CHURCH LIFE FEBRUARY 2024



MIDDLEBURY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST MIDDLEBURYUCC.ORG

FROM THE PASTOR

February is a busy month here at MCC. We have the Blood Drive on 2/10, Scout Sunday and Souper Bowl Sunday on 2/11. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, 2/14, and we will have our Shrove Tuesday/Mardi Gras Jambalaya dinner on 2/13.

For the past couple years, we've joined with the First Congregational Church of Watertown for Ash Wednesday. This year, the service will be at the Watertown church at 7pm, and I will be preaching.

Lent is the 40 day season of preparation and penitence ahead of Eater. During Lent, the Church recalls the Israelites wandering 40 years in the wilderness and also Jesus' 40 day period of temptation and fasting in the wilderness before starting his public ministry. Lent is a time for us as Christians to take stock of ourselves and reflect on things we'd like to let go or things we'd like to take on. Fasting, increased time for prayer and scripture reading, and undertaking a particular spiritual discipline are all traditional Lenten practices.

Wednesday evenings in Lent (2/21, 2/28, 3/6, 3/13, 3/20, 3/27) we will be having a Lent discussion series on the Lord's Prayer. We say the Lord's Prayer every week during church, but we often don't stop to think about what we're actually saying. The Lord's Prayer actually covers a lot of ground, and there are many interesting things we can discover in each line of the prayer. We will have a soup supper at 6:30 and the discussion will start at 7pm. You don't need to know a lot about the Bible or have done research. Just bring yourself and your questions and ideas.

We are also looking for volunteers to make soup and bring bread or rolls for the suppers. A sign up will be posted on the bulletin board outside the social hall. If you can, give me a heads up if you think you'll be coming so we can get a feel for how much soup we're going to need.

One of the ways Christians have used the Lord's Prayer is as a model for how to structure our own prayers. Sometimes, I find it hard to come up with what I'm supposed to pray, and using the Lord's Prayer as a sort of guide or prompt can be helpful to get unstuck with what to pray about. Generally the Lord's Prayer has five categories it covers, so we can use those to make our own prayers:

- 1) Praise: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name"
 - a. One of the things we do in prayer is praise God. Praising God is tied to gratitude and giving thanks, and it helps us foster appreciation and gratefulness for God and God's creation.
- 2) Praying for God's will to be done: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"
 - a. Praying for God's will to be done can have a personal or more global dimension. We can pray about ourselves and for where we seek God to help us line up our lives with God's will. But, we can also pray here for thing like peace or an end to injustice because when the Kingdom of God is fully here, God's will will be done and there will be peace and justice, etc.
- 3) Prayer for our needs: "Give us this day our daily bread"
 - a. You can take this as a place to pray broadly for all your needs or more specifically about the basic staples we all need to survive and thrive: food, water, shelter, safety, community, etc.
- 4) Confession: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."
 - a. It's good for us to recognize when we've made mistakes and done the wrong thing. We grow through acknowledging when we've missed the mark. And it's also a time to pray for people who have wronged us and to ask for help with forgiving.
- 5) Prayer for help in difficult times: "and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil"
 - a. The old King James Bible version of the Lord's Prayer we use in church isn't the most helpful translation of this bit of the prayer. More modern translations go with something more like "Do not bring us into the time of trial but deliver us from the Evil One." This is a good place to pray about the things we're struggling with and the trials we're going through.

As I was preparing for the study on the Lord's Prayer, I stumbled across a set of prayers by Karl Barth, a renowned 20th century Swiss Reformed theologian, that were included in the publication of his lectures on the

Lord's Prayer. Karl Barth served as pastor in Germany during the Nazi rise to power, and I thought this section of one of his prayers speaks to this present moment in our nation and world where there are a lot divisions and things seem up in the air:

"Remain unchanging, O God, both above and in the human actions and events of our days, so confusing and confused, oppressing and oppressive. Tell everyone and show them all that they are not lost from you, and that they cannot run from you. Show yourself everywhere as the Lord of the godly and the godless, of the wise and the foolish, of the healthy and the sick, as the Lord too of our poor church. You are the ruler of Protestants, of Catholics, and of all others. Ruler of good and bad governments, of the nourished and the undernourished peoples, and especially of those people who feel they must speak out and write whether for better or for worse. For you are Defender of us all, to whom we may commit ourselves, but also the Judge of us all, to whom we may commit ourselves, but also the Judge of us all, to whom we must answer both now and on the Last Day. [...] All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, in whom you have loved, chosen, and called humanity from all eternity. Amen."

