



Tidings

Sharing the stories of life-changing ministries

Issue 722

December 2009

THE MEMORY OF CHRISTMAS

WORSHIP
SERVICES
(9, 11 am)

HIGHER
GROUNDS &
SUNDAY
SCHOOL
(10 am)

DECEMBER
SERMON SERIES
*They Call
Him...*

SENSE GOD
PERSONALLY
(pages 1-5)

SEEK GOD
PASSIONATELY
(pages 6-7)

SERVE GOD
PURPOSEFULLY
(pages 8-13)



open hearts
open minds
open doors

What is your fondest memory of Christmas? Do you remember the excitement of childhood dreams that were so intense you couldn't sleep the night before? Do you remember a Christmas Eve service with your family when the sanctuary was bathed in soft candlelight, swags of evergreen graced the windows and familiar carols warmed your heart? Whatever happened to those kinds of Christmas memories? Have they been replaced by long lines at Walmart, the pressure to find the newest gadget, and the stress that comes from over-spending? Perhaps — *but not without your approval.*

Christmas means so much more to Christians than it does to the general population. It is our beginning, it is our greatest hope, and it is the promise from God that love never fails. Christmas for us is not just a season, but an attitude for life. It is part of our

collective memories of why the church exists and why it is so central to our lives.

But there is another question that lingers and waits to be asked — *What will Christmas remember of you?*

“What will Christmas remember of you?”

Christmas is about so much more than presents, lights, and brightly wrapped gifts under a tree; it is about a Child Who came into the world in the most unusual way to transform the world by giving it a lasting memory of what life was meant to be and perhaps still could be. He offered us grace and then invited us to join Him in the party of a lifetime. How will this Child remember you this

Christmas?

If Christmas is only a passing fancy, a day of excess, or a fleeting respite from the routine, then the Child really doesn't have much to remember about us does He? Fair weather friends are perhaps the best you could call us. But if we continue to live the rest of the year with compelling generosity, to serve and give with enthusiasm, and to celebrate His on-going life in worship, then surely He will remember us as brothers and sisters.

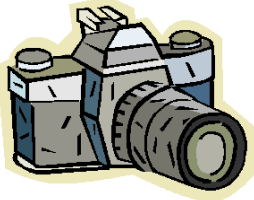
This coming year, let us work together to reclaim our heritage and our memory of what Christmas was, what Christmas is, and what Christmas will always be — God's personal invitation to a better life. *Join us and let's reclaim Christmas.*

Merry Christmas
Church Family,



sense God personally

“Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people; for there is born to you this day...a Savior...” [Luke 2:10-11].



focus on the...

WORSHIP TEAM

Everyone is on some kind of spiritual journey. Some are skeptical about God, the church, or the Bible.

Others have questions about faith and are seeking answers. Some have recently become Christ-followers and are hungering for more; others have believed for a long time and are now mentoring others. At *First United Methodist Church*, we seek to encourage each other along this spiritual journey, each one moving toward a deepening relationship with God. We accept each other as fellow travelers on the journey and share our experiences and burdens along the way. Whether by great leaps or small steps of faith, we’re growing to understand the love and grace God has shown us in Christ. By offering relevant teaching, heart-felt worship, honest friendships, and compassionate care for those in need, we strive to build a loving community that follows Christ, in order to reach a community that is struggling to make sense of life without Him.

Our purpose as both individual Christians and as the church is to enter into authentic, personal worship of God as the Source and Sustainer of all life and to inspire others to discover a personal relationship with an ever-present, ever-loving, ever-inviting Savior. Worship centers our lives on what’s real, lasting, and meaningful.

MUSIC MINISTRY

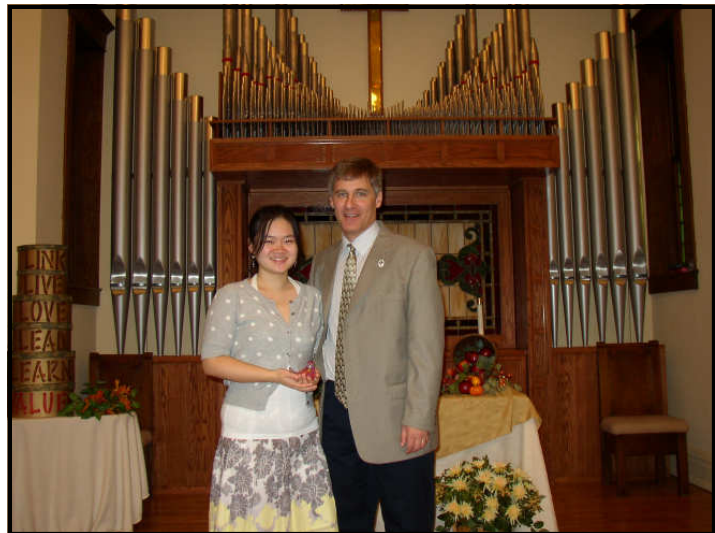
Music is a celebration of the heart whereby the Spirit of God lifts the hearts of Christians to praise God through various forms of melody, rhythm, and verse to enhance the worship experience. Music is not the focus of worship but rather an ever changing rhythm that reflects the true spirit of worship. *“Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.”*

