

CHURCH LIFE

DECEMBER 2025



MIDDLEBURY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

**OPEN & AFFIRMING
1242 WHITTEMORE RD
MIDDLEBURY, CT 06762
MIDDLEBURYUCC.ORG**

FROM THE PASTOR

As we begin the month of December, we enter the season of Advent. Advent is the season of preparation and waiting for the birth of Christ, and Advent also marks the start of the Christian year.

The Middlebury Tree Lighting is 12/6 at 4pm We will be distributing hot chocolate during the Tree Lighting. After the Tree Lighting at about 5pm we will open up the sanctuary for caroling!

The annual Christmas Pageant is during worship on 12/14 with a snow date of 12/21

On Sunday 12/21, we will have a Fourth Sunday of Advent service at 10am. That same Sunday at 5pm we will have a Longest Night Service in the sanctuary. The holidays can often be bittersweet times as people cope with grief and stress that seems to hit extra hard at a time where everything is supposed to be merry and bright. Longest Night Services (some churches call them Blue Christmas services, but that branding just always makes me think of Elvis), are an opportunity to acknowledge the hard moments that come with the holidays while also remembering the hope of Christmas.

Over the last few years, the 11pm Christmas Eve service has gotten smaller and smaller. This year we've decided to have a 5pm service like in years past, and we're moving up the late service to 10pm to see if that works as a better time for people.

One of the questions I've been asked a number of times is why we celebrate Christmas on December 25th. One of the popular explanations out there is that Jesus' birth was placed near the winter solstice to coordinate with pagan solstice holidays and therefore assist with Christianization. However, I think a much better explanation is the one supported by many scholars, including Andrew McGowan, who is a current professor at Yale Divinity School.

It was commonly held among people of all religions during antiquity that people who lived a perfect life would die on the same day as their birth. Building on that belief, the ancient church and aspects of

Judaism placed a big emphasis on God's creating and redeeming happening at the same time. So, Jesus' conception in the ancient Church was seen as a salvific moment, and it was commonly believed that the date of Jesus' conception must be the same as the date of his saving death on the cross to tie both moments together. (There's all sorts of artwork with the baby Jesus coming down from heaven with a cross, which is making this same connection.)

Conveniently, scripture is very clear on the exact date Jesus died in the lunar Jewish calendar: the 14th of Nisan. The Western Church has converted that date into our current calendar as March 25th. The Eastern Church using a Greek calendar ended up with April 6th.

So, if Jesus is conceived on March 25th (aka the Feast of the Annunciation), he would be born nine months after on December 25th, or going from the Eastern date, he'd be born on January 6th (January 6th is the date for celebrating Epiphany in the Western church.) And both those dates are the two main dates for Christmas that have been used since we have records of Christmas being celebrated, which is in the third century.

Additionally, March 25th and December 25th have both been used as dates for the Vernal Equinox and the Winter Solstice, which is something people point to in order to say Christians just stole pagan festivals. However, Christians saw these dates and their relation to the sun as demonstrating the cosmic significance of Christ's birth. Ancient people of all religions associated what the sun, moon, and stars did with signs from heaven/the gods. So, it seemed fitting to early Christians that important dates for Christ would tie to important astrological phenomenon.

St. Augustine captures this sort of cosmic understanding of the work of Christ:

“God so loved us that for our sakes he,
through whom time was made, was made in time;
older by eternity than the world itself,
became younger in age than many of his servants in the world;

God, who made man, was made man;
he was given existence by a mother
whom he brought into existence;
he was carried in hands which he formed;
he was nursed at breasts which he filled;
he cried like a baby in the manger in speechless infancy—
this Word
without which human eloquence is speechless.”

Peace,
Katrina Manzi
Minister

CHRISTMAS EVE READERS

Our 5pm and 10pm Christmas Eve services have multiple volunteer opportunities. If you are interested in reading one of the scripture lessons on Christmas Eve or lighting the Advent wreath, please let Pastor Katrina know (kmanzi@middleburyucc.org).

READ THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE WITH THE CONFIRMATION CLASS

As part of Confirmation Class, our confirmands will be reading the gospel according to Luke throughout the program year. Everyone is welcome to read Luke at home along with the class.

December: chapters 7-8

January: chapters 9-10

February: chapters 11-14

March: chapters 15-18

April: chapters 19-22

May: chapters 23-24

We also need adult volunteers to be the second adult for confirmation classes offered after church from 11:30-12:30. All you have to do is attend the class. It's a great way to learn some new things and a chance to get to know some of the kids in our church better! If you're interested in volunteering, contact Pastor Katrina (kmanzi@Middleburyucc.org.)



