



First ChurchNEWS

Statement of Purpose

We gather as a faith community to love and magnify God.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, we will love our neighbors as ourselves, advocating for peace and justice.

We will go out and share our faith in Christ, inviting others to join us.

We will be nurturers of the spirit and teachers of the Word.

We will welcome and provide sanctuary to all.

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THE IN-BETWEEN TIME

Give Up Neglecting God

Seven steps towards a more meaningful Lent (and giving up chocolate isn't one of them).

This month since we are moving into a concentrated time of prayer as individuals and a community, I thought I'd share a reflection by Debra Farrington, a retreat leader and author. Enjoy and go do likewise! Rev. Norm

Here's my advice: Don't give up chocolate for Lent this year. Or rather, give up chocolate — or whatever else you give up — if it helps you think about God more often. But if all it does is make you think about chocolate, then let me suggest some other Lenten practices to you.

In the sixth century, St. Benedict wrote a "guidebook" to living in a monastic community, a document we know today as The Rule of St. Benedict. "The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent," he wrote. In the next sentence he gets a bit more realistic. Since not many have the strength to live Lent all the time, Benedict advises us to "wash away the negligences of other times."

What most of us neglect — with more regularity than we might care to admit — is God. So this Lent, instead of giving up chocolate, give up neglecting God. Here are a few ways for doing that, all of them straight from ancient and contemporary monasteries. I know — you're not a monk or nun! And I'm not suggesting that you start going to church seven times a day during Lent or wearing black robes and hoods. But you might be surprised at how much there is to learn from monastic life, even for those of us who live secular lives. But don't try to follow all of them or you'll end up just paying attention to your Lenten discipline — instead of God. (continued, p.2)

Lenten Sermon Series March 2009

First Sunday of Lent March 1, 2009

Holy Communion

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

"Dwelling with Beasts"

Rev. Bendroth preaching

Second Sunday of Lent March 8, 2009

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:23-31

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

"When Jesus Spoke Plainly"

Third Sunday of Lent March 15, 2009

Hebrews 11:32 – 12:3

"Second Sight"

Peggy Bendroth preaching

Fourth Sunday of Lent March 22, 2009

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

"Snake on a Stick"

Fifth Sunday of Lent March 29, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-12

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

"In Death, Life"

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The In-Between Time...(continued)

Have a heart-to-heart with God

"Pray temperately and simply. Prayer is a heart-to-heart talk between yourself and God and needs no brilliant ideas, no flood of words" (The Jerusalem Community Rule of Life, Jerusalem/Paris, 1978).

Take some time out for a long walk, or go to a quiet place you enjoy and just have a heart-to-heart with God. Put away all your notions about trying to impress God by being brilliant or by using carefully chosen words. Pretend you're talking to a friend you've neglected and say what's in your heart. Don't forget to do some listening as well.

Cut back on work

"By choosing to work as hard as possible, but not more than you ought, not primarily in view of a perishable end but one that lasts forever, you are to stand free and challenging in a world where work has been overrated into a religion and often into a sacred cow" (The Jerusalem Community Rule of Life).

A recent newscast reported that Americans actually added a week of work to their schedules in the 1990s. Many of us put work at the center of our lives, rather than God. Take a break from working too hard this Lent. Work a reasonable schedule, but not more than that. Spend some of that newfound free time with God in prayer, personal reflection or spiritual reading.

Sleep enough

"Our feeble flesh could not possibly be defrauded of the whole night's rest and yet keep its vigour unshaken throughout the following day without sleepiness of mind and heaviness of spirit" (The Twelve Books of John Cassian, Marseilles, c. 420).

Having a good relationship with God takes energy and attentiveness, something John Cassian, one of the desert fathers from the fourth and fifth centuries, knew well. He advised getting enough sleep so they could vigorously pursue their spiritual lives. Make Lent a time for getting rested so you, too, can attend to God without the heaviness of spirit that lack of sleep induces.

Give up annoyance

"Don't be irritated by the brother who sings off-key" (Rule for a New Brother, Brakkenstein Community of Blessed Sacrament Fathers, Holland, 1973).

Can you imagine standing next to a brother who sings off-key, and having to do that three or more times a day, for the rest of your life? But that's just what this monastic rule, or guidebook, suggests. Just for Lent, try to avoid being annoyed by others who do things differently than you would. See if you can find Christ in that brother or sister who "sings off-key" and

Seek a spirit of detachment

"Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly. ... Seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying [your] own material needs" (The Rule of the Secular Franciscans, Rome, 1978; based on Francis' rule, 13th century Italy).

Most of us own much more than we need. All too often our sense of self-worth and confidence rest on how much we own, rather than on knowing ourselves as God's beloved daughter or son. Take a Lenten break from buying unnecessary things. Give the money you would have spent on that CD or silk blouse to an organization that feeds the homeless or shelters the abused. Let your money do something good for some of God's other beloved children.

Pursue God through study

"Our pursuit of knowledge is an expression of love for God's world and the riches of revelation. ... Since our gifts and ministries vary we need to encourage one another to value not only reading and study but many other ways of learning, every method that helps us become more responsive in heart and mind to the whole creation" (The Rule of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

St. Benedict decreed that every monk be given a book to read during Lent. Find a book that opens up your relationship with God and read it through, either by yourself or with a group. Or find another way to study God's world. Take a course. Visit an art exhibit. Go to a concert. See a movie. Do these things with the intention of learning more about God's world and the riches of revelation.

Take care of yourself

"The hermit listens to his body, giving attention to health, exercise, work, proper diet, fasting and leisure. Because the Holy Trinity dwells within him, making him a 'Living House of Bread,' he nurtures and cares for the gift of his body and the sacredness of life" (A Way of Desert Spirituality: The Plan of Life of the Hermits of Bethlehem, Chester, N.J., 1998).

Scripture tells us that our bodies are God's temples (1 Corinthians 3:16). So do things to take care of one of God's dwelling places this Lent: Get enough exercise. Eat better. Take time for leisure and play. And do it in the knowledge that you are caring for one of God's great gifts and nurturing the sacredness of your life.

Reprint by permission from Debra Farrington, retreat leader and author.

www.debrafarrington.com

Fred Phelps is coming to Reading

The Town of Reading has the distinct dishonor of having Rev. Fred Phelps, pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas picketing the play *The Laramie Project*, which will be performed at Reading Memorial High School on March 12, 13, and 14. Phelps and members of his church will picket on the 13th at 7 p.m.

You probably know Rev. Phelps as the man who pickets the funeral services of men and women who died in Iraq claiming that God killed them as judgment upon America for tolerating homosexuality. He and his followers carry signs such as GOD HATES FAGS, THANK GOD FOR AIDS, FAGS BURN IN HELL, THANK GOD FOR DEAD SOLDIERS, and more. (If you can stomach it, go to Phelps website www.godhatesfags.com)

What is it about this play that inspires such hate-filled venom? The Laramie Project is a play about a group of young actors and writers from a New York City theater company, who come to Laramie, Wyoming, to interview the townspeople about what happened on October 6, 1998. That was the night when a gay college student named Matthew Shepard was brutally beaten, tied up and left for dead on a fence off a rural road. The details of the case are clear-cut and well-known, but as one of the actors explains, "This is not about the case. This is about the town: why did this happen here, what are people saying, how do they feel and think about what happened."

The Reading Clergy Association has met with both Reading Police Chief James Cormier and Reading School Superintendent, Pat Schettini about how to best respond. We were originally intending to have a peaceful counter protest but based upon the experience of other communities, have decided it is best to ignore them. There will, however, be a Service of Unity, at the Unitarian Church prior to the play from 6 p.m. to 6:45 p.m on the 13th.

The best way to counter this hateful intolerance is to support the high school and the kids in the play by attending it in droves. This play is part of a multi-year effort in the high school to teach tolerance, a respect for difference, and to create a culture of kindness. The Laramie Project overwhelming supports that goal.

Superintendent Schettini says that tickets must be purchased in advance and encourages local churches to buy them in blocks, especially on the 13th. If anyone would like to organize such an effort, please speak to Rev. Norm.

During this season of Lent when we recall that Jesus became the scapegoat of human hate and violence to take it away, can we not offer an alternative Christian vision to Rev. Phelps?

Peggy Bendroth to lead series on "What is Congregationalism?"

On March 15 and 22, Peggy Bendroth, Executive Director and Librarian of the American Congregational Association (and also Rev. Bendroth's wife), will be presenting a sermon and two adult education classes on our congregational heritage.

On March 15 she will be preaching a sermon entitled, "Second Sight" based upon Hebrews 11:32 – 12:3. After worship she'll offer a presentation called "Growing Deeper Roots: Exploring the Congregational Christian Tradition" that will give people an overview of the history and of the distinctives of both Congregationalism and the Christian Connection. The next Sunday she will discuss "Congregational Practices of Discernment," or what the seventeenth-century Puritans can teach us about the way we do church meetings and how we seek after God in the present day.

These presentations are apropos as we consider reorganizing our governing structure and recovering our "roots" as we seek a new pastor. Many folks, including "cradle Congregationalists," misunderstand Congregationalism as democracy at prayer; one person, one vote; or "we get to tell the pastor what to do." In fact, Congregationalism is more of a theocracy where each member has a responsibility to discern the will of God collectively with the whole congregation. One of the tasks of the interim process is understanding our history and how it impacts our self-understanding today.

We hope to see you there!

Many Participating in 40 Days of Prayer

As the newsletter goes to press, thirty-one people have signed up to use the Prayer Journal during Lent as part of their daily devotions. In addition, almost all commissions and committees have asked Rev. Bendroth to come lead them in a prayer time or have set aside a significant part of their meeting for prayer. Nine others have asked to be in small prayer groups. This is an encouraging start and I'm sure there are others out there who want to participate, but have forgotten to sign up. Extra Prayer Journals have been printed and you can drop by the office to pick one up. For more information call or email Rev. Norm.

Book Group Selections March and April



March 3 – The Shack by William Paul Young

Barbara Philbrick will lead the group in this novel with its theme of redemption and its metaphor of a house built out of your own pain. The author wrote this book to help make sense for himself and his family of his own pain and difficulties. His experience of God's love is seen through his version of the trinity: God as a large black woman with a "questionable" sense of humor, the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman named Sarayu, and Jesus as a Middle Eastern laborer. The Christian Century review suggests that "This Trinity is against institutions, hierarchy, economics and politics and for nature, individual healing, therapy, closure, relationships, cooking and gardening." The book has its rough spots, but it is talked about by many as having helpful springboards for deeper discussion.

April 7 – The Scandalous Gospel: What's So Good About the Good News? by Peter Gomes

Gomes calls us to make the message of Jesus the focus of our attention. As is usual for his writing, there are memorable lines such as – "The opposite of fear is not courage but compassion." He also warns against "cheap hope" and suggests that "...if things don't turn out right, we endure...." Gomes reminds us that Jesus' teachings are radical and relevant for today. John Lape will lead the discussion of this book.

The Book Group meets on the first Tuesday of most months from 7:30 to 9:00 in the church parlor. Please contact John or Mary Ann Lape if you have questions (978 664-3583 or malape@verizon.net).

NOW Meeting March 15 and Still Moving Forward

In February, the NOW group created a subcommittee that is working to draft a new organizational structure with the intention of trying it out during the next program year. We are also talking about voting at annual meeting to temporarily suspend portions of the bylaws pertaining to committee and commission numbers. Mark your calendars for our Annual Meeting on Friday, May 15.

Please join us on Monday, March 16 at 7:30 in the library. This will be our first non-holiday meeting of the year so do come. NOW is a loose group of people interested in moving the church forward using the navigational tools created in the Golden Days meetings. You are a member of NOW if you are interested in moving the church forward. So please join us or contact Linda Ananian, icananian@aol.com.

Signs-for-All



Have you been watching the church's front lawn? Along with our new updated sign we have a permanent structure for signs to let the community know what's going on inside. By changing

the sign regularly and posting announcements of upcoming events, we share with those around us, our vital life together and with the community.

At present we have a fairly extensive inventory of signs...but we could use some more. So...we're looking for a few "sign benefactors". Your gift of \$100 would support the cost of most two sided signs for the front holder. Might you be willing to be such a benefactor? We could use signs for Palm Sunday, Easter, Homecoming, another "generic" message for in-between times—or maybe you have an idea about a sign sponsorship! If so please contact the church office and we'll get design work going!! Thank you.

CWF Annual Plant Swap



Do you have too many iris in your garden? Need some yellow daylilies? Are indoor plants taking over your house?

