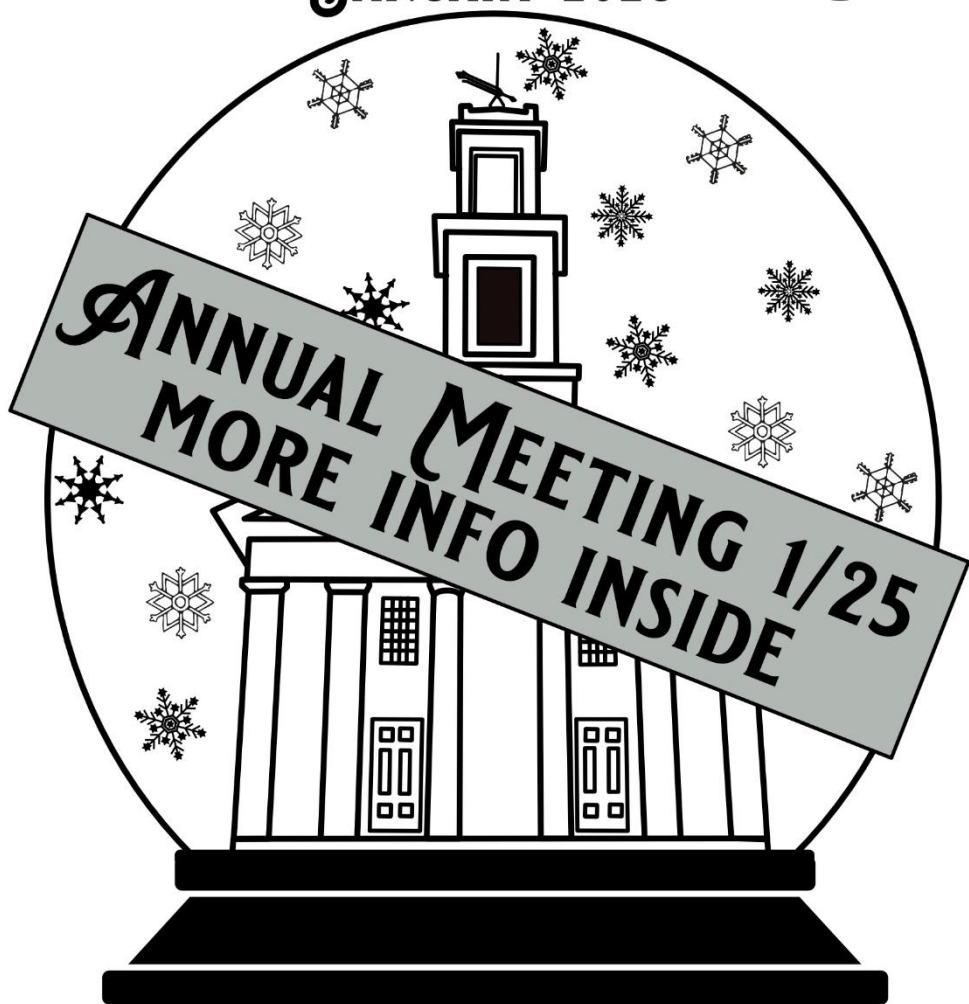


CHURCH LIFE

JANUARY 2026



**MIDDLEBURY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
MIDDLEBURYUCC.ORG**

CALL TO THE ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of the Middlebury Congregational Church will be held on Sunday, January 25, 2026 in the sanctuary following worship. The purpose of the meeting is to amend the Constitution, receive the 2025 reports, approve a budget for 2026, and elect board members and officers.

Erika Carrington, Clerk

PROPOSED CONSTITUTION AMENDMENT

We have been asked by the Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ to make minor adjustment to our Open and Affirming Covenant, which is in our Constitution, to bring us into alignment with updates the Coalition has made in language and terminology.