RESPONSIBILITIES

- ~ Invite life change through practical, relevant worship experiences
- ~ Develop creative, engaging, joyful expression of worship
- ~ Direct oversight of the music ministry
- ~ Direct oversight of weddings, funerals, and sanctuary events
- ~ Develop and train acolytes, ushers and liturgists
- ~ Enable worship experiences for seekers to mature disciples
- ~ Promote excellence in worship through training events, special classes, study times, conferences & other resources.

EVENTS

Advent	Weddings	Communion		
Music	Devotionals	Baptisms		
Easter	Funerals	PALS		
Altar	Sermon series	Bells		
Special speakers	Choir	Media slides		
Healing services	Bulletins	Community services	Audio recordings	Special Sundays



2008 baptism of Lin Xi (Lucy), who was born in Xiangfan City, Hubei Province, China, and grew up in Beijing. Currently a student at Marietta College majoring in early childhood education, Lucy is standing with Pastor Steve.

On-Line Training - <http://www.flumcelearning.com/lmodules.shtml>

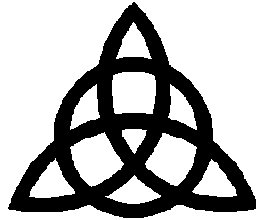
sense God personally

“And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger...” [Luke 2: 7].

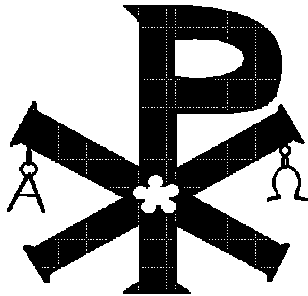
More than a craft project

CHRISMONS — CHRIST MONogram

Chrismons (CHRIST MONogram) are Christian symbols typically created in “gold and white symbolizing the purity and majesty of the Son of God and the Son of Man” and used to proclaim the birth of Jesus Christ. Made to remind us of God’s greatest Gift — Emmanuel, there are many Chrismons that can be made to adorn a Christmas tree. For example, the fish represents the affirmation of faith in Christ.



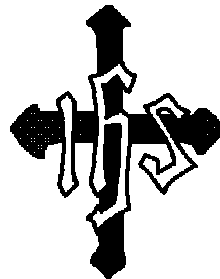
The manger represents Jesus’ humble birth, and the chi-rho stands for the first letters of the Greek word *Christos* or *Christ*. The triquetra and circle consists of the triquetra which represents the Trinity and the circle which symbolizes eternity.



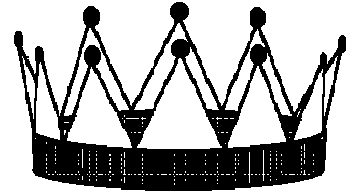
Chrismons were created by Frances Kipps Spencer in 1957 out of a desire to have appropriate decorations for the Ascension Lutheran Church’s Christmas tree. She crafted biblical symbols representing Christ that would “serve to remind each of the true reason for the season regardless of church denomination.”

Her original ornaments are still displayed in the Danville, Virginia, church.

At First Church for two years, over one hundred Chrismons were made by the United Methodist Women from 1973 to 1975. Having heard about Chrismons from the church organist who had come from a church in Pennsylvania, the ladies wrote to the church requesting information so they could learn more about Chrismons. Once they received the patterns, the ladies started making the ornaments at their weekly meetings.

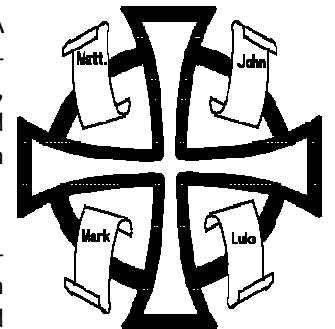


According to Jean Pickering, “The ladies brought their lunches and had a wonderful time working on them in fellowship with each other.”



The first year, the UMW “hoped to have enough ornaments to decorate the fifteen foot tree in the sanctuary.” They accomplished their goal and then “decided that they were having so much fun together that they continued making the Chrismons.” Some of the one hundred Chrismon ornaments are fragile yet many are standing the test of time. Along with the UMW, Mary Allen’s Sunday school class created the Chrismon of the circle of life with a dove while the youth group at the time crafted the building blocks of the church Chrismon.

Many of the church’s Chrismons, which uniquely proclaim Christ’s birth and the message of salvation, will be displayed again this year on a tree standing on the edge of the chapel beginning with the first week of Advent. A list of all the ladies who participated in this project, many of whom have passed away, will be located on an easel near the tree.



