

EPISTLE

February, 2017



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

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email us at: bradfordvtucc@gmail.com
see us on Facebook: [Bradford Congregational Church](#)

Dear Church Family,

Jesus knew he would not be with his beloved disciples much longer toward the end of the gospels. His teachings became more urgent, more essential to the disciples' mission and what they would need to do to thrive in the face of coming challenges.

I know something of how Jesus felt. I will not be in this wonderful church much longer. The Pastoral Search Committee has won high praise from Pam Lucas, the Vermont Conference Associate Minister who oversees congregations that are in a search process. Our profile is almost complete and the Committee will soon be looking at candidates.

Pam has also praised this congregation for the truly amazing work it has been doing and the leadership among regional churches that it has attained in the past few years. You can rejoice in this—everywhere I go I find that other church leaders know of your work to adopt your Communication Guidelines, create your Identity and Aspiration Statement, hold workshops on Healthy Communication and Beloved Community, assemble and adopt a manual for the congregation to use to ensure that it uses healthy communication, and now consider becoming an Open and Affirming congregation.

Recently a generous donation came in the mail from someone who lives far away. The cover note praised the church for all this work. You deserve it!

Jesus prayed in his final hours with his congregation, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:20-26)



“That they may all be one” is the motto of our denomination, the United Church of Christ. It does not mean we have no differences. It does not mean that we always agree. It means that we are one in God’s love, and we do the works of Christ’s love in the world and we treat one another with that love in the congregation.

My most urgent prayer for you is that you continue to train yourselves in and practice the skills of Healthy Communication and Beloved Community. This is the most important thing you can do in order to be one, and you all need to do it. It needs to be the dominant culture of this congregation. You need it in order to survive and thrive in the challenges of our times, which are as great as any Christians have ever faced. Yet over the millennia the church has faced hard times again and again, and the Holy Spirit and way of Christ have led it through to the other side of that wilderness. I have complete faith that they will lead us through, too. The tools of healthy communication and beloved community that the Spirit has inspired are the manna that God is giving us as our daily bread.

I want to be very specific about what you need to do in order that you “may all be one,” but first I need to remind you of your history. An unusually high percentage of the congregation participated in a survey and series of gatherings when I arrived in the Fall of 2014. You expressed a powerful dream of being a church that did mission and social action, that served children and youth and young families and that had a rich spiritual life, but by far and away your number one dream was of growing and revitalizing the church by being welcoming and loving and full of positivity. And by far and away the thing that discouraged you most was the way you had treated one another in the past, the lack of healthy communication and beloved community. You were reeling after a series of conflicts that had drastically diminished the size and morale of the congregation.

The resurrection you have undergone is all the more miraculous and heartening to other churches throughout the region because of this context. You began by voting to adopt the Communication Guidelines that say, “We seek to create and sustain a congregational life of inclusiveness, honesty and safety. We are precious to one another and seek to build a beloved community in which our faith can grow.” The Guidelines (printed below) go on to list several principles of healthy communication, and then they end with this pledge that you all made to one another: “I will support my brothers and sisters with gentleness and reverence. When someone speaks in a way that is clearly outside of the above guidelines, I will take responsibility to address the behavior at that time, in order to restore a healthy and open process of communication. I will endeavor to do this, out of my love for our community of faith.”

Similarly, you passed unanimously your Identity and Aspiration Statement that says, “We aspire to grow in numbers as we make this an increasingly welcoming, loving, helpful congregation.... We will seek to maintain healthy communication and a positive, hopeful attitude as we face inevitable challenges.”

These are not just words—you have been living into them in meetings and discussions. It has been moving to see how you “Listen intently to understand, though not necessarily to agree with, another person’s point of view, knowing that diversity enriches our community of faith.”



Yet not everyone in the congregation has embraced this new culture, and none of us is perfect at it yet. Sometimes we see the old pattern of parking lot or telephone conversations where we fail to live up to the guideline to “Not say outside of a meeting what I am unwilling to say inside the meeting.” Sometimes we forget to “Speak for myself and not for others.” Sometimes we fail to “Carefully consider the impact of my words, in oral, written, or electronic form.” Sometimes our big hearts want the best for the church so powerfully that we get carried away in our passion and act or speak in ways that fail to “Remember that harassment, bullying and intimidation do not have a place in our congregational process.”