Peace, Katrina Manzi Minister

SABBATICAL SPOTLIGHT

One of the concepts the Swiss are best known for is their neutrality. Switzerland home to many organizations like the Red Cross or the United Nations because of their neutrality. (During my sabbatical I was able to visit both the Red Cross Museum and the UN.) In addition to staying out of the World Wars, Switzerland didn't even join the United Nations until 2002 because they were concerned it would compromise their ability to be so famously neutral. When I was in Switzerland for my sabbatical, I found out that this neutrality is actually directly tied to the Protestant Reformation.

(As a brief aside about neutrality in the World Wars, throughout my time in Switzerland I saw multiple memorials to Swiss war dead for both those wars. The one I was able to translate was actually given as a gift by the French in thanksgiving for the thousands of Genevan men who

volunteered to fight and die for France during WWI. So, government neutrality didn't preclude many Swiss men from fighting and dying in those conflicts.)

In the 16th century, the Swiss Confederation had some provinces, cantons, that embraced Protestantism and some that remained Catholic. In some cases like the city of St. Gallen, the city was Protestant but the monastery which took up a large amount of real estate and employed much of the population, was Catholic. There were actually two very brief civil wars between the Catholic and Protestant cantons. During second of these Zurich reformer Huldrych Zwingli was actually killed in battle. I saw his sword and banner in the Switzerland Museum.

In the years following Zwingli's death, the Protestant and Catholic cantons decided to leave each other alone in terms of religious affairs and to maintain their alliances with each other against foreign threats. So, when the Thirty Years' War and other wars of religion broke out across Europe, the Swiss Confederation could not take the Protestant or Catholic side because they themselves were religiously divided. Switzerland had long provided highly regarded mercenary soldiers for armies throughout Europe, and the Swiss were able to remain neutral in these conflicts through mercenary contracts with the various powers.

This neutrality actually turned out to be quite profitable, and in subsequent European wars, Switzerland remained neutral, and eventually it became one of the central aspects of Swiss foreign policy. This longstanding policy is what led to Switzerland being the natural choice for the headquarters of the Red Cross, League of Nations, and eventually the United Nations.



THE DEACONS' BENCH

In our faith tradition, the Lenten season is generally a time of reflection and prayer. For this year's Lenten Soup and Scriptures series, Pastor Katrina will

lead a study examining the key elements of our Lord's Prayer. With this timing, the Diaconate would like to inquire again if there is interest in the establishment of a MCC prayer group and/or prayer supports.

Active prayer is a powerful way to:

- Worship the Lord by lifting up our praise and gratitude
- Develop and deepen our relationship with the Lord, Jesus and Holy Spirit
- Seek discernment and direction in situations or decisions where we struggle
- Request grace and mercy as we address the parts of ourselves that need personal growth, healing, and forgiveness
- Petition the Lord for protection and guidance for ourselves and others as we walk through the seasons of our lives
- Lament the state of discord in our boarder world and pray for peace
- Beseech the Lord for comfort when we experience illness, death, grief that knows a multiple of faces, and general uncertainly in our world

Above are a few areas where prayer is valuable, and you undoubtedly could add many other areas. In addition to all the topics we could pray about, there are different ways to pray. So beyond your own individual prayer life, we ask if you might have interest in any of the following:

- Prayer group (general). A group that meets to pray on issues as they arise at church such as concerns we learn about on Sunday, issues facing our church/community, and prayers for peace.
- <u>Prayer group (specific)</u>. A group that meets to pray on dedicated topics. For example, we could consider a dedicated group to pray for peace.
- <u>Prayer chain</u>. A listing of people who receive topics/items to pray about (likely via e-mail). The group could meet occasionally, but generally this structure would allow flexibly to pray as a unit without the constraint of time/place.
- Prayer partners. An informally organized session (perhaps quarterly) to share ideas, experiences and resources on prayer as a way to support and uplight one another. If you are interested in this type of informal gathering, we'd love to know what concepts you would like to explore. Some examples could include sharing: devotionals that have been helpful, scripture and/or bible studies that have been insightful, methods of prayer that work etc.

