

COVENANT NEWS

The Newsletter of the First Congregational Church of Webster Groves

DECEMBER 2020
JANUARY 2021

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FROM THE PASTOR

A Season of Promise but Also of Caution

At one and the same time, there come announcements of vaccines for SARS CoV2 and the sensation that, as my wife puts it, "the walls are closing in" because COVID cases increase. It seems that there are more and more people we know who are catching the virus. Even as we imagine being able to move about freely again, it is clear that we must not do so yet.

At Thanksgiving, people nationwide flouted the warnings of medical specialists and epidemiologists, and many either traveled or gathered in sizable groups. Americans' sense of privilege, borne upon the wings of our accustomed prosperity and an attendant, presumed personal license to act as we wish, has placed vulnerable lives at risk. Meanwhile, front line workers – especially doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff – are becoming overburdened along with our healthcare infrastructure. We await fearsome reports of burgeoning case numbers and deaths.

All of this comes in a season of promise, recalling again the birth of the Christ Child. It comes in a season of renewal, with the turning of the year. I cannot help but wonder, *Haven't we learned anything from our traditional narratives?*

Jesus' birth occurred at a time when the Western world was under the colonial dominance of Rome. As my own faith and world view have matured, I have realized more and more that his ministry was centered on helping oppressed individuals and groups to understand their fundamental integrity despite the messages the prevailing society told them about themselves. Our own affirmation of women, African Americans and other non-White racial and ethnic groups, LGBTQI+ people, those with mental and physical challenges, and others who have historically been disenfranchised in our society, means for us all a necessary quantum shift in our perspectives and attitudes.

"What does your God require of you," asks the prophet Micah, "but to seek justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) For those of us who have come to Jesus, here is the redirection (Dare I say, *repentance?*) that he required of his first followers and toward which he commands us. We understand that a Spirit of Holiness, his own Holy Spirit, is ours and guides us ever. This is a Spirit we must heed and embrace, as we approach our earthly siblings, yes, but also as we approach even more holidays.

On the last Sunday in November we observed Blue Christmas, and I find myself acknowledging still just how very different this particular season of the Longest Night will be from joyous others. We can still bear joy, but we will have to do it humbly, kindly, and justly, finding new and safe ways to be "together" and celebrating.

May you and all those you cherish have a blessed and safe Christmas and a hope-filled New Year.

Shalom.



WORSHIP NOTES FOR DECEMBER and JANUARY

This schedule is subject to change, as need may arise.

All Sunday worship, except December 27, will be offered in real time as a Zoom meeting (bit.ly/FCCWG-Worship) or as a live stream (bit.ly/FCCWG-YT). Recordings will be available from our YouTube channel or Facebook page.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, 10:00 AM — *Second Sunday of Advent; Feast of Nicholas of Myra; Virtual Communion – PEACE.* John the Baptist takes center stage, as we “begin at the beginning” of the Gospel according to Mark – “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1). What compelled people to go to him and be baptized? What made him such a religious phenomenon? Why should we still be paying attention, these thousands of years later? *Scriptures: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Mark 1:1-8. **Message of the Day:** “People, Get Ready”*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13, 10:00 AM — *Third Sunday of Advent – JOY; **Hanging of the Greens.*** This annual tradition at First Church includes our decoration of the sanctuary for Christmas. Although usually one of our best attended Sundays, the present pandemic makes it necessary to find some new and very special ways still to hear bells and carols again, and add wreaths, candles, a crèche, poinsettias, and the Christmas tree in a festive ritual of music and readings.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 10:00 AM — *Fourth Sunday of Advent – LOVE; **UCC Special Offering for The Christmas Fund.*** The Sunday School households of our Congregation have been working hard, assembling offerings that affirm the love of their faith community for them and their love for each other. Pastor Dave Denoon and the Student Ministers conduct us through this unique celebration. *Scripture: Luke 1:26-38.*

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, PRE-RECORDED WITH WATCH PARTY AT 4:30 PM — ***Family Christmas Eve with Lessons and Carols.*** This worship service usually includes live readings by our young people and a Nativity tableau. This year, they’re not exactly live, but we’ll still hear the story told by our youth and children, as well as carols sung by families and the Chancel Choir.

