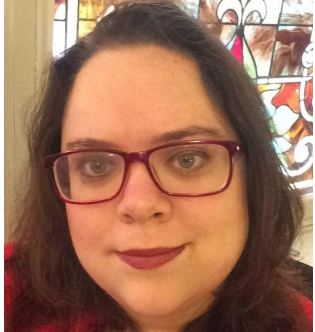


THE MESSENGER

NEWSLETTER FIRST QUARTER 2024



First Congregational Church UCC
412 4th Street Manistee Mi



From The Pastor

Dear Friends,

The idea that we are going to be celebrating St. Valentine's Day and Honoring our faith tradition of remembering Ash Wednesday with the imposition of ashes on the same day might not feel like a very good combination of events. After all of Valentine's day we make cute little Valentine's with paper hearts, go to dinner with our loved one, share chocolate shaped hearts, and send flowers to those we love. And Ash Wednesday, marks the beginning of Lent, when we gather, and mark ourselves with ashes, as a reminder that we are only living in our bodies temporarily, and that someday, in the future we will die, and our bodies will return to the earth.

The amazing team at Illustrated Ministry created 4 "Ash Wednesday" themed valentines for people to print, color and share this year. I'm sharing one with you in this newsletter, partly because it is one way to share just a little more joy, but also because the more I think about it the more I believe that Ash Wednesday is about love. We have always known it is about seeking forgiveness, and finding opportunities to change and refocus our lives, as we begin our yearly journey towards Easter and the Good News and Hope we can find in the promises of Easter, but in all that talk of repenting, and sacrifice of Lent, that we sometimes miss the love.

In her blog, Gifts in Open Hands, Maren C. Tirabassi shared some writing she did the last time Ash Wednesday fell on the same day as St. Valentine's Day, I'd like to share with you part of what she wrote,

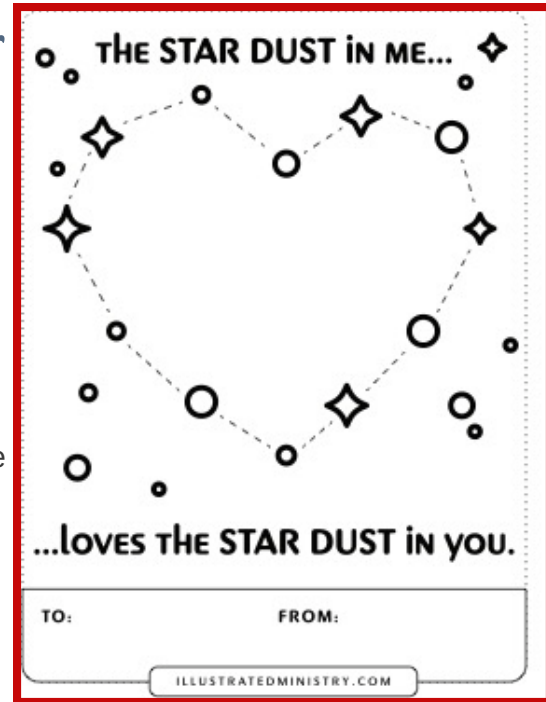
*Ashes are awkward; ashes are dirty; ashes, like love,
are not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude.*

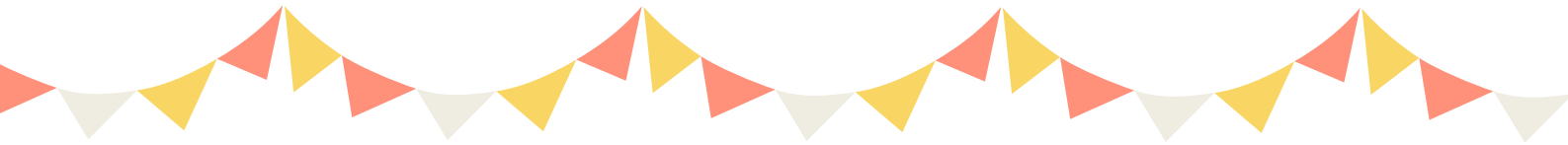
*Ashes do not insist on a perfect Lent;
they do not even need to be in church
or a gimmick to get folks to church;
they do not inventory wrongdoing,
especially the wrongdoing of others,
but rejoice in the precious now,
the very fragility of life.*