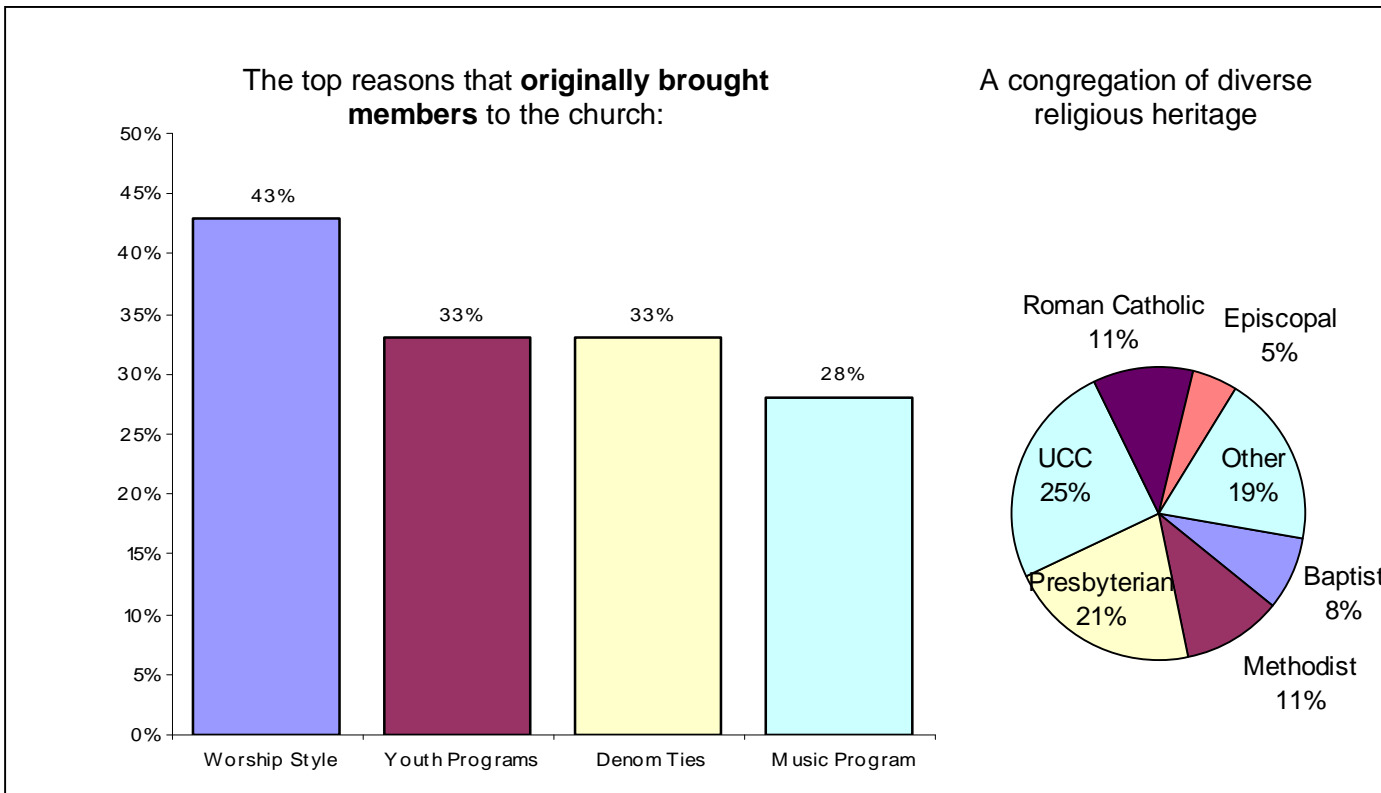
Start planning your garden by thinking about what you would like to trade at CWF's Perennial Plant Swap. It will be held in May, either the second or third Saturday from 8:30-12:00. Joan Kingston and Mary Ann Higgins will run it with help from Carol Patterson. This is always a fun event, and we hope to see you there.

PROFILE COMPLETED!

Thanks to all of you for helping us to complete our Local Church Profile!

The Local Church Profile is a critical step in the process and the feedback that we received from the recent survey was invaluable in helping us better define how a new pastor might help us on our faith journey. Our profile has been completed and has been submitted to the Massachusetts Conference. For those of you who completed the survey, we appreciate all of the thoughtful care that went into your responses. We became ever more hopeful about the future of our wonderful church as reflected in the many positive comments provided. **A few key themes emerged from the survey:**

- A focus on children and youth was identified as a core need with many emphasizing the need for enhanced programs for youth
- We have a truly diverse congregation in terms of theological background, worship style preferences and expectations for the pastor's role
- Spiritual development and identifying individual gifts are important to a majority of the congregation
- The majority feel very connected to the church and as such are very hopeful about finding the right pastor to unify as well as appreciate the diversity within our congregation



Thanks again for your participation in the survey. As always, if you have thoughts and ideas as we travel on pastoral search journey, please don't hesitate to contact any member of the committee.

Joyce Burnham (jaeburnham@comcast.net), Ginny Davenport (Ginny827@aol.com), Christine Hylan (clhylan@verizon.net), Jane McCord (jane.comins.mccord@bankofamerica.com), Bob Svensson (bobsven@comcast.net), Craig Taylor (j.c.taylor@verizon.net), Laurie Tucker (tuckerlandb@yahoo.com) and Steve Viegas (stephenviegas@hotmail.com).

2009 Stewardship Campaign

Our 2009 Stewardship Campaign runs from March 1st to 29th. We will again be contacting parishioners through the Pony Express program. 20 people have agreed to be “trail bosses”. The trail bosses met to kick off the campaign at a breakfast on February 22nd. The trail bosses will oversee the relay of the “saddlebag”. The saddle bag contains pledge forms and information. When the saddle bag arrives at a home, the family will consider its pledge, fill out a pledge form, seal it in an envelope, place it in the saddlebag and forward the saddle bag to the next family on the list. In 2008, the Pony Express allowed us to reach more families than previous programs, resulting in an impressive increase in the number of pledges and in the dollar amount.

Please consider your stewardship of our church and its ministry in your prayers as you consider your pledge. We offer as a guide the following excerpt from the March 2009 issue of “Stewards of Our Relationship with Money: Financial Health for Families and Congregations”, a publication of the national office for stewardship of the UCC:

“Being stewards in the household of God is intensely counter-cultural in significant ways. We live in a society where we are taught explicitly and implicitly that to be truly human is to be self-sufficient, independent, protective, competitive, acquisitive, accumulative, a consumer. If you pay money, you should get something. There is no limit to the satisfaction of our desires. Our spirit is nourished and our worth is measured by what we possess.

What are the marks of this counter-culture, the Household of God?

We are interdependent and collaborative – we need each other, others need us. We share surplus so each has enough. In order for all to live, each limits accumulation. Money is just another resource to be allocated to ensure shalom. Our spirit is nourished by living up to who God made us to be. Our worth is given by God.

Churches have a unique ministry opportunity to liberate members to order their financial life according to their faith values. As centers of hope and transformation, local churches help members address and heal their personal relationship with money. And the church will tend to its financial health.”

The Stewardship Committee: Stephen Viegas, Doug Rogers, John Myers

ACEs in Lent

FCCR’s ACEs are an on-line group who focus on scripture and prayer, primarily prayer. The lectionary for the upcoming Sunday is posted each week, and various hardy souls attempt to volunteer some thoughts on the readings. Occasionally others chime in.

The prayer component is more popular. Each day during the week a member offers a prayer to the group. The prayer assignment is based on a schedule, and is, naturally, opt-in. It is a good way to develop one’s ability to converse with God, and also a good way to connect one’s concerns with the larger church community. Both activities are e-mail based, so virtually anyone can participate. New members are always welcome (instructions for joining are at the end of the article).

We will continue these activities during Lent, but will be augmenting our prayer activity with a prayer blog! Our pastors have challenged us to work on incorporating regular prayer into a Lenten discipline. They have suggested banding together in prayer groups. For some, going out to regular

prayer meetings can pose difficult scheduling problems. One way to address the scheduling problem is by having an on-line prayer group. You can pray at a time and place convenient to you, but still be connected with others by being able to read the prayers of your cohort, and in turn, share your prayers with them. While the goal of this exercise is to encourage everyone to post a prayer *each day* during Lent, we encourage everyone to participate at a level that is comfortable for them. Thinking you might miss a day or two—or week—here or there is no reason not to try.

You don’t have to sign up for either group to read what people have posted. The prayers and musings from the e-mail group are on line at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/FCCR-ACE/>. The blog can be found at <http://fccr-ace.org/>. To become an active participant in the e-mail group, merely send an e-mail to FCCR-ACE-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To become a *prayer blogger*, request log-in credentials from Larry Piper [larry@lgpiper.net]. If you have questions or concerns, contact Larry Piper.

Outreach Opportunities

Monthly Collection for Reading Food Pantry: We are supporting a monthly focused donation for the Reading Food Pantry, concentrating on collecting on the first week of the month. Of course, all items are needed at all times, but we thought if we established a routine, for ourselves and the church, we would be thinking about our contributions on a scheduled and routine basis.

March will be St. Patrick's Day **Green** – canned spinach, relish, olives.

Around Mother's day, Outreach and CWF will be sponsoring an "All Church Collection" of **Gifts of the Heart**. These Hygiene Kits for Church World Service Kits are distributed anywhere in the world in response to global emergencies and disasters. In the face of natural disasters, violence, or grinding poverty, a Hygiene Kit can mean the difference between sickness and health for struggling families.

The Outreach Commission will be making and serving **lunch to participants in the common cathedral** on Boston Common **Sunday, March 22**. We need people who would be willing to make the lunch and accompany us into Boston.

Where is Your Treasure?

This is the theme of this year's One Great Hour of Sharing, which our congregation will celebrate Sunday, March 22. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus reminded his listeners that "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" [Matthew 6: 21]. He called upon people to "lay up" wealth not on earth, but in heaven, saying such treasure was both incorruptible and safe. Today, we can "lay up" wealth in heaven by supporting One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS). OGHS is the special mission offering of the United Church of Christ that carries God's message of love and hope to people in more than 80 countries. This offering is also taken by eight other Protestant denominations, thus multiplying the effectiveness and extent of our witness many times over. In cooperation with hundreds of local partners around the world, One Great Hour of Sharing is part of a remarkable network of service and caring that is efficient, effective, and faithful. Administrative costs are typically less than 8 percent annually.

Through OGHS, the UCC works with national and international partners to provide sources of clean water and food, education and health care, small business micro-credit, emergency relief, and advocacy and resettlement for refugees and displaced persons. OGHS also supports domestic and international ministries for disaster preparedness and response.

The funds collected help to:

Build sustainable communities through self-help programs that enable people and communities to stand against and rise above hunger, disease, illiteracy, and other forces of injustice that deny and destroy dignity.

Respond to disaster with emergency and long-term assistance to people in the aftermath of natural or human-caused events such as hurricanes, tornados, storms, floods, tidal waves, fires, explosions, technological disasters, civil strife, and war.

Minister to refugees by responding with advocacy and help, hope, and hospitality.

The UCC annually channels more than \$3 million dollars through One Great Hour of Sharing to these and other humanitarian needs in the world. Let's be a part of it!

Habitat for Humanity Update

The Lowell chapter of Habitat has completed the Westford project, utilizing 'green' technology. They are currently working at a site in Bedford and funding construction of houses in South Africa. And the next site has been identified in Dracut. All this takes lots of support! You can help in several ways:

- Attend "A Touch of Green" Gala Event on March 7th at the Vesper Country Club in Tyngsboro, MA. The event runs from 6:30-11:00 PM with dinner, dancing, live and silent auctions and entertainment. Guest speaker is Rep. Niki Tsongas. Tickets are \$75 - call the Habitat office at 978-692-0927 to reserve yours!
- Or go to <http://www.lowellhabitat.org> and click on "VolunteerUP" to help at the Bedford project or click on "Become a volunteer" and serve on a committee

Or join the FCCR Congo Climbers hike team in June or sponsor the team with a pledge

Confirmation News

On the last weekend in January, the 2008-09 our Confirmation class gathered at the Grotonwood retreat center for a worthwhile weekend of Christian fellowship, worship, and Christian education. There were several churches participating in the weekend event, which offered FCCR confirmands a chance to make new friends. Joined in small and large group workshops, there were ample opportunities for everyone to freely raise ideas and questions about their faith journey. Accompanied by guitar, everyone sang God's praises and created artful tee-shirts. During every community gathering, all had the chance to learn about each other, our faith, and the unconditional love of God. O yes, and there was still plenty of free time, and plenty of good food for all.

On February 15th, the confirmation class and their mentors gathered to attend an alternate worship service at the First Baptist Church in Reading. The rich experience began with warm welcome, moved into new expressions in Word and song, alongside lively musical accompaniment, which kept everyone standing up to keep singing and praising God!

Mentors and Confirmands:

Please continue to explore your faith journey in conversations.

The confirmation process includes each Confirmand working with an adult mentor. They meet at least four times together and discuss their faith journey, spiritual gifts and service, and spiritual practices. In addition, they observe a worship service, a funeral, baptism or wedding together and attend a worship service in another faith tradition. The mentor and their student are each reading the Gospel of Luke and keeping a journal on it.

Upcoming Confirmation Gatherings:

On March 1, the confirmation class will gather in the Chapel at 6pm. Prepare by reading Chapters 20-21.

On March 15th, the confirmation class will gather in the youth lounge at 10:15am. Prepare by reading chapter 22.

Y'all can come on downstairs on March 29th for Heifer Marketplace!



The marketplace begins after worship on Sunday, March 29. Come experience the good works and fun of Heifer at FCCR. The children and teachers are hard at work making crafts, creating posters and artwork and planning yummy treats for their animal stalls. Please come support them as they reach out to minister to the world's hungry by 'donating' animals to help people help themselves. Parents who would like to volunteer to lend a hand on March 29th should see their child's teacher or Linda Jerrett for more information.

Please join us as Sandi Watson from Heifer International presents our congregation with an award for donating an ark to Heifer for 2007 and 2008!

