world wants to participate in the wonders. Our faith thrives when we give from our goodness. Our Advent thrives when we remember that we are on a journey in this expectant darkness, and the brilliant Good News ahead is not for us to seize for ourselves, but for us to share.

In Search of Our Kneeling Places by Ann Weems

*In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
an inn where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
we experience our own advent in his.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
we can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars
not hearing angel voices.
We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
tending our sheep or our kingdoms.
This Advent let's go to Bethlehem
and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.
In the midst of shopping sprees
let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.
Through the tinsel
let's look for the gold of the Christmas star.
In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,
let's listen for the brush of angels' wings.
This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.*



On a Mission!

I (Pastor Julie) am returning to the Dominican Republic in late February for my eighth mission trip. Through Central Mass Mission, this annual trip includes a medical mission, construction projects, a vacation Bible school for kids and more! We serve the Haitian refugees in the sugar cane villages, and have been able to do great work with a mission team of about 30 people each year (usually a third are teens, including a few of my own).

I will be hosting several “Yoga on a Mission” events in different locations around Worcester in December and January, all proceeds directed towards this year’s mission. On December 8th, “Yoga on a Mission” will be held at the Pakachoag Center, 203 Pakachoag Street here in Auburn from 2-3:30 p.m. Bring a yoga mat and dress in comfy clothing - we will have a very gentle, relaxing afternoon to soothe you in the midst of holiday madness! Your entrance fee is either a donation to the mission or a donation of supplies. If possible, please let Pastor Julie know you’ll be attending.

For more information on the mission trip to La Romana, Dominican Republic, have a look at our website:
<https://laromana.fcsterling.org/>

In January, Pastor Julie will offer a presentation about her upcoming mission trip. Please look for the date in our January newsletter and in the weekly bulletin.

Please check out the donation list on the back of the calendar insert in this issue of the *Tidings* newsletter. The listing is of items needed for Pastor Julie’s mission trip.



Wow, I can't believe that it's the last month of another year! December is National Hand Washing Awareness Month, Seasonal Affective Disorder Awareness Month, and World AIDS Month.

December 1 is World AIDS Day

December 1-7 is Crohn's, Colitis Awareness Week

December 2-6 is National Influenza Vaccination Week

As we go through this month, please remember that not everyone has a Merry Christmas! Many people, for many reasons, have a difficult time. Sometimes a card, to let them know that you are thinking of them, a visit, and invite will help. It's usually a good feeling on your part as well to know that you have made a difference, even for a moment.

I do wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a healthy season! God Bless!

Debbie Pranaitis

Parish Nurse

508-612-4521 (cell)

FROM YOUR NOMINATING COMMITTEE

A very big **THANK YOU** to all who have volunteered in the past as well as into the future! We appreciate your commitment to serve our church. Our January annual meeting is fast approaching and 11 openings still remain available. The following Boards and Committees have openings as follows: 3 vacancies on the Board of Deacons, 2 vacancies on the Board of Christian Education, 1 vacancy on the Music Committee, 2 vacancies on the Board of Trustees, 2 vacancies on the Stewardship Committee and 1 vacancy on the Nominating Committee. Terms vary by board/committee but we are happy to work with you and the commitment you are comfortable with, be it one year (or more).

If you are a current member of FCC of Auburn and if any of our boards or committees interest you, please reach out to me @ 508-259-2239 or email me @ chel061759@gmail.com.

~ Michele Schillinger

1 Peter 4:10: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."

COMPLETING YOUR 2024 PLEDGES AND DONATIONS

Please help our church's 2024 budget by completing your current pledges as early in the month of December as possible. By doing this, it becomes much easier to prepare the year-end reporting for 2024. Please be aware that any pledges or donations the church receives showing a post-mark "**after**" December 31, 2024, will be posted and reportable for next year's 2025 giving statement, and not for 2024. **All pledges and donations received before the deadline of December 31, 2024, will be reported on your 2024 giving statement.** Also, if you did not make a pledge in this current year, but would like a recorded 2024 donation, please do so as early in December as possible. **All gifts are greatly appreciated** and checks should be made payable to: **First Congregational Church.**

Our theme this year of “**IMAGINE** together” has resulted in new and increased pledges being received and inspiring opportunities being available to us. Pastor Julie has brought fresh ideas to our committees and energy to our Sunday services. We are blessed!

**Imagine
Together**

IMAGINE the programs and outreach made possible through our pledges in 2025! At printing we have \$125,000 in pledges with 65 responses. Please be sure to return your pledge card so we may conclude our pledge drive.