Current sentence in our Open and Affirming Covenant: “We welcome all persons of all sexual orientations, gender expressions, socioeconomic status, family configurations, ages, national origins, races, physical, cognitive, and medical ability, and religious background.”

Proposed change to be voted on at 2026 Annual Meeting (change is in bold and underlined): We welcome all persons of all sexual orientations, gender expressions **and identities**, socioeconomic status, family configurations, ages, national origins, races, physical, cognitive, and medical ability, and religious background.

For reference, gender identity is what gender someone is. Gender expression is how someone expresses or lives out their gender.

FROM THE PASTOR

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all of you!

I want to thank all our staff, volunteers, musicians, actors, and ushers who enabled us to have wonderful Advent, Christmas Pageant, and Christmas Eve services and events. It takes a lot of people to make

everything happen, so thank you to everyone who gave their time and energy in the busy Advent and Christmas seasons.

During Advent, I read *Voices of Advent* by biblical scholar Matthew Skinner. I really enjoyed it; it's one of the best Advent books I've read for incorporating good scholarship about scripture in with good faith takeaways.

One of the major themes of Christmas comes from the gospel according to John where John describes Jesus as the light shining in the darkness. Skinner notes in his book that he once heard a sermon on Psalm 119: 105 “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path,” where the preacher spent time explaining how ancient lamps worked. And lamps in antiquity in the region of Israel were typically little bowls of oil with a wick hanging out the side. They gave sputtering light that didn't illuminate very far in front of you. They were totally different to more modern lamps or flashlights that can shine far around or ahead.

So, if Christ illuminates our path like those ancient lamps, that means the path in front of us is only lit up just in front of us. We can't see far ahead. We can only see the next step in front of us. And I think that idea of not being able to see far ahead is often what a life of faith and just life in general feels like. When we're in the middle of changing or difficult times, we often can't see any of the twists and turns that lie far ahead. We can only see the path immediately right in front of us. When we can only see what's right in front of us, our call as God's people is simply to take the most faithful step we can take. And after we take that step, we can see a little further down the path, so we then take our next most faithful step. And we continue on, faithful step by faithful step.

As we begin the new year, there is often a lot of talk about big plans or resolutions for the coming year, and there is nothing wrong with that. But, I think it's helpful to remember that God makes no promises about illuminating the path ahead for the whole year; sometimes all we can see is the step immediately in front of us. So, this New Year, whether you feel the path ahead of you is lit up far into the distance or

whether you can only see the ground directly in front of you, I pray that all of us remember that we are called to take one faithful step at a time, and if we do that, we will get where we are meant to be going.

Peace,
Katrina Manzi
Minister

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.)

WHAT IS THE THIRD CENTURY FUND, WHY DOES IT MATTER, AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

About 35 years ago, our church launched a major capital campaign that created what we now know as the Third Century Fund. The goal was simple but ambitious: to build a financial safety net that would preserve our beautiful parsonage, our grounds, and the church building itself. It was a true all-church effort, and together we raised more than \$300,000—an investment in ensuring our church's ministry

and physical home would endure well into the next century and beyond.

For more than three decades the Third Century Fund has faithfully served that purpose. Although it is currently a fraction of what it was 35 years ago, it has supported numerous preventative maintenance projects across our buildings and property, helping us avoid larger and more costly issues along the way. A few of the more sizable recent projects covered by Third Century Funds include repainting the front exterior of the church building and renovating the social hall bathrooms, church kitchen, and kitchenette.

Over the last year, the Trustees and Church Council have taken a deeper look at the current and future needs of our facilities. The Board of Trustees obtained estimates and bids from several contractors and vendors, and it quickly became clear that some of the larger upcoming projects could not be covered by the remaining Third Century Funds and would place significant strain on our endowed funds. These endowed funds are essential: they provide annual income that helps support our operating budget, charitable ministries, and staff salaries.