*Ashes bear love, believe in love,
hope in the possibility
of forgiveness for everyone,
endure even times of lovelessness.*

The ashes we wear, remind each of us of something different. For some it is an opportunity to recenter our lives as we begin lent. For others it is a yearly reminder that we only have so much time to make as much as we can from the lives we have been given, that we only have so much time to do all our tasks, and make our mark on this world. I pray that as we celebrate St. Valentine's Day, and receive the ashes this year we will remember that no matter what do with our lives, no matter what we achieve, or don't achieve, no matter if we have long lives, or short lives, no matter what, we are loved by the God who created us. We are loved by the God who formed us in their own image. This year let our ashes be a reminder to love the world with that same passion and grace. I hope to see you at our service on February 14th at 7:00pm.

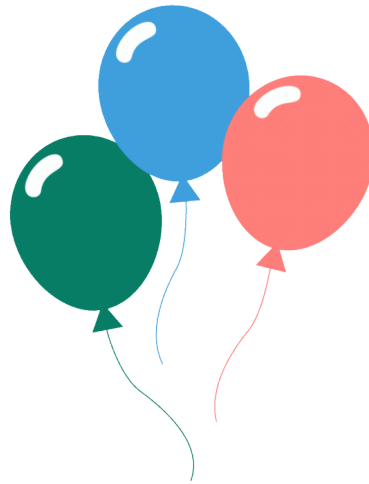
Blessings, Pastor Liz





February Birthdays

- February 1- David Vande Vusse
- February 1- Casey Joe
- February 6- Liz Hoy
- February 8- Elana Warsen
- February 16- Alice Amstutz
- February 21- Mary Hoffrichter
- February 22- Betsy Rosenow
- February 24- Anne Baker
- February 25- Pam Weiner
- February 26- Phyllis Thorsen



February Anniversaries

- February 10- David Martus and Loren Bach

February Greeters

- February 4- Volunteer Needed
- February 11- Masons
- February 18- Volunteer Needed
- February 25- Volunteer Needed



February Coffee Hour Hosts

- February 4- Masons
- February 11- Mary H.
- February 18 - Volunteer Needed
- February 25- Volunteer Needed

February Clock Winders

- February 4- Nanci Swenson
- February 11- Kevin Postma
- February 18- Andy Amstutz
- February 25- Jane Kendall

Please Consider Signing up as Greeters, Coffee Hour Hosts or Liturgists. Sign up sheets are located in the hallway next outside of the small dining room.

February Liturgist

- February 4- Loren Bach
- February 11- Loren Bach
- February 18- Nanci Swenson
- February 25- Volunteer Needed

End of Year statements

If you need a copy of your 2023 Giving Statement, please contact Deb in the office. She will be happy to make sure you get the information you need. Please remember that Deb is in the church office Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday from 9:00am-Noon. She doesn't often check her email over the weekend.

We had to take out a \$60,000 loan to pay for the new high efficiency heating boiler replacement. Our monthly loan payment is \$330. If you happen to find an extra \$330 in your account this month, please consider writing a check to become a Boiler Buddy and help us pay off this loan. You can just drop the check in the offering plate on Sunday or mail the check to the office. If you have any questions or want additional information, please contact John Helge.



Faith Formation

When I was in elementary school it was Winnie who kept me connected to the church, the woman who walked with a cane from the time I knew her until she passed years ago. It was Winnie who kept me excited about church, always ready with hard candy or smarties in her pockets for my friends and I.

It was also Mr. & Mrs. Osbo, the couple who gently invested in each and every kid who attended church. Often their investment looked like birthday cards and stickers, but more often than not it looked like them taking a seat next to us, asking us how we are and not standing up until we were done talking.

In high school, where my faith took a turn, it was Cal and Lois who set their eyes on mine and didn't turn away. And while youth group held a space in our calendar, it was Cal and Lois who kept me connected to church. They were old enough to know that everything would turn out alright, and wise enough to know that youth group had its role in community. But it was in their quiet interest in my questions that my salvation was rescued.