THE DEACONS' BENCH

The holidays are upon us: Halloween and Thanksgiving have raced past and the mad rush of Christmas is in full swing, to be closely followed by

New Year's. That is a difficult counterpoint to the fact that loneliness and emotional disconnection have become defining features of life here in America. There is also a tremendous level of division between individuals and groups.

This can all lead to the holiday season being one not of simple joy, but one of stress or distress.

For some, that holiday stress might be high or unrealistic expectations (the "Hallmark movie" Christmas expectation). It might be fraught with concerns over finances, or overshadowed by sadness or loss, or concerns about what might happen during those holiday events ... things just not being how we want them to be. It's not all happy camper stuff for many people.

But there are also ways to build resiliency that can help offset the things that stress us or bring us down.

One of the first is something you're already doing if you're an active member of our congregation: social connectedness. According to Arthur Evans, the CEO of the APA, "...social support is one of the strongest predictors of people's well-being. ...Reaching out, showing up and building community are not optional; they're essential." Our church family (and for me, the MCC is my church family) can be a source of enormous social, emotional as well as spiritual support, and in many cases, concrete support as well. Think of all the meals, cards and calls that are shared!

There are also many healthy practices that build resiliency and physical as well as mental well-being. What works for any person is highly individual, but besides spending time with others (in real time and space – not just through social media or texting), these include physical activity, being outdoors in nature, prayer, meditation, reading, journaling, and so many more.

Coming to church services and then spending some extra time in coffee hour speaking with others is great. Reaching out to a friend or family you haven't spoken to in a while can be rewarding for you both.

If the holidays are especially difficult, our church offers two special opportunities. The Longest Night service (Sunday 12/21 at 5 PM) is specifically planned for people who may have experienced the loss of a loved one, or some other situation that makes the holidays particularly challenging – offering peace and hope. And new this year, Michele Finn, for the Diaconate, developed a special series of Advent devotionals: *Waiting With God: Light for the Heart in Advent Shadows*. She has paired a biblical story of someone who faced hardship and how their connection to God helped them, one for each Advent candle /week. They will be on the new table in the narthex for you to take home and utilize in the way that works best for you. No extra meeting or responsibility – just a series of meditations that might just help.

No matter how the holidays impact you, we hope that the Christmas celebration of the birth of Jesus is a potent reminder of how much God understands and loves each and every one of us, and how we have the opportunity to share that love and light with each other.

For the Board of Deacons,
Janine Sullivan-Wiley

FROM THE MISSION BOARD

GWIM Soup Kitchen

December's monthly food contribution to the GWIM Soup Kitchen is **Instant Mashed Potatoes and any Canned Vegetables**. The pantry shelves are running low, so every can truly counts. Please consider donating a variety of vegetables to help restock their supply and ensure families have nutritious options through the season.

Harvest Sunday

Harvest Sunday was a great success. The table was bountiful with so many groceries. Thank you for all your donations.

Thanksgiving Baskets

Middlebury Social services were so thankful for your generosity of all the food in the Thanksgiving Dinner Baskets.

Christmas Dinner Baskets

Again we will be assembling Christmas dinner baskets to provide a full meal for two families in Middlebury who could use a helping hand. If you'd like to donate an item, please sign up on the bulletin board by the kitchen. These items are due on Dec 21st.

Star Tree Children

Again we will be supporting the Wellmore foundation with presents for their children. These gifts are probably the only gift these children will receive. Each star will list a child's name, age, and their requested items. Just pick up a star from the tree and write your name on the sign up sheet next to your child's name. The price should be between \$25-40. They will be due by December 15th.

Thank you all—your generosity is deeply appreciated by every organization we support. Have a very Merry Christmas and Happy New year.

With gratitude,
Mission Board



Welcome to Advent and Christmas.

With the First Sunday of Advent, we start a new liturgical year. And as we observe the beginning of the he liturgical year, starting with the Advent, followed by the Twelve Days of Christmas (December 25 to January 5) and concluding with Epiphany (January 6), we again are "deluged" with all the music of the season.

I've been thinking about this season and the great quantity of both sacred music and secular (non-sacred) music that exists for the Christmas season. I don't know of any other occasion which has

generated a nearly countless number of musical pieces- over many generations and a multitude of cultures.

Our choir exists to provide sacred music to enhance and elevate our worship experiences but during this season, the choir has had an opportunity to share some secular music with the larger community.

