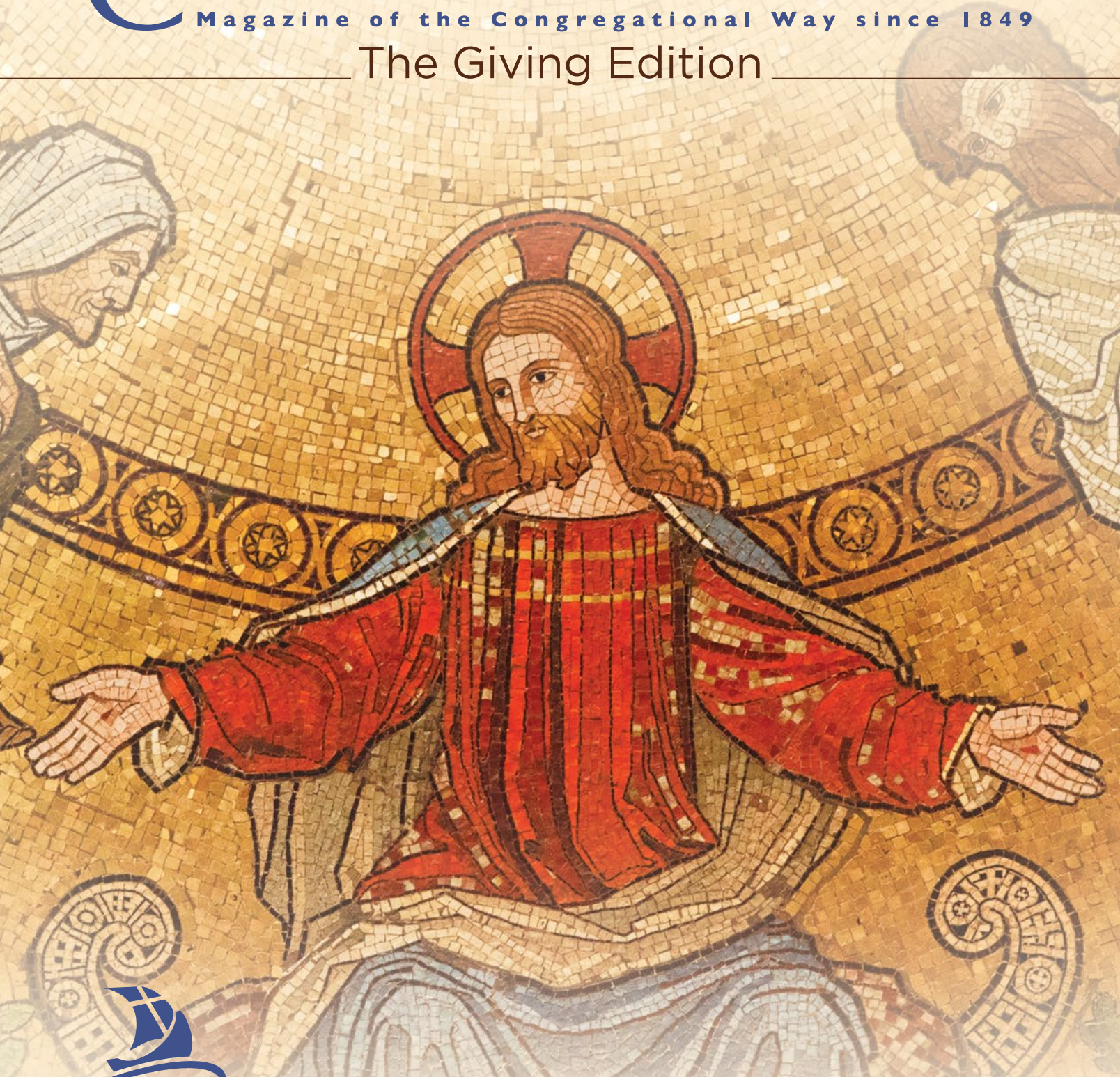


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The CONGREGATIONALIST

Magazine of the Congregational Way since 1849

The Giving Edition



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Neither *The Congregationalist* nor the NACCC has a creed or holds positions on social or theological issues; but we recognize the authority of each local church to do so for itself, if and as it wishes, and we encourage thoughtful and respectful discussion of our agreements and differences.

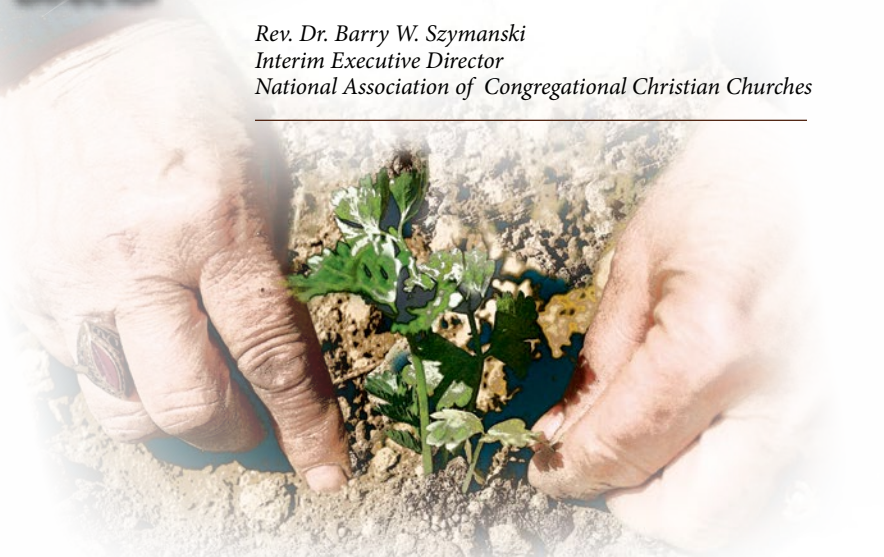
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A MESSAGE FROM
**Your Interim
Executive
Director**



THOUGHTS: *I Know You!*

*Rev. Dr. Barry W. Szymanski
Interim Executive Director
National Association of Congregational Christian Churches*



Some years ago, actually centuries ago, a boy named Jeremiah realized God was calling him to speak out for Him. "I am only a boy," he responded, trying to avoid the call of the Divine. Wouldn't you and I feel the same way? We each have our own excuses. I am too busy. I am too old, or too young. Retired. Need to get a haircut. Afraid. God has heard all our excuses! We try to fudge, just as Jeremiah tried to dodge God's call. Yet, as God spoke to him, He speaks to us, "You shall go to all to whom I send you ... do not be afraid of them." Your job, our job, is "to build and to plant." After God's call, Jeremiah's life was never the same. Neither will ours be. Working with, and for, God is not easy.

The title "prophet" in today's culture has a very different meaning than it does theologically and in ancient times. In our modern world, we deem a prophet as a sort of clairvoyant: a person who foresees the future, a seer, or a psychic. But in scripture, we find prophets worked to creatively bring God's words to life in his or her own culture. When prophets reflect on God's word, they become visionaries

of how to live in the way God wants us to live, and how to give in the way that God wants us to give. Jesus the Christ, our Savior, is the perfect prophet. You and I are prophets as we consider how God's word leads us to follow His Son, Jesus the Christ. St. Peter assures us we are prophets! Immediately at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit entered the souls of the apostles, St. Peter went out to address the crowd. He announced to them that God declares, "I will pour out my Spirit and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." We are the spiritual descendants of those in that crowd. St. Peter continues to speak to us.

We become more relevant as prophets when we make a more significant connection between God's word and our world because church life is not confined to one hour on Sunday. Jesus asks us to give ourselves fully and totally to loving God and neighbor.

When we love a person, we find creative ways to prove our love. Think of how imaginative people are in

expressing their love when they first meet a new love interest. Think of how inventive some people are when they propose marriage. And how imaginative people or family members are in showing their love when a loved one returns from military service overseas. Therefore, I deem that it is the prophetic task of a church member, as well as the entire congregation, to continually seek ways to creatively express their love for God and neighbor. I believe that God calls every member, individually and as an integral part of a congregation, to be resourceful in giving our love to our communities.

Just as the Lord said to Jeremiah, "... you shall go to all to whom I send you." Jesus sends us into the real world around us. When we go forth in God's Spirit, God's Kingdom expands, the entire congregation grows, and our souls are enlarged. And it doesn't stop there, for when we do so the souls of everyone we encounter realize God's loving care for them. This is how, I believe, we live out our prayer that God's Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We fulfill what Prophet Jeremiah was called to do: to build and to plant. May our prayer for our congregations be to work, like Jeremiah, to be creative builders and loving planters.

'Thoughts' are Barry's musings based upon scripture and remain his own opinions and not those of the National Association, though he prays that they are meaningful to all.

References: Jeremiah 1; Mark 1; Acts 2



As With Gladness Men of Old

by William Chatterton Dix

ABOUT THE POEM

William Chatterton Dix wrote this Epiphany hymn on January 6, 1859, drawing on Matthew 1:1-12 to liken the journey of the Magi to the personal spiritual journeys of Christians. Dix's poem emphasizes the significance and joy to be found in giving to and honoring Jesus, just as the Magi experienced. The poem was first published in A. H. Ward's Hymns for Public Worship and Private Devotion. One year later, it was published in Dix's Hymns of Love and Joy, as well as his Hymns Ancient and Modern.

