

# EPISTLE

December, 2016



**Bradford Congregational Church – UCC  
Bradford, VT (802) 222-4034**

Our website: <http://bradforducc.org>  
email us at: [bradfordvtucc@gmail.com](mailto:bradfordvtucc@gmail.com)

see us on Facebook: Bradford Congregational Church

Dear Church Family,

What a fall we have had! The Search Committee circles, the deeply moving conversations leading up to our decision to explore becoming Open and Affirming, and another highly successful Healthy Communication and Beloved Community workshop, to name just a few! **I realized after I sent**

**my Thanksgiving email message that I left out one of the biggest sources of gratitude in our congregation—this year's Wild Game Supper.**



I had a unique perspective as the greeter upstairs. Most of us saw the amazing teamwork and good spirit, the phenomenal competence and creativity in evidence downstairs. I saw the eager anticipation of the loyal customers upstairs, I overheard them enthusiastically advising newcomers on how to experience the feast and what not to miss (try everything! one thirty year veteran insisted), and then I got to hear the awe-filled praise of those who came back upstairs afterward. Thank you to Dan and Tracey and all who poured themselves into that gift.

Many if not most congregations are experiencing a decline in attendance at worship on Sunday mornings. It began years ago when church started to lose its centrality in our society. As life has gotten busier and more things scheduled on Sundays, the exodus has increased. It is easy for the remnant to get discouraged as we look around at the empty pews. It can lead to the thought that church doesn't matter to people anymore.

**Then something happens—a catastrophe or loss leads people to look for spiritual comfort in the gathered community, or, in this case, the Wild Game Supper comes along and we see that there is still something about the church that brings people out to participate gladly in Christ's work of establishing God's realm of mercy, justice and peace on earth.**



It is time to rethink what church is. Worship and spiritual nurture centered on the life and teachings of Christ need to remain at its core, but in today's completely changed social setting we need to think about how to provide spiritual nourishment beyond traditional services.

We need to think of what it means to “go to church” more broadly. Community Dinners are church. Sunday School cider pressings at the Munsons are church. Circle conversations on important issues are church. Committee, Board and Council meetings are church. Mission and social action projects are church. Bible Study or book discussions are church. Wild Game Suppers and Harvest Bazaars are church.



The congregation that makes up that church includes everyone who participates, whether they come to worship only at Christmas or Easter or merely drive by and are reminded to look beyond themselves to God and neighbor and think, “That is my church, if I ever need one.” Far more people feel they belong than show up on Sunday mornings. We need to reflect on what that means about the church today.

One thing it means is that we need to let go of the old standard of judging the church: the number of people in the pews on Sunday morning. Many of you remember when the pews were full and the Sunday School filled the vestry with teeming classes. Assessing the church today by that measure, it looks sad, weak and dying.

But if we see that a revolution has taken place in society around us, and that what church is and now means to people has changed irrevocably because of it, we can celebrate the extraordinary faithfulness and vitality of this congregation. We can see that it plays an important, unique role in the lives of many in our community. We can think about how we can work in this changed society to fulfill our Identity and Aspiration Statement’s vision. We can celebrate all the more the core members who attend Sunday worship and congregational meetings and keep the church being a church.

**Advent is designed to help us approach changes in life with hope, peace, joy and love, in the faith that we will find Christ in whatever comes.**



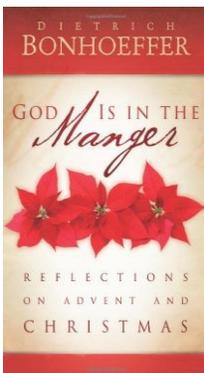
Advent is the season of preparing ourselves in the darkness for the light of Christ to be born anew at Christmas. It is a good time to “ponder nothing earthly-minded,” to open ourselves to being Spirit-minded and respond to the new situation we find ourselves in by saying as Mary did, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Last December I began my Epistle letter:

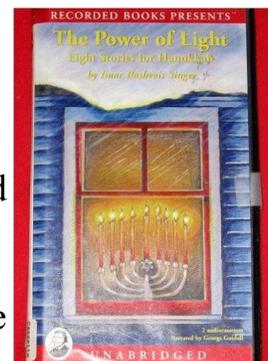
“If you love beautiful church music and candlelight, if you love the children’s Christmas pageant and the church full of greens, if you love Christmas carols and familiar Bible passages foretelling or recounting Jesus’ birth, then every Sunday in December and the first half of January will be a treat for you, and the 6:00 PM Christmas Eve service best of all.”

