

CHURCH LIFE

MAY 2026



UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
OPEN & AFFIRMING
MIDDLEBURYUCC.ORG

FROM THE PASTOR

In my sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent, I shared some statistical analysis on the United Church of Christ done by Baptist minister and scholar Ryan Burge. He did a whole article in March on the United Church of Christ, and the gist of what he found in the data is that according to the numbers, the United Church of Christ isn't doing great.

The United Church of Christ has had six straight decades of membership decline. For every ten UCC members there were in 1960, there are only 3 members today. 51% of UCC churches have fewer than 100 members. The median UCC church has a membership of 97 people and average weekly attendance of 39 people. 2/3rds of UCC churches have an average weekly attendance of under 50 people. I ran our church's 2025 attendance numbers for the annual report we send to the United Church of Christ national setting, and with an average weekly attendance of 52 across all services, we are hanging on to a spot in the just one third of UCC churches with an average attendance of over 50. So, compared to our peer churches, we're holding our own.

In the weeks since Burge's article, there have been a number of articles written by UCC clergy trying to diagnose why we're in this mess and what our leaders could have done differently. I'm not entirely sold on any of the explanations proposed since decline in membership is present across all Mainline Protestant denominations, so clearly this is a broader trend and not wholly the result of decisions our particular denominational leaders have taken.

However, in reading some of those articles, I was reminded of a quote that was a favorite of denominational leadership for years: "The UCC is the best-kept secret in the world . . . if only people knew about us they would be flooding through our doors." A number of our friends and members who participated in the financial feasibility study in October in preparation for our capital campaign actually said nearly the same thing. There was a broad consensus about how wonderful our church and community are, but we don't do a good job telling

people about it. Surely everyone would be here, if only they knew about us.

One of the main themes of the season of Easter, our current season in the church calendar, is witnessing and testifying to the good news of the resurrection in word and in deed. We Congregationalists tend to be doers rather than talkers in terms of living our faith in the world. We focus more on actions, how we are living the values of the gospel, rather than actually using words to tell people about our faith and why we're doing all these things. People will know we are Christians by our love, by all the things we do.

However, that focus on doing and not saying has meant that we are not particularly effective evangelists. We have not told our story. We have not made sharing the good news with people a priority. I think honestly the biggest indicator of this truth is the number of people in town each year who come into the Church Office trying to pay their taxes. We've done so much doing and so little saying, people just think our church is a town office building.

Our church is currently undertaking a capital campaign, Foundations for Our Future: Building for the Third Century, to raise funds for capital investments in our church's physical infrastructure. We are essentially raising money to prepare and build for our future to ensure we're able to do ministry here in Middlebury for years to come. And, apart from raising the funds we need, one of my hopes for this campaign is that it helps us share using words with one another and with other people the good news of Christ that we believe and live out here at MCC. It's an opportunity for us to share our stories about what faith and Christian community in the church mean to us. And I know MCC is important to so many of you because of the generosity and dedication you show.

One of the things I believe deep in my soul is that the gospel changes lives and, because of that, church changes lives. God changes lives right here in our church. We have the opportunity to both financially contribute to ensure lives keep being changed and to tell people our story so their lives can be changed too. We don't need to keep the

good news of what goes on here a secret. We just need to tell the story.

As the old hymn goes:

I love to tell the story
Of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and his glory,
Of Jesus and his love.
I love to tell the story,
Because I know it's true;
It satisfies my longings
As nothing else would do.
I love to tell the story;
'Twill be my theme in glory
To tell the old, old story
Of Jesus and his love.

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.

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

Spring has finally arrived after a long cold winter and with it both the joys of blooming flowers and birdsong and the violence of thunderstorms. While most of us ride out these storms from the comfort and safety of our cozy homes, they can be truly terrifying for those on the sea. There is a traditional fisherman's prayer that speaks so simply but eloquently to a feeling that I imagine all of us have experienced at one time or another:

Dear God, be good to me; the sea is so large and my boat is so small.