There are no services conducted at First Church on Christmas Day.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27, PRE-RECORDED WITH WATCH PARTY AT 10:00 AM — *Sunday after Christmas; Second Day of Kwanza’a – **Kujichagulia (Self-Determination).*** The staff will rest on this day after Christmas, but not before preparing a special “best of” worship service reflecting on the year 2020, recognizing the season of Kwanza’a, and anticipating the year to come.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 3, 10:00 AM — *Sunday before the Feast of the Epiphany (Jan. 6); Virtual Communion. **Scripture:** Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12.* This is the day when we honor the arrival of the Magi at the house of the Christ Child. The evangelist Matthew recognized this as the dawning of God’s light upon the Gentiles. In the first century, Jewish people whose land was occupied by Roman forces and ruled by Rome-appointed officials would probably have found the idea of Gentile salvation uncomfortable to say the least. Pastor Dave Denoon translates this ancient reality into our modern context in a message he’s calling, **“Privilege Has Its Memberships.”**

SUNDAY, JANUARY 10, 10:00 AM — *Baptism of Jesus. **Scripture:** Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11.* Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, where crowds of people also went for this soul-cleansing ritual. The meeting of John and Jesus would change baptism forever, so that now it is a metaphor for rebirth. Water is not only where our Savior welcomes us but where we are born afresh with our Brother. **Message of the Day: “Wild Water”**

SUNDAY, JANUARY 17, 10:00 AM — *Second Sunday after the Epiphany; MLK Holiday Weekend.* Pastor Dave Denoon begins a 3-part series about how people encounter the Messiah, which he’s entitled, **Is God Irresistible?** Along the way in Part 1, **“Jesus Presumes,”** we’ll consider the call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-20), a Psalmist’s affirmation that God is everywhere and every-when (Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18), the mystery of our connection with Christ (1 Corinthians 6:12-20), and the calling of Nathanael the Guileless (John 1:43-51).

SUNDAY, JANUARY 24, 10:00 AM — *Third Sunday after the Epiphany; Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; Ecumenical Sunday.* Part 2 of **Is God Irresistible?** is “Jesus Invites,” in which we find the Messiah calling the four fishers and them miraculously leaving their nets (Mark 1:14-20). This time, we ask our question in light of Jonah’s apparently irresistible message to Nineveh (Jonah 3:1-5, 10). Perhaps there’s a clue in Psalm 62’s command to wait and trust (vv. 5-12) or Paul’s insistence that we ought to live as though the world has no hold on us (1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

SUNDAY, JANUARY 31, 10:00 AM — *Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany; Heritage Sunday (155th anniversary).* The pastor completes his sermon series, **Is God Irresistible?** with the message, **“Jesus Commands.”** As Jesus performs an exorcism in a Capernaum synagogue (Mark 1:21-28), one observer remarks, “Even the unclean spirits... obey him!” After examining Jesus’ winsome gifts of presumption (Week 1) and persuasion (Week 2), we will consider his authority and its basis of love, and assess whether we’ve reached a conclusion about God’s irresistibility.

MODERATOR'S CORNER

For the past nine months I have used this column to keep you apprised of how we were handling the challenges presented to our church, primarily the planning of our future by the Strategic Planning Committee, and how we are handling the impact on church operations by the COVID-19 pandemic. This month I would like to shift my focus to the joys of the Advent season and the celebrated birth of our Savior. At the time of His birth, Jesus represented a new hope and the promise of salvation for all the world. This is exactly what we need during these unsettling times. Perhaps we can look to His teaching and His leadership with a renewed hope for what He has to offer us? Perhaps we can have a better understanding of why the Three Wisemen traveled miles to see the Savior, or why songs of praise have been sung year after year to mark this special event? Perhaps this year we should sing all the old familiar Christmas songs while recognizing what the words are really saying to us? Maybe therein lies the true hope of Christmas?

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world, in sin and error pining
'Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks, a new and glorious morn

Merry Christmas everyone!

Mark Edwards

Moderator

PLEDGES FOR 2021 RECEIVED \$320,028

(If you have not yet made your pledge, please call the church office at 314-962-0475, or visit:
<http://FirstChurchWG.org/Donate> and scroll down to make your pledge online.)

A BIG THANK YOU!

We want the congregation to know how much we appreciated your many cards, prayers and well wishes over the last month as we were sick with the Covid virus. They worked, as we are both feeling much better and are definitely on the upswing.