Much more than a craft project, the Chrismons, which proclaim the Good News and span Jesus’ life from cradle to tomb, illustrate God’s love for His children as seen through the gift of Emmanuel, Whom He gave to all so that each can have everlasting life.

To learn more about the meaning and the making of Chrismons, “which proclaim the name, the life, and the saving acts of Jesus the Christ,” visit <http://www.umcs.org/chrismons> and <http://www.chrismon.org/site/chrismon.htm>.

sense God personally



**SAY A PRAYER &
SEND A CARD**
*"I thank God upon every
remembrance of you."*
[Philippians 1:3]

WEEKLY ACTIVITIES

SUNDAY

Choir, 6 pm
IHS Youth, 6 pm

MONDAY-FRIDAY

Walking, 8:30 am

MONDAY-THURSDAY

Learning Center, 9 am

MONDAY

Girl Scouts, 3 pm
Boy Scouts, 6:30 pm

TUESDAY

Bells, 6:30 pm
Hasty Small Group, 5:30 pm

WEDNESDAY

Women's Bible Study, 9:30 am

DECEMBER ACOLYTES

9 am Blended Service

December 6: Isabelle Erb
December 13: Liz Sexton
December 20: Abby Stoveken
December 27: Kaylin Burge

11 am Traditional Service

December 6: Bryce & Megan Sayre
December 13: Allison & Emily Pickering
December 20: Joshua Chambers & Ben Demhlow
December 27: Christopher Berman & Jillian Leo

DECEMBER USHERS

9 am BLENDED SERVICE

Brian & Fred Burge
Steve Bodnar

11 am TRADITIONAL SERVICE

December 6

Rex Bush, Ken Cox, Chris Henderhan,
Jim Schmidt, Bob Woodford

December 13

Fred Dearman, Wayne King, Jeff & Pam
Middleton, Charles Pickens, Warren
Epperly (WA)

December 20

Rick Blauvelt, Larry & Marilyn Croucher,
Joe Hutchinson, Tim Sayer

December 27

Wes Clarke, Gene Duncan, Joe & Lori
Webb, Karen Fenton (WA)

DATES TO REMEMBER

DECEMBER 3: Christmas Play Practice, 3 pm
DECEMBER 4: Senior Luncheon, 12 pm
DECEMBER 5: Angel Breakfast, 8:30 am
DECEMBER 7: WES Santa Shop, 8:30 am
DECEMBER 8: WES Santa Shop, 8:30 am
Children's Ministry Christmas
Party, 6 pm
DECEMBER 9: WES Santa Shop, 8:30 am
DECEMBER 10: UMW Circle Christmas Party
at DaVinci's, 12 pm
DECEMBER 11: Polar Express Pajama Party &
Parents' Night Out, 5-9 pm
IHS Christmas Lock-In, 5 pm
DECEMBER 12: Christmas Play Practice, 2-4 pm
DECEMBER 13: Christmas Play, 10:15 am
DECEMBER 14: Girl Scout Troop 5527
DECEMBER 17: Faithgirlz, 3 pm
DECEMBER 19 & 26: Community Breakfast, 8 am
DECEMBER 20: Christmas Caroling, 4 pm

sense God personally



**SAY A PRAYER &
SEND A CARD**
*"I thank God upon every
remembrance of you."*
 [Philippians 1:3]

Young at Heart Luncheon

Friday, December 4, 12 pm

Come, begin your Christmas celebration early with a traditional turkey dinner including mashed potatoes, dressing and gravy accompanied by lots of fun and fellowship. The program will be everyone listening to and then helping to ring the bells from The Inn in Marietta. These bells are smaller than the average musical bells and are much easier to hold. Come, make music with the bells! We'll be looking for you!

Please bring a vegetable or salad dish.

*May the peace and hope of
Christ's birth
be with you now and in the days ahead...*



HOLIDAYS CHURCH OFFICE SCHEDULE

DECEMBER 24-25: Office closed
DECEMBER 28-31: Office closes at noon
JANUARY 1: Office closed

HOSPITALIZED

Elma Boyd	Joe Hutchinson
Mark Epperly	Marjorie Lane
Mahlon Fauss	Jerry McCallister
Dale Hall	Raymond Parrish

BIRTHDAYS & ANNIVERSARIES

December 1: Mike Albertson
Jennifer Fenton

December 2: Dave Mahaney, Weston McCallister,
Pat Schultheiss
Dave & Sandy Mahaney

December 3: Kaylin Burge

December 4: Cameron Constable, Davis Haynes,
Janet King, Ted Townsend

December 5: John & Betty Hammett

December 7: Josie Tomsik
RaeAnn Webb

December 9: Joe Hutchinson
Mary Lee Neal

December 10: Laura McCallister

December 12: Alex Ash

December 14: Jason King
Larry & Becky Martin

December 15: Kathryn Emerick
Eric Stephan

December 16: Charles Pickering
Ken & Beth Cox

December 17: Rex Bush

December 18: Loretta Constable, Charlotte Fauss,
Amy Stines

December 19: James Rittenhouse, Jr.