At times in our lives we are buffeted by waves of loss, loneliness, failure, unkindness, fear or doubt and it's easy to feel that surely our tiny boat will founder. But the message Jesus brought us, with the help of a few fishermen, is that though the sea is big and the storm powerful, our God's power is bigger. He calmed the very waves that toss our little boats so His Son could walk across them to us, shining like a beacon of hope and grace in the storm.

But we are also not alone on the raging sea in other ways. Every time someone in our church family prays for us, greets us across the aisle before worship, sends us a kind note, hands us a warm cup at coffee hour, or asks how our family is doing, it's another tiny boat pulling up alongside ours to ride out the waves together. As a church family we steady each other, raise our prayers to God in the storm, shine light into the darkness so someone may find their way, and lend an oar. We help launch our children's boats out into the world. We mourn together as our loved one's boats make their final journey. We celebrate the sun breaking through.

So as we go into the coming week and whatever waves life may toss at us, I offer this simple prayer:

Lord, in the storm give us the faith and strength to both reach across that large sea to You and across the gunwale of our small boats to each other.

Respectfully submitted for the Board of Deacons,
Liz Walker

FROM THE MISSION BOARD

Our monthly food contribution to GWIM will be **instant potatoes**, and we thank you in advance for your continued support of this important effort.

We are excited to announce that our annual **Strawberry Festival** will take place on **Sunday, June 7th**. The Missions Board will once again host raffle baskets, silent auction items (based on the wonderful donations we receive), and a tag sale featuring a variety of treasures. To make participation easy and fun, we will provide clear plastic bags for anyone interested in creating a raffle basket. We will also feature dedicated tables for tag sale items, books and puzzles, and quality costume jewelry. If you are doing some spring cleaning and come across gently used items that could be a great addition, we warmly welcome your donations.

In honor of **Mother's Day**, the Missions Board will be assembling personal care gift bags for the women at Safe Haven shelter, offering a small gesture of care and encouragement.

The Missions Board extends its sincere gratitude for your continued generosity and faithful support, which make all of these outreach efforts possible.

Mission Board
Carol Rollins



"HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN"

If you are in church on May 17, we will be observing "The Ascension of the Lord". This special day in the church calendar occurs forty days after we celebrate "The Resurrection of the Lord" (Easter). The Book of Acts tells us that Jesus spent forty days with his disciples and then was taken up to heaven before their eyes. However, forty days from Easter lands on a Thursday, so we be remembering this special event in the salvation story on the nearest Sunday, which is May 17.

One of our hymns that day will be "Crown Him With Many Crowns". The author of this text, Matthew Bridges wrote it in 1851 and was inspired by the Book of Revelation, specifically chapter 19, verse 12 which describes the Lamb (Jesus) as wearing many crowns.

The original hymn had nine verses (not all are included in our hymnal) with Bridges attributing these crowns to Jesus:

(Crown Him with many crowns)
Crown him the virgin's Son...
Crown him the Son of God...
Crown him the Lord of life...
Crown him the Lord of peace...
Crown him the Lord of love...
Crown him the Lord of Heaven...
Crown him the Lord of lords...
Crown him the Lord of years...

Hope you'll join in singing to honor Jesus with many crowns.

Blessings,
Donna Obarowski

STEWARDSHIP

Let's be honest: when we hear the word stewardship, many of us instinctively check to see if our wallets are still in our pockets. It's a word commonly associated with church shorthand for "the budget needs help." That is, until Barbara and Howard got involved with Stewardship.

This dynamic duo have fundamentally changed the view of what Stewardship means. They have both served two 3-year terms as chair each, or 12 years combined, as well as hours of careful and prayerful writing, editing and sharing of knowledge and attending seminars and workshops on church finances.