We had a truly beautiful Advent and Christmas season last year, and this year will be very similar.

**One difference that is important to note is that we are changing the time of worship on Christmas Day to 10:30 AM so that we can go from the service to the Christmas Dinner in the vestry that starts at noon.** It will be our annual carol sing and story telling service—a favorite for many. It is very informal, more like a family gathering around the piano, where we sing carols by request and where we bring in favorite poems or personal or published Christmas stories to share.



Traditional Advent practices include increased prayer, spiritual reading and serving those in need. Our website has a category called [“Advent Resources”](#) that can help you observe



it at home, including many things for children.

This year two books not listed on the website are speaking to me particularly poignantly. The first is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *God is In the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*. The other is actually a Hanukkah book that works as an Advent book as well, Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Power of Light*.

Here is an important reminder from my letter last December: “**If this is a season when you struggle**, please know that you do not have to avoid coming to church, nor do you have to hide the truth if you are feeling down.... The congregation wants to support you and surround you with our love and care. The Deacons and I are available to talk one on one with you anytime. Please do not hesitate to speak with us after worship or email or call. It is what we are here to do. Christ came to love and serve those who were suffering in body, mind, heart or soul. He calls us to do the same.

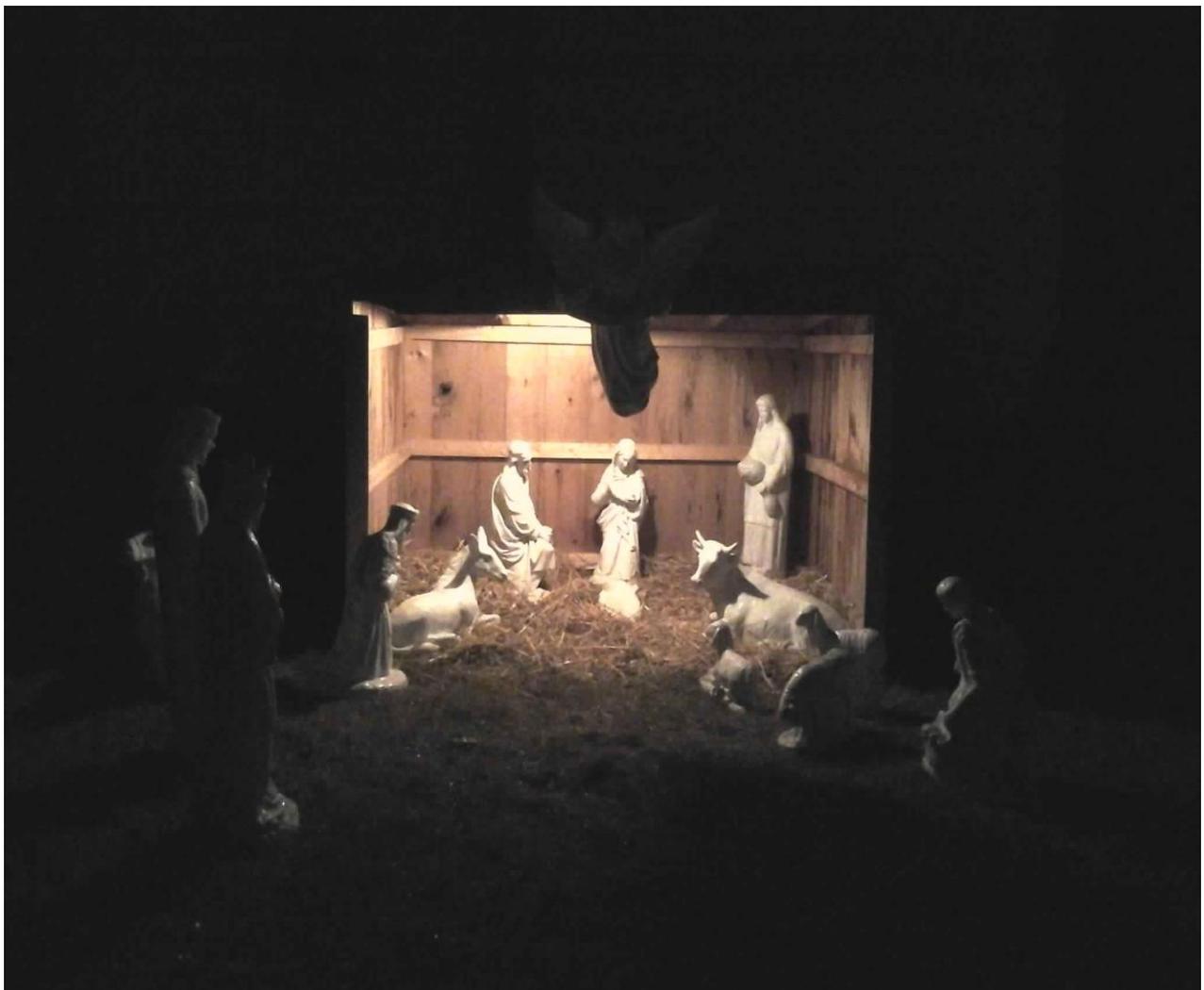


“One of the marks of Advent spiritual wisdom is to know that when you are in a dark night of soul, when it seems as if there is no light in the universe...right then is a time to turn to the light in faith as if it were within you and all around you. It is the time to increase your prayer and worship

and spiritual practice of all kinds. As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Trappist monk and author, Thomas Merton, said, ‘Pure love and prayer are learned in the hour when prayer has become impossible and your heart has turned to stone.’ We transform our suffering to wisdom and our struggle to peace when we turn to God in those worst moments.”

Thank you for being part of this loving community. May your Advent and Christmas be blessed again this year with