Every one of these breaches in healthy communication and beloved community causes pain, hurting individuals, hurting the health of the congregation and bringing back the excruciating PTSD of past conflicts. Failure to live up to your aspirations for positivity and healthy communication is the biggest threat to your continued resurrection. Yet imperfections are inevitable, so what can you do?

Respond to every stumble by immediately returning to the principles and practice of healthy communication and beloved community!

Surround the person who has slipped up or neglected to abide by this new culture with all the tools and skills you have learned, with caring and courageous communication and with overpowering love, **the way the body’s immune system will surround a threat and render it harmless and absorb it back into the healthy body.**

It is as simple as that. You may feel tempted to ignore painful, inappropriate behavior. You may feel tempted to fight back in kind. You may be tempted to give up and leave the church. I urge you not to do these things. Do not

lose faith. Trust in the practices and skills you have seen work. When inappropriate communication happens, do not tolerate it. Regroup and use your skills aggressively again until health is restored.

Miracles will continue to happen if you continue to have faith in the process, and you will grow and thrive in every way. People can feel positivity and love when they walk into a church, or when they talk with members of a congregation around town. People will be drawn to you. The Holy Spirit works through positivity and love—how could the God who gave us Jesus work in any other way? Positivity and generous hearted lovingkindness are the means and the ends, they are the path and the destination. “Be the change you wish to see in the world” and you will be the church you wish to be.



You have so much to celebrate of positivity and love and their fruits. They have enabled you to blossom beautifully in the years I have been here. I will carry the memories with me when I go. I will be singing your praises all the rest of my days. Other churches will get sick of hearing me hold you up as a model, saying, “Well, in Bradford...” Thank you for all the gifts you have given yourselves and the world!

I am excited to work with you in the remaining days we have together. You have the chance in the Open and Affirming deliberations to continue strengthening the new culture of positivity and love among you, and to continue being an outstanding model to other congregations. It does not matter so much what the outcome of that decision is—what matters most is

that you arrive at it by practicing healthy communication and maintaining your beloved community. If you do that, you will find the right road forward, and all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

Thank you again!
Epiphany blessings,
Tom

Communication Guidelines to Strengthen Our Community

The purpose of these guidelines is to fulfill our mutual covenant with each other as brothers and sisters at the Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ Bradford Vermont. We seek to create and sustain a congregational life of inclusiveness, honesty and safety. We are precious to one another and seek to build a beloved community in which our faith can grow. These guidelines serve as a foundation to strengthen our faith and our interactions with one another.

I WILL:

Pray for guidance, patience and understanding before all interactions, communication, or meetings

Listen intently to understand, though not necessarily to agree with, another person's point of view, knowing that diversity enriches our community of faith.

Communicate directly my personal opinion and experience

Speak for myself and not for others

Welcome inquiry into my point of view and be willing to inquire respectfully into another person's point of view.

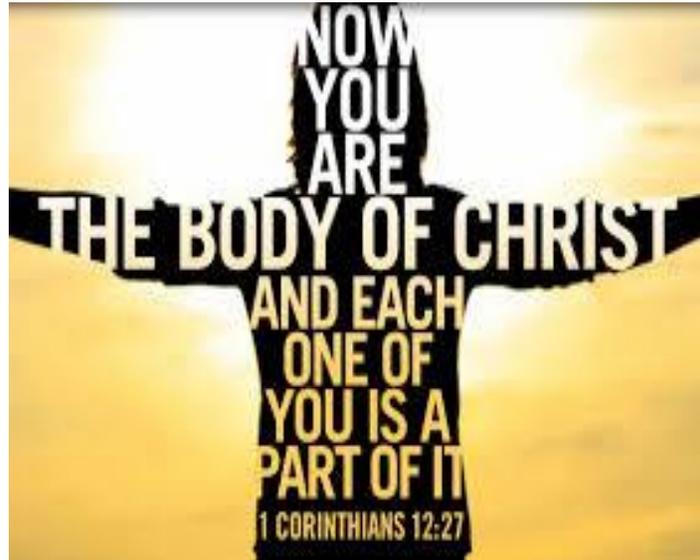
Not say outside of a meeting what I am unwilling to say inside the meeting.

Carefully consider the impact of my words, in oral, written, or electronic form.

Remember that harassment, bullying and intimidation do not have a place in our congregational process.