December 20: Steve Parks
Louis Stephan

December 23: Kelly Roberts

December 26: Patty Templeton

December 27: Hailey Constable
Dave & Pat Stephan
Lou & Rita Stephan

December 28: Ben Dehmlow
Sandy Laird

December 29: Ron Anderson, Tonia Bohnen,
Jeff McCallister

December 30: Michael Erb
Diana Leo

seek God passionately

“And suddenly there was...a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!’ [Luke 2: 13-14].

*Christmas Eve
Candlelight
Services*

6 pm & 8 pm

*Reception
MPR
7 pm*



First United Methodist Church

“WHERE IS IT?

WHERE IS THE MANGER?”

What is the true “Reason for the Season?” On Sunday morning, December 13, at 10:15 am, children from preschool thru sixth grade will answer that question for all of us when they ask, “Where is the manger in your holiday planning?” Written by Tonia Bohnen with assistance from Alisha Sexton, this year’s Christmas program entitled **“AWAY IN A MANGER,”** according to Tonia, “is about our reclaiming Christmas by slowing down and taking

time to remember the real reason for Christmas.” Practices have begun, and the children are learning their lines and rehearsing the traditional Christmas carols set to contemporary music. Come, celebrate the Good News in song and words as shared by the children.



Mason Adkins and Lauren Sexton as Joseph and Mary in the 2008 Children’s Christmas pageant.

Come, enjoy a morning of fun and fellowship and a hearty breakfast of pancakes and sausage on December 5 at 8:30 am in the MPR when the children “Give Christmas Away” at the annual **ANGEL BREAKFAST.** The children will visit different stations to assemble gift bags and make ornaments to be given to residents of Harmar Place Nursing Home while also preparing Prayer Bears to be distributed to residents of area nursing homes. As traditional, Pastor Steve will conclude the morning for the children and their parents with his reading of the Christmas Story. Please join in teaching the children about “Joyful Giving” by bringing a 1) scarf, 2) stocking cap, or 3) mittens to be hung on the Mitten Tree. All those items collected will be given by Hearts and Hands to area families in need.

The **HUG-A-BEAR** collection began on November 15 and will continue thru December 18. Bring a cuddly, squishy, loveable teddy bear to church and place it in a pew, so we can do like **Emma Jean Barnard**, the originator of the idea suggested years ago, “Hug them and fill them with lots of love before we deliver them” on December 20 to area nursing home residents.

seek God passionately

1 Corinthians 13

A CHRISTMAS VERSION

If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights, and shiny balls, but do not show love, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave-away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals, and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home, and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties, and sing in the choir's cantata, but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the husband,

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, but is thankful they are there to be in the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.

Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust, but giving the gift of love will endure.

— Anonymous

“HERE WE COME A-CAROLING...” on December 20 at 4 pm. Join us for an evening of fun and fellowship as both youth and adults “reclaim Christmas” by sharing themselves and their hearts, voices, smiles, and hugs with area nursing home residents while giving each, one of the Hug-A-Bears, filled with “love and joy.”

The nights may be dark, but the Star still shines. The days may be bleak, but the Light offers hope. You may be lonely and alone, but “Love, God’s love, came down at Christmas” for you, yes, you, for all of us, then, now, and for ever. Read the story of God’s gift, God’s Son, and know that it is your story, that God loves you, and that Jesus is the answer to every one of your questions: *“While Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to give birth. She gave birth to a Son, Whom the angel had told her to name Jesus. She wrapped Him in a blanket and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. There were shepherds watching their sheep nearby. Suddenly, God’s angel stood among them,...and they were afraid; but the angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid. I am here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everyone: a Savior has just been born in David’s town, a Savior Who is Messiah and Master. This is what you’re to look for: a Baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.’ At once the angel was joined by a huge choir of angels singing God’s praises: ‘Glory to God in heaven, and peace to all men and women on earth. The shepherds left, running, and found Mary and Joseph and the Baby lying in the manger”* [Luke 2: 6-18 MSG]. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him shall...have eternal life”* [John 3:16].

ALL ABOARD THE POLAR EXPRESS!

Bring a sleeping bag or blanket and a pillow and dress in your pajamas and climb aboard for an evening of magical fun on Friday, De-

cember 11, from 5-9 pm in the MPR at the **POLAR EXPRESS PAJAMA PARTY**. Children, infants to sixth graders, are invited to attend; and a pizza dinner will be provided. Games will be played; crafts will be made; and, of course, everyone will watch *The Polar Express*.

