

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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December Newsletter



Our mission is to embrace people of every age and stage of life and help them become the most loving version of themselves possible.

The Pastor's Column

The Best Kind of Hope: Hope on Its Own Terms

This week, we begin our Advent series, in partnership with Sanctified Art. We will weave a beautiful tapestry together, and we will explore hope. It is safe to say that many people struggle with hope these days. Sanctified Art authors suggested reading MaryAnn McKibben Dana's book, **Hope: A User's Manual**. I must admit I have just begun the book, but it is quick to read, and you will be hearing a lot about it during Advent.

In the introduction, Dana reminds us that, "Reality is...complicated. We can do everything 'right' and things still may not turn out as we would like...Many of us grind it out, clinging to the myth of inexorable progress and calling that 'hope,' but it is anything but. That kind of hope falls short when things are bleak—which is when we need hope the most."

The book is divided into two sections: What Hope is Not and What Hope is. Her chapters, just a few pages in length, are clear and easy to understand. I highly recommend the book to you. I could spend all day sharing quotes that have already impacted my life. For I, too, experience hopelessness from time to time. Or at least I think I do, because as I am learning, I might be experiencing something else, but I have misnamed it. The point is, we need hope right now. We need hope that is resilient and gives us the courage we need to forge ahead fully engaging in our past and embarking on our future.

Our Advent theme is: "What do you fear? Insisting on Hope this Advent."

To open, I would like to end this column with a reflection from Dana's book. She is writing about the movie **Black Panther**, which is the story of the mythical nation of Wakanda. She describes the movie more in depth, but I will leave you and Google to do that. Here are Dana's closing thoughts in her chapter Hope Is Not the Opposite of Despair.

In several Marvel films, T'Challa (who is both king and Black Panther) rallies his Wakandan troops with the cry of "Yimbambe!" which is a Xhosa word meaning "be strong" or "hold fast." I love that, at pivotal moments of the battle, the war cry isn't "Charge!" or "Take no prisoners!" or "Show no mercy!" or some other swaggering Rambo-inflected line. It is simply, Be Strong. Hold the line. Stand with courage. Focus on the task, regardless of how we "feel." When we hold the line, when we stand with courage, we may still experience despair or even desperation. But the standing is itself a hopeful act, and the best kind of hope: hope on its own terms.

May you find such hope this Advent!

In Christian love,

Pastor Greg

Affirmation of Faith
Courtesy of Sanctified Art and our Advent Series,
Hope Over Fear

We have seen the valley.
We have seen a sky without stars.
We have seen the longest night,
and still we believe.
We believe in a with-us God.
We believe in the hope of tomorrow.
We believe that good news is louder than fear.
We believe this good news is for all people.
So even when our knees shake,
even when our voice trembles,
even when fear is all around us,
we will hold onto that good news.
We will reach for each other.
We will look for God in our midst.
We will sing songs of joy.
We will proclaim:
Unto us, love is born.
We have seen the longest night,
and we have seen unimaginable love.
So still, we believe.
Amen.

Linus' Christmas Speech from "A Charlie Brown
Christmas"

The Advent Tapestry Project

What do you fear? Insisting on Hope this Advent Season.

Can we name our fears honestly and still trust that God is near? Hope and fear are interwoven in our lives. This Advent Season, we are working on a tapestry together that will help us acknowledge fear while representing the hope that can come with it. A huge reason we have hope is our community. How can we, like Jesus and Isaiah, point to the places where God is at work in our world? We are given moments every day to practice small, quiet acts of courage in our solidarity with others which makes us stronger. Our communal flourishing depends on each person stepping into their calling despite their fear. In a world where the algorithm decides what takes up space in our lives, let us be disruptive with our joy. Let us run through the streets like the shepherds shouting the good news! And let us quietly document our blessings, our victories, our tragedies mixed with hope. To symbolize walking through our fears, let us be a community and remember how strong we are together.

To create this piece, collect strings, ribbon, strips of cloth, old jewelry, pieces of leather, even a vine from outside--anything that you can weave through the loom. These things can represent family, prayers, times when friends were near, people of hope, things made right. It could signify something you feared that you made it through because of others. It can even be a color that brings you joy. You could weave long grasses from a remembered journey with a friend or a piece of clothing from someone you lost where your community helped you through. You can even hang things from it like keys, buttons, or jewelry, tokens, or ornaments. Anything that helps you hope and remember God's grace can be woven into this piece to remind us that we are an interwoven community. We are stronger together.

