



more than just Sunday morning

The Newsletter of First Presbyterian Church

Issue 298

December 2016



Advent...A Time to Look Forward

The Christian season of Christmas actually begins on Christmas Eve and lasts for twelve days, ending on January 6. No, the twelve-day season of Christmas did not start with the song; in fact it was the other way around. The time before Christmas is Advent, a season of preparation for Christmas. Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus by remembering the longing of the Jews for a Messiah. In Advent, we are reminded of how much we ourselves also need a Savior. We look forward to our Savior's second coming even as we prepare to celebrate his first coming at Christmas. The word "Advent" comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming" or "visit." In the season with this name, we keep in mind both "advents" of Christ, the first in Bethlehem and the second yet to come.

I did not grow up observing Advent, so it seemed odd to think of the weeks before Christmas as something more than Christmastime. As a child, I occasional received a calendar of December 1st thru the 25th that had little windows. When you opened a little window there was a little piece of chocolate! I was given strict instructions to only open one little window on the designated day. Ok, sometimes I opened more than one a day because I had a hard time waiting. Years later I learned that that little calendar was called an "Advent Calendar" whose intent was to whet my appetite for Christmas. But, to be honest, I didn't need help and it seemed like that little calendar actually led me into temptation! I loved Christmas when I was young, mostly because it was a giant party at which I received lots of presents. In a sense, the Christian observance of the days leading up to Christmas is like those Advent calendars with a much greater purpose. It's meant to get us ready, not for a present-opening party, but for a transformational celebration of the birth of Jesus who brought the gifts of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love into the world.

Wednesday Worship Services

Wednesday, **December 7th** we'll gather for our monthly mid-week worship service at 6:30pm. Our Wednesday worship series focuses on the parables that Jesus uses to teach us about the Kingdom of God.

Prior to worship a simple dinner will be provided by our Session. Dinner will be served from 5:45pm until 6:15pm in Fellowship Hall. The Wednesday worship services are family friendly and casual. Come as you are and enjoy dinner, a time of praise and thanksgiving.

Grief Seminars Offered for Holiday Season

When you are grieving a loved one's death, the holiday season can be especially painful. Our Surviving the Holidays seminar helps participants discover:

- How to deal with emotions
- What to do about traditions
- Helpful tips for surviving social events
- How to find hope for the future

Please join us for this encouraging seminar, which will be offered here at the church on 3 different times and dates:

- Tuesday, Dec. 6th 6:30-8:30pm
- Wednesday, Dec. 7th 1:00 – 3:00pm
- Saturday, Dec. 10th 9:30-11:30am

To sign up, respond by phone at 608-790-9481 or email expandinghopecs@gmail.com. Please indicate which seminar you'll be attending and provide a call-back phone number. Space is limited to 12 persons per seminar. The seminars will be facilitated by Nancy Miller. Course materials may be purchased (\$10.00) at the church office.



3MF Heralds the Season with Carols

*"What sweeter music can we bring
Than a carol for to sing
The birth of thee our heavenly King?
Awake the voice! Awake the string!
(Robert Herrick)*

Please join us on **December 12 at 11:00am** as Sue Walby, our Director of Music/Organist, will present a program featuring your favorite carols and some carols you may not know. Do you know how your favorite carol came to be? Have you ever heard a Brazilian or Russian carol? Come prepared to listen, to sing and to ask questions. Also, if you care to, tell why a particular carol is especially meaningful to you.



Following the program, lunch will be served. The cost for lunch is \$7. Please sign up in the Gathering Area.

Haiti Mission Trip Set for January

First Presbyterian continues to respond to the devastation in Haiti from Hurricane Matthew. We will continue to forward donations to our Blessings Offering, as they are received, to Harvest International for the Wrays' outreach to the Haitians.



A work team from First Pres will travel to Haiti on Jan. 13-22. The focus of the trip will be rebuilding a church flattened by the hurricane. Those with construction and mechanical experience are encouraged to consider participating. More information can be found on our website: firstpreslax.org.

