

EPISTLE

MARCH, 2017



Bradford Congregational Church – UCC
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please be on the lookout for the warning of the March 26 Special Meeting

Dear Church Family,

Choosing to grow—this was what you said you were doing when I first arrived. You said it in the interviews with me as your prospective interim pastor, you said it loudly and clearly in small groups and the questionnaire in the fall of 2014, and you affirmed it unanimously in your Identity and Aspiration Statement: “We aspire to grow in numbers as we make this an increasingly welcoming, loving, helpful congregation.”

Choosing to grow is not something you do once, it is something that is part of every little choice you make, as the book *Real Good Church* emphasizes. Rev. Molly Baskette wrote that the choice to grow influenced things as small as the care her congregation took to make a bathroom more pleasant, or to make sure that each new person felt affirmed and fully embraced from the first time they came through the doors.

Occasionally people comment about the amount of paper our bulletin uses—it has been a page and a half almost every Sunday since I arrived. We chose to save a substantial amount of money by moving away from the preprinted color bulletin covers, but it is true we could save a little more by cutting to

make the bulletin fit onto one page. We could cut the cover image of the church, we could cut the words to the Lord's Prayer and Gloria Patri and Doxology, and we could cut the calendar and announcements and lists of people in charge of various aspects of church life. We would then not have the extra column available where we usually print the Identity and Aspiration Statement or Communication Guidelines or "The Lighted Window," so we would cut them, too.

There would be no question about doing those things if saving every penny were the guiding consideration in our choice, but if we are choosing to grow, then we might choose to keep the cover image because it makes the bulletin and church more attractive (meaning beautiful in a way that attracts people). We might choose to keep printing the words that most of us know by heart like the Lord's Prayer because it makes the service accessible to new people who are not as familiar with them. We might choose to keep the calendar and announcements and lists of people to contact because they invite new people to enter into the life of the church—they open windows and doors in what otherwise would be a blank wall. We would then have room to include inspiring words that remind us of the directions in which we choose to grow and the church we are choosing to become.

Every little choice in our current bulletin reflects our choosing to grow.



I know that the Trustees have been making choices to improve the condition and appearance of the church partly based on the desire to help the church grow in numbers. I suspect that most of our Boards and Committees do the same. We have been celebrating the growth and wonderful energy of our Sunday School recently. We can celebrate the vital work of the Board of Mission and Social Action, and the Diaconate, and the beautiful music of the choir and organist, and the many hours officers and committee members put into making the church run well, all of which are setting the stage for growth.

The congregation as a whole can also make choices that lead to or away from growth. For instance, churches that boldly live into being Open and

Affirming tend to grow and flourish, bringing in young families especially, as *Real Good Church* emphasizes. Churches that boldly reject being open to and affirming of all are growing, too. The churches that are dying out are ones that choose not to be bold in how they live what they believe.

If you believe Christ calls the church to be welcoming, open and affirming of all, or if you believe this congregation already is welcoming, open and affirming of all, then one of the very best things you could possibly do to promote the congregation's growth and vitality is to become officially Open and Affirming. If you do not believe it is the right thing to be and do, then your path to growth is boldly to state that this is a church opposed to Open and Affirming. The reality of our society today requires clarity on this issue. People who are searching for a church need to know which congregation is the right one for them, and this is one of the major indicators they look to for guidance.

Churches also are choosing to grow when they ask what the people in their community need, including what spiritual seekers are looking for in a congregation and worship service, and then ask themselves how God is calling their church to address those needs and desires. Churches are choosing to grow when they respond to changes within their existing membership, as well, for instance providing a range of music or new ways for children to participate on Sunday mornings.

That growth could be in one direction or another—every congregation that chooses to grow also chooses the kind of church it grows into being. A church that chooses to grow as a congregation that is open to and affirming of all would choose to expand its music program in the direction of new hymns and songs that reflect that spirit, whereas a church that chooses to grow as a congregation that welcomes a narrower range of people would choose music that reinforced that culture. There is an abundance of new music in both directions, and both can enhance church growth. On the other hand, choosing not to expand to meet the needs and desires of a changing society is choosing not to grow.



I encourage you as church leaders and church members to ask yourselves every time you deliberate on even the smallest decision, which choice is more likely to help you grow both in numbers and in the direction of the beautiful, healthy, beloved community your Identity and Aspiration Statement, Communication Guidelines and Covenant envision?

Every meeting and every little decision can be exciting if you see it as helping you fulfill your vision. Nothing is too small or peripheral to the life of the congregation—everything can make a difference in growth in a positive direction.