The Heifer web site explains that each gift ark can provide "two cows to bring milk and income to a Russian village. Two sheep to help families in Arizona produce wool. Two camels to help families in Tanzania earn income by transporting agricultural and industrial materials. Two oxen to pull plows and carts in Uganda. Two water buffalo to help Cambodian families increase rice production through animal draft power. And that's just the first five sets of animals ... and ark provides 15 pairs of animals to change lives."

We hope to surpass last year's accomplishments and we can do it with your help! **Please** be sure to come on down and see all the kids' hard work! Come be a part of our Heifer Marketplace.

Wanted: Greetings cards – new, used, any subject. Will be used for a craft to sell at the Faire. Put them in the box outside the office. Contact Joann Sanford (jo.take@verizon.net or 781-944-7805) with any questions.



Town Wide Rummage Sale Clothing and Linens

Friday March 13 6-9pm

Saturday March 14 10am-2pm

25 Woburn Street, Reading


First Congregational Church of Reading, UCC

Clean, functional donations may be dropped off at the church basement off Sanborn Street starting Monday, March 2nd.

Volunteer to help by contacting info@readingcares.org or calling 781-942-2145. We need sorters during the week before the sale, clerks during the sale, and clean-up help at the end. Earn vouchers to use at the sale, help your community, and have fun with your neighbors!

Vouchers are also available for qualifying individuals and families through Reading Town Hall. Contact Elder/Human Services at 781-942-6608.

*Proceeds to benefit the **Reading Food Pantry.***

Sponsored by: 

The First Congregational Church of Reading, UCC.

Rummage Sale at FCCR

FCCR and ReadingCares are proud to be sponsoring the Rummage Sale on March 13th and 14th, but we need your help. We need sorters the week before the sale, cashiers during the sale, and clean-up help after the sale. The sign-up sheet will be hanging up during coffee hour starting: 2/22. Come one and all! We can also use your donations of clean, usable clothing and linens, and hangers and bags for the sale, to be dropped off after March 1st in Pilgrim Hall.

In addition, there will be a meeting after worship on March 1st for past and future Rummage Sale workers. We need your input on what worked, and what can be done better. Please contact Cindy at 781.942.2145 or Betsy Schneider at info@readingcares.org or betsy.schneider@comcast.net with any questions or suggestions.

Thank You!

Thank you

A thank you to members of Circle 10 who provided a delicious, home cooked meal for Emmaus House on Jan 25th. Thanks also to Sharon Ofenstein, chair of Outreach, and Judie Williams of Circle 10 for delivering this meal. It was gladly accepted and appreciated.

Update from Pommern Village Choir!!

We have heard back from the choir we hosted in November from Tanzania. During their tour through the state, the choir raised enough funds (including funds we collected at our November 1 Ham and Bean Supper/Coffeehouse for them) to drill at least **ten wells** that will assure safe fresh water for their village and beyond!

Rev. Peter Cook, from The Plymouth Church in Framingham, UCC, the sponsoring church, reports: "It is hard to imagine what a positive change this will make in the daily lives of thousands of people. Thank you so much for your part in making this happen."

Thank you for your generosity. The spirit of their music and fellowship will not soon be forgotten on us all here in Reading.

To the members of Reading UCC,

We would like to thank you for inviting us to play the Coffeehouse on February 7th. Not only were you the most attentive audience we have ever experienced, but your generosity, both of spirit and of financial gift, was extreme! We thank you very much, and hope to share music, tears, and laughter with you again.

Grace and peace,

Annie & Katie

KINDRED

Dear Project Leader,

We are deeply grateful for your congregation's commitment and support of Operation Christmas Child in 2008. Some 8 million gift-filled shoe boxes were collected, including 4.9 million in the United States—the most ever since the project's inception 16 years ago. That's 8 million children and their families who will hear the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, and it is mission-minded churches and groups like yours who make this spiritual harvest possible!

Participation by individuals, families, groups, and especially churches is critical to the global ministry of Operation Christmas Child. We praise God for your partnership in this ministry and for your investment in eternity.

In December, Samaritan's Purse delivered thousands of shoe box gifts to war refugees in the Eastern European country of Georgia. We hope the article and video report [will serve as a powerful testimony to the impact Operation Christmas Child is having on hurting people in need of a Savior. Please share these materials with your congregation. Thank you, and God bless you for your passion to bring children around the world to faith in Christ! "

See the article and video at [http://www.samaritanspurse.org/index.php/OCC/OCC_Impact/]

Notes from the Altar Committee...

Orders for the Easter lilies will be due on **April 5th**. Order forms will be in the April newsletter, in the Church office and in the weekly bulletin beginning on **March 22**. Call Mary Ann Higgins 617-347-8346 if you have any questions or want to order early.

We will also need help delivering the plants on Easter and the week following.

The Altar Committee is in need of two committee members for the upcoming Church calendar year. Tasks include calling donors to confirm their gift, ordering the flowers, and being sure the flowers are delivered. There are no meetings. Please consider saying yes when you are called. If you have decided to be on the Committee already, call Mary Ann Higgins.

There are several dates open if you would like to donate altar flowers to honor a loved one or in memory of a loved one. Call Mary Ann if one suits your needs.

March 31

May 31

June 21

June 28

If you would like to deliver the altar flowers to a shut-in, please call Mary Ann Higgins for an assignment. You may deliver on Monday if you are not able to do so on Sunday.

Daily prayers are invited for all of our friends and members-especially those who are dealing with these special joys and concerns. They and their families are most grateful for your spiritual support and cards of greeting.



We pray for healing, recovery, and strength for:

- ✓ Janice Russells's brother, Jeff, suffering from cancer.
- ✓ Marcie's continued healing as she fights a nasty infection.
- ✓ Our Aunt Nav Jiwan's whose cancer has come out of remission.
- ✓ Gay Williams who fell and fractured her wrist, and recently had surgery.
- ✓ Ken's continued commitment to rehab.
- ✓ Jim Breadmore, Leslie and Bob Fuller's son-in-law who is having back surgery tomorrow.
- ✓ Liz Swallow who is having surgery.
- ✓ My girlfriend Donna, who is having trouble healing from a ruptured appendix incision.
- ✓ Mollie Ziegler who took a bad fall on the ice a couple of weeks ago.
- ✓ Bruce for a successful surgery.

We pray for those who are grieving:

- ✓ For the families of those who passed away recently: Gertrude Moore, George Sanford and Jim Colbert.
- ✓ Fran Doughty whose brother Charles passed away February 4th.
- ✓ A sister-in-law who lost her battle with breast cancer on Thursday and for her husband struggling to carry on.

We also pray for the following special concerns:

- ✓ The LeConti family for strength and hope with Bryce's everyday challenges.
- ✓ Employment for friends who are struggling financially.
- ✓ To repair my relationship with my sister.
- ✓ A family in need of housing with 3 kids and one on the way.

- ✓ Those suffering from depression, feeling isolated from God and their family.
- ✓ Those who are losing their jobs.
- ✓ Those who have terminal illnesses.
- ✓ Laura Wood that tests will find the problem.
- ✓ My mother who is struggling with depression.
- ✓ My brother recently diagnosed with MS telling his children of his condition today.
- ✓ A dear friend who has a brain tumor.
- ✓ Gay William's cousin Linda who is the last stages of cancer.

God and we pray in celebration for:

- ✓ Profound thanks to the Lord for helping me to find a job in this difficult economy.
- ✓ My brother and sister-in-law who are adopting their new son and will be traveling to Ethiopia shortly.
- ✓ Praise from the Ellerts for Maya getting into Columbia College in Ohio.

Our prayers continue for those who are in need of ongoing nursing care or assisted living:

- ✓ Bertha Babb (Susan Suarez's mother) at Bear Hill.
- ✓ Doris Torppa (Susan Torppa's mother) at Bear Hill.
- ✓ John Weston at Longwood Place.
- ✓ Libby Hodges at son's in Connecticut.

And those who are cared for at home:

Jane Rice Peter Thorstensen
Molly Rowe Grace Faulkner

Please call the church office for these addresses if you would like to send a card or visit these friends.

Altar Flowers in February



Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of her husband Bruce, by Carol Patterson

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of George Cruickshanks, father, Helen Cruickshanks, mother, and Helen Cruickshanks, sister, by Duncan and Heather Cruickshanks.

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of Samuel Taylor by his daughter, Leigh Taylor.

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Woodward by their daughter Shirley Thurston.

Women 'n' Stitches

Women 'n' Stitches created and donated 12 baby quilts recently. Five of them went to the Children's Hospital in Salem via Chad and 7 of them, along with 3 baby outfits, went to single mothers associated with the City Mission Society of Boston. We also donated 4 lap quilts to the Sawtelle Family Hospice House in Reading. All were greatly appreciated. Thanks to everyone that donated the fabric, time and love that created them. We will be donating a sweet baby quilt that was hand-quilted to the church's auction in May.

calendar



First ChurchNEWS

Statement of Purpose

We gather as a faith community to love and magnify God.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, we will love our neighbors as ourselves, advocating for peace and justice.

We will go out and share our faith in Christ, inviting others to join us.

We will be nurturers of the spirit and teachers of the Word.

We will welcome and provide sanctuary to all.

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THE IN-BETWEEN TIME

Give Up Neglecting God

Seven steps towards a more meaningful Lent (and giving up chocolate isn't one of them).

This month since we are moving into a concentrated time of prayer as individuals and a community, I thought I'd share a reflection by Debra Farrington, a retreat leader and author. Enjoy and go do likewise! Rev. Norm

Here's my advice: Don't give up chocolate for Lent this year. Or rather, give up chocolate — or whatever else you give up — if it helps you think about God more often. But if all it does is make you think about chocolate, then let me suggest some other Lenten practices to you.

In the sixth century, St. Benedict wrote a "guidebook" to living in a monastic community, a document we know today as The Rule of St. Benedict. "The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent," he wrote. In the next sentence he gets a bit more realistic. Since not many have the strength to live Lent all the time, Benedict advises us to "wash away the negligences of other times."

What most of us neglect — with more regularity than we might care to admit — is God. So this Lent, instead of giving up chocolate, give up neglecting God. Here are a few ways for doing that, all of them straight from ancient and contemporary monasteries. I know — you're not a monk or nun! And I'm not suggesting that you start going to church seven times a day during Lent or wearing black robes and hoods. But you might be surprised at how much there is to learn from monastic life, even for those of us who live secular lives. But don't try to follow all of them or you'll end up just paying attention to your Lenten discipline — instead of God. (continued, p.2)

Lenten Sermon Series March 2009

First Sunday of Lent March 1, 2009

Holy Communion

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

"Dwelling with Beasts"

Rev. Bendroth preaching

Second Sunday of Lent March 8, 2009

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:23-31

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

"When Jesus Spoke Plainly"

Third Sunday of Lent March 15, 2009

Hebrews 11:32 – 12:3

"Second Sight"

Peggy Bendroth preaching

Fourth Sunday of Lent March 22, 2009

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

"Snake on a Stick"

Fifth Sunday of Lent March 29, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-12

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

"In Death, Life"

Church Contact Information:

Office Phone: 781-944-0205

www.churchofreading.org

Office E mail: office1.fccr@verizon.net

The In-Between Time...(continued)

Have a heart-to-heart with God

"Pray temperately and simply. Prayer is a heart-to-heart talk between yourself and God and needs no brilliant ideas, no flood of words" (The Jerusalem Community Rule of Life, Jerusalem/Paris, 1978).

Take some time out for a long walk, or go to a quiet place you enjoy and just have a heart-to-heart with God. Put away all your notions about trying to impress God by being brilliant or by using carefully chosen words. Pretend you're talking to a friend you've neglected and say what's in your heart. Don't forget to do some listening as well.

Cut back on work

"By choosing to work as hard as possible, but not more than you ought, not primarily in view of a perishable end but one that lasts forever, you are to stand free and challenging in a world where work has been overrated into a religion and often into a sacred cow" (The Jerusalem Community Rule of Life).

A recent newscast reported that Americans actually added a week of work to their schedules in the 1990s. Many of us put work at the center of our lives, rather than God. Take a break from working too hard this Lent. Work a reasonable schedule, but not more than that. Spend some of that newfound free time with God in prayer, personal reflection or spiritual reading.

Sleep enough

"Our feeble flesh could not possibly be defrauded of the whole night's rest and yet keep its vigour unshaken throughout the following day without sleepiness of mind and heaviness of spirit" (The Twelve Books of John Cassian, Marseilles, c. 420).

Having a good relationship with God takes energy and attentiveness, something John Cassian, one of the desert fathers from the fourth and fifth centuries, knew well. He advised getting enough sleep so they could vigorously pursue their spiritual lives. Make Lent a time for getting rested so you, too, can attend to God without the heaviness of spirit that lack of sleep induces.

Give up annoyance

"Don't be irritated by the brother who sings off-key" (Rule for a New Brother, Brakkenstein Community of Blessed Sacrament Fathers, Holland, 1973).

Can you imagine standing next to a brother who sings off-key, and having to do that three or more times a day, for the rest of your life? But that's just what this monastic rule, or guidebook, suggests. Just for Lent, try to avoid being annoyed by others who do things differently than you would. See if you can find Christ in that brother or sister who "sings off-key" and see what difference that makes in both of your lives.

Seek a spirit of detachment

"Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly. ... Seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying [your] own material needs" (The Rule of the Secular Franciscans, Rome, 1978; based on Francis' rule, 13th century Italy).