Hope, peace, joy and love,  
Tom



## *Advent Colors*

I have asked the Diaconate to use the Advent vestment color on communion Sunday again this year. This is a departure from tradition in this congregation, but in most congregations this is standard. For instance, in all the denominations that celebrate communion weekly, the colors of the season are always used—otherwise they would have only white all the year round. The reason why Advent is so important to keep in the violet, purple or blue vestment is that it is all about waiting in the darkness for the coming of the light—waiting for the change to white at Christmas. Advent colors symbolize our preparing for the light of Christ in hope and a spirit of metanoia (that Greek word meaning turning our hearts, minds and spirits back to God that is translated inadequately as “repentance”). If you are uncomfortable with the absence of white vestments on communion Sunday, you can reflect on the discomfort of Mary on the hard journey to Bethlehem. She, too, longed for the coming of the light.





Prayer requests may be emailed to  
[our prayer group](#)

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

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

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***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.***

The Game supper is a long, well run operation which made coming on board as co-chairs a relatively smooth transition. The amount of people involved in all aspects of this event is huge and unknown to most people involved. We could try to list all the people who need to be thanked, but it would be nearly impossible to include everyone in this space. Many of them are not even members of this church, but never seem to question why they should be helping a church they don't belong to. That to us just shows the type of people we surround ourselves with on a daily basis.



As co-chairs we hope to be able to make some improvements for next year, like having it sold out! We welcome any feedback to help us continue on with this successful money raiser, but more important, this community wide event that brings so many people together. We look forward to next year, rest up as it will be here before we know it. -Dan and Tracey



## 2017 Bazaar – Holiday Table

We are planning ahead for the 2017 Harvest Bazaar and hope you will too! This Christmas when you are decorating your home for the holidays please keep out any unwanted ornaments and decorations for the 2017 Harvest Bazaar Holiday table.

