

THE CHURCHMOUSE

Newsletter of The First Congregational Church, Canton Center, CT

April 2026



Message from the pastor...

Dear Church Family,

As you know this past week I was on vacation in the 'Sunshine State'. It was a delightful, safe, and relaxing time spent with my wife, Jenn, sister, Lisa, and brother-in-law, Duncan. We stayed in a beautiful condo complex that walked right out to a long sandy beach and nothing in the horizon but the blue ocean. We shared our complex with several Minnesota cousins so each day was catching up with our lives, reliving our past times of spending vacations in CT and MN and laughing until our sides ached. Each evening, we would watch together the sun dip below the horizon, mesmerized by its beauty. It was a picture-perfect "Sabbath", the kind of soul-rest we all hunger for.

Arriving safely at home I offered my gratitude to God for such a blessed time with family, perfect weather, (a bit chilly but perfect for me), good food, quiet reading on the beach, long walks, and shared memories. However, my prayers shifted for thanks to God for the things that *did not happen*. We often thank God for the "mountain-top" moments, but we rarely thank Him for the "valley-moments" He spared us from entering.

Those prayers were heightened as I followed the news of the tragedy at LaGuardia Airport. An Air Canada jet was landing and collided with a large truck causing the death of the two young pilots, a flight attendant thrown from the plane, and several passengers injured. A normal routine arrival like I experienced that in this case turned into a nightmare within seconds.

Do you struggle like me with the "why them" vs. "not me" at times? Ecclesiastes 9:11: *Again, I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful, but time and chance happen to them all.*

This verse doesn't promise us a life without storms; it asks God to help us realize how few and how precious our days really are. Seeing the wreckage at LaGuardia stripped away the illusion that I am in control of my 'comings and goings'. It reminded me that each day is a 'loan' and I must be grateful for my blessings and spared the 'mishaps that could have been'. Yet fully knowing when I traverse the valleys of life, I remain in God's company. Let us not take for granted the blessings we have. My gratitude is not because I am safer than others, but because I am aware more than ever of how much of a miracle a 'normal' day truly is. Our thankfulness is a humble recognition of our fragility.

May you and I keep in prayer those walking through the 'valley of the shadow' affected by the physical and emotional trauma from this horrific event relying on God's grace we cannot earn and for all our unknown tomorrows. Our safety isn't a sign that we are more loved than those who suffer; rather, our commission is to continuously be consciously thanking God and a call to love our families more deeply, to serve our neighbors more urgently, and to never walk out the door without acknowledging that every breath is a borrowed gift.

It is wonderful to be back among all of you, grateful to God being safe and sound, and ready to continue our journey together.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Kurt

Director of Faith Formation

Jody Swan



Dear Canton Center Church Family,

As the days grow longer and the first signs of spring appear around us, we are reminded of the hope and renewal this season brings. There is something special about spring's arrival—the warming sun, budding trees, and the sense of new beginnings that fill our hearts and our church community. It is a wonderful time to reflect on our journey together and to look forward to what lies ahead.

Our Church School has been busy with meaningful activities this season. We recently gathered in Parish Hall with Hollace and Karen for Lenten Pretzel making. This annual event is enjoyed by all as we connect the meaning of the season to the shape of a traditional pretzel. The folded arms signify prayer and a time for reflection as we prepare for Easter.

Looking ahead, we are excited to invite you to our Easter Family Fun Day on Saturday, April 4th from 10:00-12:30. This event promises Easter egg decorating, crafts, games, cookie decorating. We will also have an Easter arch so families can take pictures to remember this fun event. Later in the month, on Sunday, April 19th, youth will have the opportunity to make sandwiches for Brian's Angels, supporting those in need within our wider community. These moments of out-reach are wonderful opportunities to live out our faith and teach our children about compassion and service.

Don't forget—registration is open for Silver Lake summer camps! These camps offer a chance for our young people to grow in faith, form lasting friendships, and experience the beauty of God's creation. Please visit www.SilverLakeCT.org for more information.