Their humble and quiet nature is a testament to a strong faith that supports without boasting, and leads by example. This example reframed what it means to be “Stewards” to one fundamentally about faith and making best use of the resources God has given us – Time, Talent and Treasures.

If you were to read through all of Howard’s writings for Stewardship, including the annual report and Church Life, it becomes clear how gifted he is for writing. Coupled with Barbara’s research skills, they don’t just write, they educate, with an evident gratitude for everyone’s gifts of contribution.

They shared with all of us the results of what they gathered to inform, elevate and encourage us to become more faithful through our time, talents and treasures. They have set a high standard for transparency and depth of insights for us that will be difficult to uphold!

We share our deepest gratitude for time well spent learning and sharing the responsibilities of participating as members of the Board of Stewardship for the MCC.

As we move forward in this important role, we are mindful of the legacy Barbara and Howard entrusted to us—that stewardship is not simply a board, but a shared way of being in our church community. Each of us has a role to play, expressed through the offering of our time, talents, and treasures.

While Barbara and Howard leave us with big shoes to fill, we are grateful for Michele Rowell Finn to be joining us yet there is still opportunity for anybody interested to get involved. We have small jobs, like stuffing envelopes and writing Thank you notes as well as creative ones for our Stewardship Campaign and more. Please reach out if you have an interest in helping.

Thank you all for your support.

On behalf of the Board of Stewardship,
Drew Kwashnak

PREPARING FOR *AS MUCH AS YOU WANT*



Left to right: Christopher Avcollie, Pete Vindigni, Sue Vindigni, and Michelle Rowell Finn rehearse a scene from *As Much As You Want*, a production at Middlebury Congregational Church. The world premiere runs May 15-17, 2026.

Photo Credit: Grace Avcollie



Left to right: Christopher Avcollie, Naya Brito, Pete Vindigni, Gracian Brito, and Sue Vindigni rehearse a scene from *As Much As You Want*.

VBS MATERIAL REQUEST

- Corn Starch
- Rock Salt
- Disposable Gloves
- Lard/Shortening (Tubs)
- Chessboard
- Instant Snow
- Cardboard
- Paper towels
- Disposable Plates
- Baby wipes
- Blue Plastic Table Covers



CLASSIFIEDS

Looking for Car to buy, Garage to Rent, Offering Handyman/Yardwork Services (Volunteer or Paid)

David Haase dshinwtbyct@hotmail.com 860-993-9285

- looking for a 2002 or older 4cyl. or 6cyl. pickup truck or hatchback car
- looking for a garage to rent for storage.
- Looking for paid work or willing to help people as a volunteer if they need a helping hand
- I have work, personal, volunteer, references. I have background checks done with two different sources

Running Club

Established in July 2025, the Middlebury, CT Run Club meets twice a week, Thursdays at 6pm and Saturdays at 9am. Currently each meetup gathers at the Middlebury Volunteer Fire Department at 65 Tucker Hill Road we run on the safe and off street Middlebury Greenway Trail. ALL are welcome as well as ALL skill

levels. We are a no pressure group that is comprised of walkers and beginner runners all the way up to competitive marathon runners. Run/walk at your own pace or bring your leashed dog and just take a



nice stroll and meet some new people. We have occasional team events, theme nights, raffles, swag, etc. Also, each meetup will always have a first aid kit on hand, bug spray, and a water bowl and healthy treats for the puppies. We practice SAFE: S(Safety) A(Accountability) F(Fun) E(Exercise). So what are you waiting for?! Check us out, you may have just found your new favorite weekly event.

Portraiture

Bring the joy of portraiture into your home! Commission a quality hand drawn or painted portrait in Charcoals or Oils. See examples of my work on Wenty's poster or at www.shawnalee.com



Scions

Wanted: Branch clippings (scions) from Old Apple Trees and Native Dogwood trees. Willing to gift very young Red Japanese Maple saplings.

ShawnaLee / artist@shawnalee.com. Can leave message with Sarah in office too. Thanks!