Three years ago, the Board of Deacons (specifically Deacon Janine SW) had the great idea to invite the attendees of Middlebury's Christmas Tree Lighting event into our beautiful sanctuary to share in some warmth, community and music- led by our choir members.

This year will be the third time that the choir will lead music for a Community Carol Sing, but instead of our typical musical offerings, we'll have fun leading some of the secular music of the season! Still I'm struck that even the secular songs are ultimately in service of the celebration of God's magnificent plan, through the birth of Christ, for us all.

We hope you'll join us on December 6 for our Community Carol Sing-a-Long immediately following the Christmas Tree Lighting on the Green. And, of course, please join us at Worship Services all season long.

Blessings,
Donna Obarowski

WHAT ABOUT TITHING AND PROPORTIONAL GIVING?

MCC's members live up to Connecticut's reputation as the Land of Steady Habits.

That's good: For the last five years, we have maintained a core group of 70 to 75 families who, together, pledge between \$120,000 and \$128,000 a year. But we keep falling short of what we need for a balanced budget without having to draw down from our endowment.

Can we do better? The Rev. Monica Lewis thinks we can. In the feasibility study she prepared for our proposed capital campaign, she wrote:

Future stewardship programs should include more information on proportional giving and what people should consider when determining how much to give to the church. Though it's clear the congregation has been educated on the average annual pledge, ... an overall reevaluation of giving patterns ... would be invaluable for the congregation.

In other words, everyone knows whether they give more or less than most other people. But does that amount reflect the value of your church to your own family?

We're stuck in a rut

Mentally, comparing ourselves to others locks us into repeating the model that we had five years ago. What other people are giving determines what we decide to give.

Tithing and proportional giving are based on the Biblical principles of setting aside a portion of our income for the church. In the Old Testament and early Christian church that amount was a tenth, or tithe.

That may not be practical today. The median household income in Middlebury is \$142,000. A tenth would be \$14,200—well above any pledge we have today. That's where proportional giving comes in.

Giving that feels good

Generosity should feel good. Proportional giving can help.

Start by finding your comfort level. Divide your current pledge by your household income to determine what percentage of income you give now. If your household income is the median \$142,000 and your current pledge is the median \$1,200, then your current proportional gift is $1,200/142,000=0.00845$, or less than 1%.

Does that percentage look right to you? Or, considering all the blessings you receive from this Christian family, would it feel good to step up a bit, say to an even 1%? That would be $\$142,000 \times 0.1$, or \$1,420. The following year you might shoot for 2%, or \$2,840. And so on.

Repeat as necessary, year after year, until you reach the level that's right for you.

Howard Fielding for the Board of Stewardship



A red poster with white text and a white silhouette of a nativity scene. The text is arranged in a hierarchical manner, starting with 'CHRISTMAS EVE' in large, ornate letters, followed by 'with' in a script font, and 'MIDDLEBURY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH' in a serif font. Below this, two service times are listed: '5PM: CANDLELIGHT FAMILY SERVICE' and '10PM: CANDLELIGHT COMMUNION SERVICE'. The nativity scene silhouette is centered at the bottom, showing Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus in a manger, with a star above. The address '1242 WHITTEMORE RD, MIDDLEBURY, CT' is at the very bottom.

CHRISTMAS EVE
with
MIDDLEBURY CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH

5PM: CANDLELIGHT
FAMILY SERVICE

10PM: CANDLELIGHT
COMMUNION SERVICE

1242 WHITTEMORE RD, MIDDLEBURY, CT

IMPORTANT DATES

- 12/6:** 4pm Middlebury Tree Lighting
5pm Carol Sing in the Sanctuary
- 12/7:** 10am Second Sunday of Advent Worship & Communion
- 12/13:** 10am Christmas Pageant Rehearsal in the Sanctuary
- 12/14:** 10am Third Sunday of Advent Worship & Christmas Pageant
- 12/21:** 10am Fourth Sunday of Advent Worship
5pm Longest Night Service
- 12/24:** 5pm Candlelit Family Service
10pm Candlelit Communion Service
- 12/25:** Christmas Day, Office closed
- 12/28:** 10am First Sunday of Christmas Worship

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Second Sunday of Advent

Children will light the Advent wreath during worship

Longest Night Worship

The holidays can be bittersweet or stressful times for many people. This is a Christmas service that acknowledges those complexities. You don't have to spend the longest night of the year alone.

Office Hours

Office hours for the weeks of Christmas and New Year's will be Tuesday and Friday from 1-5pm.

**Middlebury Congregational Church
1242 Whittemore Rd.
Middlebury CT 06762**

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