As we begin the month of December, we enter the season of Advent. (Though technically, this year Advent started on November 27th.) Advent is the season of preparation and waiting for the birth of Christ, and Advent also marks the start of the Christian year. Because Advent is the start of the new Christian year, it is a season of new beginnings and possibilities.

These new beginning and preparation themes of Advent make it a good time to start a spiritual practice or discipline, and being more attentive to one’s spiritual life is a longstanding practice of Christians during Advent. There are many good Advent devotionals out there for those who would like some more spiritual grounding this season. I’m going to go through some options of devotionals I’ve looked at.

There was a sale on Dietrich Bonhoeffer books, so I’ve got two recommendations for Bonhoeffer devotionals. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian, who was extremely critical of the Nazi regime. He was a leader in the German Confessing Church, which was the part of the German church that resisted Nazi propaganda and state control. Bonhoeffer was eventually imprisoned and executed for his participation in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. But, while in prison and before his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer wrote a lot, and his work has become extremely influential.

For a daily devotional for Advent and Christmas there is *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*. For each day there is a passage from Bonhoeffer, a scripture passage, and a supplemental paragraph from Bonhoeffer’s letters or sometimes another author that fits thematically with the day.

The other Bonhoeffer book is *Wonder of Wonder: Christmas with Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. This book is sort of a cross between a devotional and a small coffee table book. Each page has a lovely winter/Christmas/Advent themed photograph along with a Bonhoeffer excerpt or prayer. There is some overlap in material between the two books.
For something more contemporary and particularly mindful of how the holidays can be hard when dealing with loss, there is *A Weary World: Reflections for a Blue Christmas* by Kathy Escobar. Escobar is a pastor who wrote this devotional in the wake of her son dying by suicide. There’s a daily reflection for each day along with a quote for reflection. At the end of each week, she offers some spiritual practices/activities one might want to engage in. There are also group discussion questions if you wanted to use the book with a group/family. I found Escobar very easy to read, and she connects a fair amount to popular culture.

Another good option is the *Advent for Everyone* series by Church of England Bishop N.T. Wright. The Matthew book in that series goes with this year in the church calendar. Wright gives a scripture passage and a short reflection on it for each day, and I find it accessible and thoughtful.

*Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*. It’s got a daily reading from various Christian thinkers/theologians, including people from all time periods in Christian history. So, there’s a mix of early church/medieval theologians and modern day writers. The readings for each day are about 5-10 pages, so this is a good option if you want something a bit longer to read and think about. I like that it offers daily readings through Christmas to Epiphany, and it’s a really approachable way to sample a bit from some influential Christian thinkers. That same publisher also released an Advent devotional in the same format but with readings from more contemporary authors: *Goodness and Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*. That book is a good way to explore some more contemporary thinkers in the context of Advent. (I will say there are a few authors in here I’m not keen on, but you may like them.)

As we enter the Advent and Christmas season, I’ll leave you with this excerpt from one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s sermons:

> We all come with different personal feelings to the Christmas festival. One comes with pure joy as he looks forward to this day of rejoicing, of friendships renewed, and of love…Others
look for a moment of peace under the Christmas tree, peace from the pressures of daily work…Others again approach Christmas with great apprehension. It will be no festival of joy to them. Personal sorrow is painful especially on this day for those whose loneliness is deepened at Christmastime…And despite it all, Christmas comes. Whether we wish it or not, whether we are sure or not, we must hear the words once again: Christ the Savior is here! The world that Christ comes to save is our fallen and lost world. None other.

Peace,
Katrina Manzi
Minister

**Pastor Contact Info & Schedule**

Email: kmanzi@middleburyucc.org
Office Phone: (203) 758-2671 x11
House Phone: (203) 758-2345
Cell Phone:
Day off: Fridays
**To schedule a time to meet:** Email, text, or call. Pastor Katrina is typically in the office most weekday afternoons except Fridays.

**Faith Formation**

On November 13, we held our Advent Workshop after worship. Our youth had been busy preparing in the weeks prior to learn how to make decorative advent wreaths in order to teach the younger children, families, and friends in the congregation. This was a wonderful intergenerational experience for all. We hope you were able to attend and enjoy lighting the candles each week during Advent.
Our November Sunday School lessons focused on Solomon. Thank you to Katie O’Connor, Kelly Pelletier, Pam Albon, Robbie Kamide, and Liz Walker for teaching.