In consideration of this, we have begun exploring the possibility of launching a new Capital Campaign in 2026. The idea was first introduced this past spring during a question-and-answer session following Sunday worship, and conversations have continued as we prayerfully consider our next steps. As stewards of both our buildings and our mission, we believe it is important to approach these needs thoughtfully and proactively. A new Capital Campaign would allow us to address major facility projects *without diminishing the endowment that sustains our ministries year after year*. By inviting the congregation to participate in a focused, time-limited effort, we can preserve long-term financial health while ensuring that our church remains safe and accessible for current and future generations. This is not simply about maintaining a building, but about continuing to create a space where worship, service, and community life can flourish for decades to come. More details will be shared soon, and we encourage you to reach out with questions as we explore this

vision together. We hope you will consider partnering with us as we move forward in caring for this shared commitment.



THE DEACONS' BENCH

Welcome to our New Year and to “ALL” Godspeed ahead. The word Godspeed has become part of literature from Middle English Texts and from their expressions “God spede you” meaning “May God grant you success” or “May God prosper you”. As a church body, we want a certain level of success and to prosper enough to keep the lights and heat on in our buildings, while staff funding. Our church’s ministry somewhat depends on a secure base of operation.

Interesting enough, Jesus’ ministry was less structured. He wandered the countryside preaching, apparently subsiding off of nature’s abundance or peoples’ goodwill. He spread his message while walking or possibly riding a donkey while we might endeavor to secure the newest model found at our plentiful auto dealerships.

I admit, I’d be extremely hard pressed to follow in his footsteps, literally. I’d never qualify to touch his sandals let alone wear them!

I perceive my elderly leanings and advocacy is to try and seek clarity on issues I’m surrounded by or thrust upon. I feel we have a duty to self determine our standings on issues without overly succumbing to group think. A biblical example would be Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor and Prefect of Judea. Pilate couldn’t enforce his personal belief of Jesus’s innocence. In Matthew 27-24, he washed his hands of Jesus’s blood instead assigning it to the crowd who responded, “let his blood be on us and our children”.

So although I might not be built to walk in Jesus’s sandals, as admitted, I’m *hoping to avoid being stained* by the failures of Pontius Pilate of self-determination. I endeavor – Godspeed.

The Scripture

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgement, relieve the oppressed; judge the fatherless; plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

Isaiah 1:16-20

Who Is Thy Neighbor?

Who is thy neighbor? He whom thou
Hast power to aid or bless;
Whose aching heart or burning brow
Thy soothing hand may press.

Thy neighbor? 'Tis the fainting poor,
Whose eye with want is dim;
O enter thou his humble door,
With aid and peace for him.

Thy neighbor? He who drinks the cup
When sorrow drowns the brim;
With words of high, sustaining hope,
Go thou and comfort him.

Thy neighbor? Pass no mourner by;
Perhaps thou canst redeem
A breaking heart from misery;
Go, share thy lot with him.

William B. O. Peabody

Respectively submitted on behalf of the Board of Deacons,
Michael J. Granja

FROM THE MISSION BOARD

January's soup kitchen food contribution will be Alfredo sauce again. They use this sauce a lot with chicken dishes so they are asking again for this contribution.

The Christmas dinners baskets were overflowing with food for the two families we adopted. Social services was so appreciative of our continued support for our Middlebury families.

All the Stars for the children were taken this year and we had such a wonderful outpouring of generosity from our congregation. Its so humbling to see how much this congregation gives and the difference we make in peoples lives. Thank you, Thank you , Thank you for all you do for our church.

January is usually our coldest month and its also when we collect used or new mittens, hats, scarfs, gloves and socks for the homeless. The mitten line will be put up in January in the social hall, so feel free to hang any of the above mentioned items so we can take to GWIM for the homeless.

We are also looking to maybe have another blood drive in February. Date and times will be announced in the future.

Bless all of you
Carol Rollins

MUSIC NOTES

January is a traditional time for resolutions and new practices. I wonder if you any of you have any new spiritual practices that you want to adopt in 2026.

If so, I may have an idea for you.