The frame will be in Fellowship Hall until December 21. Then it will be hung in church during the Christmas Holidays.

CONVERGENCE COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

CONVERGENCE TEAM MEMBERS ARE STILL INTERVIEWING PEOPLE AROUND GAYLORD TO HELP THE CHURCH GET TO KNOW OUR NEIGHBORS AND DETERMINE OUR NEXT STEPS FOR ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY. WHILE THE ISSUES ARE IMPORTANT TO DISCOVER, THEY MAY NOT SURPRISE US. THE PURPOSE OF THIS INTERVIEW PROJECT IS:

- **TO GET TO KNOW COMMUNITY LEADERS AND MAKE THEM AWARE THAT THE CHURCH WANTS TO WORK FOR THE COMMON GOOD OF OUR LOCAL COMMUNITY.**

- TO LEARN ABOUT THE ISSUES FACING OUR LOCAL COMMUNITY.
- TO DEVELOP OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIPS WITH ORGANIZATIONS SEEKING TO SOLVE COMMUNITY ISSUES.

THE TEAM IS ASKING THESE QUESTIONS:

1. HOW DID YOU COME TO BE IN OUR COMMUNITY OR CHURCH? WHAT KEEPS YOU HERE?
2. IN YOUR WORK OR LIFE OUTSIDE OF WORK, WHAT ARE YOU PASSIONATELY PURSUING?
3. WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING OUR LOCAL COMMUNITY NOW AND IN THE FUTURE?
4. WHAT IS A DREAM YOU HAVE FOR OUR LOCAL COMMUNITY?
5. WHAT ROLE DO YOU THINK A SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY LIKE MY CHURCH COULD PLAY IN ADDRESSING THOSE ISSUES AND/OR MAKING THOSE DREAMS A REALITY?
6. WHAT OTHER ENTITIES, ORGANIZATIONS AND/OR INDIVIDUALS WOULD BE HELPFUL FOR US TO CULTIVATE AS POTENTIAL PARTNERS IN ADDRESSING THOSE ISSUES AND/OR FULFILLING THE DREAMS YOU MENTION?
7. WHO ELSE IN THE COMMUNITY WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THAT WE SPEAK WITH? CAN YOU SHARE THEIR INFORMATION WITH US SO THAT WE CAN CONTACT THEM? WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO CONNECT US TO THEM?

Draft Annual Meeting 2025 Minutes are attached to the e-blast. They will be voted on in November 2026. Committee Minutes are available and attached.

~ In Our Prayers ~

During December, the UNA is holding New Waves UCC (Traverse City) in prayer.

Mary Sue Evans requests prayers for her husband as he is facing health issues.

Maggie Shanahan Menkes (Kathy's daughter-in-law) –for her healing and for increased energy. Pray for the entire family to restore their spirits and energy levels so they can do all that needs to be done each day.

Louanne Spearman as she continues to heal at home.

Laura Bantens, who asks for prayers for employment and finding where she belongs. Her mother, ***Connie***, needs prayers for the same.

Jay Jans, Rokko Jans' brother—Jay under hospice care in Illinois.

Jason Peterman – who is dealing with a variety of health issues.

The English Family – as they manage medical and family challenges.

Chris Crubaugh – who is dealing with medical issues. Continued prayers Chris and Laura Bantens as they adapt.

Madison Crawford – as she suffers from neurological and vision issues.



Prayer requests are received by the church office. Names will appear on the list for two months. Please let the office know if this time needs to be extended, or if it is time to remove a name.