Continuing Mission and Social Action Opportunities: The Salvation Army

If you would like to spread some Christmas joy by volunteering around the holidays, there are many opportunities with the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army, founded in 1865 by William Booth, was started in the squalor of the slums of London with the mission of helping people by offering "soup, soap and salvation." The Salvation Army came to La Crosse in 1896. It operates the only emergency shelter of its type within a 100 mile radius, and operates the community's largest meal program.

The following volunteer possibilities are available:

- 1) Bell ringing opportunities are now open to the public from 10am to 8pm. Each shift is about 2 hours long.
- 2) Meal servers are needed at the Salvation Army at 223 N 8th St., beginning in mid-December (when the college students go home) for Friday, Saturday and Sunday meals. The time commitment is: 4:15 to 5:15pm and Sunday lunch 12:15 to 1:15pm.
- 3) There is a Christmas Boutique at 99 Copeland Ave. that is open until December 23rd. The store is open during the afternoons and on weekends, and one can sign up for 2 hour shifts (Tuesday-Friday noon to 5pm, and Saturday, 10am to 4pm).
- 4) An Angel Giving Tree is set up at Valley View Mall beginning November 22nd. Take a tag off the tree and shop for a Christmas present for a child.
- 5) Volunteers can help families register for Coats for Kids, Angel Giving tree, and the Christmas Food Basket program. You can also help give out food packages to families in time for their Christmas dinner.

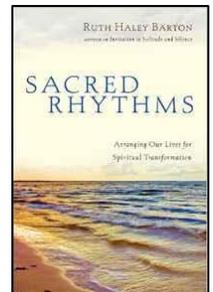
If you would like to volunteer, contact Heather Dutcher at 608-782-6126 or sign up online.

"You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give." - Winston Churchill

Finding Solid Ground

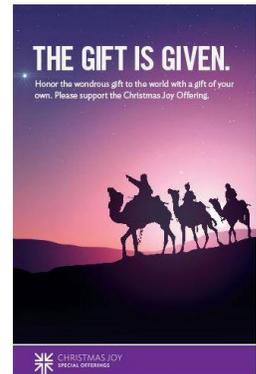
Spiritual practices open us to God's transforming love and the changes that only God can bring about in our lives. When we engage in these practices our relationship with God gains depth and becomes the solid ground for our lives!

This year we are learning more about spiritual practices in small group settings. You are invited to join one of our Sacred Rhythm groups, which meet once a month. One group meets here at church on the first Sunday of the month, **Dec. 4th**, at 9:30am and a second group meets here at the church on the second Wednesday of the month, **Dec. 14th**, at 5:30pm. There is space in each group for additional participants – Please join us!



Christmas Joy Offering

The Christmas Joy Offering is traditionally received during the Advent Season. Each year during the Advent and Christmas season, we turn our eyes to Bethlehem and celebrate the wondrous gift of Jesus Christ, our Savior. By giving to the Christmas Joy Offering, you honor this gift by providing assistance to current and retired church workers in their time of need and developing our future leaders at Presbyterian-related racial ethnic schools and colleges. If you would like to support this offering, you may use the envelope enclosed with this newsletter or you will find special envelopes in the pews.



From our Deacons

Greetings to you from the Board of Deacons. We have been busy enjoying connections with our homebound friends. At our recent monthly meeting, we discussed how we might more clearly define and communicate our role. As many of you know, our primary focus is on visiting those within our congregation who are no longer able to be physically with us in worship and in church activities. Each deacon visits one to two of our homebound friends. Our goal is to make monthly visits, but sometimes more frequent visits are possible. Contact may be made by phone or cards as well. In addition to our monthly contacts, we (in pairs) bring Extended Service to homebound members on 3 Communion Sundays per year. This is authorized by session and typically done in March, June and October. Flowers are also personally delivered to our homebound members at Easter and Christmas. With help from Children's ministries (and other volunteers), we are able to deliver Thanksgiving treat bags to each homebound as well.

Deacons also sponsor the Hillview Care Center Giving Tree. Congregation members are invited to take a tag from the tree and purchase the listed gift for a resident. The Giving Tree is already up this year, and we hope each of you will enjoy shopping for someone who may not receive any other gift this Christmas. Though this list is not complete, I hope it provides a helpful understanding of some of what we do. We continue to rely on the Lord to "...equip us with everything good for doing His will," and pray that He would "...work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for every and ever." (Hebrews 13:21) May the Lord Jesus Christ himself fill your heart with love, peace and joy this advent season.