December brings some of our most treasured traditions. We are excited to have our traditional Christmas Pageant on December 11. There are parts for everyone of all ages, so please let me know if you’d like to participate, or see the sign-up in the Social Hall. We look forward to singing our favorite hymns as we listen to and recreate The Greatest Story Ever Told.

We are also starting another activity for all ages this season. Many families use advent calendars, such as ones with chocolates or toys in them, to count down the days until Christmas. This year, we will have a “Reverse Advent Calendar" for anyone who'd like to participate. The idea is that each day, you add a different item desired by GWIM (listed on the calendar) to a bag or box. At the end of the month, you bring your completed box back to the church to be donated to GWIM after
Christmas. This will help restock their shelves after the busy holiday season, and they appreciate all donations we can give. Calendars are available at the church.

We look forward to everyone joining in our fun Christmas traditions, and hope you have a happy and healthy holiday season.

Valerie Beard
Faith Formation Coordinator

**The Deacons’ Bench**

I recently noticed there is a new (well somewhat recent anyway) answer to an age-old question. In response to the query, “How are you doing?” I have been increasingly hearing people use the ironic response: “Oh you know…just livin’ the dream!” To which the universal reply is a wry and knowing smile accompanied by some rueful head shaking. The irony of the delivery is of course based on the premise that the speaker is doing anything BUT living the dream.

This commonplace exchange can be understood as a shared recognition of the difficulties and disappointments inherent in everyday life. While many of us seem to be living in relative ease, we are saying, “Hey, this every day life stuff may look easy but believe me its not all a bed of roses buddy!” I find myself wondering when I hear or use this expression: “But what is the dream? And how can we really live it?”

Of course the answers to the question “What is the dream?” are as multifarious as the askers themselves. The dream is different for every person, right? While everyone may have their own idea of happiness, the idea of “the dream” however, is that there is one dream or certain dreams that are pretty much universal right? We all want health, closeness with family, friendships, success, and some level of material security for example. When we ironically say we are, “…livin’ the dream” we are saying that while these elements of happiness might be universally desired they are clearly not as universally distributed as we would like.
Times are hard. The world is dealing with the fallout from a massive global pandemic. There is war, conflict, and oppression around the world. Political and social divisions threaten our unity as a nation and mental illness and substance abuse issues are exploding like unwelcome Amazon packages left at our doorsteps. Where is the dream lately? Life has been especially hard for many people lately. That much is certain.

As Christians, we have our own version of the dream. Scripture tells us the dream for us is called the Kingdom of God. When we answer, “Oh you know…livin’ the dream!” we are talking about living at one in the Holy Spirit with our Lord Jesus Christ in Christian fellowship with our brothers and sisters. Jesus spoke often of the Kingdom, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” John 3:5.

For many of us, our primary means of accessing the Kingdom of God is our own Middlebury Congregational Church. The MCC is often our best path to fellowship and service. It is often our place of solace and comfort. Perhaps the best we can do in troubled times is to live the best version of “the dream” we can make. Let’s make our dream of the Kingdom together. Let’s make the MCC our focus for fellowship and worship and service. Let’s live the best Christian dream we can make!

Chris Avcollie;
On behalf of the Board of Deacons
Tidings of Joy

Just as you are preparing for Christmas, the music program members are already busy preparing for our Christmas season Services.

We have a fun, cheery and supportive bunch, but there's always room for more- especially since there have been life changes and other circumstances for a few of our people, leaving us with a few holes to fill.

Maybe you are one of the people who could fill one of those empty seats. But, even you are not the one, chances are you know someone who likes to sing and who would be enriched by being part of a church community. I'll happily reach out to anyone personally, if you pass on your ideas.

Maybe Santa won't bring us a few new choir members. But perhaps, you can!

Merry Christmas,
Donna Obarowski
Minister of Music

**Stewardship: Giving at the End of the Year**

If you’ve ever given to charitable causes other than the church, you’ve probably noticed that just as we’re winding down our annual pledge campaign, your mailbox is filling up. You’re getting return address labels, packets of holiday cards, calendars, and other goodies from every list you’ve ever been on.