As we celebrate spring's renewal, may we continue to grow together in faith, hope, and love. We invite everyone to participate in these upcoming activities and to share in the joy of our vibrant church community. Wishing you all a blessed and joyful spring!

With gratitude and hope,
Jody Swan

A note from the Christian Education Committee: Alison Dolan, Kathleen Lundgren, Gina Magennis and Kristin Oswald.

The Christian Education Committee would like to express our gratitude for Heather Neumann and her time spent on this committee over the last several years. Heather's kind spirit has made a real difference in the lives of our children and families. Thank you, Heather, for sharing your time and heart with us!

We would also like take this time to welcome Robin Staszak the Christian Education Committee on May 1st!

Deacons' Bench

Vicki Rees

Last September, on a crisp Fall evening, we six Deacons and Pastor Kurt sat down to begin one of our monthly Diaconate meetings. In walked Church Historian Tim LeGeyt, holding a rugged wooden cross in his arms as if he were cradling a baby. The cross was about two and a half feet tall, tied together with a silky burgundy ribbon and attached to a small, bare wood block. None of us knew he was coming.

As many of you know, for over 30 years, Tim has performed a most wonderful, meaningful transformation in, and for, our sanctuary, and for us as a congregation. He has, singlehandedly, repurposed our church's Christmas tree, different every year in almost every way imaginable, into an (equally distinct each year) Easter cross. With the utmost of sentimentality, he proceeded to tell his story of having created our Easter cross each year from the sanctuary Christmas tree, and then "offered" the opportunity to one of us, attempting to pass the torch.

Backing up in history, I will share a few personal tidbits here. Years ago, when we were partners as Deacons, Tim casually mentioned to me that this was a tradition he personally, and voluntarily, fulfilled each year between Christmas and Easter. And each year, I looked forward to admiring the cross on the altar, noting the uniqueness and differences from years past. Every Easter Sunday, I reminded my family that he did this, and together, we enjoyed reflecting on the various symbolic meanings of the Christmas tree becoming the Easter cross.

Theologically speaking, repurposing a Christmas tree into an Easter cross could symbolize the full circle connecting Jesus' birth (the "wood of the cradle") to his death and resurrection (the "wood of the sacrifice"). This reminds us that Christ was born specifically to redeem humanity. Perhaps this practice, in itself, emphasizes what we celebrate on Easter: Jesus' life after death. And now, we take the dried, dead tree that would have otherwise been tossed down the riverbank, and we transform it into a symbol of new hope.

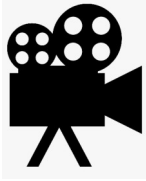
Tim, you have been the ultimate steward in the most quiet way, true to your nature as a Christian, but also as a human. You've given us an opportunity to carry on an annual act of stewardship rather than letting the tree AND the tradition die.

I'll bet you can't guess who said yes to Tim on that fall evening. :-) My family has joined me not only in plucking the trunk from the tree outside of church on a cold January afternoon, but in being my sounding board to the myriad of possible approaches I could take. I want it to be aesthetically pleasing since it will be on display on the altar. However, "perfection" just doesn't seem right given the raw, rugged nature of the sacrifice. In contrast, a more refined cross, with nubs and bark sanded and stripped away, glossy polyurethane shining brightly, could represent the purity and "new life" of the Resurrection, but would produce a very different finished product from the former possibility.

Either way, I am excited to have this first-time opportunity to give a sacred second life to a simple Christmas tree. At this point, I have no idea what our 2026 Easter cross will look like, but I hope it being my first time crafting it will reflect the "newness" of the resurrection, and be a tradition I can carry on for years. Thirty years make for some pretty big shoes to fill!

Worship Schedule

April 2	Maundy Thursday 7:30pm <i>Service of Communion and Tenebrae</i>
April 3	Good Friday ~ Personal Meditation <i>Sanctuary open from 12 pm - 3 pm</i>
April 5	Easter ~ Communion
April 12	Second Sunday of Easter
April 19	Third Sunday of Easter
April 26	Fourth Sunday of Easter



Wider Church Fellowship Upcoming Events

Movie and Pizza Night coming to the Parish Hall!