Giving Tree Shines in Gathering Area

The Hillview Giving Tree is back in our Gathering Area. The Giving Tree is a mission activity supported by our Board of Deacons. The goal of the Giving Tree is to ensure that every resident at Hillview Nursing Home receives at least one gift at Christmas.

The tree is decorated with 90 tags – with gift suggestions for specific residents at Hillview. Please take a tag, shop for one or more of the items listed, wrap and return the gift(s). Please be sure to attach the tag to the outside of your package. The Hillview staff will return on Wednesday, December 14th to pick up the gifts.



Volunteer Opportunities

Tuesday, **December 13th** is First Pres' night to help serve the free meal at Our Savior's Lutheran on Division St. If you'd like to help serve this free meal, come at 4:30pm to help serve, stay to eat and help with the clean-up. If you would like to help, please call Marna at 782-1916. Thank you.

Morning Circle

The Morning Circle will meet Wednesday, **December 14th** at 9:00am at Ardies Restaurant on Lang Drive. Everyone is welcome. So bring a friend, neighbor or relative and join us in fellowship. For reservations, please call Marilyn Delaney at 788-1341.

Men's Morning Bible Study

The men's Bible study will meet on Wednesday, **December 7th** and Wednesday, **December 21st** from 6:00 to 7:00 am in the work room. We will be finishing our study of 1 Thessalonians and possibly moving on to study 2 Thessalonians. For more information contact Don at 788-8012.

Thank You

Thanks to all who baked for the Thanksgiving bags to our homebound members. The Children's Church kids did a lovely job making a hanging fall frame and bags for the goodies. Delicious goodies were tucked into the bags along with some fruit and hard candies.

Thanks to the Deacons for delivering the bags the week of Thanksgiving. Our hope is that they brought joy and color to our homebound members and their homes.



Thanksgiving gift bag and hanging picture made by the children.

The Fall Youth Retreat: The most beautiful weekend of November

From November 4-6, Youth Ministry hosted two partially-overlapping retreats at the Sprains' Camp Salem in Black River Falls. We had six leaders and twelve students involved with the retreat and we are overjoyed with how the weekend turned out.

Below is a list of highlights from our 2016 all Retreat:

- The younger students made candles as their craft, to remember that Jesus is the light of the world
- The older students volunteered to assist with bingo at a nursing home in Black River Falls, which proved to be very impactful to students, with some even calling it their favorite part of the weekend.



- Worship songs around the campfire
 - The six adult leaders were able to build strong bonds with the students over the weekend
 - The older students spend *four hours* hanging out, playing games, and chatting on Saturday night! Praise the Lord for the strong, positive friendships that he has formed among our students
 - One student, who completed Confirmation this past spring, expressed a desire to revise their statement of faith to include what they learned over the weekend.
- Wow! God is so good!



What Makes the Cut? Inside Youth Group Preparation:

Our Wednesday evening youth groups are the flagship of Youth Ministry at First Presbyterian Church. These 90-minute meetings have proved to be essential for our ministry as they foster excitement towards Jesus Christ and the church, validate students for who they are and where they are at in their lives, and allow students to build positive friendships with one another to the point at which students are calling their group a “family.” And although we see amazing, praise-worthy things happen at every meeting, the preparation for each meeting takes a lot of time, discernment, and *balance*.

On the front-end of a youth group meeting, those 90 minutes seem like a lot to fill. By Wednesday afternoon, however, I usually find myself crossing items off the schedule. Forming meetings that students find fun and engaging, while also being a time for worship and a source of spiritual influence is oftentimes a difficult balance to obtain. And, like most weeks, I found myself struggling to achieve this balance for our youth group meetings on November 16th, which was our annual Thanksgiving Potluck Dinner. Although I had originally intended to repeat the activities from last year’s potluck dinner, it became increasingly clear to me in the planning process that the Lord wanted us to challenge the students in a different way this year. I admit that I was a little nervous to abandon the familiar plans that had proved to be successful and steer the helm towards uncharted waters, but I had faith in the Lord and what He had planned for the students. So I crossed off 5 or 6 steps on my “to-do” list, propped open one of the many resource books on the shelves in my office, and began constructing activities and discussions with the purpose of helping students realize what they should be thankful for. The 6th and 7th graders played a version of the game *Scattegories*, which brought to light the sheer volume of things they should be thankful for. In planning for the 7th and 8th graders, I felt that the Lord wanted them to dig a bit deeper. Thus, I put together a Bible scavenger hunt so that they could discover first-hand what the Bible tells us to be thankful for. Check out the answer key for this activity below:

