



December 2013

The Congregational Connection...

*Our connection to the family and friends of the
First Congregational Church*



December Highlights

Christmas Pageant/3rd Sunday Throw Down: Dec. 15th, at 11 a.m.

Cantata/4th Sunday Supper: Dec. 22nd, at 11 a.m.

Christmas Eve Service: Dec. 24th, at 7 p.m.



Devotion with Motion

Meets every Sunday 12:30
-1 p.m. in the Sanctuary.



Plan on Joining us...

Projections of God will resume January 2014 with the short series, "Who is This Jesus: Is He Risen?" Sunday evening date and time to be determined.

Words of Wisdom

"Christmas is not a time nor a season, but a state of mind. To cherish peace and goodwill, to be plenteous in mercy, is to have the real spirit of Christmas.

-Calvin Coolidge

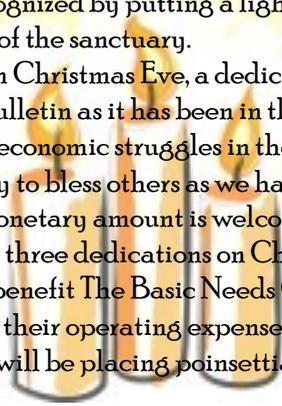


Spread The Light

In lieu of poinsettia plants for Christmas this year and in the spirit of the season of giving, we will be offering an opportunity to honor deceased and living family and friends with a monetary donation. This donation will be recognized by putting a lighted votive candle in the front of the sanctuary.

Also, on Christmas Eve, a dedication will be placed in the bulletin as it has been in the past. With the continuing economic struggles in the community, we feel this is a way to bless others as we have been blessed.

Any monetary amount is welcome and each may have up to three dedications on Christmas Eve. The donations will benefit The Basic Needs Center to assist them in paying their operating expenses. The Altar Ministry Team will be placing poinsettias on the altar for Christmas Eve.



He Will Do it Himself



“I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us... He said, ‘Surely they are my people, children who will not betray me’; and so he became their Savior. In all their trouble he too was troubled. He didn’t send someone to help them. He did it himself, in person.”

-Isaiah 63:7-9

Isaiah pictures a God of determined love who suffers when we suffer. But he doesn’t sit passively. God is the One Who Saves us.

Time after time in Israel’s history God intervenes to save his people from destruction. It is God who saves them; out of slavery in Egypt, from the attacks of the Canaanite tribes, when both the northern and southern kingdoms were destroyed, from lawlessness and idolatry. It is the same God who comes in Jesus Christ to save; to heal lives broken by sin and dominated by death.

Only the God who gave us the gift of life can restore us to life in all its eternal fullness. He who has shared our brokenness and despair can so redeem us that we find wholeness and hope. Only a God of great mercy can cleanse us from our sin, and touch our lives in such a way that we begin living our days in at least part of the fullness and richness our Creator intended.

The instrument of this new life? A baby, to be born in Bethlehem. We best get ready.



Give the Gift of Music

Do you have a friend or family member who loves music? Not sure what to give them for Christmas? You can give the gift of music by making a donation in honor of your loved one for the purchase of music for the Chancel Choir, Handbell Choir, piano/organ, or other FCC music group. Typically the purchase of sheet music for a song for either choir is about \$50.00 while the larger holiday cantatas are approximately \$300. The music will be labeled with the dedication and the choir director will let you know when the music will be played. This is a great way to honor someone and the financial gift will help conserve the music budget. Blessings to you this Christmas season!

Chuck Graham – Chancel Choir, Susan Kilmer – Handbell Choir, and Rachael Short – Director of Music Ministry

Giving Tree

This year, the theme of the Giving Tree is, “A comfy, cozy Christmas.” The Mission Team is asking for donations of children’s pajamas, slippers, socks, bed pillows, sheets, blankets & gift cards. Please take an ornament from the giving tree, purchase the item & return unwrapped with the ornament attached and place it under the tree by December 17th. Donations will be given to the Safe Center and to a local family in need.



The Light of the World

Early Christians celebrated both Jesus’ birth and baptism on Epiphany, January 6. Only in the fourth century did Roman Christians appropriate a pagan festival to celebrate what we now call Christmas — a contraction of “Christ Mass.”