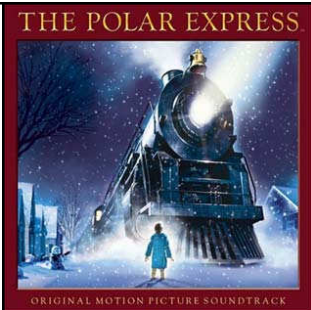
This is a **PARENTS’ NIGHT OUT** event with the opportunity for parents to spend an evening Christmas shopping or enjoying a nice dinner-date together or relaxing while the children travel on the Polar Express. The IHS Youth and the Children’s Ministry Team will entertain the children during the evening. All proceeds will be used to finance the Leap Ahead Learning Center Tuition and Programming.

PRE-REGISTRATION REQUIRED

\$20 per family

Register by DECEMBER 9

Register in the church office, 304-375-6386



serve God purposefully

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” [John 3:16].

the first Christmas changed the world;
LET’S RECLAIM CHRISTMAS
from the Advent conspiracy of consumerism

Let’s face it. The church doesn’t own Christmas anymore. Instead of a holiday that celebrates a God Who gives relationally and sacrificially, Christmas has become the ultimate celebration of consumerism. The truth is, most of the gifts we buy are meant to impress somebody — our kids, our families, our co-workers, our bosses, our neighbors. Somehow, we’ve equated our affection for people with the amount we spend on them. And so, when families can’t afford gifts for their kids, the message the kids receive is one of rejection and unworthiness. But what if we began to reclaim Christmas? What if the people who claim to follow Jesus became bold enough to tell His story? Not just the cuddly baby-in-the-manger story, but the story of a radical revolutionary Who turned culture upside down by giving of Himself through an economy of pure, perfect love. What if the church reclaimed Christmas? Can you see how it could literally change the world? That is the scandal of Christmas. That is **ADVENT CONSPIRACY.** — by Joe Webb

GIVING RELATIONALLY simple means giving gifts that demonstrate our true affection for one another. They can be handmade instead of store-bought. They can be gifts of time rather than gifts off a shelf. They can even be gifts that help others re-create their lives while honoring the recipient in some way. A few ideas of how to reclaim Christmas from consumerism and spread God’s love and grace out of gratitude for God’s Gift and our blessings are listed on these two pages. During every Sunday in Advent, opportunities to learn more about and contribute to the local and global mission and outreach programs such as Hearts and Hands and the trips to Liberia and Nicaragua will be offered in the chapel area.

“Give from the heart, not out of obligation.”

“It’s not about the cost of the gift; it’s about what the gift says from my heart to your heart.”

“Rather than giving more, give more of yourself.”

“In an act of worship and stewardship, what we don’t spend because of consumerism, frees us to share, out of love, with others.”

“Celebrating Christ’s birth is an act of worship in or out of the church.”



“Give a goat; save a child’s life with milk, cheese and much more.”

GIFT IDEAS:

1. Framed photos of family/friends ‘ activities
 2. Personalized recipe booklet
 3. Family pizza night gift basket
 4. Cook for a friend or take a meal once a month
 5. Gift certificate for household chores, errands, etc.
 6. Road trip with your children for an out-of-town adventure
 7. Take a friend for a hike and provide lunch
 8. Personal Advent reflections booklet with personal photos, scripture/devotional messages
 9. Homemade Advent calendar
- (more suggestions are available at www.rethinkingchristmas.com)

“Give ducks to produce hundreds of nutritious, protein-rich eggs to feed a family year round and to be sold for extra income.”



serve God purposefully

They made their list and checked it twice; and last year, seventy children from Williamstown Elementary School were able to purchase gifts for family members from First Church's **SANTA SHOP**. When Alisha Sexton asked the congregation to sponsor one hundred children at \$10 each, she was "overwhelmed and overjoyed at the great generosity shared by the hearts of the Body"; for within one week the contributions totaled approximately \$2,500. Shortly after the Santa Shop closed, WES asked First Church if it would consider buying winter coats and clothing for students with the greatest need. According to Alisha, "Twenty-nine coats along with winter clothing were purchased for \$250."

Because **THE GIFT CONTINUES**, First Church will again provide a Santa Shop with the \$1,500 that remained from last year. "What is so unbelievable to me and what I am so thankful for" according to Alisha, "is that, in an act of compelling generosity and out of relational giving, the church recognized the importance of this project and so lovingly embraced and supported it."

"...I was hungry, and you gave Me food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink...; I was naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me...inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these, My brethren, you did it to Me" [Matthew 25: 35-40].

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angle left her" [Luke 1: 38].

Over the past numerous years, First Church has decorated the sanctuary with **POINSETTIAS** purchased by members of the congregation in honor or in memory of loved ones and/or friends. This year, with the local need for food and shelter greater than ever, we will not be offering poinsettias, but inviting you to celebrate your love of and heart for others by giving to the **PASTOR'S DISCRETIONARY FUND** so that emergency financial assistance can be provided to those in need. I hope you will support our effort to reclaim the Christmas spirit of giving without receiving and of giving out of compelling generosity.