On **Friday, April 17th**, Wider Church will sponsor a movie and pizza night. The pizza will be here at 6pm, with the movie starting at 7pm. Show up anytime between 6-7 as your schedule allows. Popcorn will also be available as we watch the classic “Field of Dreams”. Bring your comfy camp chair, blowup couch or blanket / sleeping bag / pillows (for those nimble enough to stretch out on the floor). Please sign-up on the kitchen door so we know (generally) how much pizza to order. Everyone is invited to this free event – invite your family, friends and neighbors!

In line with the baseball theme, we will be attending a **Yard Goats game on Sunday, May 31st**. It’s a 1:10pm game vs the Altoona Curve, and kids get to run the bases after it’s over! Tickets will go on sale during coffee hours starting in early May. We hope you can join us!



We’d love to hear your ideas for other events throughout the year! Have a chat with Casey, Geri, Linda or Craig if you have thoughts you’d like to share.

Our 10th Scrip Anniversary!

Another April, another Scrip Anniversary!

In early 2016, I was sitting in a special council meeting and the trustees had been exploring lots of options to increase revenue and reduce expenses. The scrip fundraising program had been previously brought to their attention and they had researched it and explained to council briefly how it worked. It seemed like an easy way to bring in a modest addition to our bottom line and it was up for grabs if anyone was interested in coordinating it. I could hardly stop myself from volunteering, as often happens. I did some additional research, the treasurer opened up a dedicated bank account, and in April, we set up a table for the first of hundreds of coffee hours.

And speaking of people who can't stop themselves from volunteering... a huge thanks to Karen Needham who has been helping at the table since the start as well, and always fills in when I need a day off. She's also a much better saleswoman than I am! 😊 You are the best, Karen!!

Over these last 10 years, we have raised over \$14,000 for the church. While it's nothing to balance the budget on, it's an easy fundraiser with no real downside.

If you don't know about the Scrip program, here is a quick synopsis. Scrip is an easy way you can help raise money for the church by buying gift cards for everyday expenses like groceries, gas, clothing, restaurants and gifts. It is literally "fundraising while you shop" and there are nearly 600 retailers to choose from. The best part about Scrip is that you pay for exactly what you get and the church makes money by purchasing the gift cards at less than face value. You can also order scrip online or through the RaiseRight app. Add gift cards to your cart and either pay by check, credit card or through an automatic withdrawal from your checking account. For more information on how to sign up online and get our enrollment code, just reach out. I'm available via phone or text (860-371-1016), email (levine429@gmail.com) or find me at the Scrip table in coffee hour nearly every Sunday.

If you are interested in helping out at the table once in a while during coffee hour, just give me a call. We can always use the extra hands. It's a fun way to socialize and do good at the same time.

Thanks for your continued support! ~ Casey





Chili Cook-Off



Lenten Pretzels





Cake Auction



Please be sure to follow us on Facebook and Instagram.



Missions & Outreach ~ Martha Stansel, Chair

Missions Box: Thank you to everyone who purchased gift cards for Wellmore! The gift cards were delivered in late March so families could shop for Easter. Our March guest speaker, Catherine Haugh, reminded us how important the cards are to help Wellmore's Social Worker's help their clients

The **Missions Box collection for April** is change for **Holy Joe's Café**. (See article below for more information)

For a number of years, our church has supported Holy Joe's by collecting money for their mission. Maybe you have some change hanging around your house, or maybe you want to think about contributing the equivalent of your daily cup of coffee. You can save your money in the cup we'll provide or another container of your choice. We also know that, in this day and age, many people do not use much cash or change. Checks, paper money, and change are all acceptable for donation. We will have a jar for contributions on the small table at the front of the sanctuary. Please be generous to support our troops and their chaplains!