But the origin of when we celebrate Jesus’ birth doesn’t detract from the day’s holiness. In fact, God has *always* transformed things of the world to serve his purposes and show his glory.

The festival honoring the “unconquered Sun,” held on what was then considered the winter solstice, was deemed the perfect time to praise the “sun of righteousness” (see Malachi 4:2).

By claiming this day as our own, Christians profess that earthly darkness — winter’s seasonal darkness and the darkness in our hearts and lives — is brightened not by a heavenly body that will one day cease to shine but by Jesus, the *real*/unconquered and unconquerable Light of the world.



December Dedication

This month’s newsletter is dedicated by Art & Arlene Wood. Merry Christmas and a happy prosperous new year to everyone!

Jesus.

(The reason for the season.)

Linda Scott Christmas Party

The party will be held at the home of Jane Jolly on December 17th at 3:00 in the afternoon with a dessert course and devotions. Please bring a \$5.00 gift for exchange. Contact Jane at 989-224-3017.

We want to know when you were here...

Sign-in booklets let us know you were here, but we need your feedback as well. Consider writing your feedback on the sign-in sheet or write any concerns you may have. We are especially interested in how you would like to participate and spread God's love by joining a ministry team. Let us know how we can help you by jotting us a note on the sign-in booklet. You can even use the booklet to sign up to inquire about electronic giving options, or if you have a fundraising idea.

Church Office

Let's communicate as effectively as we can. Questions and concerns can be submitted with your contact information by email, phone, or by leaving a message in the drop box outside the office door.

Air Conditioning Update

The total estimated cost of this project is \$50,000.00. With the matching funds we now have approximately \$25,719.00, as of December,

Want to Lead?

We are looking for leaders & greeters for our Children in Worship and Follow Me programs. Both programs meet after the Children's Story each Sunday. Interested in helping with Children in Worship? Please contact Ellen Doppke at 810-287-3682. Contact Patti Mayes at 989-307-9026 for Follow Me.

Ways to Give

This holiday season, we thank everyone who has supported the First Congregational Church this past year with their time, talent and financial contributions and look forward to support from all of our members in the year ahead. If you need a convenient way to make regular offerings or if you plan to make an additional gift before the end of the year, we encourage you to look into our electronic giving options. As the pace of life speeds up, especially around the holidays, you may find electronic giving a most welcome way to make contributions. You can contact Paul Martis or the church office for more information.

To our loyal readers:

This fall we began the transition toward email delivery of the newsletter to conserve paper, ink and postage. Some opt to pick up the printed copy after church. Some select email only. Some do both. And we have people who prefer to receive our news by postal delivery. Please make your wishes known by phone (989-224-2636) or email (fccsj@4wbi.net) so we can meet your needs.
With God's love,
Holly Graham; Guven Witteveen



Staying Connected

Helen Johnson/Jane Knight
Grace Haven Assisted Living
1507 Glastonbury Drive
St. Johns, MI 48879

Bruce MacRae
Hazel Findlay Country Manor
1101 South Scott Road
St. Johns, MI 48879

Gifts for a King

Bring him thy precious things
And lay them at his feet;
The gold of love, the hope that
springs
The unknown ways to meet.

Bring him thy lovely things;
The joy that conquers care,
The faith that trusts and sings,
The frankincense of prayer.

Bring him thy bitter things;
The myrrh of grief and fears,
The aching heart that stings
With pain of unshed tears.

These for thy gifts to him;
And for his gifts to thee,
The comfort of his steadfast love,
His tender sympathy.

-Annie Johnson Flint

Calling All Music Lovers!

The Chancel Choir and Hands of Harmony Bell Choir are both back in full swing. Participating in choir is a fun way to worship God through music. The Chancel Choir is looking for a few more singers and the Bell Choir needs one more ringer. Please contact Chuck Graham (989-224-8596) for the Chancel Choir, and Susan Kilmer (989-224-2950) for the Bell Choir.