— Pastor Steve

A very busy time of the year? Yes. An expensive time of the year? Yes. During the holidays and the onset of winter, please be mindful of those among us who are facing very tough financial times. Because of all the layoffs in the area, there will be many facing the decision of how to pay bills while having something for their children to open on Christmas morning. Pray for those people and help, as you can, by sharing God's love and your love for them by filling one of the **HEARTS & HANDS** red bag hanging outside the MPR. Consider also donating a coat, boots, or blankets so someone young or old can experience the warmth of God's love.

"Shine the light of God's love and change lives. Forever."



OTHER ALTERNATIVE GIVING RESOURCES

1. **COMPASSION INTERNATIONAL** (www.compassion.com) — sponsor a child by providing clothing, nutrition, etc.
2. **HEIFER INTERNATIONAL** (www.heifer.org) — Buy livestock, crops, etc., for families in developing nations to help them become self-sufficient and build healthier communities and local economies.
3. **MACY'S PATH TO PEACE** (www.macys.com/rwanda) — Purchase exquisite baskets handcrafted by Rwandan women to provide sustainable income for their families and communities.
4. **ONE** (www.one.org) — Purchase merchandise to help build awareness of and raise funds for anti-poverty programs worldwide.
5. **SAMARITAN'S PURSE** (www.samaritanspurse.com) — Numerous giving opportunities, including Operation Christmas Child, relief missions, and more.
6. **TOM'S SHOES** (www.tomsshoes.com) — For each pair of shoes bought, a pair is given to a needy child somewhere in the world.
7. **WORLD VISION** (www.worldvision.com) — Sponsor a child or buy gifts that help local families and communities.

sense God personally, seek God passionately, serve God purposefully

“O Holy Night! The stars are brightly shining; it is the night of the dear Savior’s birth...a thrill of hope the weary world rejoices.... He taught us to love one another, His law is love and His Gospel is peace” [“O Holy Night”].

There is one word that describes the night He came — ordinary. The sky was ordinary. An occasional gust stirred the leaves and chilled the air. The stars were diamonds sparkling on black velvet. Fleets of clouds floated in front of the moon. It was a beautiful night — a night worth peeking out your bedroom window to admire — but not really an unusual one. No reason to expect a surprise. Nothing to keep a person awake. An ordinary night with an ordinary sky.

The sheep were ordinary. Some fat. Some scrawny. Some with barrel bellies. Some with twig legs. Common animals. They were simply sheep — lumpy, sleeping silhouettes on a hillside. And the shepherds. Peasants they were. Probably wearing all the clothes they owned. Smelling like sheep and looking just as woolly. They were conscientious, willing to spend the night with their flocks. But you won’t find their staves in a museum nor their writings in a library. No one asked their opinion on social justice or the application of the Torah. They were nameless and simple.

An ordinary night with ordinary sheep and ordinary shepherds. And were it not for a God who loves to hook an “extra” on the front of the ordinary, the night would have gone unnoticed. The sheep would have been forgotten, and the shepherds would have slept the night

“God dances amidst the common”

away. But God dances amidst the common. And that night He did a waltz. The black sky exploded with brightness. Trees that had been shadows jumped into clarity. Sheep that have been silent became a chorus of curiosity. One minute the shepherd was dead asleep, the next he was rubbing his eyes and staring into the face of an infant. The night was ordinary no more. [The Applause of Heaven by Max Lucado]

“In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.... For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” [Luke 2: 8, 11].



“the immeasurable gift...|mmanuel”

“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” [John 1:14].

Christmas is a time of celebration and song, goodwill and good food, family and friends. But it’s important to remember that the source of Christmas is the saving Christ. Humanity is lost, fallen. We were separated from God because of our sin, and our only hope of forgiveness was for someone completely innocent of any wrongdoing to take all the punishment for our crimes. Such a perfect life and a perfect love were impossible for any human to achieve, so God Himself did it for us. He sent His Son from eternity into mortality, from glory into flesh, and from a throne to a manger. Ultimate hope was born in ultimate humility.

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.... He is before all things” [Colossians 1: 15, 17].

Whenever you study the Gospels, you see God in every picture of Christ. He talks like God, acts like God, thinks like God, performs miracles that only God could do, teaches truth only God would teach, and responds with the love, goodness, wisdom, and omniscience that only God could possess. And it all begins with the birth of the divine Child. This is the immeasurable gift of Christmas. Christ, God’s own Son, gave up His wealth and privilege to live as God with us, Immanuel, that He might save His people from our sins and that through His poverty, we might become rich. The miraculous gift of Christmas is God being born in a manger, so we can be born again in His glory. [“The Birth of Hope” by John MacArthur]

sense God personally, seek God passionately, serve God purposefully

CHILD OF PROPHECY. The Christmas story in the Bible begins several hundred years before that night in Bethlehem. The Old Testament contains about 350 prophecies and promises concerning the coming Messiah, the Anointed One, Who would redeem the people of God. The centerpiece of all the Christmas prophecies, Isaiah 9:6 was written nearly 600 years before Jesus' birth: **"For a Child will be born to us, a Son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."**