There will be a box in the Vestry labeled **2017 Bazaar**. Please feel free to bring in your unwanted holiday items during the months of December and January. They will be stored for safe keeping until next fall. We hope to celebrate holiday cheer at the Bazaar next year!!

Erin Odell



## Sunday School News

In November, we learned about the 10 Commandments and how it was important to have rules, both long ago and in the present. We talked about rules at school, church, and home and how they can

sometimes be the same in all areas.

We celebrated Thanksgiving Sunday by talking about what we are thankful for and creating a “Thankful Tree”.

We also rejoiced with Caleb Peters and his family as he was awarded a badge and pin for completing his Cub Scout God and Family Program. Congratulations!

The last week of November focused on Peace and starting to plan for the Sunday school pageant.



The pageant will be held on Sunday, December 11th at 10am. Come and see the children in their costumes celebrating the birth of Jesus. As always, thank you all for your continuing support for the children. Your conversations with them and interest in their projects really help them feel

great about their church!

## From the Vermont Conference:

Dear Friends,

The address of the Vermont Conference is not only 36 North Main Street in Randolph. It is also your address and mine. From East Montpelier to West Dover, from Bennington to Brattleboro to Burlington, from St. Albans to St. Johnsbury, from Rutland to Tunbridge to Saxtons River, the Vermont Conference is us - 139 congregations, eight Associations.



As unique as our congregations may be, we share the work of the Vermont Conference with a spirit of mutuality. We strive to support one another, to

increase the vitality of our churches, and to inspire each other to serve our wider communities with love.

Our shared ministry is also supported by our Conference Ministers - Lynn, Jim and Pam -who are incredibly dedicated to the well being of our pastors and congregations. Whether they are guiding our churches through the Search and Call process, or administering Conference-wide workshops on Church Vitality and Stewardship, or providing pastoral care to our pastors, they work hard to equip us for the work of mission and ministry.



With gratitude for the covenant that strengthens us and for the efforts of our Conference staff, I would like to invite you to join me and the Board of Directors and show your appreciation for the Vermont Conference.

FRIENDS OF THE VERMONT CONFERENCE is one way for individuals and churches to make an unrestricted, financial gift. These contributions will support the Conference's 2016 Budget and help us support the faith-forming work of our congregations.

With your help and by God's grace, may we to continue to share the costs and joys of being the church - a church that says, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

Blessings on you throughout these holy days.



No matter who you are,  
or where you are on  
life's journey, you are  
welcome here!

Grace and Peace,  
Rev. Andy Nagy-Benson  
Chair, Board of Directors  
Vermont Conference (UCC)

## **Thank you, dear congregation!**

Thank you all for the unanimous vote of the warned congregational meeting on November 20th to proceed with Step 2 of our Open & Affirming process!

We will be meeting in early December to outline the educational presentations for early 2017 . We are very excited about this and hope to give you some firm "put this on your calendar" set of dates in the January issue of the Epistle, as well as the Sunday bulletin Parish News, the website and the Facebook page.

The idea to have our congregation explore becoming ONA originated in the Search Committee earlier this year. The Church Profile that the Search Committee is compiling requires us to say whether we have had an ONA process. It is of increasing importance to a wide range of pastors, and there is a good chance that one of our top candidates will be lesbian, gay or transgender. The Search Committee's congregational survey showed that three quarters of the respondents supported the idea of exploring becoming ONA. The Committee voted unanimously to ask the Diaconate to consider undertaking a process, and the Diaconate unanimously agreed.

ONA is the national UCC designation for congregations that make a public covenant of welcome to persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities. A congregation having an ONA designation is like a hotel having AAA certification—an assurance of hospitality for all.

The Diaconate ad hoc Open & Affirming Committee  
Bridget Peters and Marcia Tomlinson

From our Historian:

Inasmuch as I am disposing of my Bradford Ephemera collection, I am donating my Congregational collection to the church and I am hoping that Church Council will agree to keep it in the church for everyone to enjoy rather than in the archives. I will of course agree with their decision.