Lent is upon us, starting on Ash Wednesday, March 1st. Lent is all about choosing to grow in a positive direction. The Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness after his baptism in the River Jordan. Jesus was choosing to grow when he chose to follow the Spirit's prompting, and when he chose to remain faithful to God in every little and large test along the way. The result was that he grew into a great soul, a great teacher, a powerful instrument of the Holy Spirit, helping to transform the lives of individuals and transform the world to be more like God's realm.

This is why it is a good and holy thing to aspire to grow in numbers. Jesus calls us to be part of a movement to change the world to be increasingly full of God's love and life and light, and compassion, justice and peace. Numbers matter as measurements of the extent of suffering or grace, as indicators of the shrinking or growing of God's realm on earth. Numbers

matter when they enable us to continue our tradition of serving and increase the brilliance of the light that shines through our window into the world.



May Lent be a season of growth for you this year. May the worship and many other activities of this wonderful congregation help you grow in positive, Christ-like ways. And may you use that growth to serve God and neighbor and make this congregation, town and world more like the beloved community of God's realm.

Thank you!
Lenten blessings,
Tom



Prayer requests may be
emailed to
our prayer group

**It is our privilege to
pray for you and those
you care about.**

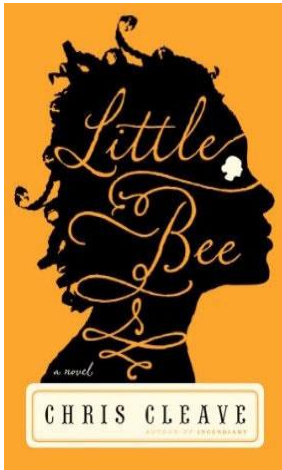
**We pray for
each other,
without ceasing
and
your prayer requests are held in strict confidence.**

*Would you like the person(s) for whom we are praying to
receive a note saying we are lifting up those prayers?
Please let us know their address and we will mail it.*

*We keep any names, concerns, and personal information
in strict confidence.*

News from the Board of Mission & Social Action

The BMSA would like to extend their thanks to all who participated in the Book Angels Project. Thank you for sponsoring a book with your generous donations. We were able to add more than twenty new books to our Sunday School library. The children will learn and be inspired by these books and will enjoy them tremendously!



It is not too late to join our adult book group.

We are reading *Little Bee* by Chris Cleave. It is a novel about a refugee girl fleeing Africa and trying to build a new life in London. The Boston Globe said *Little Bee* is “one of the most vividly memorable and provocative characters in recent contemporary fiction.... Cleave paces the story beautifully, lacing it with wit, compassion, and even at the darkest moments, a searing ray of hope.”

We will have a book-group brunch on Saturday, March 18th at 10:00. Please let Lucia, Patrick, Holly or Ginny know if you would like to borrow a book.

“Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are member of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40) God is most tangibly present in this world where people hunger, thirst, lack adequate clothing and shelter, and are sick or imprisoned. Christ claims people who suffer as family members. Christ is so present in them that when you feed the hungry, care for the sick, welcome the stranger - you feed and care for, and welcome Christ. When you give through One Great Hour of Sharing to those who suffer from natural disasters, war, or systemic poverty, you let them know: You are here. Our One Great Hour of Sharing collection will happen on March 19. Envelopes will be placed on the back table, in the sanctuary, for your convenience throughout the whole month of March. Thank you for considering a donation to this important cause.



Our monthly community dinner will be on Wednesday, March 22 at 6:00.

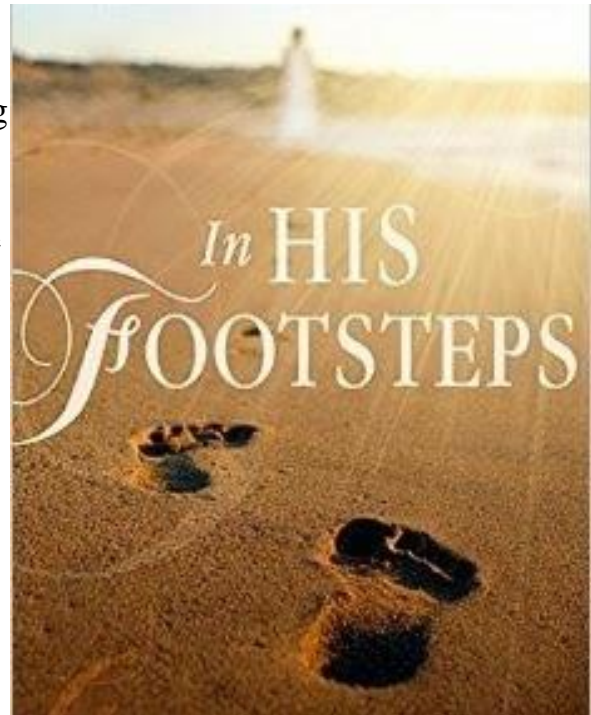
Please join us for a potluck dinner made by many loving hands and always delicious.