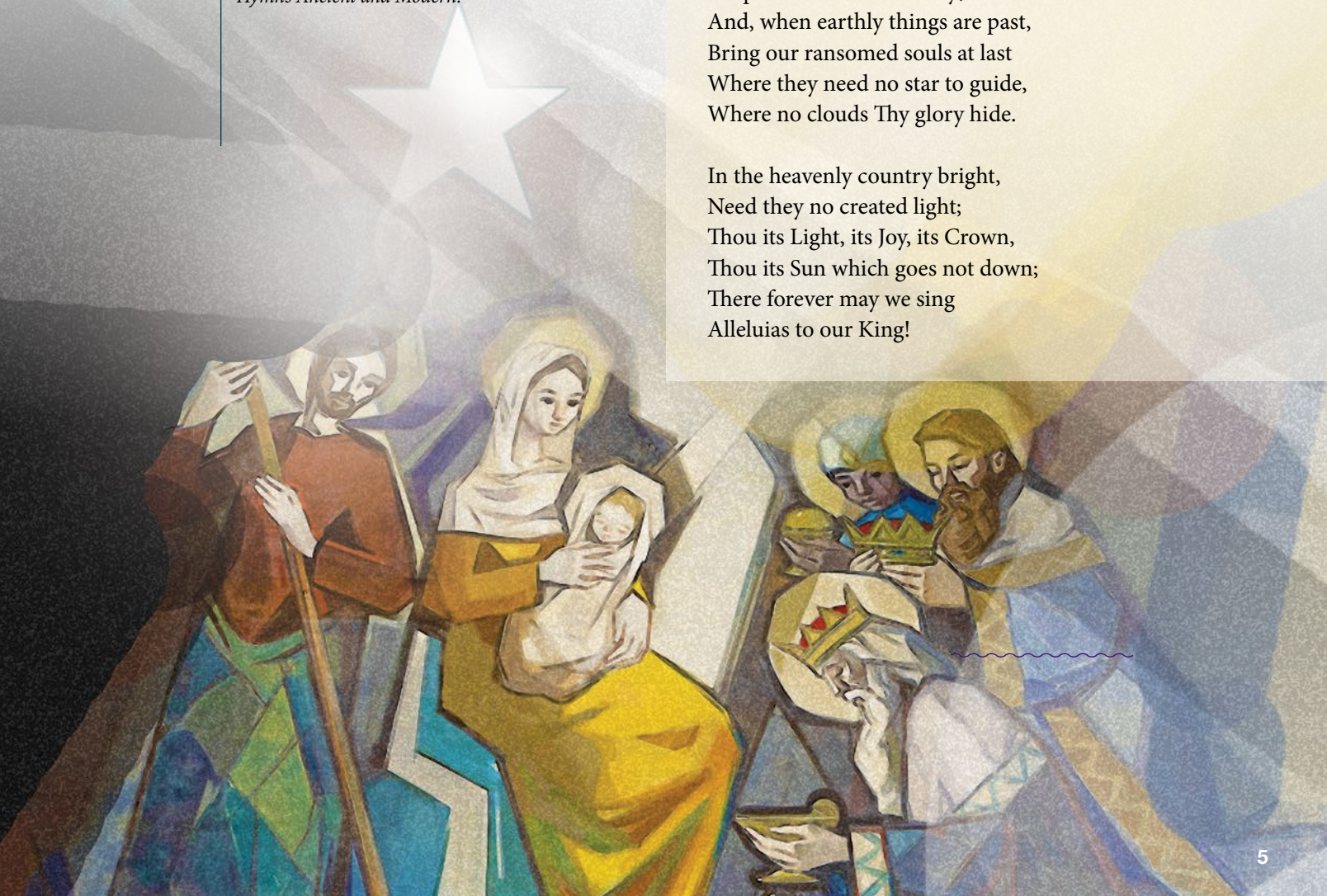
As with gladness, men of old
Did the guiding star behold
As with joy they hailed its light
Leading onward, beaming bright
So, most glorious Lord, may we
Evermore be led to Thee.

As with joyful steps they sped
To that lowly manger bed
There to bend the knee before
Him whom Heaven and earth adore;
So may we with willing feet
Ever seek Thy mercy seat.

As they offered gifts most rare
At that manger rude and bare;
So may we with holy joy,
Pure and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to Thee, our heavenly King.

Holy Jesus, every day
Keep us in the narrow way;
And, when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds Thy glory hide.

In the heavenly country bright,
Need they no created light;
Thou its Light, its Joy, its Crown,
Thou its Sun which goes not down;
There forever may we sing
Alleluias to our King!





Mrs. Peabody & the Christmas Quilt

by Rev. Justin Nierer

Let's talk about the Quilt Club, Quilting Guild, Quilt Square, Quilting Circle, etc. Whatever you want to call it, it is, by definition, the same – a group of ladies that gather at a scheduled time to create incredible works of cultural art. During the summer many years ago, I spent a lot of time with my grandmother because both my parents worked, and I wasn't quite old enough for manual labor. So, I would sit, taking it all in, while a group of community leaders, grandmothers, mothers, and mentors surrounded a piece of fabric while solving the world's problems.

Every year in my youth, our church would hold an auction for a quilt. The ladies of the church would spend the entire year working together to make this amazing piece of art. This story, though, isn't about the process of making the quilt but about the journey the quilt took. At the time, I was just a teen trying to figure out life and love, and on the day of the auction, I ended up learning a lot about the heart and how powerful a thing it can be. It is a story, an event, I can never forget, and to this day, it brings a smile to my face and warms my heart because it involves the happiness of our most favorite and unforgettable church member, Mrs. Peabody.

Dear reader, dear friend, I present to you now, Mrs. Peabody and the Christmas Quilt.

The day was upon us – the church bazaar. There were baked goods, crafts, and a basket drawing, all ending with the coveted auction of the Christmas quilt. Truth be told, the quilt was immaculate. It was something out of a dream, and I'm not one for quilts. It was absolutely beautiful with the Christmas colors of red, green, blue, and white. Even as a kid, I recognized that it was truly a work of art.

Now, as a fourteen-year-old, I was there not as a willing participant but as the son of the clerk of records, head of the property committee, etc. I had no money and wasn't going to bid. So, I sat there and did what teens do best in this type of situation, I looked like I was ignoring everyone, but in reality, I was taking it all in.

There were a number of other items to be auctioned off before the quilt – pies, lap blankets, baskets, gift cards, etc. When the quilt was displayed, we were all in awe of it – the definition of beauty and the Christmas season. The auctioneer stood on one side of the stage and Mrs. Peabody on the other, with the biggest smile on her face. With that, the auction for the quilt began.

The auctioneer stated that this was one's only chance at the beloved Christmas quilt, this amazing piece of Americana. The bidding started, and I couldn't have cared less... until Dallas made a bid.

Until I went to college, Dallas Danner was the only barber I had ever known and used. I am not exaggerating either. Dallas was the community

barber – he cut the hair of community leaders, he cut the hair of both parts of community scandals, he cut hair. I have lost count of the number of times I sat in his chair, surrounded by people of influence or people you knew your parents didn't want you in the same room with. If you needed to find the center of activity and productivity within our rural town, you simply had to find Dallas Danner's barber shop.

Before Dallas made his bid, it had been a common auction – \$100, \$200, \$300, and that would be it. Three hundred had always been the goal. Three hundred dollars for the Christmas quilt and that would be the end of our auction.

Yet this time, it wasn't the end. The auctioneer was saying, "Three hundred to the Brown family!" who had a wedding coming up, and this quilt would make a beautiful backdrop for the wedding nuptials.

"One Thousand Dollars!"

Someone said one thousand dollars.

That was said.

And it was heard.

My fourteen-year-old ears perked up because, I knew, this was something that could not be missed and I was right. Boy was I right. The following recap I will never forget and to be honest, I hope I never do.

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS was the bid, and it came from the local barber Dallas Danner.

One thousand dollars. That would be over three times the record bid for that Christmas quilt. Yet there he stood. There he made a stand.

Rev. Justin Nierer is the pastor of Sandstone Congregational Church in Jackson, Michigan. He's surprised at the positive response his Mrs. Peabody stories have gotten, having received communication from all over the country regarding "her," and wants to thank all the fans. Thank you!



I knew him, everyone knew him, and there he said, "ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS."

There was a hush over the crowd.

I watched my barber, my friend, walk towards the front, a smile on his face, a certain sparkle in his eyes.

His eyes were directly looking at Mrs. Peabody, Cookie Peabody.

For those of you who do not know but should know, Mrs. Peabody had a nickname, and that nickname was Cookie. I have been told this was her nickname for two reasons. One, she was the youngest sibling, so she was deemed "so sweet," and the second reason, the reason I think is most true, is that as a child, she liked to indulge in cookies of all kinds. Well, whatever the reason, the name stuck, and that's how many people knew her during her childhood and young adult years, "Cookie Peabody."

I sat there, in awe of what was happening, then asked myself, why in the world is he looking at and smiling at Mrs. Peabody?

The answer came from my barber and friend, and for me, it was as if Christmas had come early for anyone and everyone who needed a story to share around the dinner table for ages to come.

"Cookie Peabody," Dallas said, "many years ago the timing wasn't right, I guess, but now, over 50 years later, I am without Susan, and you are without Herbert, and here we are. Here we are Cookie, and I am going to buy this quilt, and I am going to say, in front of all these people, that I don't want to

spend Christmas with just my kids and grandkids, I want to spend Christmas with you, with you Cookie, my first love, a love that I thought would never happen again. Cookie, spend Christmas with me."

I sat there. I didn't know what to say, I didn't know what to do, and it didn't matter. My barber and the lady who always made sure I didn't throw paper airplanes off the balcony. They were facing each other, and no one knew what was about to happen.

They didn't know what was going to happen until Mrs. Peabody said the following:

"Dallas Danner, you old imbecile. This quilt isn't worth a thousand dollars."

"Cookie Peabody, if this gets you to have dinner with me, I will pay 10 times as much."