Cake Auction: A huge THANK YOU to everyone who baked a cake, bought a cake, or just enjoyed the fun of the cake auction. The money raised allows the Missions Committee to provide food to Brian's Angels, sponsor a child through Matsiko in coordination with Christian Education, buy supplies to create bags of toiletries for Hands of Grace, and lead various other projects without affecting our annual budgeted donations.

Brian's Angels: The Sunday School children will be making ham and cheese and bologna and cheese sandwiches for Brian's Angels Homeless Outreach on April 19th. These sandwiches are provided to Brian's Angels clients as part of an evening paper bag meal. The bags also include snacks and a piece of fruit as well as foods like boiled eggs or toaster pastries for breakfast. Our Missions Committee often donates waters and snacks in addition to the sandwiches that are made. This month we are also asking the congregation to help by providing fruit on April 19th. Please bring a couple (or a few) apples, oranges, or pears to church that day. By working together, we can provide the fruit for all 60 bags.

As always, if you have an idea for the Missions and Outreach Committee or know of an organization you would like us to consider supporting, please feel free to talk to one of the members of the committee. Martha Stansel, Debbie Poleyestewa, Casey Levine, Rebecca Glinsman, Darryl Haberern, Geri Bunnell (through April), Carol Orlando (through April) and Heather Neumann (starting in May). And if you'd like to join this dynamic committee, please speak to a member of the Missions Committee or the Nominating Committee.

SPOTLIGHT ON HOLY JOE'S CAFE - COFFEE FOR THE TROOPS

In 2006, the First Congregational Church in Wallingford, Connecticut, received word that there was a need for coffee at the Sather Air Force Base in Iraq where one of their church members was deployed. At the time, Air Force Chaplain Timothy Sturgill was paying out of his own pocket to provide coffee 24/7 to all military personnel on the base, plus all the service members arriving into Iraq. Once word of Chaplain Sturgill's efforts reached First Congregational Church back in Wallingford, they jumped into action – creating the foundation for Holy Joe's Café.



**Holy Joe's
Café**
COFFEE FOR THE TROOPS



Holy Joe's first location at Sather AFB, Baghdad, Iraq - September 2006.

Since their humble beginning collecting cans of coffee they have grown to serve billions of cups of coffee and helped open over 300 coffee houses throughout the world, mainly in the Middle East but also in places like Africa, Europe, and even on board Navy ships and in NATO military hospitals, as well as small Forward Operating Bases, hangar bays, other hospitals, aid stations and any setting where they are needed.

Holy Joe's Café assists Chaplains in helping soldiers with family emergencies, care for wounded soldiers, conducting memorial services for the fallen, and counseling survivors when a soldier is killed in battle. Soldiers are allowed complete confidentiality to express themselves to the Chaplains.

All service personnel are welcome, including NATO troops from other countries that share the same base as well as people of all religious faiths and backgrounds. They want to promote a place for relaxation, focusing on great coffee and conversation. It is vital for our troops to have a place to unwind and share a taste of home.

As one chaplain explains, "Holy Joe's Café is a place where chaplains in makeshift chapels are able to bring a taste of home to the tired, the anxious, the angry, the lonely and the wounded. They all can get a gourmet coffee, a reminder that the world they willingly left behind still cares."

Our church has supported Holy Joe's for most of their existence by collecting change, bills or checks, often during Lent. Check your car or your sofa for loose change or pledge to match the cost of your daily cup of coffee to this Holy Joe's collection. Look for the specially labelled Holy Joe's collection cups at the end of March and throughout April. When you are ready to bring your donation to church there will be a jar for contributions on the small table at the front of the sanctuary. Please be generous to support our troops.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

We gather as a welcoming community in worship, learning, service and fellowship to embody Christ's message of love, compassion and justice.

Joining faith with action, both within and beyond our church, we strive to build a community that serves all.