Even better is the warmth of conversation with our neighbors.

Always someone new to meet and break bread with. If you can join us for set up we usually begin around 5:15.

In our ongoing commitment to educating ourselves about refugees the BMSA has created a set of bulletin boards in the vestry entitled: Take a Walk Through the Bible to See How We are Called to Treat Refugees.

Follow the footsteps, literally, to read verses from the bible that reference how Jesus taught us to welcome and care for refugees.



From the Vermont Conference

*Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky tacky,
Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes all the same.*

This chorus came to mind this week as I pondered the Transfiguration story. Written in the 60's by Malvina Reynolds, the song was a protest against those who were fleeing to suburbia. A protest against the quest for conformity in the midst of the diversity bursting forth in that decade and in 2017 diversity is being forced back into boxes - easily defined and categorized.

*Little tents on the mountaintop
One for each of you
Moses, Elijah and Jesus.
Little tents all the same.*

Just days before Jesus had asked the disciples "Who do you say I am?" They named them, "Elijah, Jeremiah...one of the prophets?" "But who do YOU say I am?" Peter proclaimed with his usual bravado, "YOU are the Messiah. The Son of the Living God!" "Good for you" says Jesus. Then, Jesus goes on to tell the disciples what is in store for the Messiah. The Messiah must die before new life can burst forth. Peter doesn't want to hear anything about the dismal news.

So just six days later, on this mountaintop, before their amazed eyes, there stood Jesus, Moses and Elijah. So what does Peter want to do? He wants to put them in three little boxes - right there on the mountaintop. Capture the glory in little tents all the same! From now on, follow the directions and you too can replicate the glory.

Oh, I am so grateful that something happened to Peter on the way to building a church. Something happened when Peter and the others were praying in an Upper Room in Jerusalem. Struck by the Holy Spirit, Peter proclaimed Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. "Repent, be baptized, be forgiven, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit - you, your children and all who are afar off."



There were no little boxes that day. There were no tents. There was no conformity. No one size fits all. There was the glorious bursting forth of diversity. Little groups of believers gathered for prayer, teaching, fellowship and sharing of possessions and story. We know from the Epistles and church history that there was this great emergence of passion, energy and many different forms of church as new occasions taught new duties and each culture and generation made the faith their own.

Only later did folks try to squeeze their church into a box and church has been bursting out of the box ever since. Look at the United Church of Christ!

But at 60 some years old, we're not feeling so green and young, restless and reckless. Yet, there is enormous need for the church. To not just 'do' church but to 'be' the church - standing with Jesus against the boxes.

Something in us needs to die in order for new life to burst forth. Maybe that is enough to ponder this Lenten season.

Pam Lucas
Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ
Associate Conference Minister
for Search and Call and Small Church Ministry

From our Church Historian:

Here is the **Table of Contents** for the third of the four albums on display in the vestry reading areas