"Dallas, I am going to give you dinner and let that be that."

"No, two thousand dollars on that quilt and grab me a chair, since I need to sit down and grasp what just happened to me," said Dallas, and it made me realize this man wasn't 20 years old but decided to take a step before he couldn't take another.

With that, it was done, and I sat there in awe of life, love, and the fact that "old people" have hearts that are still beating for romance, Christmas joy, and a little adventure.

For those wondering, and I know you are, they went out to dinner and another dinner and lunch and breakfast. They were an "item" for a little over a year until Dallas was

diagnosed with cancer. Our beloved church member sat by his bedside; he was covered by the Christmas quilt as he passed. Dallas Danner was buried next to his wife and Mrs. Peabody's plot is next to her husband's, but for a little over a year, they got to share life together and what a beautiful Christmas gift that was.





Consequently, Saving Lives

by Daniel Wiita Livingston

In 2002, I attended my one and only NAPF/HOPE Conference hosted at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. The NAPF/HOPE is an opportunity for Congregational churches to send teens and young adults up to the age of 26 to an annual gathering for spiritual growth through fellowship by drawing closer to Christ. At 20 years old, I had no foresight that this conference would be a pivotal moment in my life that would take 22 years to boomerang back.

Having only been baptized six months prior to the conference, I was grappling with profound emotional and spiritual turmoil. My future seemed bleak to those around me, and I was considered "troubled" at best. With hardly any biblical knowledge or formal church upbringing, I was a true product of the secular world. It was a miracle that I came to the church of my own free will as a young adult and placed myself in those pews. My friend April Kelley, who I met at that 2002 conference, recently told me that the 2002 Spokane NAPF/HOPE literally and miraculously saved my life. She is right. It did!

At this year's conference, venturing out to find a quiet place along the Spokane River to reflect on the gatherings of past and present was surreal. As someone who often finds solace in the quiet moments of life, I have discovered a profound beauty in both the silent, introspective times and the joyous. The sentimental memories made in the company of others at these meetings are special. I cannot properly

put into words the feeling I leave with after breaking bread with so many from around the country. I cannot replicate the feeling I depart with after being recharged by the Spirit. It is something worth protecting and preserving.

One year away from graduating from the Lay Ministry Training Program, the question I ask myself is, "What can I give back that is so freely given to me?"

Leaving this year's conference early for a flight to Alaska, I had plenty of time to consider the meaning of this year's gathering and its future while backpacking the mountains of the Kenai Peninsula. It was a shock to go from the hustle and bustle of the conference to complete and utter solitude with God on the snowcaps of Seward. While meditating there, I thought about the survival of the Congregational Way to Christ and how we must heed the call to invest in our youth. Revisiting memories from 22 years ago while getting to know our next generation at this year's conference was rejuvenating. It sparked my desire to help, teach, and assist our youth in a noisy world where technological distractions are rampant.

A year ago, I had the profound experience of witnessing first-hand how families and children live out their lives in Utqiagvik, Alaska. Located in the North Slope Borough, the harsh realities of poverty in this Arctic region are striking, where survival depends heavily on imported resources. The extreme weather, the threat of polar bears, and the unique polar desert conditions with only 7 inches of annual

precipitation make life incredibly challenging. The absence of trees and the phenomenon of the midnight sun and polar nights can further complicate daily living. It can be especially hard on the lives of children.

In the face of these challenges in the northernmost city of the United States, we witness God's work in the teenagers and young adults of Utqiagvik. The Utqiagvik Whalers, the only football team in the Arctic, exemplify what can emerge from a small dream for their future. This dream aims to support children and young adults with healthy endeavors, fostering resilience and camaraderie. With God's help, it is our duty to encourage the next generation's hopes so they can pass them on. Our actions today will ripple for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

Seeing others invest in the youth in these icy conditions brings me back to the memories of those who invested in me in my home state of Michigan – the men and women of various churches who saw potential in me that I couldn't even see myself. That is the type of spirit we ought to pass on if we are able. If it were not for the people of my church, I would have never been able to go to that NAPF/HOPE Conference. I know my life would be very different if it were not for a scholarship and someone's private money to send me and the young adults of my church to Spokane in 2002.

I owe the utmost gratitude to NAPF/HOPE for taking the time to educate me, provide me with fellowship, and give me the encouragement I deeply

Daniel Wiita Livingston's journey into Congregationalism began in 2001, marking a significant step in his spiritual and professional life. His dedication to the Mount Hope Congregational Church in Livonia, Michigan, reflects his unwavering commitment to faith and community. In 2020, he earned a degree in Fire Science from Schoolcraft College and continues to expand his knowledge through the Lay Ministry Training Program with the NACCC.



needed during a time when I was gnawing to get out of the world. My survival depended on it, and I pray for the longevity of its existence. To be able to be the guest speaker all these decades later is a tribute owed to our Lord. Life is coming full circle for me, and God is making it all happen.

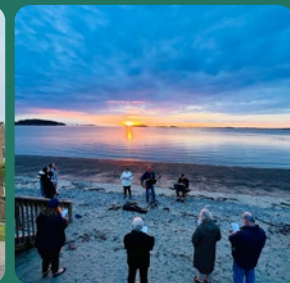
Many organizations have had a hard time staying purposeful in a post-pandemic world. The Congregational Way has endured many trials throughout its history with its torch burning bright each time it has been tested. I know we can be resilient in this together as we build back the NAPF/HOPE to the numbers it used to be pre-COVID. It's going to have to start on a local level, church-by-church, pew-by-pew, family-by-family, and child-by-child. With the next conference coming to St. Louis, imagine how many young lives we can change with a decision.

I pray that we, together, can keep these conferences growing so that at least one child or young adult can have their life saved as mine was all those years ago. If your church can find one child or young adult to send next year to Saint Louis, that is a victory. If the conference plants the seeds for their life to be changed in the future, then that is a divine blessing to be celebrated. The support and fellowship of others have been instrumental in my journey, and I pray we make a positive difference for our youth of God, for God, and with God.

What we do outside the church walls is a testament to our faith and

the strength of our community. It's about being a community that cares, not just when we gather on Sundays but throughout the year, in our homes, workplaces, and neighborhoods. As we move forward, let us commit to being a community that reaches out, checks in, invests in our children, and cares deeply for one another. Let us be the fellowship that acts with intention and love, both within and outside the church walls. Let us all make a

concerted effort to embody the spirit of fellowship in our daily lives. Reach out to someone you haven't spoken to in a while, offer a listening ear to someone in need, and take the time to check in on each other. Together, we can ensure that our community is a beacon of love, support, and kindness. Together, we can break bread at our next NAPF/HOPE Conference.



Seeking: Full-Time Senior Minister

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Located immediately along the idyllic New England coastline, First Church of Squantum's active and vibrant congregation seeks a full-time Senior Minister to lead them in their next chapter, bringing God's love into their community, leading their spiritual growth and development, and growing their congregation. First gathered in 1907, First Church of Squantum has a long history of leadership (spiritual and civic) and involvement in the tight-knit Squantum community. The church provides the Senior Minister a parsonage immediately adjacent to the church for housing.



What If...

Encouraging and Supporting Our Pastorless Churches

by Rev. Dr. William R. Toliver



Rev. Dr. William Ronald (Ron) Toliver is the proud descendant of a long line of pastors, missionaries, and religious vocational workers dating back to the Antebellum period. He serves as the pastor of Crystal Congregational Church in Crystal, Michigan, and a member of the NACCC's Growth Ministry Council, Leadership Council, and Executive Director Search Committee.

The reality of pastorless churches is a significant challenge faced by many NACCC congregations today. According to Robert Sullivan of America Media – The Jesuit Review (June 24, 2019, Issue), nearly 20% of U.S. churches do not have a resident pastor. The reasons for this situation vary from pastor retirement to pastor departure or difficulties in finding a suitable replacement.

In this landscape, pastorless churches may encounter several challenges that can impact their community and operations. One of the key issues they confront is finding pulpit supply or an interim pastor – specifically, acquiring a preacher, pastor, or minister of the Congregational Way to serve their congregation during this transition. This is a pressing ecclesiastical reality of our day. In the words of a gospel song from my youth, “Is there any hope for tomorrow?”

Yes, there is hope for tomorrow.

We need to support our pastorless member churches to help them “keep on keeping on.” We should encourage our pastorless congregations to remember that “where two or three are gathered together in Christ’s name, He is there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). Our shared faith can become a foundation for giving – not just of resources, but of encouragement, time, and presence.

However, there is also a need for a sober warning about the potential dangers of making desperate decisions

simply to fill the pastoral role. Like others in our Association, I carry a burden for these churches. I see the potential and the pitfalls they face, and I pray for effective, practical solutions. This concern is what led me, I believe, to be awakened out of a sound sleep at four in the morning with these words echoing in my mind: “Not by power nor by might, by My Spirit,” says the LORD (Zechariah 4:6).

Since sleep had forsaken me, I got out of bed, searched for my glasses, found a pencil and paper, and sat at the dining room table. It sounds strange, I know. It felt strange! I remember the adults in my home church admonishing us kids, “God moves in a mysterious way. Don’t limit or resist Him working in your life.” I thought this may be one of the moments they were talking about, so I began writing. This is the end product of my scribblings: What if we looked to the satellite church paradigm and fashioned a solution based on their playbook?

1. A Collective Resource List:

What if we gathered and maintained a list of NACCC churches with an online presence? A congregation struggling to find an interim minister or pulpit supply could refer to the list, select a church, and share from its scripture and sermon segments during their own worship service.

2. Mobilizing Our Lay Leaders and Pastors:

What if our lay leaders and associate, assistant, retired, or

student pastors could be recruited to fill the void? If these pastors and churches were to use technology to connect during worship or to share a recorded message, the distance issue could be rendered null and void.