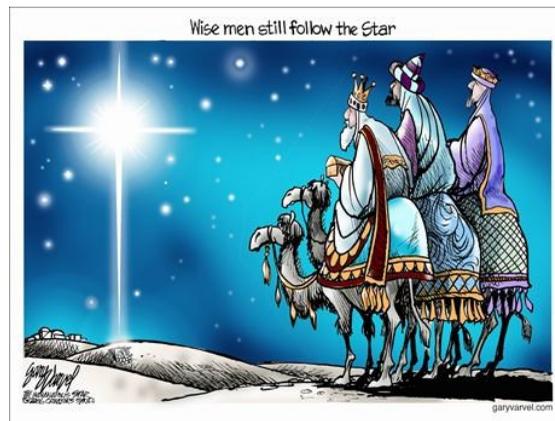
Cares and Concerns

Volunteer needed to continue Cares and Concerns. Duties include mailing get well and sympathy cards. For more information, please call Bonnie Wickerham at 989-227-5635.

Helping Hands Needed

"Friendly Service Ministry Team" needs on call help! We are seeking able-bodied women and men to help with set-up and clean-up as we continue to serve meals following funerals or memorial services.

The long time members of this team have aged and feel the need for more help so they can continue this valuable service to our members. For more information, please call Joann Martis at 989-224-4165.



Lessons from the angels

To frightened shepherds on the first Christmas Eve, a host of angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14, KJV).

Nineteenth-century minister Charles Kingsley explained how these key words tell the meaning of Jesus' birth and give meaning to our lives.

- **Glory.** "That little babe, lying in the manger among the cattle, was showing the very highest glory of the great God who had made heaven and earth. To stoop, to condescend, to have mercy, to forgive — that is the highest glory of God."
- **Peace.** "God is not selfish. He sacrificed himself for us. Sacrifice yourselves then for each other! Give up your own pride, your own selfishness, your own interest for each other, and you will be...at peace."
- **Good will.** "God loves you, and he wills to raise you out of this selfish, quarrelsome life of sin, into a loving, brotherly, peaceful life of righteousness. That babe in the manger at Bethlehem is a sign to you and me that God will freely give us that spirit of love if we ask for it."



Brain Buster

According to Scripture, what does the name *Jesus* mean?

- A) "God is with Us"
- B) "Anointed One of God"
- C) "[The Lord] will save his people from their sins."
- D) "Son of the Most High God"

(C) See Matthew 1:21

Fun Fact

The account of the candy cane's origins circulates every Christmas season and is more likely a fun story than historical fact. No matter; tales often contain truth. This tasty treat can convey important elements of our Christian faith.



The stripes remind us of the heart of Christmas, our Savior, Jesus; white for his purity; red for his blood shed on the cross. The candy cane resembles the curved staffs of the shepherds — the first people to visit the Christ-Child and worship at the manger. And when the cane is turned upside down, it becomes a letter J, for "Jesus."

Indeed, Jesus turns our lives upside down and inverts our presumptions: A poor baby born in a stable becomes King of kings and Lord of lords; enemies aren't for hating but loving; blessings aren't for hoarding but sharing; the world works for war, but Jesus calls us to live in peace; giving is better than receiving; sinners are made saints; and death is conquered as God grants us eternal life.



Notes from the Music Ministry Team: *Advent Musings: Sing Your Song!*



In the first week after concluding performances of *The Secret Garden* with the SJHS musical theater department, I gratefully slowed down. At a slower pace, I became aware of the abundance in my life, much of it music – lots of music! Songs on my i-pod; printed music waiting to be played; pageant and cantata rehearsals; handbells ringing in preparation for December worship and concert; students playing in their lessons. Some of the music comes in different forms: holding a warm, purring, snoring cat; buying fresh food at a farmers' market, cooking, and eating it; visiting with a friend; reading a good book; housecleaning; running in the cold and enjoying the symbiosis of respiration and moving limbs. Of course, I am also aware of tasks postponed. I'm entering a season of attending to other responsibilities, which I would mostly describe as uninteresting or even distasteful, but necessary. In order to live my best life, I must be faithful to all of my responsibilities.