Most of us own much more than we need. All too often our sense of self-worth and confidence rest on how much we own, rather than on knowing ourselves as God's beloved daughter or son. Take a Lenten break from buying unnecessary things. Give the money you would have spent on that CD or silk blouse to an organization that feeds the homeless or shelters the abused. Let your money do something good for some of God's other beloved children.

Pursue God through study

"Our pursuit of knowledge is an expression of love for God's world and the riches of revelation. ... Since our gifts and ministries vary we need to encourage one another to value not only reading and study but many other ways of learning, every method that helps us become more responsive in heart and mind to the whole creation" (The Rule of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

St. Benedict decreed that every monk be given a book to read during Lent. Find a book that opens up your relationship with God and read it through, either by yourself or with a group. Or find another way to study God's world. Take a course. Visit an art exhibit. Go to a concert. See a movie. Do these things with the intention of learning more about God's world and the riches of revelation.

Take care of yourself

"The hermit listens to his body, giving attention to health, exercise, work, proper diet, fasting and leisure. Because the Holy Trinity dwells within him, making him a 'Living House of Bread,' he nurtures and cares for the gift of his body and the sacredness of life" (A Way of Desert Spirituality: The Plan of Life of the Hermits of Bethlehem, Chester, N.J., 1998).

Scripture tells us that our bodies are God's temples (1 Corinthians 3:16). So do things to take care of one of God's dwelling places this Lent: Get enough exercise. Eat better. Take time for leisure and play. And do it in the knowledge that you are caring for one of God's great gifts and nurturing the sacredness of your life.

Reprint by permission from Debra Farrington, retreat leader and author.

www.debrafarrington.com

Fred Phelps is coming to Reading

The Town of Reading has the distinct dishonor of having Rev. Fred Phelps, pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas picketing the play *The Laramie Project*, which will be performed at Reading Memorial High School on March 12, 13, and 14. Phelps and members of his church will picket on the 13th at 7 p.m.

You probably know Rev. Phelps as the man who pickets the funeral services of men and women who died in Iraq claiming that God killed them as judgment upon America for tolerating homosexuality. He and his followers carry signs such as GOD HATES FAGS, THANK GOD FOR AIDS, FAGS BURN IN HELL, THANK GOD FOR DEAD SOLDIERS, and more. (If you can stomach it, go to Phelps website www.godhatesfags.com)

What is it about this play that inspires such hate-filled venom? The Laramie Project is a play about a group of young actors and writers from a New York City theater company, who come to Laramie, Wyoming, to interview the townspeople about what happened on October 6, 1998. That was the night when a gay college student named Matthew Shepard was brutally beaten, tied up and left for dead on a fence off a rural road. The details of the case are clear-cut and well-known, but as one of the actors explains, "This is not about the case. This is about the town: why did this happen here, what are people saying, how do they feel and think about what happened."

The Reading Clergy Association has met with both Reading Police Chief James Cormier and Reading School Superintendent, Pat Schettini about how to best respond. We were originally intending to have a peaceful counter protest but based upon the experience of other communities, have decided it is best to ignore them. There will, however, be a Service of Unity, at the Unitarian Church prior to the play from 6 p.m. to 6:45 p.m on the 13th.

The best way to counter this hateful intolerance is to support the high school and the kids in the play by attending it in droves. This play is part of a multi-year effort in the high school to teach tolerance, a respect for difference, and to create a culture of kindness. The Laramie Project overwhelming supports that goal.

Superintendent Schettini says that tickets must be purchased in advance and encourages local churches to buy them in blocks, especially on the 13th. If anyone would like to organize such an effort, please speak to Rev. Norm.

During this season of Lent when we recall that Jesus became the scapegoat of human hate and violence to take it away, can we not offer an alternative Christian vision to Rev. Phelps?

Peggy Bendroth to lead series on "What is Congregationalism?"

On March 15 and 22, Peggy Bendroth, Executive Director and Librarian of the American Congregational Association (and also Rev. Bendroth's wife), will be presenting a sermon and two adult education classes on our congregational heritage.

On March 15 she will be preaching a sermon entitled, "Second Sight" based upon Hebrews 11:32 – 12:3. After worship she'll offer a presentation called "Growing Deeper Roots: Exploring the Congregational Christian Tradition" that will give people an overview of the history and of the distinctives of both Congregationalism and the Christian Connection. The next Sunday she will discuss "Congregational Practices of Discernment," or what the seventeenth-century Puritans can teach us about the way we do church meetings and how we seek after God in the present day.

These presentations are apropos as we consider reorganizing our governing structure and recovering our "roots" as we seek a new pastor. Many folks, including "cradle Congregationalists," misunderstand Congregationalism as democracy at prayer; one person, one vote; or "we get to tell the pastor what to do." In fact, Congregationalism is more of a theocracy where each member has a responsibility to discern the will of God collectively with the whole congregation. One of the tasks of the interim process is understanding our history and how it impacts our self-understanding today.

We hope to see you there!

Many Participating in 40 Days of Prayer

As the newsletter goes to press, thirty-one people have signed up to use the Prayer Journal during Lent as part of their daily devotions. In addition, almost all commissions and committees have asked Rev. Bendroth to come lead them in a prayer time or have set aside a significant part of their meeting for prayer. Nine others have asked to be in small prayer groups. This is an encouraging start and I'm sure there are others out there who want to participate, but have forgotten to sign up. Extra Prayer Journals have been printed and you can drop by the office to pick one up. For more information call or email Rev. Norm.

Book Group Selections March and April



March 3 – The Shack by William Paul Young

Barbara Philbrick will lead the group in this novel with its theme of redemption and its metaphor of a house built out of your own pain. The author wrote this book to help make sense for himself and his family of his own pain and difficulties. His experience of God's love is seen through his version of the trinity: God as a large black woman with a "questionable" sense of humor, the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman named Sarayu, and Jesus as a Middle Eastern laborer. The Christian Century review suggests that "This Trinity is against institutions, hierarchy, economics and politics and for nature, individual healing, therapy, closure, relationships, cooking and gardening." The book has its rough spots, but it is talked about by many as having helpful springboards for deeper discussion.

April 7 – The Scandalous Gospel: What's So Good About the Good News? by Peter Gomes

Gomes calls us to make the message of Jesus the focus of our attention. As is usual for his writing, there are memorable lines such as – "The opposite of fear is not courage but compassion." He also warns against "cheap hope" and suggests that "...if things don't turn out right, we endure..." Gomes reminds us that Jesus' teachings are radical and relevant for today. John Lape will lead the discussion of this book.

The Book Group meets on the first Tuesday of most months from 7:30 to 9:00 in the church parlor. Please contact John or Mary Ann Lape if you have questions (978 664-3583 or malape@verizon.net).

NOW Meeting March 15 and Still Moving Forward

In February, the NOW group created a subcommittee that is working to draft a new organizational structure with the intention of trying it out during the next program year. We are also talking about voting at annual meeting to temporarily suspend portions of the bylaws pertaining to committee and commission numbers. Mark your calendars for our Annual Meeting on Friday, May 15.

Please join us on Monday, March 16 at 7:30 in the library. This will be our first non-holiday meeting of the year so do come. NOW is a loose group of people interested in moving the church forward using the navigational tools created in the Golden Days meetings. You are a member of NOW if you are interested in moving the church forward. So please join us or contact Linda Ananian, icananian@aol.com.

Signs-for-All



**COFFEE
HOUSE &
HAM and BEAN
SUPPER**

Have you been watching the church's front lawn? Along with our new updated sign we have a permanent structure for signs to let the community know what's going on inside. By changing

the sign regularly and posting announcements of upcoming events, we share with those around us, our vital life together and with the community.

At present we have a fairly extensive inventory of signs...but we could use some more. So...we're looking for a few "sign benefactors". Your gift of \$100 would support the cost of most two sided signs for the front holder. Might you be willing to be such a benefactor? We could use signs for Palm Sunday, Easter, Homecoming, another "generic" message for in-between times—or maybe you have an idea about a sign sponsorship! If so please contact the church office and we'll get design work going!! Thank you.

CWF Annual Plant Swap



Do you have too many iris in your garden? Need some yellow daylilies? Are indoor plants taking over your house?

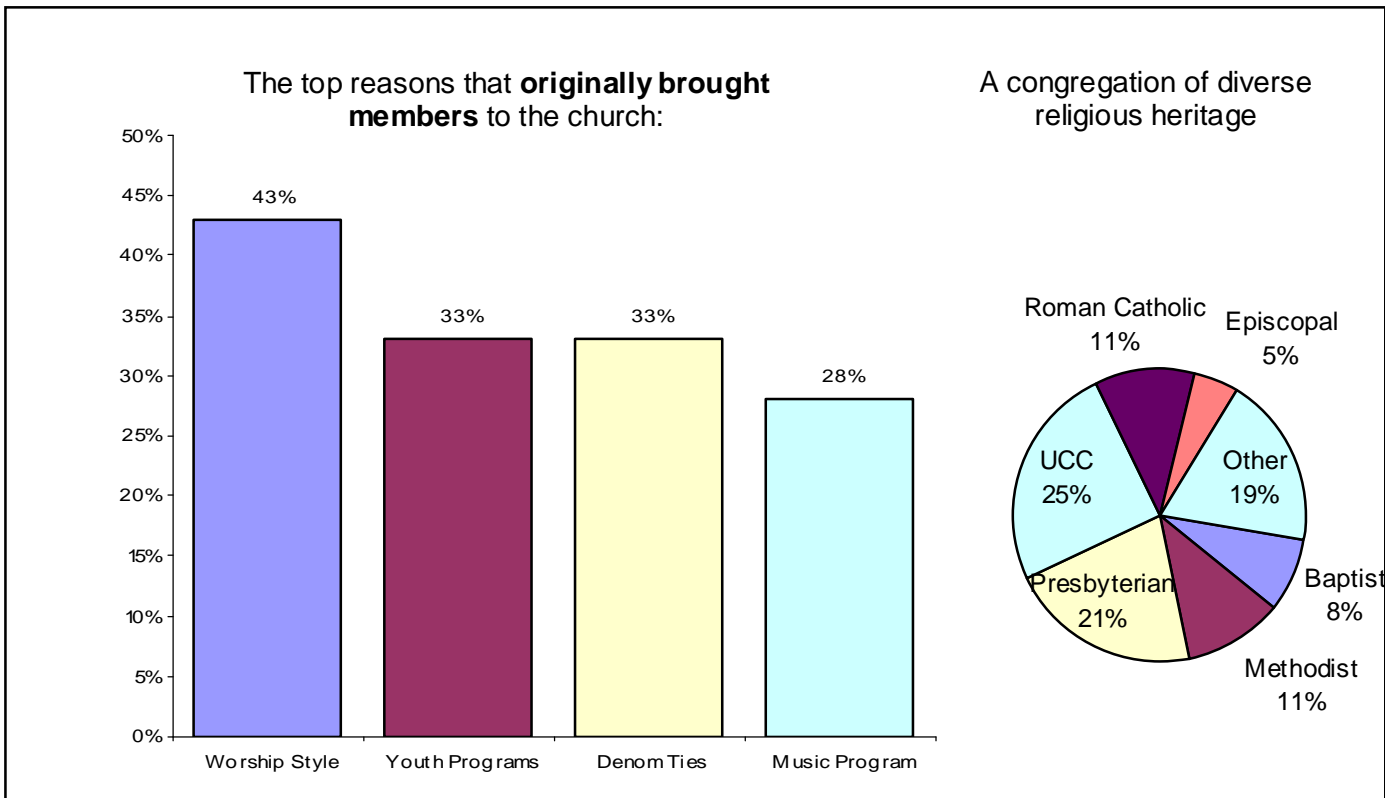
Start planning your garden by thinking about what you would like to trade at CWF's Perennial Plant Swap. It will be held in May, either the second or third Saturday from 8:30-12:00. Joan Kingston and Mary Ann Higgins will run it with help from Carol Patterson. This is always a fun event, and we hope to see you there.

PROFILE COMPLETED!

Thanks to all of you for helping us to complete our Local Church Profile!

The Local Church Profile is a critical step in the process and the feedback that we received from the recent survey was invaluable in helping us better define how a new pastor might help us on our faith journey. Our profile has been completed and has been submitted to the Massachusetts Conference. For those of you who completed the survey, we appreciate all of the thoughtful care that went into your responses. We became ever more hopeful about the future of our wonderful church as reflected in the many positive comments provided. **A few key themes emerged from the survey:**

- A focus on children and youth was identified as a core need with many emphasizing the need for enhanced programs for youth
- We have a truly diverse congregation in terms of theological background, worship style preferences and expectations for the pastor's role
- Spiritual development and identifying individual gifts are important to a majority of the congregation
- The majority feel very connected to the church and as such are very hopeful about finding the right pastor to unify as well as appreciate the diversity within our congregation



Thanks again for your participation in the survey. As always, if you have thoughts and ideas as we travel on pastoral search journey, please don't hesitate to contact any member of the committee.

Joyce Burnham (jaeburnham@comcast.net), Ginny Davenport (Ginny827@aol.com), Christine Hylan (chylan@verizon.net), Jane McCord (jane.comins.mccord@bankofamerica.com), Bob Svensson (bobsven@comcast.net), Craig Taylor (j.c.taylor@verizon.net), Laurie Tucker (tuckerlandb@yahoo.com) and Steve Viegas (stephenviegas@hotmail.com).