These are a few of our ideas, and we would love to know your feedback if you have any interest, and/or other ideas! Ultimately, if there is

interest/need, we simply wish to find ways to offer support for prayer, whether that is active prayer with others, or a more informal gathering to talk about elements of it, and learn from one another by way of encouragement.

If you have feedback, contact me at <u>michfinn@comcast.net</u>, Pastor Katrina, or any member of the Diaconate.

Michele Rowell Finn
On behalf of the Board of Deacons

FROM THE MISSION BOARD

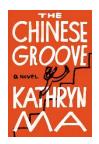
Mitten Line is hung in the Social Room for any new/gently used mittens, gloves, scarves to be donated to GWIM.

Blood Drive: February 10th 9am – 2pm. We are holding a blood drive in the social room. We are looking for volunteers to man the snack table and also to bake some goodies to hand out. Sign up sheets are on bulletin board if you want to give us an hour or two and also if you want to sign up for just a baked good it would be greatly appreciated.

Souper Bowl Sunday: February 11th Soup will be on sale for \$5.00 a 16oz container. Anyone who wants to try their culinary skills and provide a soup for our fundraiser would be wonderful. Sign up sheets for soups will also be on the bulletin board.

Thank you all for your generosity in supporting our missions.

Carol Rollins Mission Board



MCC Book Club

Please join us for our MCC book club on Thursday, February 22nd, 2024 at 6:00pm. In February, we will be discussing *The Chinese Groove* by Kathryn Ma. Middlebury Public Library has copies you can pick up. We hope to see you there!



As we've been preparing music for February, there are a number of things that we want to acknowledge through the hymns and anthems. First and foremost, we'll be celebrating the end of the Epiphany season (with readings that help reveal Jesus for who He really is: Healer, Teacher, Savior). And then, we transition to the season of Lent (beginning on February 14 this year).

But we'll also be hosting Scout Sunday on February 11th. And, in the wider community, we'll be seeing events in conjunction with Black History Month. It's very appropriate that the 2024 theme for Black History Month is "African Americans and the Arts". Here at MCC, we've drawn on Black Spiritual music for many meaningful moments during worship.

The Pilgrim Hymnal contains six different African American Spirituals, including two congregational favorites, "Let Us Break Bread Together" and "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian". And the New Century Hymnal contains a whopping thirty-four spirituals. In choir (weather and choir health permitting), we hope to include a spiritual as one of our anthems this month.

We hope you find the music meaningful as we observe the various significant days of February.

Blessings, Donna Obarowski

P.S. You can see for yourself if a hymn is based on a spiritual. The source or composer of the tune (as well as the source of the text) is always included with each hymn.

TRUSTEES

Goodbye 2023 and hello to 2024. As we close out 2023 and prepare our finances for 2024 we are very thankful for all those who sent in their pledge cards but also made part of their contributions to 2024 early. Our

hats are off to each of you. The new budget will have been presented and voted on by the congregation by the time you read this.

Most of our January meeting was spent analyzing last year's expenses and projecting where we are going in 2024. Our utilities were up to 5-6% over the year before. Repairs are a big unknown since things break down. The parsonage is like anyone's home and needs to be maintained. As trustees, we work hard to stay within our budget as best possible.

Going forward, with respect to the parsonage, painting the interior and new gutters are in the works and will be finished before the end of the month. I know you have seen this topic for some time. The end is near.

We have several projects in the works. Door closers for the NOAH's ARC room and the door towards the Town Hall have been sent out for repair. The door to the Town Hall has become an issue and hard to open and close, creating a safety hazard and must be addressed.

We are checking on possible income sources like fiber optic service, EV Charging station and solar system to reduce electric costs are possibilities. Any suggestions? There is nothing that can't be investigated.

Another trustee would be welcome. New face, new ideas, new skills will help get our job done. Look at the latest trustee report and contact one of us if interested. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted for the Trustees, Russ Tolles

YOGA AT MCC!