3. Collaborative Support Through Grants:

What if one of our NACCC councils (I am partial to the one I serve on – Growth) or some other collaborative NACCC effort was to fund grants to help churches struggling with technology so they can implement the suggestions of the previous two points? This investment in resources could generate mutual encouragement while empowering and strengthening ministry in times of transition, all while helping to maintain local church autonomy and fervor for the Congregational Way.

Times of pastoral transition present significant challenges. Community support, encouragement, and the sharing of resources from within our “brand” could be a great solution for churches without a pastor. Together, we can navigate these challenges, reminding one another that the spirit of generosity and community is a profound gift, enriching our congregations and reinforcing our commitment to the Congregational Way.

The Lord of the Trees...

by Rev. Dr. Michael Glidden



Rev. Dr. Michael Glidden holds an MDiv from Bangor Theological Seminary and a DMin from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Rhonda, live in Portland, Maine, and are members of East Summer Congregational Church in nearby Sumner, Maine.

*I am the Lord of the trees...
Come and take my limbs,
Walk and dance with me
Through the forest and leaves ---
The sun will guide us
Through long nights and glistening days...
The wind whispers as the owl takes a seat
Take a seat by the roots and
See the butterflies and birds go by
A tree frog and squirrel find a home in a hole
And you will find a home too near the roots
I am the Lord of the trees...*



Pastors Who Persist

by Rev. Andrew McHenry

I have been blessed to serve three different Congregational churches that have gifted me with sabbaticals – each one allowing me to pursue creative acts I don’t normally get the chance to do. During these breaks, I like to combine personal travel with pastoral interviews for a chance to glean from the minds of other ministry leaders. This year, with all the talk of clergy burnout and pastors leaving the ministry, I was curious about those who have stayed the course – what keeps them going? So, with twelve weeks of leave at my disposal, I chose to connect with ministry leaders who have been pastoring continuously (or nearly continuously) since attending seminary in the 1990s or early 2000s. The experience was truly enriching, and, while no one variable was mentioned by every single interviewee, several powerful common themes did emerge. What follows is what I found to be at the heart of the pastors who persist.

A Sense of Calling

A pastor’s sense that they’ve been called to their work is a common notion among those I’ve spoken to over the years, and there are two sides to it. The positive side is the divine imperative – “the Lord’s calling” – and the negative is a sense of limitation regarding other options – “What else could I do?”. If the latter seems cynical, we should understand that pastors seek guidance by looking for doors that open. If the door for one pastorate is open and others are not, some choose

to take that for providence and go where God leads.

Pastor Kent Jackson of The United Methodist Church of Hyde Park, NY, explained why he had never seriously considered quitting: “With a bachelor’s degree in religion and music and a master’s in divinity, there’s not a lot I could do without lots of training. Plus, this is what I feel called to do. Even in the times of struggle, I can’t run away from ministry. I’ve wanted a change of appointment at times from the bishop, but that’s different... [Ministry is] the Lord’s calling on my life.”

A Love of People

Jesus’ command to “love one another” (John 13:34) applies here. Some pastors are more extroverted than others, but anyone who persists will find a way to love the people that God puts before them.

Pastor Ashley Green-Young of Bowman Chapel United Methodist Church of Purcell, Oklahoma, and Newcastle United Methodist Church of Newcastle, Oklahoma, told me what she most enjoyed about ministry was “the people: The relationships with the people, seeing children and families growing, watching how God uses people and makes changes in people’s lives, seeing God working in people’s lives – it’s what keeps me going.”

Pastor Greg Watling of First Congregational Church (UCC) of Gaylord, Michigan, shared a similar sentiment when explaining his motivation: “It is the people. They can be singularly frustrating, but I

miss people from every congregation I served. When I couldn’t do pastoral care in the COVID pandemic – that made it a real struggle. You can be struggling with church, with politics, with money – but when you go to visit people, I just get a charge out of that.”

Pastor Charles Packer talked about the same broader church experience with people over time, coupled with the excitement of facing new challenges: “There’s stimulation in knowing that you haven’t seen it all - but it’s those moments where you recognize that you’ve connected with people or contributed to their spiritual journey. The flip side is that after you’ve done it for so long, you’ve accumulated all of these bits of knowledge and experience and it’s hard to imagine translating them into anything else. So you want to keep and use what you’ve learned, and hopefully that will inform what comes down the path next.”

A Sense of Shalom

By “sense of shalom,” I mean not needing to be in total control but trusting in God – no unnecessary fretting about details and trivialities. I sensed that as these pastors got older, they were less uptight and more at peace.

Pastor Robin Carden of Suttons Bay Congregational Church in Suttons Bay, Michigan, expressed it well: “God is truly worthy of my trust... When I began, I was very much a micro-manager. I was very controlling... I was in many ways too self-reliant. I thought too much depended on me, but in all

Rev. Andrew McHenry has served in Congregational churches of NACCC, UCC, and CCCC affiliation since 2000. Presently, he is the pastor of First Congregational Church and Trinity Presbyterian Church – both in Oroville, California.



these years of ministry, I realized how very little depends on me. A lot of it is bearing witness to the lives of the parishioners and the stories they tell.”

If that was true for the pastors, Greg Watling wondered if it was true for the churches too: “...it seems that people have opened up and relaxed about some things [since when we were in seminary]. So many people have said that moving the chairs and tables on the Titanic is an image of the church. People were worried about those tables and chairs. Now, we’ve been through such a crisis, and people aren’t worried about it as much. I’ve also gotten older, and I don’t have tolerance for it anymore.”

Using Spiritual Gifts

The use of spiritual gifts was emphasized in regard to both pastors and the laity. Pastor Anthony Hughes of St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church in Berkeley, California, emphasized the importance of being yourself: “If God called you, then God called *you* – not to make you in someone else’s mold or image, but you to serve as yourself... I’ve been dean of our denominational board of examiners for ministry training for nine years. I preach this to the student ministers: Don’t preach like other people; be yourself.” This reminded me of previous conversations where pastors talked about not getting pigeonholed, either by institutional needs or by other people’s expectations. Pastors need to carve out room to use their gifts.

Robin Carden expressed it similarly:

“You must be authentic as a pastor. The times when I’ve tried to be something that I’m not as the leader of a church – they’ve caused me a lot of anxiety, and relationships with parishioners have suffered as a result.”

If that’s true for pastors, it’s also true for the laity. Kent Jackson remembered what he was like when he was just out of seminary, more eager to give input than to listen, and had a more definite idea of how things should go. That changed over time, he told me:

“There’s the old expression: ‘If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.’ That’s not a good way to do ministry. Liturgy is the work of the people. The people have to be involved. I help people discern and develop their spiritual gifts and use them in ministry.”

Perseverance

Pastors can experience alienation and challenges in various ways. In these interviews, I heard about experiences of being voted out of a church, failed church plants, serious disagreements with church leaders, feelings of alienation from denominations, and a host of frustrating church experiences. How does one persist through this?

Ashley Green-Young was very open about persisting through a past experience of struggle: “I went through a midlife crisis a few years ago when I completely doubted the existence of God. I thought that Jesus maybe was a great teacher, but not divine... My spiritual director told me this: Keep showing up. Keep going to church.

Keep listening to Christian music – and eventually you’ll find God again. And I did.”

Pastor Brad Stockton of Connecting Point Church of the Nazarene in Denair, California, talked about his experience of a three-year search process where he deliberately avoided pushing the buttons of self-promotion in his denominational system; he felt like he needed to wait for the right opportunity to come, and he likened it to Jesus’ true vine discourse in John 15 where the vinedresser prunes the branches: “God uses waiting, and He’s the ultimate treasure in the waiting. We often passionately want something (e.g., a new job, to get married, relief from pain, etc.). What we really need is Him. He wants us to treasure Him more than what we’re waiting for. God does great work in us in the waiting if we cooperate with His pruning process.”

Anthony Hughes, likewise, tried to think of it all in light of the Bible: “...ministry isn’t designed to be easy. All you have to do is look at any biblical prophet. They had struggles, some of them to the point of being executed and all that. How much have you sacrificed? Have you done everything you’re

Continued>



Pastors Who Persist

CONTINUED

called to? Or are you just being a wimp? You encourage yourself in the difficulties, but at the same time – you know that there's grace to be pulled out of the cistern."

Ministry Setting

Most of the people I interviewed seemed to be in good places for ministry. Some had been there a long time; others had started in more recent years. Whatever the frustrating experiences from the past, they had emerged from them into their present ministry settings. I had the sense that the right move came when it was needed. Brad Stockton talked about his experience: "The church I'm pastoring now is the most loving, encouraging church that I've pastored. They encourage me daily – not monthly or weekly. I feel so loved, accepted, and supported. I'm preaching and leading with great freedom – whereas, in some contexts, there was so much critique that it ultimately hindered me. You can overcome it, but it makes it more difficult to serve. I've had to learn how to receive criticism and stay sweet."

Looking Ahead

These are challenging times for pastors and churches, and the future is uncertain in many ways. Charles Packer said this: "I frequently question the viability of ministry in its current form, in the present day, in this 21st century. I really question if there has

to be some kind of radical reshuffling that takes place. I just question things: Is what I'm doing in its present form what God wants me to be doing? And is it making a difference? But that's not burnout; to me, that's asking the questions we all should be asking ourselves in this context."

He is correct. To his words, I would add that the Titanic is not a good

image for the gospel itself. The Titanic is famous because it sank, but Jesus rose from the grave. His teaching that the gates of hell will not prevail against His church (Matthew 16:18) should help us understand that Christianity will persist. Even if some of the forms change (and they will change), God will persist in raising forth laborers for the harvest.