God chose the name *Jesus* for His Son because its basic meaning defined the fundamental, overarching purpose for the Son's coming to earth. *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Joshua*, *Jeshua*, or *Jehoshua*, each of which means "*Jehovah (Yaweh) will save.*" The name *Immanuel* is the heart of the Christmas story. It is a Hebrew name that means, literally, "*God with us.*" It is a promise of incarnate deity, a promise that God Himself would appear as a human infant. This baby who was to be born would be God Himself in human form. If we could condense all the truths of Christmas into only three words, these would be

"Christmas in three words...God with us"

the words: "*God with us.*" We tend to focus our attention at Christmas on the infancy of Christ, but the greater truth of the holiday is His deity. More astonishing than a baby in a manger is the omnipotent Creator of the heavens and the earth!

Immanuel, infinitely rich, became poor. He assumed our nature, entered our sin-polluted world, took our guilt on Himself although He was sinless, bore our griefs, carried our sorrows, was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities. All of that wrapped up in "*God with us.*" The apostle Paul penned one of the gladdest truths in all of Scripture: **"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich"** [2 Corinthians 8:9]. That's the immeasurable gift of Christmas. Christ, God's own Son, gave up His wealth and privilege to live as *God with us*, that He might save His people from their sins and that through His poverty might become rich. [God's Gift of Christmas by John MacArthur]

"Joy to the world! The Lord is come...let every heart prepare Him room,..." ["Joy to the World"].

MARY'S PRAYER. God. O infant-God. Heaven's fairest child. Conceived by the union of divine grace with our disgrace. Sleep well. Sleep well. Bask in the coolness of this night, bright with diamonds. Sleep well, for the heat of anger simmers nearby. Savor the sweet safety of my arms, for a day is soon coming when I cannot protect You.

Rest well, tiny hands, For though you belong to a King, you will touch no satin, own no gold. You will grasp no pen, guide no brush. No, your tiny hands are reserved for works more precious: to touch a leper's open wound, to wipe a widow's weary tear, to claw the ground at Gethsemane. Your hands, so tiny, so tender, so white, clutched tonight in an infant's fist. They aren't destined to hold a scepter nor wave from a palace balcony. They are reserved instead for a Roman spike that will staple them to a Roman cross. Sleep deeply, tiny eyes. Sleep

while you can. For soon the blurriness will clear, and you will see the mess we have made of your world. O eyes that will see hell's darkest pit and witness her ugly prince...sleep,



sleep while you can. And tiny feet cupped in the palm of my hand, rest. For many difficult steps lie ahead for you.... Do you feel the cold sea water upon which you will walk? Do you wince at the invasion of the nail you will bear? Rest, tiny feet. Rest today so that tomorrow you might walk with power. Rest. For millions will follow in your steps. And little heart...holy heart. How many times will we break you? You'll be torn by the thorns of our accusations. You'll be crushed under the weight of your own sorrow. And you'll be pierced by the spear of our rejection. Yet in that piercing, in that ultimate ripping of muscle and membrane, in that final rush of blood and water, you will find rest. Your hands will be freed, your eyes will see justice, your lips will smile, and your feet will carry you home. And there you'll rest again — this time in the embrace of your Father. [God Came Near by Max Lucado]

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Seated at the great desk, the Author opens the large book. It has no words. It has no words because no words exist. No words exist because no words are needed. There are no ears to hear them, no eyes to read them. The Author is alone.

And so He takes the great pen and begins to write. Like an artist gathers his colors and a woodcarver his tools. The Author assembles His words. There are three. Three single words. Out of these three will pour a million thoughts. But on these three words the story will suspend.

He takes His quill and spells the first. **T-I-M-E.**

Time did not exist until He wrote it. He, Himself, is timeless, but His story would be encased in time. The story would have a first rising of the sun, a first shifting of the sand. A beginning...and an end. A final chapter. He knows it before He writes it. **TIME.** A footspan on eternity's trail.

Slowly, tenderly, the Author write the second word. A name. **A-D-A-M.**

As He writes, He sees him, the first Adam. Then He sees all of the others. In a thousand eras in a thousand lands, the Author sees them. Each Adam. Each child. Instantly loved. Permanently loved. To each He assigns a time. To each He appoints a place. No accidents. No coincidences. Just design.

The Author makes a promise to these unborn: **"In My image, I will make you. You will be like Me. You will laugh. You will create. You will never die. And you will write."** They must. For each life is a book, not to be read, but rather a story to be written. The Author starts each life story, but each life will write his or her own ending. What a dangerous liberty. How much safer it would have been to finish the story for each Adam. To script every option. It would have been simpler. It would have been safer.

But it would not have been love. Love is only love if chosen. So the Author decides to give each child a pen. "Write carefully," He whispers.