Why?

According to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (yes, we’re on their list, from Lexi’s William & Mary days), about a third of all charitable gifts are made in December. November is the runner-up.
Two key reasons: Everyone feels more generous around the holidays, and many people start making tax calculations at the end of the year. I’m not a tax or investment adviser, but here are some common scenarios:

- **You total your itemizable deductions but find it will be better to claim the standard deduction.** You could bunch some of your charitable giving into one year to maximize your deduction, then claim standard deduction in other years.

- **Your stock portfolio has declined over the past year, but most of your securities are worth more than you paid for them a decade ago.** Selling those underperforming stocks would mean hefty capital gains taxes. By giving them to your church or charity, you can avoid the capital gains taxes and take them as a charitable deduction if you itemize.

- **You are over age 70½, have an IRA, and your sources of income are more than you need for living expenses.** You can direct your IRA administrator to make up to $100,000 annually in Qualified Charitable Distributions. These qualify for the mandatory annual distributions you must make from your IRA starting at age 72 but are not included in taxable income.

- **You intend to update your will and want to provide for your heirs as well as make legacy gifts to charity or your church.** You should always work with your attorney to develop your estate plan. Bequests and gifts to charities are fully deductible for estate-tax purposes. If you name the church or charity instead of an individual as a beneficiary of your IRA, 401(k), or other retirement plan, it would not be subject to estate tax.

Many people feel more generous during Advent, Christmas, and New Year’s. That’s a good thing that we ought to cultivate all year long. If the season motivates you to make additional contributions to your church or favorite charities, they—and you—will start the new year a little brighter.
Many thanks and wishes for a blessed Christmas and New Year!

Howard Fielding,
for the Board of Stewardship

**A Scout is Cheerful: Trustees get good news from the BSA**

At the beginning of this year, the Boy Scouts of America national organization changed the wording of troop charters to put more legal liability onto the charter organizations. Many churches nationwide simply gave up sponsoring troops because they couldn’t risk the liability.

Ours didn’t. To keep Troops 5 and 6 in business, we signed the charter for 2022. Attorney Chris Avcoolie told the local Scout council exactly why the charter was unacceptable and what needed to be changed before we could sign for 2023.

The council passed it along to BSA national, which came back with a new charter form granting exactly what we wanted. This includes a hold-harmless clause that states charter organizations like the church will not be liable for claims that occur during Scouting activities. Pending a minor revision in the wording, we should be able to continue our long history sponsoring Troops 5 and 6 in 2023. It may even become a model for other churches and sponsoring organizations to save troops nationwide.

An Eagle Scout candidate is interested in coordinating a service project to upgrade our outdoor chapel, which started as an Eagle project years ago. The work will probably be done in the spring. As our liaison to the project, I have completed the BSA Youth Protection Training to work with the candidate and his father together.

More good news: We may soon have a new conference room table and office-style ergonomic chairs. Our current chairs are falling apart. Josh Hubbard learned of the problem and is arranging a donation of used conference room furniture from Webster Bank.
As 2022 ends, our treasurers are working hard to balance the books. Trustees are doing what we can to prioritize repairs that must be done.

Howard Fielding reported that one week before the end of our pledge drive, the number of pledges was down 27 percent and the total amount pledged was down 16 percent from the last two campaigns. This could be from many reasons, including the economy and inflation. The good news is that the average pledge is up. People have already given 25 percent of the total pledged for 2023, which helps ease our end-of-year cash flow.

Building repairs are an ongoing process. For now, work on the parsonage chimney will be limited to putting a cap on top instead of repointing or rebuilding. Interior wall repair and painting is on hold until we see whether the chimney continues to leak.

The triangle area of the front of the church has a new coat of paint but still needs some final work. We will patch a roof leak over the church offices and hope that will get us through the winter. The North Street water line is being replaced, which we hope will resolve sporadic brown water issues in the parsonage and church.

Our church elevator has been inspected and we will have a new annual agreement with Hartford Elevator for maintenance and repairs. We will also upgrade the parsonage alarm system.
On behalf of Sal Sena, Katrina Manzi, Ellen Aronheim, Greg Ecsedy, Bob Giannini, Howard Fielding, Diane Barnard, Len Beard, and Chris Avcollie, thank you all for your support in pledges, time and understanding as we all move forward.