SEEKING: FULL-TIME MINISTER

CROWN POINT, NEW YORK

First Congregational Church of Crown Point, located in the beautiful Adirondack Park in northern New York, is seeking a full-time minister. They are a Christ-centered, community-focused church that has served their small neighborhood for over 200 years. Their close-knit church family worships together weekly with peace, love, and respect for one another, and seeks to make a positive impact on their community. They offer a competitive salary as well as a parsonage with paid utilities.

CVs can be sent to their search committee in care of Corey James at corey@adirondackdrone.net.

Title: Give Me Thy Heart • Lyrics: Eliza E. Hewitt • Music: William J. Kirkpatrick • "Give Me Thy Heart," written by Eliza Hewitt in 1898, invites listeners to dedicate their hearts to God and embrace a life of faith and trust. Hewitt, an educator and hymn writer known for her uplifting and encouraging messages, aimed to inspire a deeper relationship with the divine. The hymn emphasizes the transformative power of surrendering one's heart to God, fostering love and peace in the believer's life.

Give Me Thy Heart

My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways. Pro. 23:26

1. "Give Me thy heart," says the Fa-ther a - bove— No gift so pre-cious to Him as our love;
 2. "Give Me thy heart," says the Sav-ior of men, Call-ing in mer - cy a - gain and a - gain;
 3. "Give Me thy heart," says the Spir - it di - vine; "All that thou hast to My keep-ing re - sign;

Soft - ly He whis-pers wher - ev - er thou art, "Grate-ful - ly trust Me and give Me thy heart."
 "Trust in Me on - ly, I'll nev - er de - part— Have I not died for thee? Give Me thy heart."
 Grace more a - bound-ing is Mine to im - part— Make full sur - ren - der and give Me thy heart."

Refrain *p*

"Give Me thy heart, give Me thy heart"— Hear the soft whis - per, wher - ev - er thou art;

From this dark world He would draw thee a - part, Speak-ing so ten - der-ly, "Give Me thy heart." *rit.*

WORDS: Eliza E. Hewitt, 1898. MUSIC: William J. Kirkpatrick, 1898. Public Domain

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

An Interview with Missions Coordinator Julie Robie



In this spotlight interview, I had the privilege of delving into the life and insights of NACCC Missions Coordinator Julie Robie. Julie and her husband of 45 years, Jeff, live in Kingston, New Hampshire. While Jeff serves as the interim pastor of Campton Congregational Church in Campton, NH, Julie worships, teaches Sunday School, and is on the prayer team at Bethany Church in Raymond, NH. Julie and Jeff have a daughter, Jessie, who teaches English at Phillips Andover in Andover, MA, and a son, Josh, who works for an HVAC company and lives in nearby Raymond, NH, with his wife Heather and their two daughters Penelope and Charlotte. In addition to their children and grandchildren, Julie and Jeff care for two mini horses, four goats, two cats, two parakeets, a flock of chickens and ducks, and a pond full of fish on their small farmette. In sharing this exchange, I hope to help readers gain a more robust sense of fellowship with their greater Congregational community and inspire readers to have conversations of a similar nature with those within their local communities - forging stronger bonds and deeper understandings of one another.

- Maggie Helmick, Editor

M: What has the faith journey of your life looked like?

J: I have loved Jesus and serving His people since I was a little girl. Raised up in a Baptist Church in Amesbury, MA, my grandmother led the way to my spiritual growth as a Christian, a heritage for which I will always be grateful.

M: Can you tell us about your path to mission work?

J: God has always given me a heart to care for His people and the eyes to see those in need. My great-grandparents served as officers in the Salvation Army. When I was about eight years old, I went door to door gathering funds for UNICEF. In one apartment building, I was pinned up against the wall by a snarling German Shepherd. Not to be deterred, here I am today!

M: Are there particular Congregational mentors who have inspired you?

J: Rev. Dr. Arthur Rouner and Mrs. Molly Rouner, founders of the Pilgrim Center for Reconciliation, taught me that it is always high adventure to serve the Lord. That spirit of high adventure has led to many service opportunities over the years, including:

- Two Hurricane Katrina relief trips to New Orleans
- Visits to US-based mission organizations like the Morgan Scott Project in Tennessee, Hosanna Industries in Pennsylvania, Seafarer's Friend in Massachusetts, and ECHO International in Florida
- International visits to Rwanda, Burundi, and Kenya with the Pilgrim Center for Reconciliation, Mission Mazahua and the Panamerican Institute in Mexico, and World Alive Mission in Ghana and the Ivory Coast

M: What do you see as your spiritual gifts?

J: My spiritual gifts are mercy, helps, and hospitality.

M: Do you have any favorite Bible passages, religiously oriented books, or works of art?

J:

- Esther 4.14: "...And who knows whether you have not come to the Kingdom for such a time as this?" I believe that God places us in history exactly when He wants us.
- Joshua 1.9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." This faith life in Christ requires God-given courage!

- Nehemiah: I love this Old Testament book because it illustrates Nehemiah's trust in the Lord to bring comfort in all situations. Nehemiah is a planner, persistent in prayer, and a Godly leader.
- Canoeing the Mountains by Tod Bolsinger: My favorite quote from this book is, "The mission of Christ will not fail." I pray that every day.
- "Simeon's Moment" by Ron DiCianni: This painting illustrates the pure joy of meeting the promised Jesus.

M: What are some of the biggest challenges and greatest joys you experience in your role?

J: The biggest challenge is to look each day into the needs of humanity and find ways to help, knowing that helping is only possible by God's grace. My greatest joy is seeing God at work in everything that is going on in the world, remembering that there will always be a remnant of His people who are working to love others through the darkness.

M: Can you share a transformative experience from your mission work?

J: Witnessing firsthand the power of forgiveness. My husband and I traveled with the Pilgrim Center for Reconciliation to Rwanda, Burundi, and Kenya to help lead healing retreats with survivors and perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide. Retreat participants often come full of hate, grief, anger, and brokenness, even seeking revenge against fellow retreatants from another tribe. We retreat leaders are powerless to relieve their anguish. And then we lead them, slowly and gently, through times of prayer, Bible readings, and deep faith conversations. We share meals with

them. Our hearts all end up at the foot of the Cross with complete surrender. And there we watch God heal their wounds. One Rwandan pastor hated white people and forbade them to come to his village. Well, we retreat leaders were all white. At the end of the retreat, he said, "I have always hated white people. Now you are welcome to my village."

M: Has your work impacted your personal growth or influenced your faith?

J: One of the first phone calls I received when I started working as Missions Coordinator was from a woman who had heard that Linda Miller was retiring and wanted to make sure that her donation to missions was properly designated. It was a widow's mite donation. I immediately recognized that donations to NACCC Mission Partners come from God's hand through donor's hearts.

M: What practices do you engage in to maintain your spiritual well-being amidst challenges?

J: C. S. Lewis writes, "All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day." At about 5:30 each morning, it's me, my Bible, my coffee, and perhaps a cat or two curled up on the couch for an hour or so of devotions.

M: What brings you great joy and peace in your life?

J: Being convinced that God knows the reason and the result of everything that happens. And that in this broken world, we can always help in the name of Christ.





To Grow and to GIVE BACK

by Pastor Polly Bodjanac and Rev. William Mulholland



Pastor Polly Bodjanac is a member of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Green Bay, Wisconsin. A graduate of Olivet College, Polly is a licensed lay minister and serves as the administrator of the Lay Ministry Training Program.



Rev. Bill Mulholland is the pastor of the First Congregational Church and the Federated Church of Becket Massachusetts. In the past, he served on the Editorial Board of the Lay Ministry Training Program.

The Lay Ministry Training Program was created to provide basic training for people interested in serving their church more fully, either as a lay minister or lay leader. To serve in one's church, one must be willing to give of time, talent, and treasure. In addition, one must be willing to give of oneself. And yet the greatest gift in giving to others is the blessing of being the hands and feet of Jesus, caring for others as Jesus would have done.

The Lay Ministry Cohort A graduated 8 students at the Annual Meeting in Spokane this past June. Two of those graduates have gone on to become ordained associate pastors at their churches, the First Congregational Church of Becket and the Becket Federated Church, located in Becket, Massachusetts.

Rev. Kathleen Vsetecka and Rev. Linda Shaw have merged the skills of their previous careers with the training of the Lay Ministry Program to answer the call to be pastors. Rev. Kathleen said she was interested in enrolling in the Lay Ministry Training Program so she could "become closer to the Lord and strengthen [her] own spiritual life, thus gaining insight into how to best help others." Now that she has completed the course and graduated, she has reflected on how much she has grown in her faith. Rev. Kathleen says: "The two greatest gifts I was given from my training were that of self-confidence and self-worth; knowing that whatever God called me to do, He would be with me in the training and in the work. I believe that now I can use these gifts to better give spiritual guidance and love to my church. For years I have sung 'Here I Am, Lord' with my brothers and sisters in Christ. My ordination confirmed that I am where He has called me to be these last years of my life here on earth – a place I have never thought I would be, an ordained minister and an associate pastor of two churches! I heard His call and said, 'YES, it is I Lord!'"

Rev. Linda said she was interested in enrolling in the Lay Ministry Training Program so she could "grow [her] knowledge and understanding of Jesus and the history in the Bible." "Just as important to me is the desire to serve my church community," says Rev. Linda. "Most importantly, I want to follow God's will." Now that she has completed the course and graduated, she too has reflected on how much she has changed: "The Lay Ministry Training Program gave me a deeper understanding of God! I am amazed at how He uses who we are to work good through us! The program taught me a deeper understanding of the Bible. I learned to value the history of the church and how it grew from a small group of disciples to the faith of today. I learned how to deliver a good sermon! I never even considered doing such a thing, but I realize now that as I create a sermon, I am drawn more closely to God, and I've learned that my sermons help to teach others. Because I have been ordained, I bring strength and credibility to our community, as I now represent more than myself; I represent Jesus, as He has sent me."