What: Vinyasa Yoga for all fitness levels

Where: Our Social Hall

When: Mondays @ 5:30 p.m. Why: Join us and RELAX!

How: Bring a mat and blocks. Bolster, water bottle, strap and blanket are

optional. Please dress to move.

Any questions, ask Cynthia Flisher @ 203-758-8454



JUMPIN'
JAMBALAYA
IS READY TO
ROLL!!

MCC Social Hall
Dine in or pick up
9\$ per bowl

+ MANAMA

Fat Tuesday

February 13. 2024

5:00 to 6:30 pm

Advanced orders recommended!

We will prepare extras but don't get left out in the cold. Please contact the church office to

leave a message with your preorders at office@middleburyucc.org 203-758-2671

Or email Ellen at spirit2000@aol.com

Our menu is straight from

Bourbon Street: a steaming bowl of

delicious jambalaya on a bed of

rice! Enjoy the New Orleans cuisine

and then dance the night away to

traditional zydeco music!



GOOD NEWS — AND GOOD IDEAS — FOR THE NEW YEAR

First, the good news: Thanks to the generosity of our members and friends, this year's pledge campaign was a rousing success! More than 60 families together pledged over \$123,000 – more than in any of the last seven years. Thank you!

Despite this success, we will still need to draw down money from our endowment in 2024 in order to meet our mission of Worship, Spiritual Growth, Service, and Fellowship. In the last two issues of Church Life, we've looked at ways other churches have faced similar challenges of declining membership and increasing expenses. This month, let's look at some of your questions and suggestions.

One member asked where income from the Preschool on the Green fits into the budget and whether it donates more than it costs. In 2023 the donation from PSOG was budgeted at \$8,500, or about 3% of our income. Because the preschool donates rather than paying rent, the amount has been variable and negotiable based on circumstances such as registration. The donation has been as high as \$10,000 at one point but was waived when the pandemic closed the school.

The preschool uses the church's payroll services but pays its staff and other expenses from its own budget. Whether insurance, utilities, and other shared costs total more than the donation is difficult to determine. This relationship is something church leadership will need to address in 2024.

About 10 pledges did not renew, some because of death or relocation. One previous pledge who did not renew this year responded to our letter that they were returning to their Catholic roots because they disagree with our Open and Affirming discussions. MCC has not yet decided on ONA, so it's still too early to tell the long-term impact on membership or giving, if any. Like the Preschool, ONA must also be considered in light of our mission.

One member suggested pooling costs, such as back-office payroll and accounting services, with other churches and nonprofits. It's worth looking into.

Along the same lines, MCC could develop alliances with other churches to support one another. In the past we swapped summer worship with St. George's and we discussed combining teen youth programs with other area churches. We have done pulpit exchanges with Congregational churches in Washington and Watertown, and MCC native Jeff Lukens is now pastor at South Britain. These UCC churches are active in the Litchfield South Association, and by working together we may be able to expand missions, programs, and perhaps communal fundraising through projects we don't have the resources to do alone.

Two more stewardship suggestions come from the Southern New England Conference. When a Massachusetts church came up \$40,000 short of a balanced budget on its pledge drive, they developed a "40 for 40" campaign. They asked for 40 gifts of \$1,000, or \$20 a week, from the wider community. They received support not only from members and friends who had already pledged, but also the community groups that met there, couples who married there, families who had moved away, local businesses and banks, community foundations, even charitable organizations.

They came in slightly short of their goal, but it was enough to avoid dipping into the principal of their endowment. That church may do it again this year.

SNEUCC also shared the story of another Massachusetts church that was paid \$7,500 by an HBOMAX production company for on-location filming of a show about Julia Child. Here in Connecticut, we can get our picturesque site on the state Office of Film, TV & Digital Media list of filming locations.

We will need to make changes and choices in 2024 if we are to fulfill our mission in the future. Some of that is policy. Some is individual commitment. Some involves outreach or working with others.

All of those come from God, who gives us the time, talent, and treasure we need to make it work.

