December 2021

Still Speaking

Newsletter of First Congregational United Church of Christ of Alpena

Board of Directors:

- ***Dennis Artley, Treasurer***
- ***Bill Dempsey***
- ***Blair Diamond, Vice Chair***
- ***Boris Gerber***
- ***Vicky Lindsay***
- ***Jim McNeil, Chair***
- ***Beth Petty***
- ***Tammy Veasy***
- ***Nancy Wedge***

December
Dates to Remember

5
Worship Service
with Communion

12
Worship Service

13
Board of Directors
Meeting

19
Worship Service

24
Christmas Eve
Candlelight Service
and Fellowship

25
Merry Christmas!

26
Worship Service

27
Office Closed

31
Happy New Years
Eve!

A Blessed Advent and a Merry Christmas

Rev. Dr. H. Robert Case

Our lives are marked by special occasions. In our individual lives they are marked by our birthdays, anniversaries, and celebrations at the end of our lives. In our secular world we celebrate special occasions in our national history and mark the year with the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, Mother and Father days and a secular Christmas centering around a jolly old man who brings gifts.

Our church life also centers around special occasions and marches to a different drummer and sometimes seems out of step with the other traditions. Our Christian calendar is also divided into two main sections. One following the life of Jesus the Christ, the other celebrating the birth and life of the church. I suppose we could say Happy New Year the last Sunday of November as it is the start of a new church year. You can follow the year by watching the colors on the pulpit, lectern and altar.

Advent is the time of preparation for the birth of Jesus and the close of history. The color used to be purple and pink for prayerful preparation and joy. Now most churches use blue which is the color of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The word *advent* comes from the Latin term *adventus* meaning “arrival” or “coming,” particularly the coming of something having great importance. Advent season, then, is both a time of joy-filled, anticipatory celebration of the arrival of Jesus Christ and a preparatory period of repentance, meditation, and penance. In the United Church of Christ and many other churches, Advent itself is divided into four special Sundays. Tradition has the order of Hope, Peace, Love and Joy. Advent comes at the darkest time of the year and celebrates the light that comes into the world in Jesus the Christ. Light always shines out brighter during darkness.

Following Advent comes the Christmas season which is often out of step with our secular celebration of Christmas that starts well before the 25th of December. You can hear the singing of Christmas carols well before the Christmas season. When the church starts celebrating Christmas, the culture is often tearing down its Christmas and putting up its white sale ads. When the church starts singing Christmas carols, the world and many Christians are tiring of them. Christmas in not a single day, but a season of the year that lasts 12 days starting with Christmas Day and ending with Epiphany, or the arrival of the wise men by tradition at the house where Jesus was. (In scripture the wise men never meet the shepherds at the manger. Even some well known Christmas carols get this wrong.) That means the church celebrates the birth of Jesus from the 25th day of December until the 6th day of January and the color is white or gold.

I am suggesting that we at First Congregational begin Advent by praying the first week the prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.

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I will print, each week in the bulletin, a different prayer for that week. Notice that this prayer contains the major themes of Advent.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console,
To be loved as to love,
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

~St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

I want to take this opportunity to wish you a very Blessed and Merry Christmas, and I look forward to celebrating the holidays with you. Peace and Grace, Bob

The Mitten tree is beginning to sprout gifts, and the basket in the main hallway is ready for your donation. Please help if you can!

In preparation for our **2021 Annual Report and Annual Meeting,** all committees are asked to submit a written report to the church office by December 20. Due to limited activity of several committees, the report may be quite brief, but necessary all the same.

Board Meeting Summary—November 2021

Judy Suszek, Office Administrator

An emailed correspondence from Dennis Artley, Finance Committee Chair, was shared. It stated the finances of the church look good, and recommended the October financial reports be accepted as printed. The proposed 2022 budget will undergo final scrutiny at the December board meeting, and will be presented to the congregation for final approval at January's Annual Meeting.

Committee Reports:

- Comstock—The committee met in October to review 2022 grant applications and allocate funds to 11 area agencies in addition to First Congregational's Local Missions and Human Needs Funds.
- Missions—The annual Christmas Fund offering for *Veterans of the Cross* is scheduled for Sunday, December 5.
- Stewardship—The annual stewardship drive officially ended October 31, but pledges continue to arrive and probably will do so into December. The committee is hopeful of reaching its goal.