December Birthdays and Anniversaries

Birthdays:

- 1 Ryan Watling
- 3 Terry House
- 4 Maureen Derenzy
- 5 Cindy Goller
- 14 Mike Dockery-Fobar
- 16 Ian Hotelling
- 19 Paul Kaczanowski
- 25 Ilah Weaver
- 29 Jim Akans

Anniversaries:

- 22 George & Carol
- Leinerth
- Paul Balliet & Jane
- Balliet-Hanck

Pet Partners Therapy Dogs

By Judy Gatewood-Keim

Our church is involved in many ways in our community. One of the newest ways is providing the base for training therapy animal teams. The church began the use of the fellowship hall to do the training in April 2025. We also provide volunteers for team evaluations. From those efforts there are now therapy dogs visiting both Otsego and Kalkaska hospitals, Gaylord and Kalkaska schools, and the Otsego library reading program. Our church's therapy animal efforts extend to Lansing and Ann Arbor.

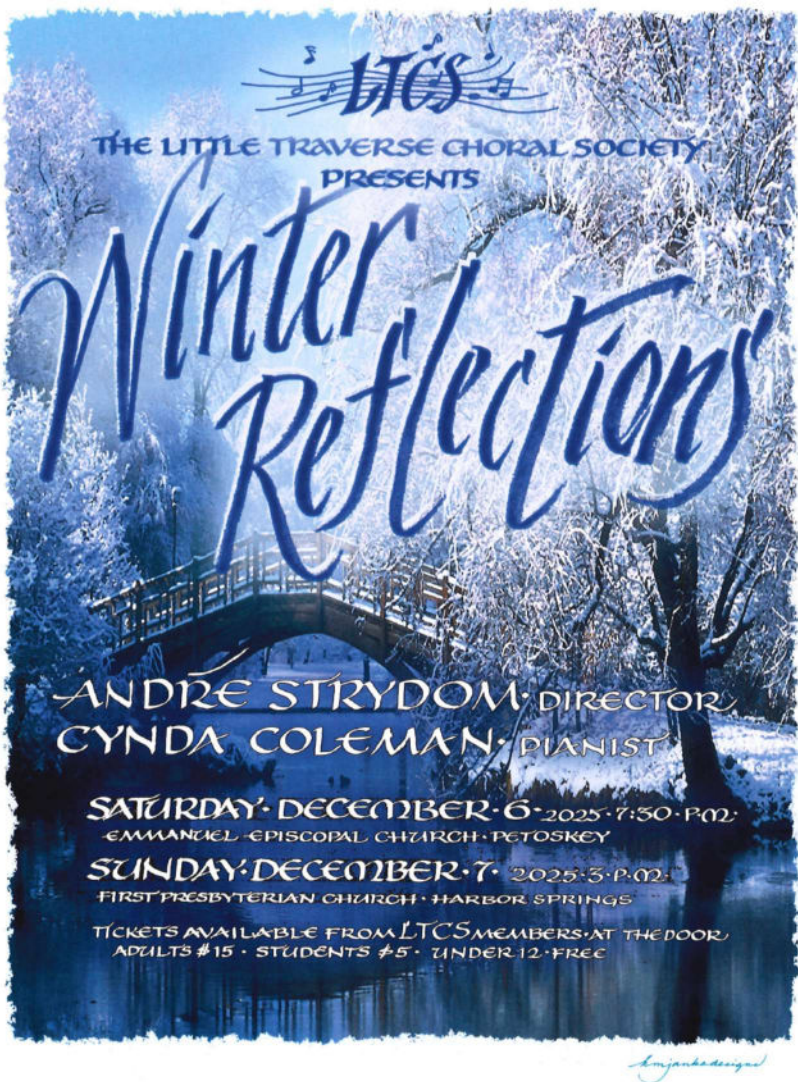


Thank you to our volunteers who have shown up on Saturdays and those

who will when I ask them; Cindy Goller who handles Nicki, Margaret Hellenberg, Jeanne Hough, Jenny Taratuta, and Maggie Wallen. We appreciate your support in our efforts to make our area a better place to live and work.



If you want to volunteer, talk to Judy or Cathi Gatewood-Keim and follow what we are doing on Facebook at **Northern Michigan Pet Partners**.



Announcements

- Signing up for **snow removal**? You now sign up for a day of the week—if the snow event occurs between dark the night prior and dark of that day, you clear.
- The first Sunday of **Advent** is November 30. Each Sunday, and on Christmas Eve, worship will include the lighting of

the Advent Candle(s) and an accompanying short reading. If you are interested in participating as a **candle lighter or lector**, there is a special signup available in Fellowship Hall.