Bottle Drive: June 6th

Troop 5 and Troop 6 will be running their Bottle Drive fundraiser from 8:15 AM to 1:15 PM at 530 Middlebury Road. This is one of the Troops big fundraising events to help fund events throughout the year.

Dorm Fridge

If you have a small (apartment or dorm-style) fridge that you aren't using on June 6th or June 7th we would love to borrow it!!

We need some extra storage space for some special "picnic fare" for our Strawberry Festival. Please contact Ellen at 203-217-5363 or spirit2000@aol.com or see me anytime after church!!



Classifieds

If you want to include a classified in the June Church Life, please email your classified information to the main office at office@middleburyucc.org by Wednesday, May 20th.

Middlebury Congregational Church

1242 Whittemore Road, Middlebury, CT

Presents World Premier of:

MCC
PLAYERS

As Much As You Want

May 15 & 16th 6:30 pm

\$35 per person includes dinner

May 17th 2:00 pm

Matinee \$15 per person

*A Play in Three Acts
Sequel to "As You Were"*

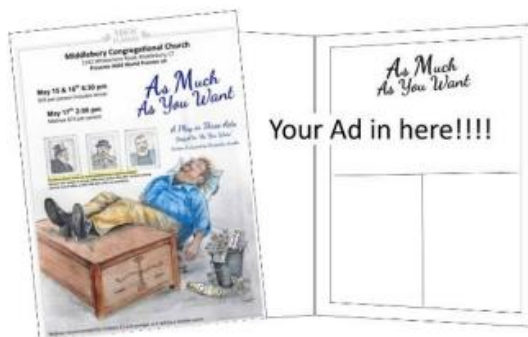
Written & directed
by Christopher Avcollie

Purchase tickets online at
www.middleburyucc.org/mcc-players
(Service fees apply) or during coffee
hour before May 8th. Limited seating.

Call the church office at
203-758-2671 with any questions.



Matinee recommended for children 12 and younger as it will be a shorter event.



Promote your business, celebrate a loved one, or share a message of support while helping bring our production of *As Much As You Want* to life!

- Full Page Ad or Message- \$125.00
- Half Page Ad or Message- \$75.00
- Quarter Page Ad or Message- \$50.00
 - Business Card – \$25.00

You can also make a patron's donation. We will list your name in our Playbill as one of our generous sponsors.

William Shakespeare Circle (top tier) - \$60.00

Eugene O'Neill Stage (middle tier) - \$40.00

Arthur Miller Spotlight (entry tier) - \$20.00

Deadline for submissions: May 9, 2026

Questions or Submissions to: office@middleburyucc.org

CHURCH RECORDS

Deaths

Wendy Cooper on December 12, 2025

IMPORTANT DATES

- 5/3:** 10am Worship, Communion Sunday
- 5/10:** 10am Worship
- 5/15:** 6:30pm “As Much As You Want” dinner performance
- 5/16:** 6:30pm “As Much As You Want” dinner performance
- 5/17:** 10am Worship
11:30am Confirmation Class
2:00pm “As Much As You Want” matinee performance
- 5/19:** 6pm Litchfield South Association Spring Meeting, First Congregational Church of New Milford
- 5/24:** 10am Worship, Pentecost
5pm Memorial Day Parade
- 5/30:** Lumos concerts renting the sanctuary (MCC does not get any additional revenue from ticket sales. We have been paid a rental fee)
- 5/31:** 10am Worship
- 6/6:** Troop 5 & 6 Bottle Drive (more information on page 11)

AS MUCH AS YOU WANT **COMING SOON TO MCC**



Playwright and director Christopher Avcollie rehearses a scene from *As Much As You Want* with cast member Michele Rowell Finn. The world premiere runs May 15-17, 2026, at Middlebury Congregational Church.

Photo Credit: ShawnaLee W. Kwashnak

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

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