Phil and Diane Shoulberg



JOIN US FOR A CHRISTMAS TREE DECORATING CELEBRATION!
December 12th at 10:00 am to 2:00 pm
Jubilee Garden (& Parking Lot)

We will safely and socially distance to decorate our Christmas Tree. Participants are also asked to wear masks when outside of their vehicles. The tree is up and is lit up, just in time for decorating.

Dr. Leon Burke is planning a very special treat involving cars and carols at 11:00 am and 1:00 pm.

There will be Elves on site to safely guide everyone through.

If you would like to help prepare for this event, you can:

- Make or purchase birdseed ornaments
- Popcorn garland
- Cheerio and cranberry ornaments
- Bring a log or two to keep the elves warm

If you cannot make it to the celebration on the 12th, you can still bring an ornament when you can and add it to the tree. Please take photos!

As we will not be together on Christmas Eve in the sanctuary, *“Gifts for the Manger”* will be collected during the day. Please bring your unwrapped gifts for infants and children, and personal items for women, to be presented to Gateway 180, along with cash offerings.

“FROM MONROE COUNTY TO MONROVIA”

For Heritage Weekend, watch for a **new video by Pastor Dave Denoon** about the life of **Jennie Davis Sharp**. Remembered by our community as the first schoolmistress of the Colored School which preceded North Webster’s Douglass School and High School, Mrs. Sharp was a member of First Church during her tenure with the Webster Groves School District (1878-1883). Widely regarded in her time as a brilliant and dedicated educator, not only here but in her adopted homeland of Liberia, the life, work, and stellar character of Jennie Davis Sharp are only now coming into focus for us, a century after her death. Here is American history as few have even imagined it.



Jennie Davis Sharp and female pupils, St. Paul’s River, Liberia, 1893

This project has been a labor of love by the pastor with help from Historian Kay Roush and others from across the U.S. and the world inspired by Mrs. Sharp’s love and ambition, especially for the empowerment and education of young girls

FROM THE MUSIC DIRECTOR



Calling all families! If you would feel comfortable singing in a virtual Christmas Carol Sing as part of the Christmas eve service, I have a meaningful way to include you. Either you would sing along with a guide tape and video yourselves at home or someone would stop by and record it for you. The different families would be mixed (cross faded) with our choir doing all the singing. This is just for the fun of it so don’t be afraid if you feel your singing is not up to the choir’s level - have fun and we will fix it in the mix! Please respond with Carol Singing in the subject line to leon.burke@firstchurchwg.org. Have a safe and happy holiday season!

Leon Burke
Music Director

TREASURER'S REPORT

Below are the church operating results as of or through October 31st

Statement of Financial Activities

	2020	2019	Budget	Change to Prior Year	Change to Budget
Income				Higher/(Lower) Income	
Pledges and Gifts	\$ 303,893	\$ 275,935	\$ 291,667	\$ 27,957	\$ 12,226
Transfer from Endowment	100,000	100,000	151,667	-	(51,667)
Benevolence	23,934	22,953	12,500	981	11,434
Use of Space and Miscellaneous	29,495	60,671	50,513	(31,177)	(21,018)
Interest Income	13,930	16,279	11,167	(2,349)	2,763
Total Revenue	471,251	475,838	517,513	(4,587)	(46,261)
Expenses				(Higher)/Lower Expense	
Human Resources Expense	\$ 325,916	\$ 336,678	\$ 354,608	10,762	28,693
Facilities and Finance Expense	\$ 128,894	\$ 137,026	\$ 129,833	8,133	939
Benevolence Expense	\$ 37,449	\$ 35,114	\$ 26,667	(2,336)	(10,782)
Christian Education Ministry Expense	\$ 1,958	\$ 2,069	\$ 3,417	111	1,459
Parish Life Ministry Expense	\$ 2,662	\$ 7,487	\$ 9,334	4,826	6,672
Executive Ministry Expense	\$ 637	\$ 3,306	\$ 6,000	2,669	5,363
Total Expenses	497,515	521,679	529,858	24,165	32,344
Net Increase (Decrease) in Net Assets	\$ (26,263)	\$ (45,841)	\$ (12,346)	\$ 19,578	\$ (13,917)