Thank you,
The Stewardship Committee
Nan Johnson, Ron Klaucke and Lori-Ann Stockhaus

SAVE THESE DATES!

12/5 **Workshop with Pastor Julie - The History of Santa Claus** 6:30 p.m.

12/8 **Cantata Sunday**

Women’s Fellowship Marketplace after worship (also 10 am - 3 pm on 12/9)

Boy Scout Wreath Sale after the worship service

12/13 **Parents’ Night Out** 5-8 p.m. - SEE SIGN-UP IN Fellowship Hall



12/14 **Women’s Fellowship Holiday Gathering** 1-3 p.m.— ALL ladies welcome — sign-up in F.H.

12/15 **Cindy & Judy’s Christmas Greenery Church Fundraiser** 9 a.m. in fellowship hall
(Note: new this year - start time is before the church service.)



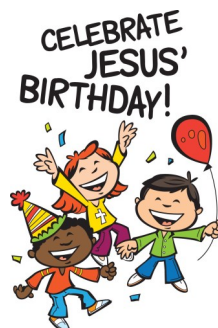
Join us at the movies for “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever” (time to be determined)

12/21 **Christmas Carol Singalong, Potluck & Deacons’ Basket Assembly** - SIGN-UP IN F.H.

12/22 **Cookie Walk** - PLEASE SEE SIGN-UP SHEET in fellowship hall

YOM Christmas Celebration & Yankee Swap 5-7 p.m.

12/24 **Coffee Hour prior to worship service — Happy Birthday, Jesus!**
5 p.m. **Church Service with Children’s Christmas Pageant**
9 p.m. **Candlelight Communion Service**



12/29 **“Cozy/Comfy” Church Service**

Let’s meet up at La Salette Shrine at 5 p.m. — open to all!

FROM OUR DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

I am sure you have heard me say this in the past, but I will say it again... We have already started preparing for what I call the "Church Olympics!" Celebrating the birth of Jesus is not only an important time in our faith, but it is certainly a fun time filled with love, joy, hope, giving and receiving, singing, dancing, family time and a lot of treats!!! Treats are important because the extra fluff we add to our bodies is necessary to stay warm during the cold New England days! (At least this is what I tell myself!)

The Christmas season is a special time of year, but a hectic time too. You may hear from time to time that there is no date in the Bible stating when Jesus was born, there were no Christmas trees or frosty the snowman in the Bible either. The piles of gifts under the tree can also seem like the opposite of how Jesus would like us to celebrate his birthday. This may all be true, but what is also true is recognizing Jesus as a real human being and, therefore, celebrating his birth at any time of the year is wonderful. I am happy that we all celebrate together, at the same time. Whether it is building your own advent wreath, or making homemade ornaments, or indulging in too many home baked cookies, or spending too much money on the people we love, or singing loud for all to hear, these traditions bring us together and create joy! We put aside our differences and fill our hearts with the Christmas Spirit (or maybe it is the Holy Spirit)! However you celebrate this year, remember the "reason for the season!" Take a moment, or many, to thank our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for his blessings of abundance. Without him, none of this is possible.



Our third classroom has been successful, with help from Stephanie Sanborn and Carrie Grimshaw. Michele and I still have full classrooms of our own as well. There has been some baby spotting in our church recently, so let's get Cradle Roll up and running!!!! If rocking babies while listening to our worship service sounds lovely to you, please let me know and I will get you on the list!!!!

Our Youth On a Mission (YOM) is having a bit of a slow start this year. If you think that you would make a good YOM leader, please let me know. I am hoping to find a volunteer for about an hour or two per week, to help me get this group of teens engaged. I will tell you exactly what needs to be done!!! Easy Peasy!!

Thank you to the BOCE (Board of Christian Education), my teachers, Pastor Julie, Denise and the entire church family for all the love and support you give me and this program all year round. I love you all so much!!

A super special shout out to all the children and teens!!! You fill my heart with joy and thanksgiving!

Ephesians 3:20 "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."

Shannon Hartmann

WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP HAS BEEN BUSY PLANNING — CHECK IT OUT BELOW!

Holiday Marketplace after worship on Sunday, December 8th and continuing on Monday, December 9th, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Bring your holiday shopping lists for handmade crafts and more... Also, there will be a Children's Corner for gifts for Mom and Dad!

Be sure to check out our **Puzzle and Magazine bookcase** in the back of the sanctuary (to the left of the choir room entrance). Feel free to take a puzzle and/or magazine to enjoy at home during your leisure time.