Some of these are copies which were made for the display tables at our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary in June 2010. Whenever possible, I made copies for display and kept the originals in the archives.



(The list of contents for each of the four books will be published in the January and February issues of this Epistle as well as being placed in their respective albums. After Church Council the albums were placed on the reading area tables in

the vestry, to be removed when only when necessary to the file cabinet in the upstairs study, formerly the Pastor's study and now referred as the copier room. The albums are already a big hit at Coffee Hour each Sunday! These albums contain photos and articles and ephemera dating back to 1810, affording us an opportunity to see the wide range of activities and missions our church has accomplished ... Marcia Tomlinson)

Eris, Historian



**Jan 1** - first Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 63: 7-9 (God's love is steadfast)

Hebrews 2: 10-18 (Jesus experienced what we do)

Matthew 2: 13-23 (Jesus is brought to Nazareth)

Psalm 148 (Praise the Lord!)

theme hymn: *In the Bleak Midwinter*

*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!*



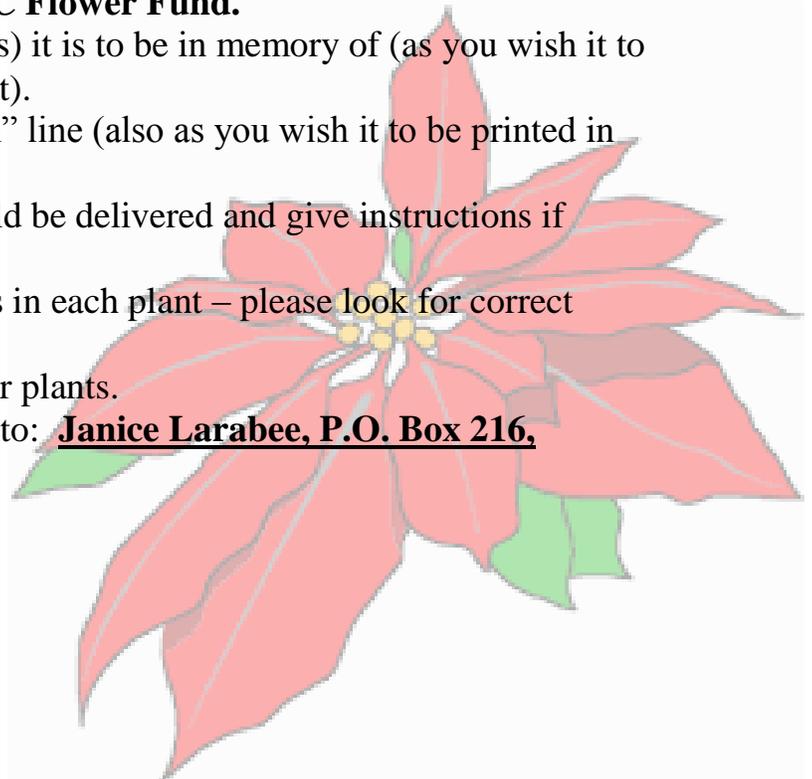


*Memorial Poinsettias*  
2016 Order Form



Please place your order for this year's memorial poinsettias on or before  
**December 12th.** Christmas Sunday is **December 18th.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ \$15.99 each in a 6 ½ inch pot with 5-8 blooms.  
**20% of the purchase is donated to the UCC Flower Fund by the florist.**
2. Make your check out to: **UCC Flower Fund.**
3. Print the name of the person(s) it is to be in memory of (as you wish it to be printed in the bulletin insert).
4. Print your name on the “from” line (also as you wish it to be printed in the bulletin insert).
5. Print to whom the plant should be delivered and give instructions if needed.
6. We will have large name tags in each plant – please look for correct name.
7. Help will be needed to deliver plants.
8. Mail the check and this form to: **Janice Larabee, P.O. Box 216, Bradford, VT 05033**



**In Memory of:**

**From:**

**Deliver to:**

**Check here if you wish your plant to remain for the Christmas Eve**