2009 Stewardship Campaign

Our 2009 Stewardship Campaign runs from March 1st to 29th. We will again be contacting parishioners through the Pony Express program. 20 people have agreed to be “trail bosses”. The trail bosses met to kick off the campaign at a breakfast on February 22nd. The trail bosses will oversee the relay of the “saddlebag”. The saddle bag contains pledge forms and information. When the saddle bag arrives at a home, the family will consider its pledge, fill out a pledge form, seal it in an envelope, place it in the saddlebag and forward the saddle bag to the next family on the list. In 2008, the Pony Express allowed us to reach more families than previous programs, resulting in an impressive increase in the number of pledges and in the dollar amount.

Please consider your stewardship of our church and its ministry in your prayers as you consider your pledge. We offer as a guide the following excerpt from the March 2009 issue of “Stewards of Our Relationship with Money: Financial Health for Families and Congregations”, a publication of the national office for stewardship of the UCC:

“Being stewards in the household of God is intensely counter-cultural in significant ways. We live in a society where we are taught explicitly and implicitly that to be truly human is to be self-sufficient, independent, protective, competitive, acquisitive, accumulative, a consumer. If you pay money, you should get something. There is no limit to the satisfaction of our desires. Our spirit is nourished and our worth is measured by what we possess.

What are the marks of this counter-culture, the Household of God?

We are interdependent and collaborative – we need each other, others need us. We share surplus so each has enough. In order for all to live, each limits accumulation. Money is just another resource to be allocated to ensure shalom. Our spirit is nourished by living up to who God made us to be. Our worth is given by God.

Churches have a unique ministry opportunity to liberate members to order their financial life according to their faith values. As centers of hope and transformation, local churches help members address and heal their personal relationship with money. And the church will tend to its financial health.”

The Stewardship Committee: Stephen Viegas, Doug Rogers, John Myers

ACEs in Lent

FCCR’s ACEs are an on-line group who focus on scripture and prayer, primarily prayer. The lectionary for the upcoming Sunday is posted each week, and various hardy souls attempt to volunteer some thoughts on the readings. Occasionally others chime in.

The prayer component is more popular. Each day during the week a member offers a prayer to the group. The prayer assignment is based on a schedule, and is, naturally, opt-in. It is a good way to develop one’s ability to converse with God, and also a good way to connect one’s concerns with the larger church community. Both activities are e-mail based, so virtually anyone can participate. New members are always welcome (instructions for joining are at the end of the article).

We will continue these activities during Lent, but will be augmenting our prayer activity with a prayer blog! Our pastors have challenged us to work on incorporating regular prayer into a Lenten discipline. They have suggested banding together in prayer groups. For some, going out to regular

prayer meetings can pose difficult scheduling problems. One way to address the scheduling problem is by having an on-line prayer group. You can pray at a time and place convenient to you, but still be connected with others by being able to read the prayers of your cohort, and in turn, share your prayers with them. While the goal of this exercise is to encourage everyone to post a prayer *each day* during Lent, we encourage everyone to participate at a level that is comfortable for them. Thinking you might miss a day or two—or week—here or there is no reason not to try.

You don’t have to sign up for either group to read what people have posted. The prayers and musings from the e-mail group are on line at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/FCCR-ACE/>. The blog can be found at <http://fccr-ace.org/>. To become an active participant in the e-mail group, merely send an e-mail to FCCR-ACE-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To become a *prayer blogger*, request log-in credentials from Larry Piper [larry@lppiper.net]. If you have questions or concerns, contact Larry Piper.

Outreach Opportunities

Monthly Collection for Reading Food Pantry: We are supporting a monthly focused donation for the Reading Food Pantry, concentrating on collecting on the first week of the month. Of course, all items are needed at all times, but we thought if we established a routine, for ourselves and the church, we would be thinking about our contributions on a scheduled and routine basis.

March will be St. Patrick's Day **Green** – canned spinach, relish, olives.

Around Mother's day, Outreach and CWF will be sponsoring an "All Church Collection" of **Gifts of the Heart**. These Hygiene Kits for Church World Service Kits are distributed anywhere in the world in response to global emergencies and disasters. In the face of natural disasters, violence, or grinding poverty, a Hygiene Kit can mean the difference between sickness and health for struggling families.

The Outreach Commission will be making and serving **lunch to participants in the common cathedral** on Boston Common **Sunday, March 22**. We need people who would be willing to make the lunch and accompany us into Boston.

Where is Your Treasure?

This is the theme of this year's One Great Hour of Sharing, which our congregation will celebrate Sunday, March 22. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus reminded his listeners that "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" [Matthew 6: 21]. He called upon people to "lay up" wealth not on earth, but in heaven, saying such treasure was both incorruptible and safe. Today, we can "lay up" wealth in heaven by supporting One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS). OGHS is the special mission offering of the United Church of Christ that carries God's message of love and hope to people in more than 80 countries. This offering is also taken by eight other Protestant denominations, thus multiplying the effectiveness and extent of our witness many times over. In cooperation with hundreds of local partners around the world, One Great Hour of Sharing is part of a remarkable network of service and caring that is efficient, effective, and faithful. Administrative costs are typically less than 8 percent annually.

Through OGHS, the UCC works with national and international partners to provide sources of clean water and food, education and health care, small business micro-credit, emergency relief, and advocacy and resettlement for refugees and displaced persons. OGHS also supports domestic and international ministries for disaster preparedness and response.

The funds collected help to:

Build sustainable communities through self-help programs that enable people and communities to stand against and rise above hunger, disease, illiteracy, and other forces of injustice that deny and destroy dignity.

Respond to disaster with emergency and long-term assistance to people in the aftermath of natural or human-caused events such as hurricanes, tornados, storms, floods, tidal waves, fires, explosions, technological disasters, civil strife, and war.

Minister to refugees by responding with advocacy and help, hope, and hospitality.

The UCC annually channels more than \$3 million dollars through One Great Hour of Sharing to these and other humanitarian needs in the world. Let's be a part of it!

Habitat for Humanity Update

The Lowell chapter of Habitat has completed the Westford project, utilizing 'green' technology. They are currently working at a site in Bedford and funding construction of houses in South Africa. And the next site has been identified in Dracut. All this takes lots of support! You can help in several ways:

- Attend "A Touch of Green" Gala Event on March 7th at the Vesper Country Club in Tyngsboro, MA. The event runs from 6:30-11:00 PM with dinner, dancing, live and silent auctions and entertainment. Guest speaker is Rep. Niki Tsongas. Tickets are \$75 - call the Habitat office at 978-692-0927 to reserve yours!
- Or go to <http://www.lowellhabitat.org> and click on "VolunteerUP" to help at the Bedford project or click on "Become a volunteer" and serve on a committee

Or join the FCCR Congo Climbers hike team in June or sponsor the team with a pledge

Confirmation News

On the last weekend in January, the 2008-09 our Confirmation class gathered at the Grotonwood retreat center for a worthwhile weekend of Christian fellowship, worship, and Christian education. There were several churches participating in the weekend event, which offered FCCR confirmands a chance to make new friends. Joined in small and large group workshops, there were ample opportunities for everyone to freely raise ideas and questions about their faith journey. Accompanied by guitar, everyone sang God's praises and created artful tee-shirts. During every community gathering, all had the chance to learn about each other, our faith, and the unconditional love of God. O yes, and there was still plenty of free time, and plenty of good food for all.

On February 15th, the confirmation class and their mentors gathered to attend an alternate worship service at the First Baptist Church in Reading. The rich experience began with warm welcome, moved into new expressions in Word and song, alongside lively musical accompaniment, which kept everyone standing up to keep singing and praising God!

Mentors and Confirmands:

Please continue to explore your faith journey in conversations.

The confirmation process includes each Confirmand working with an adult mentor. They meet at least four times together and discuss their faith journey, spiritual gifts and service, and spiritual practices. In addition, they observe a worship service, a funeral, baptism or wedding together and attend a worship service in another faith tradition. The mentor and their student are each reading the Gospel of Luke and keeping a journal on it.

Upcoming Confirmation Gatherings:

On March 1, the confirmation class will gather in the Chapel at 6pm. Prepare by reading Chapters 20-21.

On March 15th, the confirmation class will gather in the youth lounge at 10:15am. Prepare by reading chapter 22.

Y'all can come on downstairs on March 29th for Heifer Marketplace!



The marketplace begins after worship on Sunday, March 29. Come experience the good works and fun of Heifer at FCCR. The children and teachers are hard at work making crafts, creating posters and artwork and planning yummy treats for their animal stalls. Please come support them as they reach out to minister to the world's hungry by 'donating' animals to help people help themselves. Parents who would like to volunteer to lend a hand on March 29th should see their child's teacher or Linda Jerrett for more information.

Please join us as Sandi Watson from Heifer International presents our congregation with an award for donating an ark to Heifer for 2007 and 2008!

The Heifer web site explains that each gift ark can provide "two cows to bring milk and income to a Russian village. Two sheep to help families in Arizona produce wool. Two camels to help families in Tanzania earn income by transporting agricultural and industrial materials. Two oxen to pull plows and carts in Uganda. Two water buffalo to help Cambodian families increase rice production through animal draft power. And that's just the first five sets of animals ... and ark provides 15 pairs of animals to change lives."

We hope to surpass last year's accomplishments and we can do it with your help! **Please** be sure to come on down and see all the kids' hard work! Come be a part of our Heifer Marketplace.

Wanted: Greetings cards – new, used, any subject. Will be used for a craft to sell at the Faire. Put them in the box outside the office. Contact Joann Sanford (jo.take@verizon.net or 781-944-7805) with any questions.



Town Wide Rummage Sale Clothing and Linens

Friday March 13 6-9pm

Saturday March 14 10am-2pm

25 Woburn Street, Reading

First Congregational Church of Reading, UCC

Clean, functional donations may be dropped off at the church basement off Sanborn Street starting Monday, March 2nd.

Volunteer to help by contacting info@readingcares.org or calling 781-942-2145. We need sorters during the week before the sale, clerks during the sale, and clean-up help at the end. Earn vouchers to use at the sale, help your community, and have fun with your neighbors!

Vouchers are also available for qualifying individuals and families through Reading Town Hall. Contact Elder/Human Services at 781-942-6608.

*Proceeds to benefit the **Reading Food Pantry.***

Sponsored by: 

The First Congregational Church of Reading, UCC.

Rummage Sale at FCCR

FCCR and ReadingCares are proud to be sponsoring the Rummage Sale on March 13th and 14th, but we need your help. We need sorters the week before the sale, cashiers during the sale, and clean-up help after the sale. The sign-up sheet will be hanging up during coffee hour starting: 2/22. Come one and all! We can also use your donations of clean, usable clothing and linens, and hangers and bags for the sale, to be dropped off after March 1st in Pilgrim Hall.

In addition, there will be a meeting after worship on March 1st for past and future Rummage Sale workers. We need your input on what worked, and what can be done better. Please contact Cindy at 781.942.2145 or Betsy Schneider at info@readingcares.org or betsy.schneider@comcast.net with any questions or suggestions.

Thank You!

Thank you

A thank you to members of Circle 10 who provided a delicious, home cooked meal for Emmaus House on Jan 25th. Thanks also to Sharon Ofenstein, chair of Outreach, and Judie Williams of Circle 10 for delivering this meal. It was gladly accepted and appreciated.

Update from Pommern Village Choir!!

We have heard back from the choir we hosted in November from Tanzania. During their tour through the state, the choir raised enough funds (including funds we collected at our November 1 Ham and Bean Supper/Coffeehouse for them) to drill at least **ten wells** that will assure safe fresh water for their village and beyond!

Rev. Peter Cook, from The Plymouth Church in Framingham, UCC, the sponsoring church, reports: "It is hard to imagine what a positive change this will make in the daily lives of thousands of people. Thank you so much for your part in making this happen."

Thank you for your generosity. The spirit of their music and fellowship will not soon be forgotten on us all here in Reading.

To the members of Reading UCC,

We would like to thank you for inviting us to play the Coffeehouse on February 7th. Not only were you the most attentive audience we have ever experienced, but your generosity, both of spirit and of financial gift, was extreme! We thank you very much, and hope to share music, tears, and laughter with you again.

Grace and peace,

Annie & Katie

KINDRED

Dear Project Leader,

We are deeply grateful for your congregation's commitment and support of Operation Christmas Child in 2008. Some 8 million gift-filled shoe boxes were collected, including 4.9 million in the United States—the most ever since the project's inception 16 years ago. That's 8 million children and their families who will hear the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, and it is mission-minded churches and groups like yours who make this spiritual harvest possible!

Participation by individuals, families, groups, and especially churches is critical to the global ministry of Operation Christmas Child. We praise God for your partnership in this ministry and for your investment in eternity.

In December, Samaritan's Purse delivered thousands of shoe box gifts to war refugees in the Eastern European country of Georgia. We hope the article and video report [will serve as a powerful testimony to the impact Operation Christmas Child is having on hurting people in need of a Savior. Please share these materials with your congregation. Thank you, and God bless you for your passion to bring children around the world to faith in Christ! "

See the article and video at [http://www.samaritanspurse.org/index.php/OCC/OCC_Impact/]

Notes from the Altar Committee...