ACTION:

“As a member of the Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ



Bradford, Vermont, I will support my brothers and sisters with gentleness and reverence. When someone speaks in a way that is clearly outside of the above guidelines, I will take responsibility to address the behavior at that time, in order to restore a healthy and open process of communication. I will endeavor to do this, out of my love for our community of faith.” *Adopted April 6, 2014*

Our very busy Sunday School made **74 Valentine's cards** for the Diaconate Sunshine Baskets (see Diaconate notes on page 11) and then relaxed with some yummy treats on January 29th





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 Board of Missions and Social Action has many opportunities for you to join in on our church's works of mission. Whether you want to reach out to your brothers and sisters on a global scale or help out with your neighbors or touch the lives of children in our congregation we have a way for you to get involved.

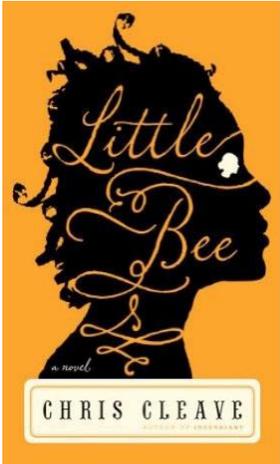


During the month of February we will once again sponsor our **Book Angels Project**. Each Sunday in February, after church, we will display books that you can purchase to donate to our Sunday School Children's Library. The Lyme Congregational Church, through Tom, shared a list of wonderful books they use, which guided our purchases. There is a book about the life of St. Francis of Assisi and many about love and kindness. Some books will help children imagine the lives of people around the world and some encourage thinking of others and finding ways to make a difference. Books will be priced at \$5, \$10, \$15 and \$20. If you purchase a book we will thank you by putting a book plate with your name into the book of your choice.

The Inter Church Council is planning a town wide event to **assist Syrian Refugees coming to Vermont**. Some time this spring they are thinking about having a dinner and guest speaker who would educate participants

about the current refugee situation. We will announce specifics as soon as possible.

To prepare ourselves for this event the BMSA would like to sponsor a book group. Holly has suggested we read **Little Bee by Chris Cleave**. She describes the book as one that really tackles the disconnect we have about the plight of refugees. A generous donation allowed us to purchase ten books to share with church members and town folks who are interested in joining us. We propose that people read the book in February or March and join us after church one Sunday in March (to be announced) for a light lunch and discussion. Please let Holly, Lucia, Patrick or Ginny know if you would like to borrow a book to read.



Our next **Community Supper** is on Wednesday, February 22 at 6:00. Please plan to join us. We set up at 5:00 and are usually all cleaned up by 7:00 if you are able to help, the more the merrier!



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

***update:** on Sunday, January 29th the box that had been in the vestry for this purpose was not there ... temporarily, put your donations in a bag on the table for Erin*

Diaconate Notes:

As we live into the light of this Season of Epiphany (which will end with Transfiguration Sunday on February 26th, followed by Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent on March 1st) , may our hearts and words and actions be as beacons shining out into the world around us.

January 29th ... it was a joy to welcome to our pulpit our longtime friend Ted Goodfleisch. His words of love and challenge were as inspiring as they were compelling. He challenged us to do two things for at least several months, if not an entire year, and then let him, and each other, know how that went for us:

**thank God for everything
blame God for nothing**

February 5th ... Communion Sunday with Rev. Kinder.

February 11th ... the Diaconate will be assembling the Sunshine Baskets in the vestry at 9:30 a.m. If you'd like to help please DO come on down! On Jan. 29th the children of the Sunday School made 74 valentines to go into the baskets!

This ministry of light and love has been a mainstay of the Diaconate and our church for many years. So many thanks are necessary for this: the Munson's who in-gather all the “ingredients” and wrappings and bags and cards, the Deacons over the years who all turn out for the fun of putting it all together, and last but certainly not least all those who volunteer to deliver these fun and delicious gifts throughout the community. **If you can be a volunteer deliverer, please contact Kathy Munson.**

February 12th ... (please see page 19) We need **YOUR** input and ideas and views! Diaconate sponsored ONA discussion meeting after church

February 19th ... filling the pulpit will be the Rev. Harvey Bartlett, who will also be serving as Emergency Pastoral Care for the week Tom is absent. This is a change from the original schedule.