Each of these women has so much to give – to their local church and the wider community. And each woman gives all credit to the glory of God for allowing this training to work into their lives at the right time and for being called for "such a time as this."

Both churches benefit from the unique talents of these women, as God weaves separate paths for each of them. The Lay Ministry Training Program and the churches of Becket, Massachusetts, have truly given Rev. Kathleen and Rev. Linda the opportunities to grow and to give back.



AN EPIC NOVEL *and a Model of Hope*

by Dr. Richard Kurrasch



Dr. Richard Kurrasch is a CFTS Fellow (1971) and served NACCC churches in the Upper Midwest and California. He also served a four-year term on the Executive Committee (one year as chair) and as moderator of the International Congregational Fellowship. An introduction to his memoir, *Acre of Oak – A Pastor Rethinks Church in the 21st Century*, is available on his website, RichardRKurrasch.com.

Waiting recently for my doctor to get my file up on his computer, he casually asked how my year had gone since our last visit, and I casually responded that I had published my memoir. He seemed impressed and noted that urologists don't write memoirs (it seems that recasting the stories they tell at cocktail parties to the printed page loses something in the translation).

An interesting exercise, committing the narrative of one's earthly sojourn to print (or any media for that matter), because along the way we have ample opportunity to name and celebrate the many places our roots reach ... including the ones we would like to forget but cannot and the peculiar ones we embraced because, well, life is like that.

Among the mix that constitutes my story are some twists and turns that after some 30 years took me into the wider ecclesiastical world beyond the National Association itself, but even there, the deeply embedded gifts of our Congregational heritage remained always relevant and ever active. Premier among them is the bedrock concept of covenant, very much on my mind these days.

I don't have the space here to define biblically what we mean by covenant other than to say that God enters into covenant with the people of God and they with God and one another. Metaphorically, we point to the marriage covenant – two people mutually committed to one another come what may – but in the closing

scene from his powerful Depression-era epic, *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck paints artistically what I would call the definitive picture of the covenantal glue that binds the human community together.

In many respects, the whole book is a terrible indictment of how far we have fallen short in realizing—or even caring about—our covenantal commitments. In our own time, we are painfully aware of the discord and despair tearing at our fragile social fabric, and in the Depression-era story, the health of the body politic was, if anything, even more tattered. At the center is the Joad family. They lose everything in Oklahoma and travel to California, a new promised land of milk and honey, but to their great misfortune, they arrive only to discover that they have been deceived and used. Their lot goes from bad to worse to utter despair and, finally, they end up in a barn, destitute; quickly, they discover that they share this space with another man and his son. The man, the father of this anonymous and equally destitute family of two, is near starvation. Rose of Sharon, who had just lost her baby, has the unique opportunity even in the grip of great suffering and death to respond to the man's need, to embrace another mortal in the community of human suffering and hope.

It does not take much imagination to bring the saga to its conclusion. Suffice it to say, she offers this man whom society has discarded the nourishment intended for the child society had never wanted. The image may create any

number of feelings from ambivalence to revulsion, and it certainly captures the hopelessness that pervades so much of the human story in the daily news today, but it also serves as a kind of signpost to the promise of covenantal fellowship as the way forward. Not that we must emulate Rose of Sharon, but like Rose of Sharon, we are invited to transcend the moment of depravity and despair with the offer of a shared humanity.

Which leaves, then, only the obvious question: what in the world are we to do with the picture Steinbeck etches indelibly in our hearts, minds, and souls? We can hardly unsee something like this and in this season of our discontent it does give us a starting point, for covenant is not just an intellectual construct but a moral imperative. It answers the question, what do we owe one another, and as it turns out, the answer is plenty.

Perhaps the best we can do is just wrestle with it. I read John Steinbeck's seminal *The Grapes of Wrath* a long, long time ago, and it has had a profound impact on my evolving theology of social, environmental, and especially economic justice ever since. It all comes together in the closing scene, and I can only tell you after all these years that those final moments in the barn haunt me still, as does the lingering question, "Well, if not that, then what, what would you do?"

Well?

The King of Golden Gate



by Rev. Dr. Chris Surber

Rev. Dr. Chris Surber serves as the senior minister at First Congregational Church of Naples, Florida, and executive director of Supply and Multiply, a mission ministry sharing Christ among the nations.



In the heart of Naples, Florida, there's a man known by many as "The King of Golden Gate." Dressed in outlandish costumes, he roams the streets, most often seen in the bustling Golden Gate neighborhood.

I go out of my way to talk to him whenever I see him. He is the most delightfully unconventional fellow I've ever met.

Our last chance encounter occurred as he recently stood in the first rays of sunshine on a Sunday morning near what is undoubtedly one of the most trafficked intersections in Naples. What he was up to was remarkable. Some folks see only an irrational man dressed in one of many ridiculous king costumes. There is so much more to him than meets the eye. He reminds me of I Corinthians 1:27-29, "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (ESV).

He stood before the crowd of commuters, scrolling on a blank screen, while the rest of us – many tethered to our devices – missed the richness of the world around us. His message, though silent, shouted at the futility of distraction. His lived message was an implicit invitation to mindfulness.

I quickly made a U-turn to request an audience with the King. Like the "foolish things of the world" that God uses to challenge our wisdom, "The King of Golden Gate" brings an unspoken message to those who take a moment to look deeper.

He stood by the side of the road, bringing a message to his fellow man. However, only those who paid close attention would understand it. I observed that the phone was off. It had a blank screen. It might not even work. He stood before the masses, watching the world go by, scrolling mindlessly on a blank screen.

When I greeted him in Haitian Creole, his eyes lit up, but he responded only with a wink and a knowing smile. In that silent exchange, I realized his message wasn't spoken—it was lived. He was sending a message, alright, and it is one this generation needs to hear. Some think the King is as sane as a two-legged chair on a trampoline. I don't see it that way. I think he may be a kind of local prophet. How many have we dismissed because they seem to color outside the lines of logic? How much artful living is given away in the world that we refuse to appreciate because we prejudice the artist?

That ol' Congregational divine, Horace Bushnell, said it best, "Somewhere under the stars God has a job for you to do and nobody else can do it." God prefers oddity because it confronts vanity.

As I drove away, I couldn't help but think: how often do we, like those passing the King, overlook the deeper

truths around us? His quiet presence on that road is a reminder that there is very often meaning to be found in what seems nonsensical.

In a world that often dismisses what it can't categorize, perhaps we should pause and consider the unconventional messengers among us. What gifts are we overlooking? What truths are being spoken through silence and oddity? We all have something to offer; sometimes, the most profound wisdom comes from entirely unexpected sources.



Thoughts from Here and There:

HELPING

by Pastor Leslie Shultz



Pastor Leslie R. Shultz, Jr., served NACCC churches in Beloit, Afton, Kenosha, and Mukwonago, retiring in 2000. Leslie was a member of what was the NACCC's Division for Ministry, and he served seven years as the NACCC's Historian.



On June 20, 1996, I officiated at a non-member wedding in the sanctuary of Caldwell United Methodist Church. After the wedding, a gentleman who is a member of the church, and who opened and closed the building, approached me with a question and an inquiry. A church member complained about non-member families' use of the church facilities. The comment was, "They neither will join the church nor attend services. Under these conditions, why should we provide people the services of the church?" Why indeed? But then, stop and ponder what the church is for.

My answer to the custodian of the day was, "The church is here to be taken advantage of." We are to demonstrate love and do good works whether they are appreciated or not, whether there is a positive response or not. We are here to provide loving

service to those in need with the hope that what is done might strike a responsive chord in their lives and turn them toward God in ways that we may not anticipate.

It is and has always been that way, even from the beginning when Jesus taught and performed the miracles of healing for mind and body. Jesus went about the countryside of Galilee and Decapolis and other places healing people and teaching them the basics of the kingdom of God. Did Jesus ever say that these good people had to become church members? No! Of course, there was not yet a church, but Jesus did have a group of followers. He did not even tell people to become part of the group.