Orders for the Easter lilies will be due on **April 5th**. Order forms will be in the April newsletter, in the Church office and in the weekly bulletin beginning on **March 22**. Call Mary Ann Higgins 617-347-8346 if you have any questions or want to order early.

We will also need help delivering the plants on Easter and the week following.

The Altar Committee is in need of two committee members for the upcoming Church calendar year. Tasks include calling donors to confirm their gift, ordering the flowers, and being sure the flowers are delivered. There are no meetings. Please consider saying yes when you are called. If you have decided to be on the Committee already, call Mary Ann Higgins.

There are several dates open if you would like to donate altar flowers to honor a loved one or in memory of a loved one. Call Mary Ann if one suits your needs.

March 31

May 31

June 21

June 28

If you would like to deliver the altar flowers to a shut-in, please call Mary Ann Higgins for an assignment. You may deliver on Monday if you are not able to do so on Sunday.

Daily prayers are invited for all of our friends and members-especially those who are dealing with these special joys and concerns. They and their families are most grateful for your spiritual support and cards of greeting.



We pray for healing, recovery, and strength for:

- ✓ Janice Russells's brother, Jeff, suffering from cancer.
- ✓ Marcie's continued healing as she fights a nasty infection.
- ✓ Our Aunt Nav Jiwan's whose cancer has come out of remission.
- ✓ Gay Williams who fell and fractured her wrist, and recently had surgery.
- ✓ Ken's continued commitment to rehab.
- ✓ Jim Breadmore, Leslie and Bob Fuller's son-in-law who is having back surgery tomorrow.
- ✓ Liz Swallow who is having surgery.
- ✓ My girlfriend Donna, who is having trouble healing from a ruptured appendix incision.
- ✓ Mollie Ziegler who took a bad fall on the ice a couple of weeks ago.
- ✓ Bruce for a successful surgery.

We pray for those who are grieving:

- ✓ For the families of those who passed away recently: Gertrude Moore, George Sanford and Jim Colbert.
- ✓ Fran Doughty whose brother Charles passed away February 4th.
- ✓ A sister-in-law who lost her battle with breast cancer on Thursday and for her husband struggling to carry on.

We also pray for the following special concerns:

- ✓ The LeConti family for strength and hope with Bryce's everyday challenges.
- ✓ Employment for friends who are struggling financially.
- ✓ To repair my relationship with my sister.
- ✓ A family in need of housing with 3 kids and one on the way.

- ✓ Those suffering from depression, feeling isolated from God and their family.
- ✓ Those who are losing their jobs.
- ✓ Those who have terminal illnesses.
- ✓ Laura Wood that tests will find the problem.
- ✓ My mother who is struggling with depression.
- ✓ My brother recently diagnosed with MS telling his children of his condition today.
- ✓ A dear friend who has a brain tumor.
- ✓ Gay William's cousin Linda who is the last stages of cancer.

God and we pray in celebration for:

- ✓ Profound thanks to the Lord for helping me to find a job in this difficult economy.
- ✓ My brother and sister-in-law who are adopting their new son and will be traveling to Ethiopia shortly.
- ✓ Praise from the Ellerts for Maya getting into Columbia College in Ohio.

Our prayers continue for those who are in need of ongoing nursing care or assisted living:

- ✓ Bertha Babb (Susan Suarez's mother) at Bear Hill.
- ✓ Doris Torppa (Susan Torppa's mother) at Bear Hill.
- ✓ John Weston at Longwood Place.
- ✓ Libby Hodges at son's in Connecticut.

And those who are cared for at home:

Jane Rice Peter Thorstensen
Molly Rowe Grace Faulkner

Please call the church office for these addresses if you would like to send a card or visit these friends.

Altar Flowers in February

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of her husband Bruce, by Carol Patterson

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of George Cruickshanks, father, Helen Cruickshanks, mother, and Helen Cruickshanks, sister, by Duncan and Heather Cruickshanks.

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of Samuel Taylor by his daughter, Leigh Taylor.

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Woodward by their daughter Shirley Thurston.



Women 'n' Stitches

Women 'n' Stitches created and donated 12 baby quilts recently. Five of them went to the Children's Hospital in Salem via Chad and 7 of them, along with 3 baby outfits, went to single mothers associated with the City Mission Society of Boston. We also donated 4 lap quilts to the Sawtelle Family Hospice House in Reading. All were greatly appreciated. Thanks to everyone that donated the fabric, time and love that created them. We will be donating a sweet baby quilt that was hand-quilted to the church's auction in May.

calendar



First ChurchNEWS

Statement of Purpose

We gather as a faith community to love and magnify God.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, we will love our neighbors as ourselves, advocating for peace and justice.

We will go out and share our faith in Christ, inviting others to join us.

We will be nurturers of the spirit and teachers of the Word.

We will welcome and provide sanctuary to all.

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THE IN-BETWEEN TIME

Give Up Neglecting God

Seven steps towards a more meaningful Lent (and giving up chocolate isn't one of them).

This month since we are moving into a concentrated time of prayer as individuals and a community, I thought I'd share a reflection by Debra Farrington, a retreat leader and author. Enjoy and go do likewise! Rev. Norm

Here's my advice: Don't give up chocolate for Lent this year. Or rather, give up chocolate — or whatever else you give up — if it helps you think about God more often. But if all it does is make you think about chocolate, then let me suggest some other Lenten practices to you.

In the sixth century, St. Benedict wrote a "guidebook" to living in a monastic community, a document we know today as The Rule of St. Benedict. "The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent," he wrote. In the next sentence he gets a bit more realistic. Since not many have the strength to live Lent all the time, Benedict advises us to "wash away the negligences of other times."

What most of us neglect — with more regularity than we might care to admit — is God. So this Lent, instead of giving up chocolate, give up neglecting God. Here are a few ways for doing that, all of them straight from ancient and contemporary monasteries. I know — you're not a monk or nun! And I'm not suggesting that you start going to church seven times a day during Lent or wearing black robes and hoods. But you might be surprised at how much there is to learn from monastic life, even for those of us who live secular lives. But don't try to follow all of them or you'll end up just paying attention to your Lenten discipline — instead of God. (continued, p.2)

Lenten Sermon Series March 2009

First Sunday of Lent March 1, 2009

Holy Communion

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

"Dwelling with Beasts"

Rev. Bendroth preaching

Second Sunday of Lent March 8, 2009

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:23-31

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

"When Jesus Spoke Plainly"

Third Sunday of Lent March 15, 2009

Hebrews 11:32 – 12:3

"Second Sight"

Peggy Bendroth preaching

Fourth Sunday of Lent March 22, 2009

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

"Snake on a Stick"

Fifth Sunday of Lent March 29, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-12

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

"In Death, Life"

Church Contact Information:

Office Phone: 781-944-0205

www.churchofreading.org

Office E mail: office1.fccr@verizon.net

The In-Between Time...(continued)

Have a heart-to-heart with God

"Pray temperately and simply. Prayer is a heart-to-heart talk between yourself and God and needs no brilliant ideas, no flood of words" (The Jerusalem Community Rule of Life, Jerusalem/Paris, 1978).

Take some time out for a long walk, or go to a quiet place you enjoy and just have a heart-to-heart with God. Put away all your notions about trying to impress God by being brilliant or by using carefully chosen words. Pretend you're talking to a friend you've neglected and say what's in your heart. Don't forget to do some listening as well.

Cut back on work

"By choosing to work as hard as possible, but not more than you ought, not primarily in view of a perishable end but one that lasts forever, you are to stand free and challenging in a world where work has been overrated into a religion and often into a sacred cow" (The Jerusalem Community Rule of Life).

A recent newscast reported that Americans actually added a week of work to their schedules in the 1990s. Many of us put work at the center of our lives, rather than God. Take a break from working too hard this Lent. Work a reasonable schedule, but not more than that. Spend some of that newfound free time with God in prayer, personal reflection or spiritual reading.

Sleep enough

"Our feeble flesh could not possibly be defrauded of the whole night's rest and yet keep its vigour unshaken throughout the following day without sleepiness of mind and heaviness of spirit" (The Twelve Books of John Cassian, Marseilles, c. 420).

Having a good relationship with God takes energy and attentiveness, something John Cassian, one of the desert fathers from the fourth and fifth centuries, knew well. He advised getting enough sleep so they could vigorously pursue their spiritual lives. Make Lent a time for getting rested so you, too, can attend to God without the heaviness of spirit that lack of sleep induces.

Give up annoyance

"Don't be irritated by the brother who sings off-key" (Rule for a New Brother, Brakkenstein Community of Blessed Sacrament Fathers, Holland, 1973).

Can you imagine standing next to a brother who sings off-key, and having to do that three or more times a day, for the rest of your life? But that's just what this monastic rule, or guidebook, suggests. Just for Lent, try to avoid being annoyed by others who do things differently than you would. See if you can find Christ in that brother or sister who "sings off-key" and see what difference that makes in both of your lives.

Seek a spirit of detachment

"Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly. ... Seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying [your] own material needs" (The Rule of the Secular Franciscans, Rome, 1978; based on Francis' rule, 13th century Italy).

Most of us own much more than we need. All too often our sense of self-worth and confidence rest on how much we own, rather than on knowing ourselves as God's beloved daughter or son. Take a Lenten break from buying unnecessary things. Give the money you would have spent on that CD or silk blouse to an organization that feeds the homeless or shelters the abused. Let your money do something good for some of God's other beloved children.

Pursue God through study

"Our pursuit of knowledge is an expression of love for God's world and the riches of revelation. ... Since our gifts and ministries vary we need to encourage one another to value not only reading and study but many other ways of learning, every method that helps us become more responsive in heart and mind to the whole creation" (The Rule of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

St. Benedict decreed that every monk be given a book to read during Lent. Find a book that opens up your relationship with God and read it through, either by yourself or with a group. Or find another way to study God's world. Take a course. Visit an art exhibit. Go to a concert. See a movie. Do these things with the intention of learning more about God's world and the riches of revelation.

Take care of yourself

"The hermit listens to his body, giving attention to health, exercise, work, proper diet, fasting and leisure. Because the Holy Trinity dwells within him, making him a 'Living House of Bread,' he nurtures and cares for the gift of his body and the sacredness of life" (A Way of Desert Spirituality: The Plan of Life of the Hermits of Bethlehem, Chester, N.J., 1998).

Scripture tells us that our bodies are God's temples (1 Corinthians 3:16). So do things to take care of one of God's dwelling places this Lent: Get enough exercise. Eat better. Take time for leisure and play. And do it in the knowledge that you are caring for one of God's great gifts and nurturing the sacredness of your life.

Reprint by permission from Debra Farrington, retreat leader and author.

www.debrafarrington.com

Fred Phelps is coming to Reading

The Town of Reading has the distinct dishonor of having Rev. Fred Phelps, pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas picketing the play *The Laramie Project*, which will be performed at Reading Memorial High School on March 12, 13, and 14. Phelps and members of his church will picket on the 13th at 7 p.m.

You probably know Rev. Phelps as the man who pickets the funeral services of men and women who died in Iraq claiming that God killed them as judgment upon America for tolerating homosexuality. He and his followers carry signs such as GOD HATES FAGS, THANK GOD FOR AIDS, FAGS BURN IN HELL, THANK GOD FOR DEAD SOLDIERS, and more. (If you can stomach it, go to Phelps website www.godhatesfags.com)

What is it about this play that inspires such hate-filled venom? The Laramie Project is a play about a group of young actors and writers from a New York City theater company, who come to Laramie, Wyoming, to interview the townspeople about what happened on October 6, 1998. That was the night when a gay college student named Matthew Shepard was brutally beaten, tied up and left for dead on a fence off a rural road. The details of the case are clear-cut and well-known, but as one of the actors explains, "This is not about the case. This is about the town: why did this happen here, what are people saying, how do they feel and think about what happened."

The Reading Clergy Association has met with both Reading Police Chief James Cormier and Reading School Superintendent, Pat Schettini about how to best respond. We were originally intending to have a peaceful counter protest but based upon the experience of other communities, have decided it is best to ignore them. There will, however, be a Service of Unity, at the Unitarian Church prior to the play from 6 p.m. to 6:45 p.m on the 13th.

The best way to counter this hateful intolerance is to support the high school and the kids in the play by attending it in droves. This play is part of a multi-year effort in the high school to teach tolerance, a respect for difference, and to create a culture of kindness. The Laramie Project overwhelming supports that goal.

Superintendent Schettini says that tickets must be purchased in advance and encourages local churches to buy them in blocks, especially on the 13th. If anyone would like to organize such an effort, please speak to Rev. Norm.

During this season of Lent when we recall that Jesus became the scapegoat of human hate and violence to take it away, can we not offer an alternative Christian vision to Rev. Phelps?

Peggy Bendroth to lead series on "What is Congregationalism?"

On March 15 and 22, Peggy Bendroth, Executive Director and Librarian of the American Congregational Association (and also Rev. Bendroth's wife), will be presenting a sermon and two adult education classes on our congregational heritage.

On March 15 she will be preaching a sermon entitled, "Second Sight" based upon Hebrews 11:32 – 12:3. After worship she'll offer a presentation called "Growing Deeper Roots: Exploring the Congregational Christian Tradition" that will give people an overview of the history and of the distinctives of both Congregationalism and the Christian Connection. The next Sunday she will discuss "Congregational Practices of Discernment," or what the seventeenth-century Puritans can teach us about the way we do church meetings and how we seek after God in the present day.