March 5th ... looking ahead, as is our custom our church will host the first of the Lenten evening services of the Inter Church Council. All these Sunday evening services will be at **7pm** at these locations:

March 5 – Bradford Congregational Church – KellyAnn Donahue, speaker

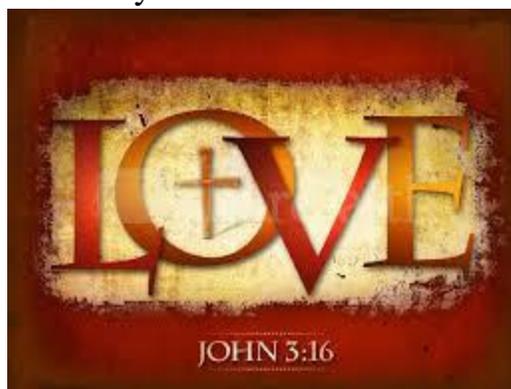
March 12 – Our Lady of Perpetual Help – Rev. Mal Kircher, speaker

March 19 – Grace UMC – Marcia Tomlinson, speaker

March 26 – Piermont Congregational Church – Rev. Bunshik Min, speaker

April 2 – W. Newbury Congregational Church- Fr. Daniel Lokanga, speaker

April 9 – Annual Palm Sunday Choir Festival at Bradford Congr'l Church



From the Vermont Conference

Dear Friends,



So It's 2017. Now What?

It's a challenging time to 'be the church.' We are in the midst of a significant change about what being church means - not only how we 'do' it, but how we live it, share it, and pass it on.

On one side are those who say we need to return to our spiritual roots. Diana Butler Bass and others have demonstrated that congregations which are able to embrace ancient liturgies and practices can be healthy, vibrant communities of faith. Along with that, they change their focus from producing new members to sending out disciples. It's a model that embraces our past rather than discards it.

On another side is the emergent/progressive camp, which has a progressive vision for a church compatible with our beliefs and able to be successful in our culture by birthing new churches, training church leaders, and by strengthening and renewing existing congregations. Using new technology, coaching, and training entrepreneurial pastoral leadership, they are renewing and birthing new churches.

Others like Mike Piazza suggest that our vintage churches can be vital churches - not by trying to be something we are not, but by being who we are really well, including 52 transformative experiences every year on Sunday morning.

And there are more than three sides, of course. Every pundit with a book deal has a plan for renewal and growth of congregations. Most amusing to me are those from people who've never actually tried it, but have an eight point plan for success.

So, which answer is right for your congregation? All of them. And none of them. Today more than ever what makes a congregation viable is contextual. It has much to do with your congregation's willingness to try something new, and the ways in which it is willing (or able) to stretch itself and find the place where your congregation's passion intersects with your community's needs. And, perhaps, even be willing to die and be born again. And plenty of prayer, discussion, contemplation, are needed before a way forward may be found.

Looking through my files this week, I found a quote that prompted these musings (when I really should have been busy depositing contribution checks and closing out our fiscal year). I've lost track of the original author, but here it is:

Perhaps God actually expects us to feed her sheep and preach the good news to her sheep rather than endlessly debate what we consider to be the best sheep food.

The most significant impediment to finding the way forward is our own inertia and entropy. It's easiest to just keep on keeping on, trying not to notice that the only thing aging quicker than our buildings is our congregations themselves. I don't think our churches were listening when Neil Young said "It is better to burn out, than to fade away", because, on the average, a United Church of Christ congregation shuts its doors for the last time every other week.

So, have you made any resolutions as a congregation for 2017? Could this be the year you let go of the entrenched vision of church left over from the 1950's? Could this be the year you begin to remake yourselves for the 21st century?

Or, you can just delete another of 'those' missives from Jim and cozy back into that protective, comfortable old blanket that has fit so well for so long.

I'd love to help you begin a conversation about what's possible. Be in touch.

Peace, Jim

Rev. Jim Thomas

Associate Conference Minister for
Stewardship, Church Vitality, and Finance



BRADFORD CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
WELCOMES YOU TO:

A WINTER WARMER DINNER

HOSTED BY THE CHRISTIAN ED. COMMITTEE AND SUNDAY SCHOOL CHILDREN

FEBRUARY 11, 2017

6:00 PM

BRADFORD CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
145 MAIN STREET, BRADFORD, VT 05033

Our annual Winter Warmer Dinner is an event hosted by the Christian Education Committee and the Children of Bradford UCC. This is a fundraiser to benefit the charities that the children want to support this year. **Donations will be collected at the door.** Advance notice of attendance is appreciated but not necessary.

We have an Italian themed dinner buffet for people to enjoy and share with loved ones and/or friends. We have lactose, gluten and nut free, as well as vegetarian options for folks to enjoy. Please join us for this fun and relaxing community event!