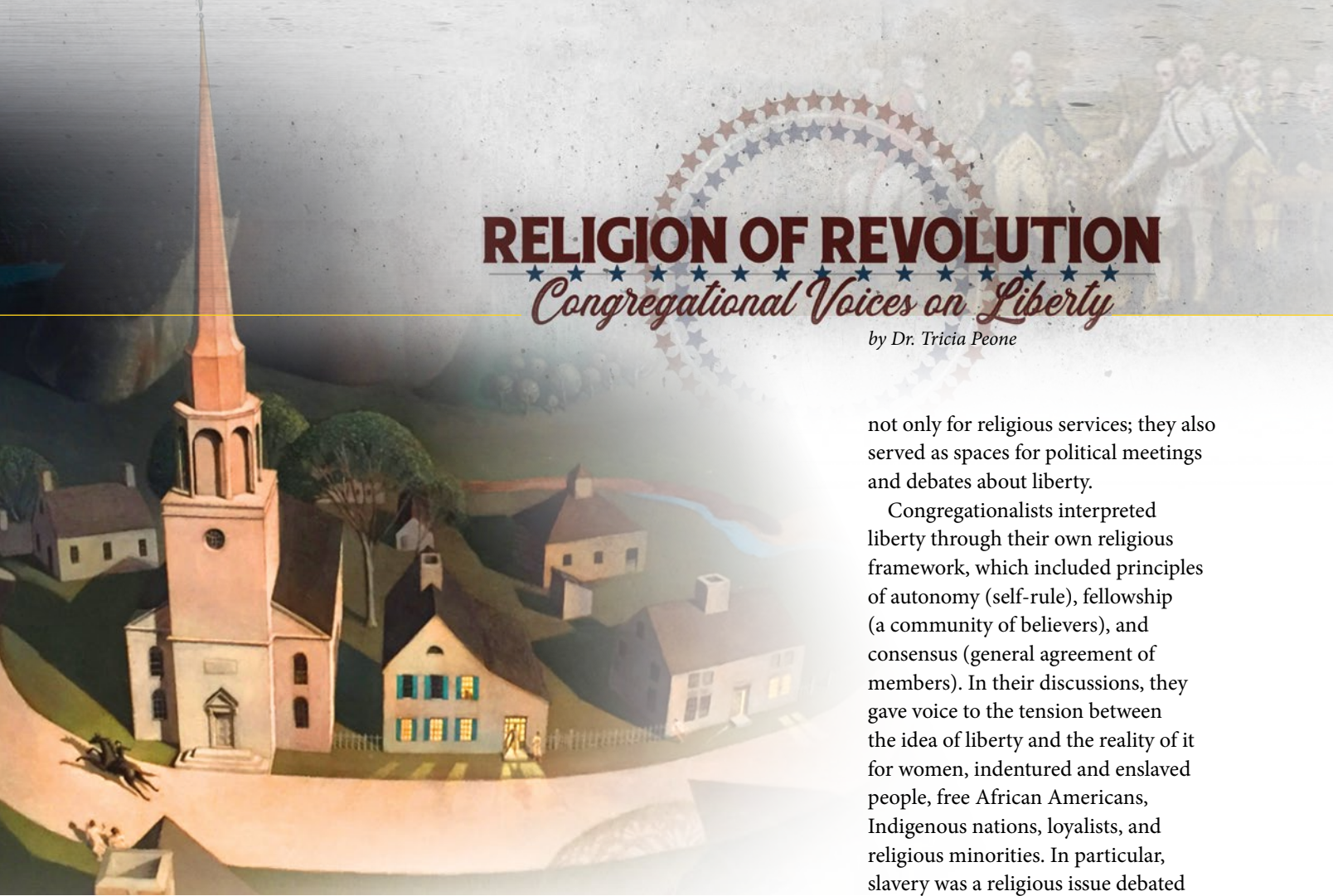
Jesus did not tell people that in order to be blessed by his power and wisdom they had to change their lives and live according to his plan for them. All that he asked was that they considered

what it meant to be a loving human being under the tutelage of a gracious God who loved them and wanted to save them.

Obviously, Jesus also pointed out what might happen if individuals were unrelated to the Kingdom of God. The results could be pretty severe. This might act as an incentive for life changes, but often it did not.

Jesus met and helped people where they were, and so ought we do the same today. When we do, the rewards may not be apparent, and yet they may be.

Thoughts from Here and There: Helping was originally published on Pastor Leslie Shultz's website <https://moreofles.com>.



RELIGION OF REVOLUTION

Congregational Voices on Liberty

by Dr. Tricia Peone

For the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, the Congregational Library & Archives (CLA) has created a new digital exhibition, *Religion of Revolution: Congregational Voices on Liberty*, which you can find at bit.ly/religionofrevolution.

This exhibition highlights the stories of New England Congregationalists through important and rarely seen print works of the period as well as manuscript church records, letters, and sermon literature drawn from the CLA's collections and the New England's Hidden Histories (NEHH) project.

The CLA holds rare and rich material in its physical and digital collections that tell the story of the Revolutionary War from many perspectives. Objects in the online exhibition include records and letters from congregations torn apart by divided loyalties, a music book with patriotic songs kept by a young woman to bolster her faith, and

rare books and sermons that shaped the war. These objects illustrate how Congregationalists explored and defined the meaning of liberty while navigating the violence and destruction of war. *Religion of Revolution* shows the ways in which Congregationalists both shaped and were shaped by the American Revolution.

When the first shots were fired at Concord and Lexington in 1775, Congregationalists were no strangers to revolution. They had fled England a century-and-a-half earlier and gathered into covenanted churches across New England to worship as a community and select their own leaders.

Yet when their preference for self-government increasingly came into conflict with British colonial policies in the 1760s and 1770s, Congregationalists steeled themselves for a fight. Standing at the center of nearly every town in New England, Congregational meetinghouses were

not only for religious services; they also served as spaces for political meetings and debates about liberty.

Congregationalists interpreted liberty through their own religious framework, which included principles of autonomy (self-rule), fellowship (a community of believers), and consensus (general agreement of members). In their discussions, they gave voice to the tension between the idea of liberty and the reality of it for women, indentured and enslaved people, free African Americans, Indigenous nations, loyalists, and religious minorities. In particular, slavery was a religious issue debated by Congregationalists before, during, and after the American Revolution. Congregationalists noted the hypocrisy of slavery, and some wondered whether God would continue to be on their side if such an immoral practice persisted in the new nation.

Religion of Revolution begins with an influential sermon on authority given by Rev. Jonathan Mayhew at the West Church in Boston in 1750. By the time war broke out twenty-five years later, Congregational ministers had already laid the groundwork for a theological justification of war and revolution. On May 31, 1775, with Boston under siege, the Massachusetts Convention of Congregational Ministers met in Watertown and voted to supply the newly raised army with chaplains. They invoked the "Guidance & Protection of that Providence which, from the first settlement of this Country, has so remarkably appeared for the Preservation of its Civil and Religious Rights." As a body, the

Tricia Peone joined the CLA in 2022 after working as a research scholar for Historic New England, the public programs director at New Hampshire Humanities, and a university lecturer. Her scholarship focuses on early modern magic and witchcraft, and she holds a PhD in history from the University of New Hampshire with a specialization in the early modern Atlantic world and history of science.



Convention declared that God was on their side.

Records from groups such as the Massachusetts Convention of Congregational Ministers show that New England's Congregational clergy were largely united in support for the War. There were, however, some exceptions. The records of the Marlborough Association reveal a story of violence and intimidation against a Congregational minister with opposing views. In August of 1777, the meeting minutes noted that the windows in Rev. Aaron Smith's study had been shot out at midnight, "as if aimed to take away his life." Smith had been the minister in Marlborough for over 30 years, but some members of his congregation were not happy with his ministry and had been pushing him to leave. Smith was rumored to hold loyalist sympathies, and the damage to his house and threat of violence that night was likely due to this tension. He requested a separation from his church through an ecclesiastical council due to poor health. Smith left Marlborough in 1778 and died a few years later. Although several new ministers were invited to settle there, none accepted until two years after the war ended. Every congregation had the right to

choose its own minister, but consensus, in this case, was only achieved through coercion.

A music book, kept by a young woman named Abigail Cleaveland, helps us to understand what the American Revolution sounded like for Congregationalists. People in this period were accustomed to the peel of bells and the beat of drums summoning them to church. Singing schools became popular in New England during the Great Awakening, and hymn singing by choirs gradually replaced psalm singing by congregations during worship. Abigail Cleaveland's selection of songs was influenced by her evangelical faith as well as the War. She included "Providence" in her music book, a hymn with music by William Billings and lyrics by Issac Watts, which begins, "Who shall the Lord's elect condemn?" In addition, Cleaveland copied other popular songs from the Revolutionary era such as "Bunker Hill: A Sapphic Ode" and "Washington." Abigail Cleaveland's father, brother, and husband all served in the Continental Army.

The exhibition also features a letter written by Rev. Lemuel Haynes, the first ordained Black Congregational minister. In 1775, he volunteered to

fight in the Revolutionary War. He was ordained in 1785 and served as a minister in communities in Connecticut, New York, and Vermont. After the war, Haynes preached and wrote about how slavery contradicted the ideology of liberty espoused by the patriots.

Guided by their faith, Congregationalists raised voices for liberty during a turbulent and uncertain period in American history. As we begin commemorating the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution in 2025, explore how this momentous event was influenced by Congregationalists in Religion of Revolution: Congregational Voices on Liberty, available on the Congregational Library & Archives' website at bit.ly/religionofrevolution.

For past virtual programs on Congregationalists and the lead-up to the American Revolution, visit the Congregational Library & Archives' YouTube channel at youtube.com/@CongregationalLibrary. An online lecture series will run throughout the winter exploring topics related to religion and the American Revolution in more depth. Visit congregationallibrary.org/events to learn more.





FORGIVEN

by Christ the Lord

by Elizabeth Gasko

Elizabeth Gasko serves as a lay speaker at Edray United Church (Edray, WV) and White Chapel Church (Woodrow, WV), where she also leads the congregation's Bible study. She lives in Edray, West Virginia, with her husband.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel for me. I am a sinner who has been saved by the grace of God, and I have been washed in the blood of the Lamb, for when Jesus died on the cross, His blood covered all the sins of the world, even a sinner like me. Jesus, while on the cross, asked God to forgive those who had persecuted Him, stating, "They know not what they have done." I stand in amazement at the One who gave His life, loves unconditionally, and forgives all sin. Hebrews 12:15 tells us, "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it, many become defiled." As we release unforgiveness and all the bitterness and anger that comes with it, we are freed to live and serve with real peace and joy and to grow in spiritual maturity. Just as God gave mankind a choice to choose good over evil, to follow Him or the world, He hopes that we make the wise and necessary choice to earn the reward of our home in heaven.