The Board decided to move forward with planning an in-person and virtual candlelight Christmas Eve service followed by a reception in the Fellowship Hall. A motion to place a 1/4-page ad in the Alpena News Christmas section at a cost of $120 was approved.

Reverend Case shared information regarding two new church members and one returning member, increases in Sunday worship service attendance, and challenges within many area church communities.

Stewardship Committee Report, 2022

Bill Dempsey

The Stewardship Committee met twice and set plans for the 2022 Stewardship Campaign starting October 3 with church service announcements and the mailing of packets to all church members. Mailings included an introduction letter, pledge cards and return envelopes. Stewardship announcements were made by committee members during Sunday services in October. The Campaign was set to end October 31.

We are pleased to announce the final numbers are $112,286 for the General Fund and $19,560 for the Mission Fund. We exceeded our goals by 6.9% and 7.9% respectively.

The Committee wishes to thank all of you for your generous contributions. We have always been a generous church, and once again you have proven that to be true.

I would like to thank the committee members for the time and efforts they put into the drive this year. Also, a special thanks to Judy Suszek for the work she did on the project. She very willingly took on the task and did an outstanding job. Thank you Judy!

Committee members: Bill and Debbie Dempsey, Bill and Dottie Haase, and Terry Bell

Poinsettias for the Altar

Nancy Wedge

If you wish to donate poinsettias for our Christmas worship services in memory or in honor of someone, please purchase the plants from your favorite store and bring them to the church by Wednesday, December 22. Also, please call or email the church office to let us know who purchased the poinsettias and to whom they are dedicated. This information will be printed in the Christmas Eve and December 26 bulletins. And one more thing, if you put your name on your poinsettia you can be sure to take home the plant you donated after the December 26 worship service. Please call Nancy Wedge at 989-356-4402 with any questions.

Search Committee Update

Ann Diamond

As the Search Committee has been organized for over a year now, we want to let the congregation know that we are proceeding with our mission of finding the right pastor for our congregation.

In the course of this past year, we began meeting weekly to complete our Church Profile, the first step in the recruitment process. That was finished in December 2020 and the Conference posted our vacancy in January 2021. All candidates visit the UCC website and express their interest in open positions to the Conference. The Conference representatives then send us the Candidate Profiles for our review. To date, we have been provided 20 Candidate Profiles for our consideration. Unfortunately, none of them have been mutually acceptable for the Search Committee and the Candidates, but we continue to focus on finding the right candidate for First Congregational Church.

With the upcoming holiday season, we expect few candidates expressing interest but if so, we will be glad to move forward. Please keep the Search Committee in your prayers as we all look forward to a new settled pastor and a meaningful future.

Serving on the Search Committee are Dennis Artley, Terry Bell, Ann Diamond, Gary Jarmuzewski, Jay Kettler, Mary Minnick and Nancy Wedge.

The Christmas Fund Offering for "Veterans of the Cross"

Sunday, December 5

"Good news. . . Great joy. . . All the people!" Luke 2:10

Our joy at Christmas is a response to God's promise of new life through the birth of Jesus. It is a joy we are called to share widely, through our witness and gifts, both to loved ones and to distant neighbors.

You have the opportunity to be a part of a ministry that cares for the active and retired clergy and lay employees of the United Church of Christ through your participation in the annual "Christmas Fund" All-Church Offering for "Veterans of the Cross".

Your gift to the Christmas Fund will be collected throughout the month of December. It will help provide emergency grants, supplementation of small annuities and health premiums, and Christmas "Thank You" gift checks each December to our lower-income retirees. Your gifts are needed more than ever to help the growing number of retirees whose low income annuities make it difficult to meet increasing costs of living.

In 2020, the United Church of Christ's Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross provided pension supplementation for 276 retired clergy and church professionals, health benefits supplementation for 89 retired clergy and lay employees, emergency grants for 96 individuals and families, and Christmas Thank You gift checks to 504 retired clergy and employees.

Every cent of that money came from the pockets of people like you. Give to this month's special offering for the Christmas Fund, and you will make sure that low income ministers and retirees have a place to go for help if they need it. 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!

Your contributions will be gratefully accepted at a Sunday service, or by mail or in person at the church office until Christmas. Thank you so much for your help!

Hosting Help Needed – Sunday Fellowship hosts are needed for all months except March and September next year. Thank you to the several committed hosts who already stepped in to help where we were shorthanded this year. A sign-up sheet is posted on the narthex table. Please consider helping host a month. Our Fellowship Hour is such a joy and blessing!