An Open and Affirming Congregation

Music Notes

Mary Lou Keefe, Director of Music



The year was 2021 and suddenly Covid was all anyone was talking about or worried about. The choirs were all set to do their thing on Palm Sunday i.e. Sr. choir cantata, handbells, the prelude, Jr Choir, the offertory, and Cherubs, and the introit. I remember attending a funeral on March 15th and hoping not to have to hug or kiss anyone. The very next day everything shut down and my well planned musical plans had been dashed.

At some later date some of us received an email from Rev. Brenda about joining up on a Friday. Jerry Alonzy was there leading us through the taping of the service from the new equipment in the loft. At the same time he trained Scott, Casey, Craig, and Kristen how to run it. That would enable us to live stream the service to home computers. That same day there were also two deacons present. The message at the time was bad because the droplets would spread out and potentially infect whoever was nearby. Of course, only if someone singing was infected. My hope at the time was that at least some of the choir members would show up. In the very beginning Jerry sang the hymns and the offertory. In the early days choir members joined us., Linda, Kathy P., Jen, Judy, and Karen who also played the chimes. As the days went by more joined us including Meg, Donna, Marilyn, Rina, Jim. Tim, and Kathleen. Scott played guitar for Jerry who sang Gethsemane at Easter and Cindy played the flute. The bell choir, because of their close proximity to each other, were a little shy at first about rehearsing but eventually they too came back.

I don't know how the pandemic affected everyone but I do know that we don't ever want to go through that again. We can't change the fact that it ruined many businesses and affected church attendance and restaurants and many other venues. For the most part we have forgotten about it until you might find an old mask somewhere in your house.

The Palm Sunday Pot Luck and now the Palm Sunday cantata have become a tradition in our church. I am not sure when the Pot luck first appeared but our Sr. Choir has been presenting a cantata since 1996 with the encouragement of our minister at the time the Rev. Larry Smith who had suggested the cantata Victory which had been performed in his previous church and that is what we first performed on that date. Notwithstanding the year of Covid we will have been singing Palm Sunday cantatas for 30 years.

Additionally, we have also been singing Christmas cantatas for many years. I have to admit that the choir members over the years have their likes and dislikes so we did repeat some of our favorites. Then there were the years that we went all out, hired musicians from within the church and also from Hartt and performed Rutter's Requiem and my absolute favorite, Faure's Requiem, sung in Latin with pronunciation instructions from Jim Todd. For that even the bell choir was involved in the playing of the final most gorgeous movement. I sincerely hope that this year's cantata with a variety of music will be a success and musically lead us into the final week before Easter. And enjoy the wonderful food from our good cooks at the Palm Sunday Pot Luck feast.



APRIL 2026

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			1 Deacons Meeting 7 pm	2 Handbell Choir 5:30 pm Maundy Thursday Svc 7:30pm	3 Knitting 9 am Sanctuary open 12pm - 3pm Sat set up 3 pm	4 Easter Family Fun Day 10am -12:30pm AA 11:00 pm
5 Sr. Choir 9 am Easter Worship 10:00 am Communion	6 Office Closed AA/ACA 7:00 pm	7 AA 4:00 pm	8 Missions Mtg 6 pm	9 Handbell Choir 5:30 pm Cub Scouts 6:30 pm	10	11 AA 11:00 pm
12 Worship 10:00 am	13 Trustee Mtg 7pm AA/ACA 7:00 pm	14 AA 7:00 pm	15 Council Mtg 7pm	16 Handbell Choir 5:30 pm	17 Knitting 9am Wider Church Pizza & Movie Night 6pm	18 AA 11:00 pm
19 Sr. Choir 9 am Worship 10:00 am	20 AA/ACA 7:00 pm	21 AA 7:00 pm	22	23 Handbell Choir 5:30 pm	24	25 Community Bike Event church Pkg lot 11am - 1pm AA 11:00 pm
26 Sr. Choir 9 am Worship 10:00 am 4th Sun Food Collection Canton HS 6-8 pm	27 AA/ACA 7:00 pm	28 AA 7:00 pm	29	30 Handbell Choir 5:30 pm		



The First Congregational Church
(United Church of Christ)
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Worship every Sunday at 10:00 a.m.

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