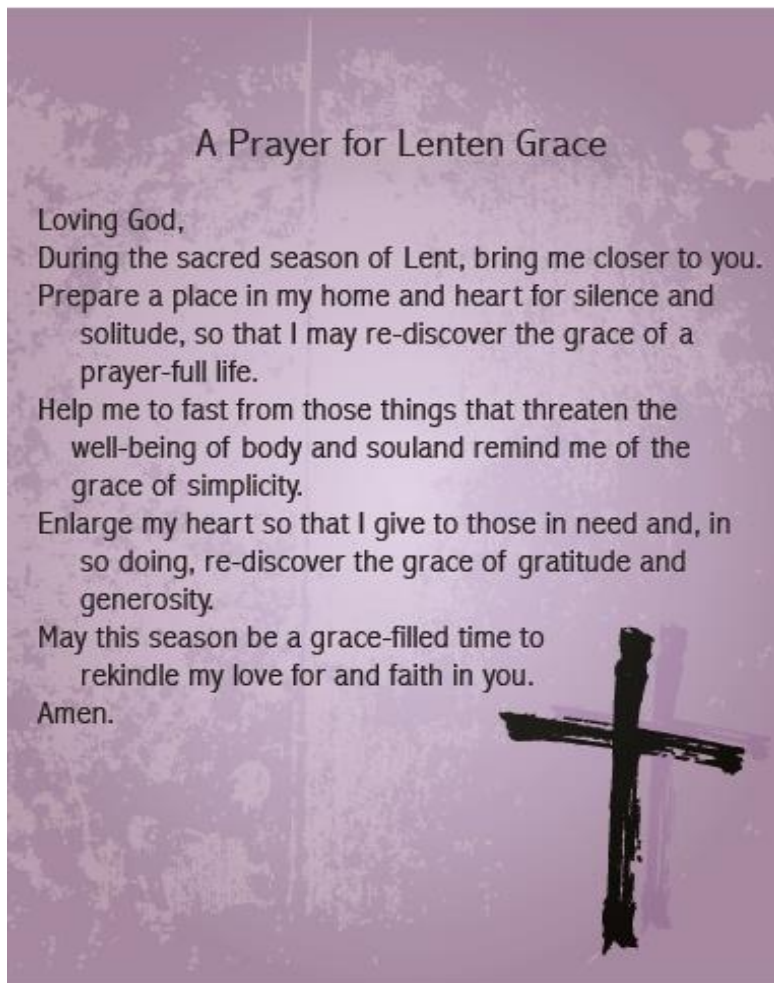
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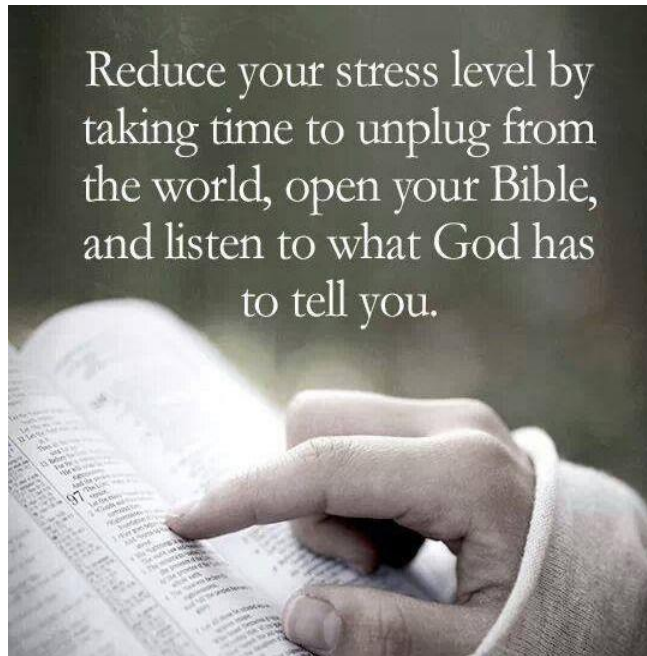
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Eris, Historian



Lectionary Readings **MARCH** (Year A)



March 1 - Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (turn back to God)

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 (let God transform you)

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (what you value is where you devote your time)

Psalms 51:1-17 (create in me a clean heart)

theme hymn: *O for a Closer Walk With God*

March 5 - 1st Sunday of Lent

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7 (freedom and boundaries)

Romans 5: 12-19 (In Christ: God's gift of Grace)

Matthew 4: 1-11 (Jesus repudiates the temptations)

Psalms 32 (Joy in forgiveness)

theme hymn: *Forty Days and Forty Nights*

March 12 - 2nd Sunday in Lent

Genesis 12: 1-4a (God promises!)

Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17 (trust God's promises)

John 3: 1-17 (Nicodemus comes looking for answers)

Psalm 121 (help comes from the Lord)
theme hymn: *The God of Abraham Praise*

March 19 - 3rd Sunday of Lent

Exodus 17: 1-7 (trust in God!)

Romans 5: 1-11 (God pours out love for us)

John 4: 5-42 (the water metaphor continues)

Psalm 95 (sing to the Lord)

theme hymn: *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*

March 26 - 4th Sunday of Lent

1 Samuel 16: 1-13 (sometimes God chooses the least likely)

Ephesians 5: 8-14 (live in the light)

John 9: 1-41 (when the blind see the most)

Psalm 23

theme hymn: *Open My Eyes That I May See*

April 2 - 5th Sunday of Lent

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 (there is power in the word of God)

Romans 8: 6-11 (we are freed by the way of the Spirit)

John 11: 1-45 (live in Him)

Psalm 130 (plenteous redemption in Him)

theme hymn: *Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart*

The theme hymns listed with the lectionary reading lists are found in our Pilgrim hymnal and/or the Hymn folders and are listed here only as lyrical illustrations of the week's scripture selections, so readers may carry the theme in tune form throughout their week!

May the road rise to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sunshine warm your face,
The rain fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the
Palm of His hand.