Statement of Financial Position

	2020	2019	Variance
Cash and cash equivalents	\$ 201,751	\$ 149,471	\$ 52,280
Pledges receivable	24,394	61,942	(37,548)
Property and equipment	30,259	31,716	(1,457)
Minister housing long term receivable	60,000	239,236	(179,236)
Total Assets	\$ 316,403	\$ 482,365	\$ (165,962)
Accounts payable and accrued expenses	\$ (65)	\$ 1,039	\$ (1,104)
Unrestricted Designated Funds	20,430	31,088	(10,658)
Restricted funds for:			
Per the Endowment Trust	40,309	33,914	6,396
Churchyard	33,760	34,093	(333)
Kishlar/Dickens Room Maintenance	58,096	61,258	(3,162)
Temporarily restricted funds for pledges	44,394	84,242	(39,848)
Memorial Funds	79,369	74,963	4,406
Long term liabilities	122,300	241,026	(118,726)
Unrestricted Net Assets	(82,189)	(79,257)	(2,932)
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 316,403	\$ 482,365	\$ (165,962)

Items to note:

Pledges and Gifts income is higher year to date as compared to prior year due to timing. Pledges have been paid earlier in the year. As of October 31, the church has received 81% of total pledges, with only \$64k outstanding if all are received. The church received \$91k in November and December.

Continued

On the statement of financial position, and included in cash and short term investments are the funds from a loan provided by the Paycheck Protection Program of the CARES Act. The \$62,300 loan has a two year term with 1% interest, with no penalty for early prepayment. The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP loan) was created to provide loans to help organizations keep their workforce employed during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis. The PPP loan has the potential for a portion of the loan to be forgiven if the funds were used for payroll, benefits, rent and utilities. Enterprise Bank facilitated the loan between the Small Business Administration and the church. Enterprise Bank will begin accepting forgiveness applications on October 27. The church is finalizing its initial submission for full forgiveness of the loan. The loan is showing in the line item long term liabilities. Any amount forgiven will be recorded as income.

If you have any other questions or want further detail, please let me know.

Thanks
Jennifer Jones, Treasurer

CLIFF'S NOTES



The first segment of “Journey thru Creation,” our year-long program, sponsored by the Calvin Worship Institute appears to have been an overwhelming success. Our artist (storyteller Valerie Tutson) and ecological advocate (Jean Ponzi) provided creative, insightful and exuberant leadership. Terry Peterson’s technical direction saved us countless times from “zoom implosion.” We learned a great deal, not only ecologically and artistically, but technically.

With the sharp spike in Covid-19 cases around us (and in our congregation) we decided to postpone the second segment of the program until early March. This will push back our other segments slightly, but we should complete our program by mid-June. The Calvin folks have agreed to our altered timeline, so it’s full (slow?) speed ahead.

If you haven’t seen the webinar or the two worship services, you can view them on our church’s YouTube Channel at: <https://tinyurl.com/y3xp3g9w>

Our theme for “Journey thru Creation” this winter will be *“Discovering our role as co-creators with the Creator.”* Our artist will be dancer/choreographer Jennifer Medina. You’ll remember her from our Earth Walk concert. She choreographed the youth dancers and collaborated with Leon—she dancing to his vocal interpretation of “The Creation” from James Weldon Johnson’s epic poem, “God’s Trombones.” Our ecological advocate will be Mick Smyer whose program “Greying Green” has inspired many religious communities, educational institutions and civic organizations to pursue a greener lifestyle. It promises to be an engaging webinar and inspiring worship. Please join us.

The pandemic has also caused us to postpone Jazz Noel. Notice I say postpone, not cancel. This will be our 10th annual performance and we’re hoping to offer a Summer Jazz Noel edition, because we could all use an extra dose of Christmas Cool during the hot summer months. Stay tuned for future details.

Have a joyous and healthy Christmas.

Rev. Cliff Aerie

Director of MICA (Ministry of Imagination, Creativity and the Arts)



JOY
PEACE
LOVE
KINDNESS
HOPE to ALL
Come find them with us
AT FIRST CHURCH

12/6 Worship: Second Sunday of Advent • *PEACE* • Service – 10:00 AM

12/13 Worship: Third Sunday of Advent • *JOY*
Hanging of the Greens Service – 10:00 AM

12/20 Worship: Fourth Sunday of Advent • *LOVE* • Service – 10:00 AM

12/24 Christmas Eve Family Worship • Lessons and Carols • Watch Party
– 4:30 PM

12/27 Sunday After Christmas • Watch Party – 10:00 AM.