These presentations are apropos as we consider reorganizing our governing structure and recovering our "roots" as we seek a new pastor. Many folks, including "cradle Congregationalists," misunderstand Congregationalism as democracy at prayer; one person, one vote; or "we get to tell the pastor what to do." In fact, Congregationalism is more of a theocracy where each member has a responsibility to discern the will of God collectively with the whole congregation. One of the tasks of the interim process is understanding our history and how it impacts our self-understanding today.

We hope to see you there!

Many Participating in 40 Days of Prayer

As the newsletter goes to press, thirty-one people have signed up to use the Prayer Journal during Lent as part of their daily devotions. In addition, almost all commissions and committees have asked Rev. Bendroth to come lead them in a prayer time or have set aside a significant part of their meeting for prayer. Nine others have asked to be in small prayer groups. This is an encouraging start and I'm sure there are others out there who want to participate, but have forgotten to sign up. Extra Prayer Journals have been printed and you can drop by the office to pick one up. For more information call or email Rev. Norm.

Book Group Selections March and April



March 3 – The Shack by William Paul Young

Barbara Philbrick will lead the group in this novel with its theme of redemption and its metaphor of a house built out of your own pain. The author wrote this book to help make sense for himself and his family of his own pain and difficulties. His experience of God's love is seen through his version of the trinity: God as a large black woman with a "questionable" sense of humor, the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman named Sarayu, and Jesus as a Middle Eastern laborer. The Christian Century review suggests that "This Trinity is against institutions, hierarchy, economics and politics and for nature, individual healing, therapy, closure, relationships, cooking and gardening." The book has its rough spots, but it is talked about by many as having helpful springboards for deeper discussion.

April 7 – The Scandalous Gospel: What's So Good About the Good News? by Peter Gomes

Gomes calls us to make the message of Jesus the focus of our attention. As is usual for his writing, there are memorable lines such as – "The opposite of fear is not courage but compassion." He also warns against "cheap hope" and suggests that "...if things don't turn out right, we endure..." Gomes reminds us that Jesus' teachings are radical and relevant for today. John Lape will lead the discussion of this book.

The Book Group meets on the first Tuesday of most months from 7:30 to 9:00 in the church parlor. Please contact John or Mary Ann Lape if you have questions (978 664-3583 or malape@verizon.net).

NOW Meeting March 15 and Still Moving Forward

In February, the NOW group created a subcommittee that is working to draft a new organizational structure with the intention of trying it out during the next program year. We are also talking about voting at annual meeting to temporarily suspend portions of the bylaws pertaining to committee and commission numbers. Mark your calendars for our Annual Meeting on Friday, May 15.

Please join us on Monday, March 16 at 7:30 in the library. This will be our first non-holiday meeting of the year so do come. NOW is a loose group of people interested in moving the church forward using the navigational tools created in the Golden Days meetings. You are a member of NOW if you are interested in moving the church forward. So please join us or contact Linda Ananian, icananian@aol.com.

Signs-for-All



Have you been watching the church's front lawn? Along with our new updated sign we have a permanent structure for signs to let the community know what's going on inside. By changing

the sign regularly and posting announcements of upcoming events, we share with those around us, our vital life together and with the community.

At present we have a fairly extensive inventory of signs...but we could use some more. So...we're looking for a few "sign benefactors". Your gift of \$100 would support the cost of most two sided signs for the front holder. Might you be willing to be such a benefactor? We could use signs for Palm Sunday, Easter, Homecoming, another "generic" message for in-between times—or maybe you have an idea about a sign sponsorship! If so please contact the church office and we'll get design work going!! Thank you.

CWF Annual Plant Swap



Do you have too many iris in your garden? Need some yellow daylilies? Are indoor plants taking over your house?

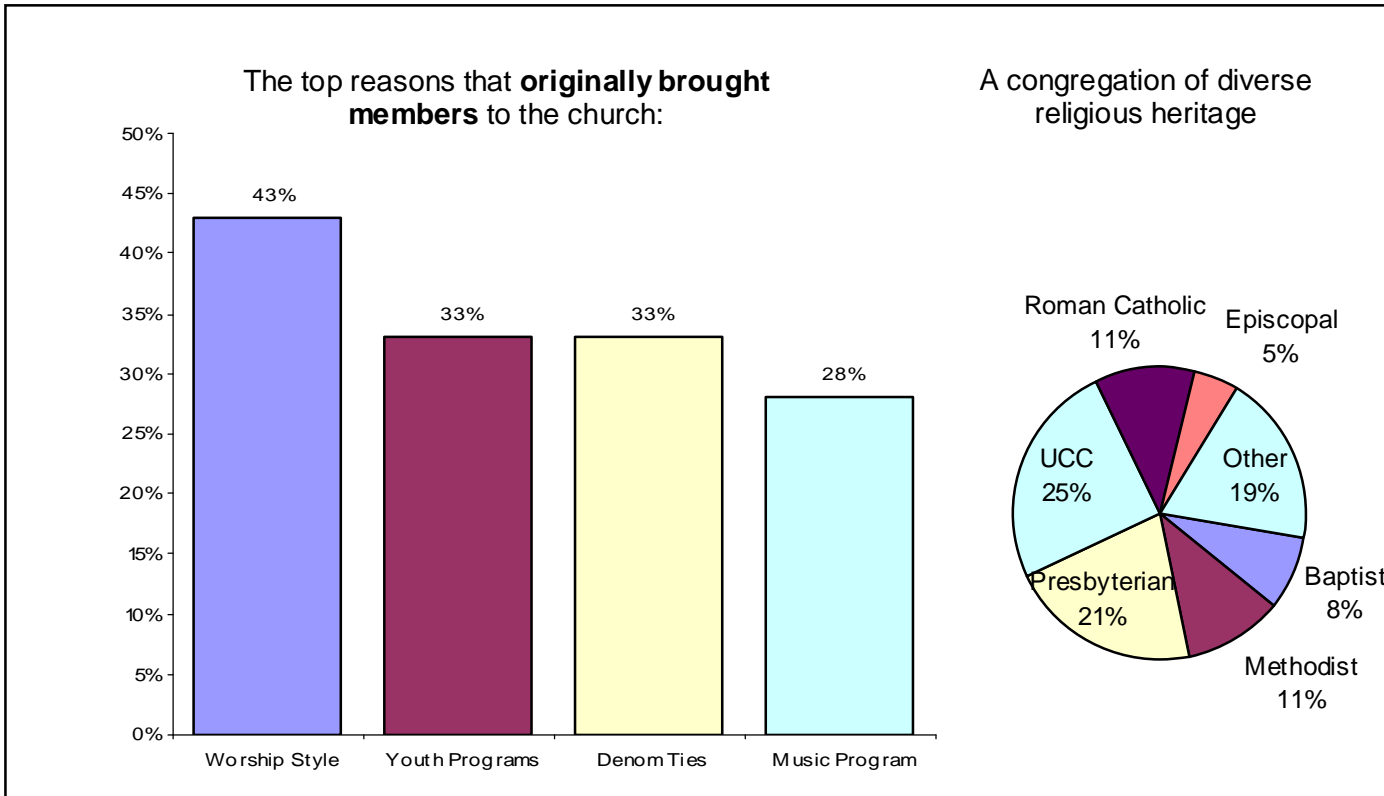
Start planning your garden by thinking about what you would like to trade at CWF's Perennial Plant Swap. It will be held in May, either the second or third Saturday from 8:30-12:00. Joan Kingston and Mary Ann Higgins will run it with help from Carol Patterson. This is always a fun event, and we hope to see you there.

PROFILE COMPLETED!

Thanks to all of you for helping us to complete our Local Church Profile!

The Local Church Profile is a critical step in the process and the feedback that we received from the recent survey was invaluable in helping us better define how a new pastor might help us on our faith journey. Our profile has been completed and has been submitted to the Massachusetts Conference. For those of you who completed the survey, we appreciate all of the thoughtful care that went into your responses. We became ever more hopeful about the future of our wonderful church as reflected in the many positive comments provided. **A few key themes emerged from the survey:**

- A focus on children and youth was identified as a core need with many emphasizing the need for enhanced programs for youth
- We have a truly diverse congregation in terms of theological background, worship style preferences and expectations for the pastor’s role
- Spiritual development and identifying individual gifts are important to a majority of the congregation
- The majority feel very connected to the church and as such are very hopeful about finding the right pastor to unify as well as appreciate the diversity within our congregation



Thanks again for your participation in the survey. As always, if you have thoughts and ideas as we travel on pastoral search journey, please don't hesitate to contact any member of the committee.

Joyce Burnham (jaeburnham@comcast.net), Ginny Davenport (Ginny827@aol.com), Christine Hylan (chylan@verizon.net), Jane McCord (jane.comins.mccord@bankofamerica.com), Bob Svensson (bobsven@comcast.net), Craig Taylor (j.c.taylor@verizon.net), Laurie Tucker (tuckerlandb@yahoo.com) and Steve Viegas (stephenviegas@hotmail.com).

2009 Stewardship Campaign

Our 2009 Stewardship Campaign runs from March 1st to 29th. We will again be contacting parishioners through the Pony Express program. 20 people have agreed to be “trail bosses”. The trail bosses met to kick off the campaign at a breakfast on February 22nd. The trail bosses will oversee the relay of the “saddlebag”. The saddle bag contains pledge forms and information. When the saddle bag arrives at a home, the family will consider its pledge, fill out a pledge form, seal it in an envelope, place it in the saddlebag and forward the saddle bag to the next family on the list. In 2008, the Pony Express allowed us to reach more families than previous programs, resulting in an impressive increase in the number of pledges and in the dollar amount.

Please consider your stewardship of our church and its ministry in your prayers as you consider your pledge. We offer as a guide the following excerpt from the March 2009 issue of “Stewards of Our Relationship with Money: Financial Health for Families and Congregations”, a publication of the national office for stewardship of the UCC:

“Being stewards in the household of God is intensely counter-cultural in significant ways. We live in a society where we are taught explicitly and implicitly that to be truly human is to be self-sufficient, independent, protective, competitive, acquisitive, accumulative, a consumer. If you pay money, you should get something. There is no limit to the satisfaction of our desires. Our spirit is nourished and our worth is measured by what we possess.

What are the marks of this counter-culture, the Household of God?

We are interdependent and collaborative – we need each other, others need us. We share surplus so each has enough. In order for all to live, each limits accumulation. Money is just another resource to be allocated to ensure shalom. Our spirit is nourished by living up to who God made us to be. Our worth is given by God.

Churches have a unique ministry opportunity to liberate members to order their financial life according to their faith values. As centers of hope and transformation, local churches help members address and heal their personal relationship with money. And the church will tend to its financial health.”

The Stewardship Committee: Stephen Viegas, Doug Rogers, John Myers

ACEs in Lent

FCCR’s ACEs are an on-line group who focus on scripture and prayer, primarily prayer. The lectionary for the upcoming Sunday is posted each week, and various hardy souls attempt to volunteer some thoughts on the readings. Occasionally others chime in.

The prayer component is more popular. Each day during the week a member offers a prayer to the group. The prayer assignment is based on a schedule, and is, naturally, opt-in. It is a good way to develop one’s ability to converse with God, and also a good way to connect one’s concerns with the larger church community. Both activities are e-mail based, so virtually anyone can participate. New members are always welcome (instructions for joining are at the end of the article).

We will continue these activities during Lent, but will be augmenting our prayer activity with a prayer blog! Our pastors have challenged us to work on incorporating regular prayer into a Lenten discipline. They have suggested banding together in prayer groups. For some, going out to regular

prayer meetings can pose difficult scheduling problems. One way to address the scheduling problem is by having an on-line prayer group. You can pray at a time and place convenient to you, but still be connected with others by being able to read the prayers of your cohort, and in turn, share your prayers with them. While the goal of this exercise is to encourage everyone to post a prayer *each day* during Lent, we encourage everyone to participate at a level that is comfortable for them. Thinking you might miss a day or two—or week—here or there is no reason not to try.

You don’t have to sign up for either group to read what people have posted. The prayers and musings from the e-mail group are on line at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/FCCR-ACE/>. The blog can be found at <http://fCCR-ace.org/>. To become an active participant in the e-mail group, merely send an e-mail to FCCR-ACE-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To become a *prayer blogger*, request log-in credentials from Larry Piper [larry@lppiper.net]. If you have questions or concerns, contact Larry Piper.

Outreach Opportunities

Monthly Collection for Reading Food Pantry: We are supporting a monthly focused donation for the Reading Food Pantry, concentrating on collecting on the first week of the month. Of course, all items are needed at all times, but we thought if we established a routine, for ourselves and the church, we would be thinking about our contributions on a scheduled and routine basis.

March will be St. Patrick's Day **Green** – canned spinach, relish, olives.

Around Mother's day, Outreach and CWF will be sponsoring an "All Church Collection" of **Gifts of the Heart**. These Hygiene Kits for Church World Service Kits are distributed anywhere in the world in response to global emergencies and disasters. In the face of natural disasters, violence, or grinding poverty, a Hygiene Kit can mean the difference between sickness and health for struggling families.

The Outreach Commission will be making and serving **lunch to participants in the common cathedral** on Boston Common **Sunday, March 22**. We need people who would be willing to make the lunch and accompany us into Boston.