Howard Fielding For the Board of Stewardship

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD: A LENTEN STUDY ON THE LORD'S PRAYER

Matthew 6: 9-13, Luke 11:2-4

Social Hall, Wednesdays during Lent: 6:30 Soup Supper, 7pm Discussion

2/21: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name"

• Scripture: John 1:1-14

2/28: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

• Revelation 21: 1-7, Luke 15: 11-32, Matthew 13:44

3/6: "Give us this day our daily bread"

• Exodus 16:1-31, Isaiah 25:6-8, Matthew 14: 13-21

3/13: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

• Matthew 18: 21-35, Matthew 6:14-15, Leviticus 25

3/20: "and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil"

• Matthew 26:36-46

3/27: "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen"

• Psalm 146, Psalm 150, 1 Chronicles 29:10-13, Romans 8: 31-39

For further reading:

- N.T. Wright, The Lord and His Prayer,
 - o General accessible overview. Adapted from a sermon series.
- C. Clifton Black, The Lord's Prayer
 - Deep dive into translation, language, and interpretation of the Lord's Prayer with extensive bibliographies for further research
- Karl Barth, *Prayer* (2002, 50th anniversary edition)

Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth's lectures on the Lord's Prayer. This edition includes a bunch of pastoral prayer from Barth's sermon and essays by current scholars. If you want a short, accessible entry point into the writing of one of the most important theologians of the 20th century, this is a great option.

"MAKING ALL THINGS NEW"

This was the theme of The 34th United Church of Christ General Synod which I had the great opportunity and privilege to attend from June 30th thru July 4 last summer in Indianapolis. Our church is part of the Southern New England UCC Conference and my expenses were covered by this organization. Churches from all over the country were represented but the SNEUCC delegation was the largest with more than 100 participants representing churches from CT, RI and MA. If you are like I was before I attended, you may not have any idea of the purpose of a General Synod, which presently takes place every 2 years. There was a lot of opportunity to learn from each other, many speeches, lots of testimonials and emotional discourse, videos, discussions and presentations including a powerful visual display regarding George Floyd. We also witnessed the installation of Karen Georgia Thompson as the newest General Minister and President of the UCC.

But the real business of The General Synod was the consideration and vote on 17 resolutions and bylaw changes. The main bylaw change was a proposal to change the frequency of gathering from every 2 years to every 3 years. Some of the resolutions were topics one would expect such as solitary confinement in our prisons and gun violence prevention. But others would be unexpected to many like plastic pollution, digital justice (enabling everyone to have access to the Internet) and planning and implementing electrification. A lot of us would be surprised to realize the percentage of people in the country who live in homes without electricity.

While in Indianapolis I learned a lot about the mission of the UCC, our wider church and its members. The UCC is a spectrum. We are a diverse community representing many cultures across all levels of education and socio-economic demographics. I took away many, many thought provoking concepts and moments of grace. I leave you with a few quotes here . . . Silence is Violence . . . If there is no struggle, there is no progress . . . When hate rises, love rises louder . . . Step back so others can step forward . . . Until the Lion tells the story, the hunter will

always be the Hero . . . and they'll know we are Christians by our Love...

"Let all you do be done in Love." Corinthians 16:14 Diane Barnard

THE MCC VIRTUAL TIP JAR

We've all seen tip jars at stores and restaurants, but this tip jar is for MCC. This Lent, we're practicing gratitude. When someone goes the extra mile, does a small thing that means a lot, or you're just feeling grateful, drop something in our virtual tip jar and tell us what you're thankful for. During the season of Easter, we'll publish all our thanksgivings in Church Life so we can all



appreciate the many things we all do to be of service and make this community special. Scan the QR code or go to https://middleburycc.breezechms.com/form/f8778a73 to leave a tip! All proceeds go to support the church general fund.

IMPORTANT FEBRUARY DATES

2/10: 9am-2pm Blood Drive

2/11: Scout Sunday

Souper Bowl Sunday

2/13: 5pm-6:30pm Jumpin' Jambalaya Dinner

2/14: 7pm Ash Wednesday Service at the First Congregational Church

of Watertown

Middlebury Congregational Church 1242 Whittemore Rd. Middlebury CT 06762 RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Non-Profit Org. US Postage Prepaid Permit No. 117