Trials _____ (Hint: James 1:2-4)

Holy Spirit (Hint: John 14:26)

All Circumstances (Hint: 1 Thessalonians 5:18)

News _____ (Hint: Mark 1:15)

Kingdom _____ (Hint: Hebrews 12:28)

Salvation _____ (Hint: Hebrews 2:3)

To be honest, we never know for sure whether the activities or lesson we execute in youth group meetings will be impactful, transforming, or even memorable for students. After all, one of the most beautiful aspects of having a relationship with Jesus Christ is that it is so quiet, internal, and personal. All we can do is put in our best effort possible, look to him in making difficult choices of what to keep and what to eliminate from the schedule, and have faith that He is working and shaping students in ways that we cannot even imagine.

-Alex Jerve, Director of Youth Ministry

Sunday School – A Winter Break

Remember we offer something for every age preschool through adult on Sunday mornings at 9:30am.

There will be no Sunday school on December 25th or January 1st because of the Christmas holiday season. We will resume our regular Sunday morning schedule on January 8th.



Operation Christmas Child Collection Week



Our church joyfully collected 158 shoe boxes from our congregation... that is an amazing outpouring of generosity from our church!!



Over 2600 shoeboxes were dropped off in the Coach House during collection week from local churches, organizations, individuals and families. All shoe boxes were prayed over as they arrived.

Our volunteers checked to be sure every box was clearly labeled, and properly wrapped. The boxes were banded with rubber bands and then packed into shipping cartons – about 15

shoeboxes to a carton. These cartons were then numbered and placed in the semi-trailers.

The Collection Center received more than 4500 shoeboxes from regional relay sites. The Collection Center packed 7185 shoeboxes into the two semi-truck in the parking lot.

Thanks to the 40 students from Aquinas High school who came and helped us load the big trucks on the last day of collection. It was great to have their help.

Thanks to all who donated money to help ship shoeboxes and to those who donated items for the boxes. What an blessing!!



Every table and level surface in our Coach House was covered with shoeboxes as our volunteers received load after load.



Students from Aquinas High School place their hands on the semi-trailer as prayer was offered.

VOLUNTEER AT THE OCC REGIONAL PROCESSING CENTER
in Minneapolis/St. Paul on Friday, December 9th

If you are interested in traveling to the Twin Cities to help process shoe boxes at the regional collection center, we will be taking a couple of vans up on Friday, Dec. 9th. We will be gone all day and serve in the center for 4 hours. Please contact Cindi if you'd like to go. We have room for 15 individuals and are limited to 4 youth in our party of 15.

OCC Sewing Kits

A new OCC project was spearheaded by Virginia Kaatz this year. Many folks donated sewing items to help Virginia make 17 beautiful sewing kits for the older girl shoeboxes. Can you just imagine what it will mean for these young women to receive such a thoughtful gift? Thanks to all who donated sewing supplies and to Virginia for all her hard work.



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Christmas Eve Worship Services

On Christmas Eve, Saturday, December 24, two candlelight services are held to joyously celebrate the gift of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The 4:00pm worship service is designed especially for families, featuring prayers, scriptures, a message and special music.

The 7:00pm worship service features prayers, scriptures, a message, music by the choir.

Come 15 minutes early for a beautiful musical prelude.

Nursery care is provided for both services for children 3 years and younger.



Christmas Day and New Year's Day Plans

As we look forward to the holiday season, please note these plans for the Sundays in late December and early January. No worship will be offered on Sunday, December 25th. A devotional booklet will be available to encourage individuals and families to worship at home on that day.

On Sunday, January 1st, we will offer our Annual Hymn Sing at 10:30am. No 8:30 worship service will be held.