In middle school it was Mary the Secretary with her glass jar of candy and ever open door to conversation and ability to always create a job for us to help with. She never wanted us to feel awkward, and it was evident in the ways in which she welcomed the whole of us.

In college it was Troy & Heather who invited me over, who asked me to hold their babies, who consistently invited me over for dinner, who invited me into church leadership, even when my beliefs were different and I didn't believe in evangelism.

When I moved across country at age twenty-one, it was Robin who reached out, Mary who asked me to join her at Barnes & Noble for coffee and silence, Debbie who planned a surprise housewarming party when I rented my first apartment, and Lois who welcomed all my questions and never once challenged my questions or tried to fix my faith.

Over time it was Nanette & Andrea, Grandma, Elaine, & John. When my kids were born it was Laure & Kelly, Lisa & Stephanie, and it was the blessed saint who is Ms. Marian.

Throughout all these years, never once did I stay at church because of what was provided in regards to teaching. Sure, the gospel was compelling. Yes, I often found pockets of spaces to share and serve, but it was within these relationships, these individuals who sat down, extended an invitation, offered snacks, and shared their lives with us that kept us connected to the church, and as a result to Christ.

If there is one conversation that is often spoken of within the halls and pews of our church, it is the hope and wonder that surrounds the culture and future of our church.

While it can be tempting to look towards budgets & programming, events & political positions, all necessary pieces of the pie, I want to encourage each and every one of our congregation members to take a moment and remember those who have held your hand, called your name down the hall, attended your basketball game, invited you to watch the football game on Sunday evening.

Our congregation, our children, our families need you. We need you to come sit with our kids during coffee hour, to invite them out for ice cream. We need you to ask them about school & invite them over for hot chocolate.

And while the Banned Book Club will remain, Faith Formation guides will still pop up in each Sunday's bulletin, Lent & Advent small groups will continue meeting & various other programs will chug along, may we remember that Faith Formation is so much larger, and can be so much more meaningful with you by our sides, listening and passing along a package of smarties.

-Jessica Rozga

Moderator's Musings

Winter took a while to arrive but looks like it is here to stay for a while! We had a wonderful Christmas season with relatively mild weather that did not interfere with our travel or worship plans. With Christmas Eve falling on Sunday, we had the opportunity to worship early and later that special day. Our evening candlelight service of lessons and carols once again proved to be a very special way to celebrate Jesus' birth. We have the final numbers in for 2023 and we are very pleased to report that our actual annual revenues exceeded our actual expenses by over \$7000. The keys to this successful balanced budget were the revenue streams from the annual Heritage Bazaar and the Makers' Market as well as the used books and games sale. Thanks to all those who organized, helped, and contributed to these events. We were also able to find ways to significantly reduce our property insurance costs and our heating bill in 2023. We anticipate even more savings in our heating bills in 2024 now that we have our two new high-efficiency hot water boilers online. These two boilers cost a total of \$93,000 to purchase and install. We were able to utilize existing funds to pay for \$33,000 of this work, but we had to take out a loan from the United Church of Christ Cornerstone Foundation to pay the \$60,000 balance. We were able to negotiate a good interest rate which means we are budgeted for a monthly loan payment of \$330.00 in 2024. We are hoping that members of the congregation might be able to find enough money in their bank accounts at the end of the month to be willing to write a check for the \$330.00 boiler loan payment. You can drop the check in the collection plate on Sunday or mail it to the church office. With your help, we can avoid having to cut existing programs in the life of our church to balance our budget in 2024. Of course, if anyone happens to have a spare \$60,000 lying around, we could also use that to pay off this loan and not have to worry about the monthly payments! I found out in my career in technical sales that it never hurts to ask. The answer may be no right now, but if things change financially, it is good to know about this opportunity to help. Hard to believe that Lent will start on Ash Wednesday which is also Valentine's Day this year! This means we will have an early Easter celebration. As we enter this season of contemplation my wish for all is for you to find peace and personal happiness in all your do.

SEE YOU IN CHURCH

-John Helge

Monthly Mission

Thank you to all that adopted a child or adult for Christmas! We ended up buying gifts for 30 people. We heard so many thanks and blessings from the families as we delivered the gifts. They were all so appreciative.