Attention ALL Ladies — You are invited to the **Women's Fellowship Holiday Gathering** on Saturday, December 14th. from 1pm-3pm. All ladies are welcome! Please look for a sign up sheet in Fellowship Hall.



Happy Holidays from **Here We Grow** Preschool



The last few weeks have been busy. I hope you all enjoyed the Thanksgiving holiday.

We want to take a moment to say thank you to all who donated to our Savers clothing drive last month. A big thank you to Todd Dube for donating his time and van to help us load and deliver to Savers; we would not have been able to get it all there without his help. We delivered just over 2000 lbs. of clothes and 635 lbs. of books!

We celebrated Thanksgiving with our students with a “feast” in the vestry this year. We enjoyed pizza thanks to our friends at Holiday Pizza in Auburn, as well as cheese and crackers and brownies donated by the parents.

During the month of December, *Here We Grow* will work with the Auburn Police Department’s **Secret Santa program in the collection of unwrapped toys and items for children** ranging from infant to sixteen-years-old; there is a donation box outside the Here We Grow office. They have told me at this time the greatest need is for the 8 to 12-year-old range. We will be collecting from December 2-13. The police department will distribute everything collected to children living in Auburn. **Thank you in advance for your generosity.**



Our Holiday program will be held on Friday, December 20 at 10:00 in fellowship hall if you would like to stop in and listen to the children sing.

The school will be closed from December 23—January 3. Our first day back will be January 6, 2025.

The **Here We Grow** staff and families wish all of you a safe and happy holiday season.

Cristi Corey - Director, Here We Grow Preschool

From the Mower family:

We are very grateful for the wonderful tribute and plaque in memory of Herb and his gifts of his talents to the church. It was a very nice day for us and the plaque is really special. He loved playing the bells and the organ, as well as contributing his time to the Music Committee.

*Thank you,
Fran Mower, for the family*

Thank you to all who supported our pumpkin patch. Our total sales were \$33,318! Our best year ever! - thanks to the weather and our volunteers. 40%, \$13,327, is our share plus \$815 in donations for a grand total of \$14,142! Donations to Troops and YOM. Remainder went to the general fund.

I started visiting **La Salette Shrine** at Christmastime when I was just a little girl. I can still feel the magic tingling in my soul! I don't think I could even put into words how truly extraordinary the experience is! I remember looking at the thousands of lights and Jesus on the cross, loving and protecting us, and I couldn't believe my eyes.

Now that I am an adult, I couldn't wait to take my own child to experience the magic. I remember standing together as we lit a candle for loved ones in heaven and getting goose bumps once again.

I mentioned to Pastor Julie how I believe other church members would enjoy this amazing shrine (if they haven't had a chance to go yet)! She asked me to write this up to see if all would like to join us **on Sunday, December 29, 2024, at 5:00 p.m.** There is a food court, cafeteria, snack-bar and gift shop on the grounds. For the children, there is a carousel, hayride to Bethlehem, train ride and Christmas donkey!

Thanks!
Nikki (Angers)

P.S. Luke would like to recommend the fried dough.

The Christmas Fund 2024

"And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them..." —Luke 2:9

The Christmas Fund has been caring for active and retired clergy and lay employees of the United Church of Christ for over 100 years, providing emergency grants, supplementation of small annuities and health premiums, and Christmas "Thank You" gift checks each December to our lower-income retirees.

United Church of Christ congregations and members have blessed the Christmas Fund with their generosity for many years. This year, your care and compassion will be especially appreciated by those servants of the church who are facing a time of need. Thank you!

A gift to the Christmas Fund is your opportunity to join with others in the United Church of Christ to bring good news and great joy to those who have given so much to our church.

In 2023, gifts to the Christmas Fund enabled:

- Monthly pension supplementation for 210 retired clergy and lay employees (\$1,007,289)
- Health benefits supplementation for 82 retired clergy and lay employees (\$173,745)
- Emergency grants for 67 individuals and families (\$155,992)
- Monthly supplementation grants for 74 grantees (351,344)
- Christmas "Thank You" gift checks to 511 retired clergy and lay employees (\$255,500)

Enclosed is an offering envelope. Please return it to the church office — 128 Central St., Auburn, MA 01501, or place in the Sunday offering plate. Make checks payable to the church with "Christmas Fund" in the memo. **Thank you.**

TIDINGS is a monthly publication of
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*God's church in Auburn Center
 doing Christ's work in the world.*
 Web: auburnfirstucc.org



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