Lovingly, deliberately, He writes a third word, already feeling the pain." **E-M-M-A-N-U-E-L.**



The greatest mind in the universe imagined **time**. The truest judge granted **Adam** a choice. But it was love that gave **Emmanuel**, God with us. The Author would enter His own story. The Word became flesh. He, too, would be born. He, too, would be human. He, too, would have feet and hands. He, too, would have tears and trials. And, most importantly, He, too, would have a choice. Emmanuel would stand at the crossroads of life and death and make a choice. The Author knows well the weight of that decision. He pauses as He writes the page of His own pain. He could stop. Even the Author has a choice. But how can a Creator not create? How can a Writer not write? And how can Love not love? So He chooses life, though it means death, with hope that His children will do the same. And so the Author of Life completes the story. He drives the spike in the flesh and rolls the stone over the grave. Knowing the choice He will make, knowing the choice all Adams will make, He pens, "The End," the closes the book and proclaims the beginning.

"Let there be light!" [A Gentle Thunder by Max Lucado]



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WHY PRAY?

“Why pray?” we ask of ourselves and others. It is very obvious in scripture that the Lord wants us to pray. There are many commands given to us concerning prayer: “Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” [Luke 18:1] and “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” [Philippians 4:6].

These are just a few of many such injunctions in God’s Word concerning prayer in our lives. Why is it then, that so many Christians feel so inadequate in their prayer lives? Christians...long to become people of prayer; yet, the life of prayer evades so many. I believe one important key is to understand the reason behind God’s commands to us to pray. There are three reasons given for prayer in God’s Word:...1) **Knowing God**, 2) **Obeying God**, and 3) **Partnering with God**.

The first reason for prayer is the simple need we all have to **know God**. There is no way to draw near to the Lord apart from prayer. It is in prayer that we express to the Lord our love for Him, our faith in Him, our worship of Him, and our surrender to Him. The second reason for praying is simple **obedience**. God says to pray...so we pray. This is especially important...when we don’t feel like praying. The only thing that will lead us out of spiritual “dry times” is sticking with the routine of daily prayer and time in God’s Word. Developing a spiritual discipline out of obedience to the Lord is a bulwark against spiritual dryness, laziness, and busyness. One of the areas that I believe is least understood by Christians is the **partnership** that God has called us to with Himself in the area of prayer. God, in His wisdom and sovereign power, has chosen to accomplish His will on this planet through the prayers of His people. God has decided not to arbitrarily move in and out of situations on earth, even though He is able to do just that. Instead, He waits on His people to pray and then pours out His power in response to those prayers. [Read Ezekiel 22:30 and Isaiah 59].

God always looks first for an intercessor. It is His plan to accomplish His will on this planet through the prayers of the saints. God has given us the awesome privilege of partnering with Him in bringing about the advance of His Kingdom on earth.

[excerpt from *Partnering with God in Prayer* by David Butts]

“Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One Who makes me who I am” [Philippians 4:13].

CORE VALUE LIVE IN GRATITUDE

Gratitude opens us to moments of grace and our eyes to see God in the midst of a hectic life. Gratitude transforms our pessimism into optimism, anger into laughter, scarcity into abundance, and fear into love. It turns what we have into enough and more and celebrates life as a gift and Easter as an every-day reality. Worship at First Church is not just a Sunday event, but a lifestyle; and prayer is not just a request, but a praise. Thus, we worship and pray as a natural response to our awareness of God’s extravagant grace. We believe that we are at our best when we’re laughing, sharing and serving others with infectious gratitude and affirming, through our actions, “**God is good, all the time; all the time, God is good.**” Therefore, we live joyfully with radical optimism, serve with enthusiasm, and celebrate each person’s unique contributions and gifts. [Pastor Steve]

“*Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others*” [Cicero]

Extend random acts of kindness

Laugh and make others smile

Say “Thank You” often during the day

Worship and pray

Ministry Moment

GRACE & BENEVOLENCE

The Wesleyan tradition expresses love for God and love for neighbor with these two words: *gratitude* and *benevolence*. Our love for God springs from a grateful heart. We are thankful to our Creator for everything but especially for loving us. When we know how much God loves us, we cannot help loving God in return. Grateful love for God leads us to love others because of God’s love for them. Benevolence means having a “good will” toward all those around us. We wish the best for them, and we act in ways that promote their well-being. Carrying out benevolence means first, doing nothing harmful, and second, doing all that we can to be useful. Living in thankfulness to God and good will to others shows that love is truly at the center of our lives. It is the genuine expression of our faith. [Wesley Study Bible NRSV]

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“Unto us
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is born,
unto us
a Child
is given;

and His name
will be called
Wonderful,
Counselor,
Might God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.”

[Isaiah 9: 6-7]

SENSE GOD
PERSONALLY *through engaging*
WORSHIP and PRAYER

SEEK GOD
PASSIONATELY *through BIBLE*
STUDY and SMALL GROUP sharing

SERVE GOD
PURPOSEFULLY
through SPIRITUAL
GIFTS and faithful
STEWARDSHIP