Russ Tolles,
Respectfully submitted for the Board of Trustees

FROM THE MISSION BOARD

Thank you to all that donated, supported and helped with the Veteran’s Day Bagged Lunches and the Thanksgiving Baskets. It was a great success as we made 200 Bagged Lunches for GWIM to hand out. And three families were able to enjoy their Thanksgiving Holiday as we provided them will all the fixings for their dinner.

For December we are in the midst of helping Wellmore bring a great Christmas to 60 Star Tree Children who would normally not receive a gift. These gifts will be due in the office by December 12th. You have all been instrumental in bringing their dreams to fruition.

We are also helping three families in Middlebury with Christmas baskets this year as well. Those will be due December 19th. This will allow them to have a wonderful Christmas dinner with all of your donations.

The mission committee wants to thank each and everyone of you for all your support you have given us throughout the year.

Merry Christmas and a Happy Healthy New year to all.

Mission Board
Open and Affirming Updates

In November, we had a pulpit exchange with the First Congregational Church of Washington, an Open and Affirming church in our association. Washington’s pastor, the Rev. Dr. Robyn Gray preached here on November 13th. The message focused on the importance of extending kindness to everyone, according to God’s word. If you missed church that day, the service is on our YouTube channel.

A number of different people have asked for resources for understanding some of the scripture passages that come up during debates about homosexuality. So, this winter, we’re reading the book Unclobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality by Colby Martin. Martin is a straight, evangelical pastor who changed his mind about LGBTQ people and the church. The book is part memoir of his journey of changing his mind and the impacts it had on his career and family, and the other part of the book is breaking down the common scripture passages people use to claim homosexuality is a sin or to exclude LGBTQ people from the church.

Dates for discussion are tentatively scheduled:
Wednesday, 1/11/23 @7pm: Chapters 1-4
Wednesday, 1/18/23 @7pm: Chapters 5-6
Wednesday, 2/1/23 @7pm: Chapters 7-8
Wednesday, 2/15/23@7pm: Chapters 9-10

As a reminder, the Open and Affirming process is a time for our whole church to discern what we want to do, and we can’t do that without your voice. Please reach out to the committee with any feedback, questions, or concerns you would like to offer. Your voice
is important, and we don’t know what you think or want unless you
tell us. In this time of discerning being more openly welcoming, we
want to hear from everyone and surely don’t want anyone’s voice to
be excluded.

Open & Affirming Committee members: Debbie Barlow, Len Beard,
Valerie Beard, Kelly Ecsedy & Sal Sena

Christmas Day & New Year’s Day Services

Christmas Day: Christmas is a Sunday this year, so we will have
worship at 10am here in the sanctuary. We’re planning a shorter, more
casual service with opportunity to sing favorite carols, hear the
Christmas story, a short meditation on Christmas, and get a chance to
ask Pastor Katrina anything you’ve wanted to know about
Christmas/the Christmas story.

New Year’s Day: January 1st is a Sunday this year, and we will be
having worship at 10am. This will also be a shorter, more casual
service, but we will have a sermon, communion, and an opportunity to
sing carols and hymns welcoming in the New Year.

Church Records

Deaths

Leavenworth (Lem) Sperry Jr. on November 15th
Richard Montville on November 19th
Important December 2022 Calendar Dates

12/3 @ 4:30pm: Middlebury Christmas Tree Lighting with MCC providing hot chocolate
12/11@10am: Annual Christmas Pageant during worship
12/12: All Star Tree gifts due in the Church Office
12/19: Christmas Basket donations and Christmas flower donations due
12/19 @5pm: Christmas Caroling: Meet at the church
12/24@5pm: Family Christmas Eve service
12/24@11pm: Communion Christmas Eve Service
12/25@10am: Christmas Day Service
12/26-12/30: Church Office closed
1/1@10am: New Year’s Day worship service

Christmas Eve with Middlebury Congregational Church
5pm: Candlelight Family Service
11pm: Candlelight Communion Service
1242 Whittemore Rd, Middlebury, CT