In Youth Worship, we read that there is music all around in creation, each of us having a unique song (of our life) to sing. A week earlier we took time to name parts of God's amazing creation (stars, cheetahs, the earth), and then read that WE (YOU – each person) are God's most awesome and treasured creation. Considering our life as our God-given song, we read that we lost our song through our sin, but Christ came to earth to give it back to us! We shouted the promises of God, received a blessing – “So go on – sing your song!” (*Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing*, Lloyd-Jones & Jago, pp 26-29) and then sang and danced, celebrating the gifts of each person.

The evidence of God's love and faithfulness is all around us, but can be surprisingly difficult to see. When we focus entirely on a busy schedule, the demands of life, or the worries of our hearts, it is easy to miss the signs, even when they brush up against us. Consider what the act of awareness yields, linking us to the sustaining love of God that brings joy and peace, strength, courage – these are the melody, harmony, lyrics, and rhythms of the song of our true Life.

During Advent, let's choose to notice how we know God's love and faithfulness. Let's use all of our senses and be open at all times. Notice a sunrise, the silent dance of snowfall, the grace of plant and animal life changing their patterns for the winter season, a friendship connection, a moment of silence, laughter, a moment of rest following tears, of peace following prayer and petition ... all opportunities to remember God's abundant love and faithfulness for us. We will incorporate slow, quiet moments for reflection and awareness into our weekly worship services amid the celebrations of pageant, cantata, and ringing bells.

Christ came to return our God-given Song of Life to us! Let's learn it, so that we can sing it!

Blessings!

~ Rachael Short

The mission of the Music Ministry Team:

- ¹ to support and sustain a creative atmosphere that supports worship for each member;
- ² to encourage active participation for the purpose of worship;
- ³ to proactively develop musical worship experiences that are varied, meaningful, and personal.

The Music Ministry Team: Susan Kilmer (Chair); Chuck Graham; Nathan Sherman;
Rachael Short; Beth Webb; Guven Witteveen; Teresa Zuker.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

*We believe in God, the Father,
infinite in wisdom, goodness and love,
and in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord
and Savior, who, for us and our salvation, lived and died
and rose again and liveth evermore;
and in the Holy Spirit, who taketh of the things of
Christ and revealeth them to us, renewing, comforting,
and inspiring the souls of men.*

MISSION STATEMENT

We are a church open to all.
As modern day pilgrims we consider it our
privilege and committed responsibility to:
CELEBRATE the glory of God through worship, service
and stewardship
NURTURE our relationships with Christian love and
truth; and
SERVE others in our daily lives, individually
and collectively as Christ's people.

First Congregational Church

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St. Johns, MI 48879

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Fax: 989-224-8306

E-Mail: fccsj@4wbi.net

Web Site: www.fccsj.com

Facebook: [firstcongregationalchurchofstjohns](https://www.facebook.com/firstcongregationalchurchofstjohns)

Hours:

Monday-Wednesday 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Tuesday-Thursday 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Closed Friday

Sunday Service 11:00 a.m.

**MERRY
CHRISTMAS**

Senior Minister: Matthew Olson

Director of Music Ministry: Rachael Short

Church Administrator Interim: Holly Graham

Office Staff: Guven Witteveen

Treasurer: Tom Webb

Financial Secretary: Paul Martis

Chancel Choir Director: Dr. Charles Graham

Hands of Harmony Director: Susan Kilmer

Custodians: Faith Hazard & Shirleyan Lake

The Board of Ministry

Moderator: Shirleyan Lake.....989-224-1870

Vice Moderator: Bill Rockwell.....517-214-4636

Board of Ministry Members:

Tom Doppke.....810-241-6794

Dave Elms.....989-227-2865

Tom Flynn.....989-224-9372

Rod Fuller.....989-224-3961

Jeramie Goetschy.....989-640-0010

Lois Graham.....989-224-8596

Melanie Lounds.....989-227-0932

Marilyn Newman.....517-331-3457

Barb Sherman.....517-242-1234

Board of Ministry Joys and Concerns

-Staff evaluations are finished. We have many staff
shining God's spirit at FCC. We are blessed.

-The Board of Ministry will begin goal setting and par-
ticipate in a service day project. We feel blessed that
we are working together for God's good.

-Another joy is the Thanksgiving Community Dinner.
We are overjoyed that Guven and Lois are helping
with the event planning.

-The budget process is near completion. The congrega-
tion will vote on December 8th to approve the 2014
budget.