- **Confirmation** continues to meet twice a month, sometimes by us at church, and other times with our friends at Peace Lutheran Church. We participated in the CROP Walk, will attend the Longest Night Service at Peace, and serve a Community Meal in January with Peace.
- **Caroling** is after church on December 14. We will leave church by 11:30 and sing at Aspen Ridge, the Brook, and at a couple of our church friends' houses. Join us if you have time, but we will finish at or before 2pm. Song books are provided and all are welcome! Talk with Pastor Greg if you have questions. ****If weather cancels church that day, caroling will also be cancelled.****
- As an interwoven community, to show how we are stronger together through Christ, this **Advent**, we are weaving a **tapestry** representing who we are. Please provide things we can use to make create this piece—strings, ribbon, strips of fabric, costume jewelry, buttons, tokens, etc. The frame will be in Fellowship Hall through *December 21*.
- For **prayer concerns, joys, announcements, or news** to share, contact Liz at office@firstuccgaylord.org or Pastor Greg at pastorg@firstuccgaylord.org
- Our **service** of carols and candles will be at 5pm on **Christmas Eve**. There is no fellowship time to follow.

Advent?

As we know, the church terms this liturgical season “Advent,” but have you given much thought to what Advent is and what it means? Advent is both the season of preparing for the celebration of the birth of Christ as well as the wait for his second coming. Christians anticipate Christmas through prayer and reflection, often by use of an Advent wreath and calendars.

The Advent wreath begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas and ends Christmas Eve with the Christ candle. The four Sunday candles are often purple—the liturgical color of Advent—and the Christ candle is pink or white. Traditionally, purple symbolizes penance and preparation. The four Sunday candles represent the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Each week during the lighting of the candle(s), an accompanying reading highlights these themes.

The Advent calendar contains small presents or observations and is used to count down the days to Christmas. While it has usually been for children, recently, commercial calendars have expanded to include everything from candles to cocktails!

To observe Advent, you may establish a daily prayer routine or time for personal reflection to deepen your relationship with God. The weekly theme is a great place to start. Another way to recognize Advent is to engage in acts of service and giving alms. Through serving others, you serve Christ. Finally, Advent is the opportunity to open your heart through penance, which can include fasting, reparation, and/or expressing remorse and gratitude for forgiveness.

Advent runs through Wednesday, December 24, 2025.

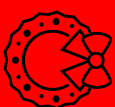
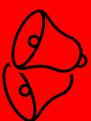




Isaiah 40:4 Every valley shall be lifted, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall be level, and the rough places plain.
Matthew 1:21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.
Luke 2:10-11 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

The gift of hope. The gift of peace. The gift of joy. The gift of love. May all these be yours to share this Christmas.

December



2025

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1 6 a Gaylord Gratitude NOON Reaching In 6 p Compassionate Friends	2 6 a Gaylord Gratitude 5p Ukeelele Group	3 11 a Bible Study 12:15 - Fellowship 4 p Choir	4 6 a Gaylord Gratitude 4 p Community Meal	5	6
7 10 a Worship/Communion	8 6 a Gaylord Gratitude	9 6 a Gaylord Gratitude 1 p Church Book Club 5 p Ukeelele Group	10 HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 6 a Gaylord Gratitude 1 p Church Book Club 5 p Ukeelele Group	11 11 a Bible Study 4 p Choir	12 6 a Gaylord Gratitude 4 p Community Meal	13
14 10 a Worship 11:30 a Caroling	15 NEWSLETTER DEADLINE 6 a Gaylord Gratitude	16 Noon Lunch Group @ Big Buck	17 6 a Gaylord Gratitude 5p Ukeelele Group 7p Convergence Team	18 11 a Bible Study 4 p Choir	19 6 a Gaylord Gratitude 4 p Community Meal	20
21 10 a Worship 7 p Confirmation @ Peace for Longest Night Service	22 6 a Gaylord Gratitude	23 CHRISTMAS EVE 6 a Gaylord Gratitude 5p Christmas Eve Service — no Fellowship following	24 CHRISTMAS DAY MERRY CHRISTMAS!	25 6 a Gaylord Gratitude	26	27
28 10 a Worship	29 6 a Gaylord Gratitude	30 NEW YEAR'S EVE 6 a Gaylord Gratitude	31			