God has also given us the choice to forgive just as He forgives. One of the most important commitments in our lifetime as a child of God is to become a forgiving person. We are, as Jesus taught us, to "Forgive as I forgive you." The Lord's Prayer taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Peter asked God how many times we are to forgive; Jesus said 70 times 7, meaning to forgive each and every time, for there is no end to the saving grace of forgiveness. Forgiveness is about going through a process where you decide

not to allow your thoughts, your spirit, and your life to be consumed with resentment and bitterness.

When we forgive those who have sinned against us, we are reflecting to others that God has forgiven our sins, and we are obeying His words of forgiveness to mankind. In the Old Testament, Isaiah tells us that the bright red stain of sin can be washed away by the blood of Christ on the cross, and we will be white as snow (Isaiah 1:18). In the Book of Psalms, David praises God for His forgiveness. In Proverbs 17:9, Solomon talks about the wisdom and benefits of our forgiveness of others. The New Testament follows through with the same thoughts on forgiveness. Jesus' life shows forgiveness to the lost, the blind, the lame, and all who will repent of their sins. James offers wisdom on loving our neighbors through forgiveness.

We are to forgive because we were forgiven, even when we were still sinners. Jesus paid our debts, forgave us our sins, and set us free. No greater love has ever been shown to us. No one except Jesus is above sin, for all have fallen short and are in need of forgiveness. One of Jesus' greatest sermons was the Sermon on the Mount, where He tells us that if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:15).

According to the Bible, forgiveness is the pardoning or letting go of an offense or debt owed by someone else, just as God has forgiven our sins through Christ. It involves a changed heart attitude and a willingness to

reconcile broken relationships. We are to respond to wrongdoings with mercy rather than vengeance. We are to forgive by letting go of bitterness, resentment, and desires for revenge. Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath." True forgiveness involves an internal heart change, a complete change of our mind about how we view the situation. Forgiveness means to throw away and bring back to mind no more. When we receive forgiveness, it opens the door for healing, repentance, and reconciliation rather than condemnation; therefore, when God forgives us, it is no longer to be remembered (Matthew 6:14-15). Jesus says,

*"For if you forgive others
when they sin against you,
your heavenly Father
will also forgive you."*

I am forgiven and loved by God; therefore, I will offer forgiveness and love to others. Forgiveness brings peace and joy to each of us; it is a gift from God.

A Reflection ON AMC SPOKANE

by Rev. J.R. McAliley III



Inspired by an article in the September issue of The Congregationalist and the Vitality Ministry Council.

The Back Story

In the two weeks before the AMC, my wife Mary and I had finally found a cobbler who could restore a pair of shoes for her. Almost 50 years ago (1976), Mary was part of a tap dance troupe chosen to appear on the Jerry Lewis telethon. She wanted to preserve her tap shoes – I had never seen actual tap shoes before. We were successful!

Fast Forward

On Sunday afternoon of the AMC, we found an open FedEx store that could crate and ship a piece of Haitian artwork to our home. The store was across Centennial Park behind our hotel. So, while Mary waited, I raced back to our room to get the artwork. On my return trip across the park, where a music festival was taking place, I saw an elderly gentleman crossing ahead of me using a walker. As I neared the gentleman, I heard a strange scraping sound on the walkway, and it

was then that I noticed his shoes – he was walking in tap shoes! By way of introduction, I said, “I KNOW those shoes!” I shared Mary’s story of her shoes, and he excitedly hoped she was near and could dance with him (he was using a walker!). I explained that

her “shoes” were in Atlanta. He then wistfully said that he hoped one of the bands would let him join in with dance. We evaluated the best sound, and he shuffled on as I continued my shipping errand.

Sometime later, on our way back to the hotel, we noted that the festival was dissolving. I had hoped we might spot our “tap dancer,” but he was not in sight (hard to miss a walker). Just as we were nearing the bridge at the dam behind the hotel, I saw the walker and our dancer! He had taken a wrong turn and was on the opposite side of the park for his journey. He had decided to get a look at the dam since he was there – and we happened on him. He had been able to dance some, but a tap fell off one of his shoes, so he had to sit it out.

It is amazing to see how God can intricately weave our paths together to coincide with others in even the most disparate of settings along our way. We were able to share with the “tap dancer” about why we were in Spokane (NACCC, etc.) and he was able to share some of his history with us – he was a Vietnam veteran too. We got a picture



Rev. John Richard (J.R.) McAliley III is a retired U.S. Navy officer and chaplain who currently serves as the pastor of Center Congregational Church in Atlanta, Georgia, the moderator of the Alabama-Georgia Association of Congregational Christian Churches, and a member of the Missionary Society Alumni Association of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

of him with Mary, and he invited us to look him up for a tap dance if we return to Spokane.

Imagine my further surprise to read a section of the articles about the Vitality Ministry Council in the September issue of *The Congregationalist* (p. 14) where Rev. Robin Carden shared about her church’s “Tap Dance” outreach! From “Tiny Tappers” all the way to “Timeless Tappers” (Mary’s category). We never know where God will open a door for sharing.



Necrology 2024



George F. Mays

George Francis Mays passed away on August 24, 2024, in Plymouth, Ohio. Born on February 17, 1956, in Springfield, Ohio, he was a devoted pastor, cherished husband, loving father, playful grandfather, and a master of jest.

George's life was marked by his unwavering faith and the joy he brought to those around him. He served as a pastor, guiding his congregation with kindness and wisdom. George was a beloved figure in his community, known for his ready smile and endless repertoire of jokes.

He leaves behind his beloved wife, Magdalena J. Mays, and his children: Joe, Robert, Sabrina, and Luis. His legacy continues through his grandchildren, Jasmine, Aurora, Dominic, Sloan, Watson, Grey, and Reese, and one great-granddaughter-to-be. He is also survived by his brother, Jerry Oppie. George was preceded in death by his parents, Sylvester and Dorothy.

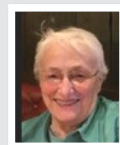


James H. Walsh

James Harmon Walsh passed away peacefully on August 16, 2024, following an extended illness.

Born in 1930 in Madison, Wisconsin, Jim graduated from Madison West High School in 1948 and the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1952 with a degree in accounting. He served in the U.S. Army for two years, including service in Korea. He had a long and distinguished 37-year career with the Arthur Andersen accounting firm. He was a longtime member of the First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa and served as treasurer of the NACCC for ten years.

Jim is preceded in death by his first wife of 62 years, Gloria, and his son, David. He is survived by his devoted wife of eight years, Cynthia; his children Thomas (Karen) and Janet; his brother Robert; eight grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren; daughter-in-law Laura (Gene); stepdaughter Carrie (Nick); and five step-grandchildren.



Mary Alice Lambert

Mary Alice Lambert of Plainfield, Illinois, died on July 18, 2024, at the age of 92. She was active for many years in the Midwest Association of Congregational Christian Churches, the Midwest Congregational Women's

Fellowship, the Howell D. Davies Association of Congregational Churches, and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches as a delegate, chairperson of the Women's Committee, and a member of the Executive Committee. For a number of years, she prepared all the meals for the annual, week-long Illinois Pilgrim Youth Fellowship (PYF) Camp. She was active in her local church, Plymouth Congregational Church in Plainfield, until recently when she became a member of the Tinley Park Community Christian Church.

Mary Alice is survived by three of her six children: Steve Lambert, Michelle Gunter, and Michael Lambert, her grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

SAVE THE DATE



February 11 – March 25, 2025

**Webinar Series: Cultivating
Generous Congregations**

Webpage: <https://www.naccc.org/events/cultivating-generous-congregations-course/>
Contact: Kristin Ward, kward@naccc.org

March 13 - 17, 2025

Freedom Journey Trip

Webpage: <https://www.naccc.org/events/freedom-journey-trip/>
Contact: Rev. Rich Miller-Todd,
minicamperllm70@gmail.com

April 27 – May 1, 2025

Ministers' Convocation

Location: Siena Retreat Center, Racine, WI
Webpage: <https://www.naccc.org/ministers-convocation/>
Contact: Laura Wright, lwright@naccc.org

CALENDAR

Handbells for Sale!

Searching for a full set of well-kept handbells? This may be just what you need! This full, three-octave set of handbells, complete with gloves, is in good condition and perfect for choirs or music enthusiasts. It is around 20 years old and has been well cared for to prevent damage. Those interested can contact Julie Skiles at skilesjulie0@gmail.com for more information.

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To nurture fellowship among Congregational Christian Churches and to support ministries of the local church in its community and to the world, all in the name of Christ.

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Letters to the Editor are welcome. All letters may be edited for clarity and length. We regret we cannot publish or respond to all letters.

The NACCC reserves the right to refuse any advertisement.

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SEEKING: PART-TIME PASTOR

First Congregational Church in Rochester, Wisconsin, is seeking a part-time pastor. Their last pastor died in July after 18 years of humble, steadfast service. A friendly congregation that values bible-based sermons, First Congregational Church celebrates a traditional Worship Hour with hymns, choir singing, and a rich variety of special music from talented members and friends of the church.

The small but active congregation supports one another through fellowship and prayer. They believe in living their mission statement: we agree to maintain the institutions of the Gospel by the giving of our service and our money in such ways shall seem to us most pleasing to our Lord and Master, and will endeavor to the utmost to walk together in mutual helpfulness and brotherly love.

The church draws from Rochester, a small, rural town of about 3,800 residents with a strong sense of community, as well as growing neighboring towns and small cities in western Racine County including Waterford, Burlington, and Union Grove.

They pray their next pastor will continue a long tradition of humbly serving and growing the congregation in service of Jesus Christ.

Interested in applying? They'd love to meet you. You can view their Church Information Form and apply to the position at <https://www.naccc.org/open-positions> and learn more about First Congregational Church at www.fccrochesterwis.org.