**Worship will be streamed on Zoom at bit.ly/FCCWG-Worship
and YouTube at bit.ly/FCCWG-YT**

OUR CHURCH DURING CHALLENGING TIMES THE EARLY DAYS

Our Church was founded in 1866, soon after the Civil War. Services were held at Chapel Grove Seminary, a private school built before the war by Robert Studley, William Plant and John Helfenstein. It was decided that with no hotels in the area the first structure to be built would be a parsonage to accommodate our first minister Rev. Henry Martyn Grant, visiting churchmen, and to provide space for meetings. By 1870 it was considered too expensive to maintain and was sold for \$10,000. It was a time of economic depression in Europe and America and the effects must have been felt in Webster Groves. After paying off debts, \$3,000 remained to go toward building our first permanent church structure – the Old Stone Church as we call it today.



Rev. James Cruikshank had just been called to be our second permanent minister and led the first service held in the new building in October 1871. During the decade of the 1870s Webster continued to be affected by the world depression. Financial panic reduced our small church membership and revenue. Rev. Cruikshank even suggested reducing his salary. By 1874 he had left and the church could not afford another pastor. Two years later the community was beginning to recover and Rev. Robert Kerr became pastor. However, a railroad strike cut Webster off from St. Louis so commuters started moving back to the city. Rev. Kerr did not get paid regularly. His children needed shoes and his wife couldn't go to church because she didn't have a proper pair of shoes. The church's Ladies Aid Society at Christmas time decided the box they usually sent to missionaries would be given to the pastor and his wife. Finally the church leaders had to tell Rev. Kerr they could not guarantee him a regular salary of any kind so he departed in 1878. These were challenging times for our church. We had no permanent minister until 1881, but our community did provide a church home (1878-1883) for Webster Groves' first African American schoolmistress, Miss Jennie Davis, who had been born in rural Missouri but educated in Boston. By then things were looking better, and the church was free from debt. Webster was beginning to grow again.

Kay Roush,
Historian



Tom Waltz — December 6
David Brader — December 10
Dennis Barnes — December 11
Earl Rinne — December 12
Nannelle Griffith — December 13
Dan Claggett — December 14
Amanda McCoy — December 16
Janet Fales — December 24
Darrell Lakies — December 26
Terri Thompson — December 26



Michael Lenard — January 1
Helen Moody — January 1
Coco Denoon — January 7
Faye Dyer — January 7
Erin Prange — January 8
Roger Barnes — January 11
Ken Perry — January 11
Marj Courtney — January 12
Kin Lavender — January 12
Richard Smith — January 14
Joyce Berger — January 17
Jan Barnes — January 23
Bob Hill — January 26
Fred Kaul — January 26
Bob Buerk — January 28
George Conlee — January 28
David von Weise — January 28



The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund

Sunday, December 20, will be the day on which we participate as a congregation in the UCC special offering for The Christmas and Emergency Fund. We hope that you will be able to give generously.

The sacred story tells us that, at Christmas, God's greatest gift was given. But the story does not end there: It goes on to show us how to respond to that wondrous gift with offerings of our own. Now, we probably don't have any frankincense in our pockets. Chances are we have no myrrh in our purses. We may not possess even a glimmer of gold. What we do have is the greatest resource of all: God's love in our hearts. By caring and with great joy, let us give to the United Church of Christ's Christmas Fund, so that the church's retired clergy and lay staff might know the miracle of God's love through our generosity. We also assist clergy and other church employees in crisis through The Emergency Fund.

There is more information at <https://www.pbucc.org/index.php/christmas-fund-home>, including a special video about how the Christmas and Emergency Fund helped one clergy family.

For over 100 years, the Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund has been a way to ensure that a light of love and hope will always shine for faithful servants of our church who find themselves facing unforeseen financial need.



"For Such a Time as This."

Esther 4:14.



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Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

MISSING OUR CHURCH FRIENDS

While we are unable to be together, we can still reach out to each other. Telephone, write and mail notes, email or text at least one church friend each week. We all need to make an effort to be together in new ways. If you know of someone who needs support from the church contact Faye Dyer or Joan Musbach. Our Parish Cares team is active even during the pandemic and would like to know of needs to be met.

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