Many of you have heard of the spiritual practice of "Lectio Divina"- there was a study group here at MCC earlier this year that examined this practice.

In Lectio Divina (literally, "Divine Reading"), you focus on one short passage of scripture, read it slowly and find the word or phrase that especially stands out to you. Then you consider that one phrase for additional prayer and contemplation.

I recently heard the suggestion to use the Lectio Divina practice with hymns. It was suggested that, while singing, you look for the one

word or phrase that really jumps out to you in the moment. Then, remember that phrase for additional prayer and reflection.

I tried this myself, with one of MCC's favorite hymns, "Be Thou My Vision". The words that really spoke to me were "now and always". I had a whole chain of prayers and thoughts that rose from deeper consideration of that one phrase.

More ideas to come...

Happy New Year,
Donna Obarowski

WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT STEWARDSHIP

When Barbara and I were asked to fill a vacancy on the Board of Stewardship at the beginning of the pandemic, we agreed on two conditions: 1) we would learn and follow best practices for the job, and 2) we could recruit a creative team to work together on the board.

ShawnaLee and Drew Kwashnak enthusiastically joined us on Stewardship and were elected to the board at the next annual meeting. We've had joyous, sometimes silly, fun together over the past six years as we created our fall pledge campaigns and put the fun in fundraising.

Now Barbara and I are approaching the end of our second three-year term, and a new team will form after the annual meeting. We've enjoyed our time on Stewardship, and may return sometime in the future, but now it's time to bring in new perspectives on our church's finances and fundraising. Of course we will continue to support MCC's stewardship campaigns.

Meanwhile, we leave you with some of the lessons we've learned about stewardship:

Stewardship isn't about fundraising. It's about finding the best use of God's gifts of time, talent, and treasure to further our mission as a church.

Most people don't give because it's expected. They give time, talent, and money because they see the value of their gifts in performing our mission.

They want to see how their gifts are used toward that mission. Transparency about the budget and recognition of those who give time and talent is important throughout the year.

Pledges are only part of the equation. Online giving, special gifts, memorial gifts, planned gifts, donor-advised funds, gifts of appreciated stocks, mandatory retirement distributions, and estate planning are among the other ways to contribute to the financial well-being of the church.

Faithful givers who have pledged and contributed to our church are abundantly generous. Throughout the year we also contribute through food bank donations, clothing drives, school supplies, and more.

We must build a culture of gratitude. The two most important words in stewardship are "thank you." We have started a tradition of thank-you notes for pledges (although I confess I'm further behind with those this year than I am with my Christmas cards).

Status quo isn't good enough. Our expenses as a church increase each year, and we know we can't keep up if everyone gives the same as they always did. Even keeping up with the average pledge doesn't move us ahead.

Instead, churches have traditionally encouraged the practice of tithing, which means setting aside a tenth of our income for charitable giving. At one time, a church was pretty much the only charity in town. Today, many nonprofits compete for our attention. Ten percent may be too much to ask.

Proportional giving encourages us to look at our giving as a percentage of our household income. Now, as we enter income tax season, is a good time to start.

What percentage of your income do you give to the church today? Divide your current pledge by your household income to determine what percentage of income you give now. If your household income is \$100,000 and your current pledge is \$750, then your current proportional gift is $750/100,000=0.0075$, or about three-quarters of 1%. Could you step it up to \$1,000, making it an even 1%?

By challenging ourselves to be more generous, year after year, we can measure our progress while ensuring the church keeps pace with the resources it needs to serve our mission.

Thank you for all your help!

Howard Fielding for the Board of Stewardship

IMPORTANT DATES

1/4: 10am Epiphany Worship

1/11: 10am Baptism of the Lord Worship

11:30am Confirmation Class

1/18: Budget Info Meeting after worship in Sanctuary

1/25: Annual Meeting after worship in Sanctuary

Potluck in Social Hall following Annual Meeting

**Middlebury Congregational Church
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