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: ANGELA CONRAD-SCHLAGER @ 802-222-9275

From our Church Historian:

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

Book II: 1985-1989

73. Notepaper by Helen Elder
74. Several copies "Primary Child"
75. Program of wedding Ceremony of Henry & Aileen Campbell in our church-goers 175th Anniversary letter from Congregational Historic Society
76. (3) Programs for 175th Celebration of Church 1810-1985
77. (5) Copies Congregation front of Church 1985
89. Picture of Church
90. Anniversary Hymn 1985
91. Journal Opinion Photo of Church
92. Helen Elder notepaper
93. Copy of Article "Margaret Pratt" People of Faith in Our Church"
91. (5) Blank Church Bulletins/History on back
92. Journal Opinion 6/18/1985 whole edition
93. Photo of 1986 Junior and Senior Choir
94. 1986 Calendar from American Airlines with Advertisement of Wild Game Supper
95. Wild Game Supper envelope & stationary
96. Advertisement "Teddy Bear Bazaar"
97. Update Game Supper Cookbook & History 1989
98. Church Bulletin – Katrina Munn Farewell
99. Dedication of Batchelder Window
100. Copy of Bulletin of Union Worship Service 1990
101. Program w/music 6/18/1989 in honor of Katrina Munn

Eris, Historian

Report from the Finance Committee

Finance committee has met in January and will meet again in February to finalize the budget to be submitted to Church Council for approval that will be voted on at annual meeting in May. Like our personal households, our Church has basic needs as well as goals and aspirations, all of which require a financial plan. This church year has been a very busy with various committees doing great works, and you have responded with tremendous support both in time and financial resources.

The Mission's & Social Action Committee provided the book "The Good Church" which should be required reading for all members and prospective members. In this book the author and pastor gives an account of ideas that have worked in her respective churches for the Overall Church Mission and for each of the various parts or committees. One idea is for each member to discuss their decision around tithing. While I am not suggesting such a practice, this past year we had two members who significantly increases their pledges; both shared with me why it was so important to do so. While these were anonymous and will remain so, their stories moved me and have stuck in my heart and in my mind.

If anyone would like to share a story or thoughts about tithing in the upcoming March or April Epistle, please let me know; or if anyone would like to prepare and present your thoughts during worship such as Dan Perry graciously offered and delivered last January, please let me know as soon as possible. Thank you again for your support.

*Sincerely,
Rob Taylor*



Lectionary Readings February (Year A)



Feb. 5 -

Isaiah 58:1-9a (give aid to the hungry, the homeless, the naked)
1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (the wisdom is in the message of the cross)
Matthew 5:13-20 (shine with good works and deeds of justice)
Psalm 112:1-9 (distribute freely, give to the poor)
theme hymn: *Once in Royal David's City*

Feb. 12 -

Deut. 30:15-20 (faithfully obey? Or turn away from God?)
1 Corinthians 3:1-9 (jealousy, strife are signs of immature faith)
Matthew 5:21-37 (we must reconcile with our brethren)
Psalm 119:1-8 (O that my ways can be steadfast!)
theme hymn: *Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty*

Feb. 19 -

Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18 (do not do injustice)
1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23 (Christ is the foundation)
Matthew 5:38-48 (love and serve your enemies)
Psalm 119:33-40 (teach me the way, lead me O Lord)
theme hymn: *The Church's One Foundation*

Feb. 26 - Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 24:12-18 (God calls Moses to the mountain top)
2 Peter 1:16-21 (eye witness to a real, not fabled event)
Matthew 17:1-9 (the transfiguration of Jesus)
Psalm 2 (let us break their bonds asunder)
theme hymn: *All Creatures of Our God and King*

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)

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

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

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!



Please mark your calendar for an after-church gathering on February 12.

In January, the congregation gathered to think about what Open and Affirming (ONA) might look like for our church, if we decide to go that direction. We discussed details of what might and might not change, what excites or concerns us, and we reviewed some sample covenants and talked about what phrases and ideas sounded like a good fit for our church, and might be part of our own Open and Affirming covenant.

The Diaconate took the congregation's input from that meeting, and put together a draft ONA covenant and implementation plan, which will be presented at the February 12 meeting for feedback and discussion. We hope you will all be able to attend and participate in this very important last meeting in our process of exploring Open and Affirming for our church.