Thanks, Bill Haase 989-916-4104, dsbhaase@live.com

Thanks a Bunch! Kudos to Edith Gerber, Cindy Straley, and Kat Tomaszewski for initiating and spearheading the wonderful and much needed improvements to our website. Please visit the First Congregational UCC site at www.uccalpena.org, then come back and visit often for additional updates both cosmetic and informative.

Many thanks to all who pitched in to help decorate our beautiful church for the Christmas season. It looks glorious!

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service Returns

In the church's continuing effort to return to normal and provide our members with the fellowship and warmth this season offers, we are celebrating a candlelight service scheduled for 7:00pm Friday, December 24. Following the service will be a reception in the Fellowship Hall with much merriment and jollity. While enjoying each other's company and extending greetings of the season, please remain cognizant of the fact that Covid community spread is still at a high level in our little corner of the world, and donning your facemask and limiting physical contact is recommended and encouraged.

SERRV Bazaar

Ann Gerow

It's time for our annual SERRV Bazaar!

This year we are offering an online event for your convenience. Shop hundreds of handmade items using the link below, and 20% of all purchases will be donated back to our organization. In this case, the money will go back to SERRV, as this is a mission project for us, not a church fundraiser. You will see an orange banner at the top of the web page indicating 20% of sales go to SERRV International for its work with producers.

www.serrv.org/?a=AlpenaSERRV

Please be sure to use our specific event link and any promotion codes that are offered for discounts.

If you need help ordering online, please contact Cindy Straley for assistance. (989) 464-2361.

Thank you for supporting our long standing mission to support artisans and farmers in 25 countries around the world.

Christmas Gifts

Nancy Wedge

Christmas is just around the corner, and I have the perfect stocking stuffer – dish cloths. These cloths are of great value, high quality and inexpensive. They are double layered knit, ravel-proof, sanitary, and made in the USA! Cost is $2 each and available in colors of red, blue, green and natural. Some colors are limited so order early. Proceeds help to defray the cost of altar supplies.

Call me at 989-356-4402 or send an email to wedge.nancy@gmail.com to place your order.

Financial Assistance Available

Boris Gerber

Do you need help paying a bill or rent, or buying food and other essentials? Through the loving support of members of this congregation, funds are available. If you are in need of assistance, please do not hesitate to email Reverend Bob Case with your needs at alpuccpastor@gmail.com. Your request will remain confidential.

Choir Corner

Kat Tomaszewski

My Heart is Filled with Thankfulness

This past week, the choir sang the anthem, "My Heart is Filled with Thankfulness" by Stuart Townsend and Keith Getty. As we prepared, I began to think of all the things I am grateful for at our church—our choir who faithfully waited until it was the right time to gather again and who returned with open hearts and big voices ready to praise; our livestream ministry that is growing week by week with dedicated technicians who make sure our service is available to those who worship remotely; Dr. Aten, the director of the bell choir, who perfectly arranges and selects pieces that allow members of any musical level to joyfully participate and our bell choir who share their time and talents; our pastor, who came out of retirement to serve our congregation again; and our members who make our church a home. To you all, thank you.

My heart is filled with thankfulness
To Him who walks beside;
Who floods my weaknesses with strength
And causes fears to fly;
Whose ev'ry promise is enough
For ev'ry step I take
Sustaining me with arms of love
And crowning me with grace.

First Congregational United Church of Christ
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Email: officeuccalp@gmail.com
Office Hours: 9:00 am — 1:00 pm, Monday — Thursday

Sunday Worship: 10:00 a.m.
In person and Online

Transitional Pastor: Rev. Dr. H. Robert Case
Organist/Choir Director: Kat Tomaszewski
Treasurer: Denise Fusina
Office Administrator: Judy Suszek
Custodian: Mike LaMarre

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December Celebrations

Birthdays

Gavin Plume	12/07	Megan Petty	12/18
Janice Snell	12/08	Robert Silver	12/19
Jean Gilliland	12/10	Michael Mack	12/19
William Dempsey	12/13	Stacy Zeller	12/19
Patricia Leahy	12/15	Nathan Jarmuzewski	12/28
Clarence Rickard	12/17	John Mack	12/28
Robert Westenbarger	12/18	Mary Bloom	12/31

Anniversaries

Brian & Belinda Hanna	December 1	31 Years
Ray & Kathy Moore	December 22	31 Years
Avery & Marcia Aten	December 27	52 Years

For it is in giving that we receive.

~Francis of Assisi