Where is Your Treasure?

This is the theme of this year's One Great Hour of Sharing, which our congregation will celebrate Sunday, March 22. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus reminded his listeners that "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" [Matthew 6: 21]. He called upon people to "lay up" wealth not on earth, but in heaven, saying such treasure was both incorruptible and safe. Today, we can "lay up" wealth in heaven by supporting One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS). OGHS is the special mission offering of the United Church of Christ that carries God's message of love and hope to people in more than 80 countries. This offering is also taken by eight other Protestant denominations, thus multiplying the effectiveness and extent of our witness many times over. In cooperation with hundreds of local partners around the world, One Great Hour of Sharing is part of a remarkable network of service and caring that is efficient, effective, and faithful. Administrative costs are typically less than 8 percent annually.

Through OGHS, the UCC works with national and international partners to provide sources of clean water and food, education and health care, small business micro-credit, emergency relief, and advocacy and resettlement for refugees and displaced persons. OGHS also supports domestic and international ministries for disaster preparedness and response.

The funds collected help to:

Build sustainable communities through self-help programs that enable people and communities to stand against and rise above hunger, disease, illiteracy, and other forces of injustice that deny and destroy dignity.

Respond to disaster with emergency and long-term assistance to people in the aftermath of natural or human-caused events such as hurricanes, tornados, storms, floods, tidal waves, fires, explosions, technological disasters, civil strife, and war.

Minister to refugees by responding with advocacy and help, hope, and hospitality.

The UCC annually channels more than \$3 million dollars through One Great Hour of Sharing to these and other humanitarian needs in the world. Let's be a part of it!

Habitat for Humanity Update

The Lowell chapter of Habitat has completed the Westford project, utilizing 'green' technology. They are currently working at a site in Bedford and funding construction of houses in South Africa. And the next site has been identified in Dracut. All this takes lots of support! You can help in several ways:

- Attend "A Touch of Green" Gala Event on March 7th at the Vesper Country Club in Tyngsboro, MA. The event runs from 6:30-11:00 PM with dinner, dancing, live and silent auctions and entertainment. Guest speaker is Rep. Niki Tsongas. Tickets are \$75 - call the Habitat office at 978-692-0927 to reserve yours!
- Or go to <http://www.lowellhabitat.org> and click on "VolunteerUP" to help at the Bedford project or click on "Become a volunteer" and serve on a committee

Or join the FCCR Congo Climbers hike team in June or sponsor the team with a pledge

Confirmation News

On the last weekend in January, the 2008-09 our Confirmation class gathered at the Grotonwood retreat center for a worthwhile weekend of Christian fellowship, worship, and Christian education. There were several churches participating in the weekend event, which offered FCCR confirmands a chance to make new friends. Joined in small and large group workshops, there were ample opportunities for everyone to freely raise ideas and questions about their faith journey. Accompanied by guitar, everyone sang God's praises and created artful tee-shirts. During every community gathering, all had the chance to learn about each other, our faith, and the unconditional love of God. O yes, and there was still plenty of free time, and plenty of good food for all.

On February 15th, the confirmation class and their mentors gathered to attend an alternate worship service at the First Baptist Church in Reading. The rich experience began with warm welcome, moved into new expressions in Word and song, alongside lively musical accompaniment, which kept everyone standing up to keep singing and praising God!

Mentors and Confirmands:

Please continue to explore your faith journey in conversations.

The confirmation process includes each Confirmand working with an adult mentor. They meet at least four times together and discuss their faith journey, spiritual gifts and service, and spiritual practices. In addition, they observe a worship service, a funeral, baptism or wedding together and attend a worship service in another faith tradition. The mentor and their student are each reading the Gospel of Luke and keeping a journal on it.

Upcoming Confirmation Gatherings:

On March 1, the confirmation class will gather in the Chapel at 6pm. Prepare by reading Chapters 20-21.

On March 15th, the confirmation class will gather in the youth lounge at 10:15am. Prepare by reading chapter 22.

Y'all can come on downstairs on March 29th for Heifer Marketplace!



The marketplace begins after worship on Sunday, March 29. Come experience the good works and fun of Heifer at FCCR. The children and teachers are hard at work making crafts, creating posters and artwork and planning yummy treats for their animal stalls. Please come support them as they reach out to minister to the world's hungry by 'donating' animals to help people help themselves. Parents who would like to volunteer to lend a hand on March 29th should see their child's teacher or Linda Jerrett for more information.

Please join us as Sandi Watson from Heifer International presents our congregation with an award for donating an ark to Heifer for 2007 and 2008!

The Heifer web site explains that each gift ark can provide "two cows to bring milk and income to a Russian village. Two sheep to help families in Arizona produce wool. Two camels to help families in Tanzania earn income by transporting agricultural and industrial materials. Two oxen to pull plows and carts in Uganda. Two water buffalo to help Cambodian families increase rice production through animal draft power. And that's just the first five sets of animals ... and ark provides 15 pairs of animals to change lives."

We hope to surpass last year's accomplishments and we can do it with your help! **Please** be sure to come on down and see all the kids' hard work! Come be a part of our Heifer Marketplace.

Wanted: Greetings cards – new, used, any subject. Will be used for a craft to sell at the Faire. Put them in the box outside the office. Contact Joann Sanford (jo.take@verizon.net or 781-944-7805) with any questions.



Town Wide Rummage Sale Clothing and Linens

Friday March 13 6-9pm

Saturday March 14 10am-2pm

25 Woburn Street, Reading

First Congregational Church of Reading, UCC

Clean, functional donations may be dropped off at the church basement off Sanborn Street starting Monday, March 2nd.

Volunteer to help by contacting info@readingcares.org or calling 781-942-2145. We need sorters during the week before the sale, clerks during the sale, and clean-up help at the end. Earn vouchers to use at the sale, help your community, and have fun with your neighbors!

Vouchers are also available for qualifying individuals and families through Reading Town Hall. Contact Elder/Human Services at 781-942-6608.

*Proceeds to benefit the **Reading Food Pantry.***

Sponsored by: 

The First Congregational Church of Reading, UCC.

Rummage Sale at FCCR

FCCR and ReadingCares are proud to be sponsoring the Rummage Sale on March 13th and 14th, but we need your help. We need sorters the week before the sale, cashiers during the sale, and clean-up help after the sale. The sign-up sheet will be hanging up during coffee hour starting: 2/22. Come one and all! We can also use your donations of clean, usable clothing and linens, and hangers and bags for the sale, to be dropped off after March 1st in Pilgrim Hall.

In addition, there will be a meeting after worship on March 1st for past and future Rummage Sale workers. We need your input on what worked, and what can be done better. Please contact Cindy at 781.942.2145 or Betsy Schneider at info@readingcares.org or betsy.schneider@comcast.net with any questions or suggestions.

Thank You!

Thank you

A thank you to members of Circle 10 who provided a delicious, home cooked meal for Emmaus House on Jan 25th. Thanks also to Sharon Ofenstein, chair of Outreach, and Judie Williams of Circle 10 for delivering this meal. It was gladly accepted and appreciated.

Update from Pommern Village Choir!!

We have heard back from the choir we hosted in November from Tanzania. During their tour through the state, the choir raised enough funds (including funds we collected at our November 1 Ham and Bean Supper/Coffeehouse for them) to drill at least **ten wells** that will assure safe fresh water for their village and beyond!

Rev. Peter Cook, from The Plymouth Church in Framingham, UCC, the sponsoring church, reports: "It is hard to imagine what a positive change this will make in the daily lives of thousands of people. Thank you so much for your part in making this happen."

Thank you for your generosity. The spirit of their music and fellowship will not soon be forgotten on us all here in Reading.

To the members of Reading UCC,

We would like to thank you for inviting us to play the Coffeehouse on February 7th. Not only were you the most attentive audience we have ever experienced, but your generosity, both of spirit and of financial gift, was extreme! We thank you very much, and hope to share music, tears, and laughter with you again.

Grace and peace,
Annie & Katie
KINDRED

Dear Project Leader,

We are deeply grateful for your congregation's commitment and support of Operation Christmas Child in 2008. Some 8 million gift-filled shoe boxes were collected, including 4.9 million in the United States—the most ever since the project's inception 16 years ago. That's 8 million children and their families who will hear the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, and it is mission-minded churches and groups like yours who make this spiritual harvest possible!

Participation by individuals, families, groups, and especially churches is critical to the global ministry of Operation Christmas Child. We praise God for your partnership in this ministry and for your investment in eternity.

In December, Samaritan's Purse delivered thousands of shoe box gifts to war refugees in the Eastern European country of Georgia. We hope the article and video report [will serve as a powerful testimony to the impact Operation Christmas Child is having on hurting people in need of a Savior. Please share these materials with your congregation. Thank you, and God bless you for your passion to bring children around the world to faith in Christ! "

See the article and video at [http://www.samaritanspurse.org/index.php/OCC/OCC_Impact/]

Notes from the Altar Committee...

Orders for the Easter lilies will be due on **April 5th**. Order forms will be in the April newsletter, in the Church office and in the weekly bulletin beginning on **March 22**. Call Mary Ann Higgins 617-347-8346 if you have any questions or want to order early.

We will also need help delivering the plants on Easter and the week following.

The Altar Committee is in need of two committee members for the upcoming Church calendar year. Tasks include calling donors to confirm their gift, ordering the flowers, and being sure the flowers are delivered. There are no meetings. Please consider saying yes when you are called. If you have decided to be on the Committee already, call Mary Ann Higgins.

There are several dates open if you would like to donate altar flowers to honor a loved one or in memory of a loved one. Call Mary Ann if one suits your needs.

March 31

May 31

June 21

June 28

If you would like to deliver the altar flowers to a shut-in, please call Mary Ann Higgins for an assignment. You may deliver on Monday if you are not able to do so on Sunday.

Daily prayers are invited for all of our friends and members-especially those who are dealing with these special joys and concerns. They and their families are most grateful for your spiritual support and cards of greeting.



We pray for healing, recovery, and strength for:

- ✓ Janice Russells's brother, Jeff, suffering from cancer.
- ✓ Marcie's continued healing as she fights a nasty infection.
- ✓ Our Aunt Nav Jiwan's whose cancer has come out of remission.
- ✓ Gay Williams who fell and fractured her wrist, and recently had surgery.
- ✓ Ken's continued commitment to rehab.
- ✓ Jim Breadmore, Leslie and Bob Fuller's son-in-law who is having back surgery tomorrow.
- ✓ Liz Swallow who is having surgery.
- ✓ My girlfriend Donna, who is having trouble healing from a ruptured appendix incision.
- ✓ Mollie Ziegler who took a bad fall on the ice a couple of weeks ago.
- ✓ Bruce for a successful surgery.

We pray for those who are grieving:

- ✓ For the families of those who passed away recently: Gertrude Moore, George Sanford and Jim Colbert.
- ✓ Fran Doughty whose brother Charles passed away February 4th.
- ✓ A sister-in-law who lost her battle with breast cancer on Thursday and for her husband struggling to carry on.

We also pray for the following special concerns:

- ✓ The LeConti family for strength and hope with Bryce's everyday challenges.
- ✓ Employment for friends who are struggling financially.
- ✓ To repair my relationship with my sister.
- ✓ A family in need of housing with 3 kids and one on the way.

- ✓ Those suffering from depression, feeling isolated from God and their family.
- ✓ Those who are losing their jobs.
- ✓ Those who have terminal illnesses.
- ✓ Laura Wood that tests will find the problem.
- ✓ My mother who is struggling with depression.
- ✓ My brother recently diagnosed with MS telling his children of his condition today.
- ✓ A dear friend who has a brain tumor.
- ✓ Gay William's cousin Linda who is the last stages of cancer.

God and we pray in celebration for:

- ✓ Profound thanks to the Lord for helping me to find a job in this difficult economy.
- ✓ My brother and sister-in-law who are adopting their new son and will be traveling to Ethiopia shortly.
- ✓ Praise from the Ellerts for Maya getting into Columbia College in Ohio.

Our prayers continue for those who are in need of ongoing nursing care or assisted living:

- ✓ Bertha Babb (Susan Suarez's mother) at Bear Hill.
- ✓ Doris Torppa (Susan Torppa's mother) at Bear Hill.
- ✓ John Weston at Longwood Place.
- ✓ Libby Hodges at son's in Connecticut.

And those who are cared for at home:

Jane Rice Peter Thorstensen
Molly Rowe Grace Faulkner

Please call the church office for these addresses if you would like to send a card or visit these friends.

Altar Flowers in February

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of her husband Bruce, by Carol Patterson

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of George Cruickshanks, father, Helen Cruickshanks, mother, and Helen Cruickshanks, sister, by Duncan and Heather Cruickshanks.

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of Samuel Taylor by his daughter, Leigh Taylor.

Altar Flowers are given in loving memory of Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Woodward by their daughter Shirley Thurston.



Women 'n' Stitches

Women 'n' Stitches created and donated 12 baby quilts recently. Five of them went to the Children's Hospital in Salem via Chad and 7 of them, along with 3 baby outfits, went to single mothers associated with the City Mission Society of Boston. We also donated 4 lap quilts to the Sawtelle Family Hospice House in Reading. All were greatly appreciated. Thanks to everyone that donated the fabric, time and love that created them. We will be donating a sweet baby quilt that was hand-quilted to the church's auction in May.

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