The monthly mission of food donations will continue until mid February. Jeff Carter, from Safe Harbor, will then stop in to explain and encourage involvement with day hosting during their new daytime hours. We can also assist with food preparation for overnight as well as many other ways to help with the homeless population in Manistee County.

From The Open and Affirming Team

Embracing God's inclusive love, we welcome you. We value you, no matter your race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pronoun preference, family structure, faith background, age, ability, or economic circumstance. This community of faith is open and affirming. We invite you to fully share in worship, fellowship, leadership, ministry, sacraments, responsibilities, and the blessings and joys of this church family. We seek to affirm you and all people, as Jesus did, with loving hearts and open minds. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, in blue jeans or Sunday best, you are welcome here at
Manistee First Congregational United Church of Christ.

This is our Open and Affirming Covenant, which our congregation adopted in the fall of 2020. Thanks to Doug, a large copy now hangs in the lower hallway, just as you enter the building from the coat area. We are aware that as a result of our passing this covenant and because all of us have been welcoming of others, several families and individuals have joined us for Sunday worship and other church activities. The principles that we espouse act as a beacon to draw those who also believe in our message of acceptance and belonging.

The Committee is in the planning stages of another episode of "Raising Allies" for sometime in the spring. We are also looking at forming a study group to look at sections of the Bible which are interpreted by some Christian denominations as messages of exclusion and condemnation, while others view the teachings of Christ as exemplifying our need to include and to love everyone. If you have interest in one of these activities, or if you have more ideas of how we can engage the LGBTQ+ community, please join the Open and Affirming Committee for our monthly meeting right after church the first Sunday of the month.

Jim Uhl for the ONA Committee

Banned Book Club

Wednesday February 28th at 7:00pm

Persepolis

By: Marjane Satrapi

First Congregational Church
412 4th St, Manistee MI



Coming up:

March

Out of Darkness

By: Ashley Hope Perez

April

The Outsiders

By: S.E. Hinton

May

The Catcher in the Rye

By: J.D. Salinger

In 2013, the Chicago Public School's superintendent, Barbara Byrd- Bennett, specifically had the book pulled from schools because she felt its graphic language and images were not acceptable for the intended seventh-grade classes. In 2014, the book was challenged three more times in different school districts. This landed it the number 2 spot on the ALA's Top Ten List of Frequently Challenged Books.

Stewardship Report

Well life at Manistee Congregational Church is never boring, predictable or unchallenging. Maybe we should work in challenging into our creed, motto or identification.

I think that everyone is enjoying the new warm boilers. Again the invitation is to go down to the basement and see them they are quite high-tech. Unfortunately they do need to be paid for. We were discussing that something like 30 months have been paid for by wonderful donors and this has been great. This is considered and actually above and beyond our church budgets. So it is wonderful that people are stepping forward. When you do contribute to our warmth and comfort please be sure to let Deb know if it is going to be applied for a month of payment on the loans or going to the principal. Obviously extra money going to the principal will greatly decrease the interest paid in the long run. But we still need to make regular payments. I am not sure if this unseasonably warm weather is going to continue to the rest of the winter, the rest of the year or eternity.

One word on the budget-would like to thank everybody for their feedback. I especially appreciate the concern for minister, staff and a cost of the living raise. I think it is well-deserved and as noted at least 2 years overdue.

A big concern of course is continued borrowing from the endowment fund. This is actually being taken from the principal fund rather than from interest. This will quickly deplete the endowment fine in some 2 to 3 to 4 years. If there is any way to contribute to the endowment fund either through estate planning, extra giving it we will really pay off in the long run for our church. We will happily give credit, if the donor would like that, to specify contributions to the boiler fund, the endowment fund, or any of the specified donation funds.

One happy note is that fundraiser's for the church have been quite successful. Kudos to those involved probably too numerous to mention. It is always fun if not always practical to think up new ways to help meet our Christian commitments.

Lastly please everyone come to the karaoke on February 13th starting at 6:00pm.

It is always great fun and quite surprising. There are some really, really talented people in the church. And then there are of those of us who sing anyway. Since it's so close to St. Valentine's Day and thats a day for love songs and I think we have about 320 love songs coming in and of course can episodically take them off the Internet. Pancake dinner as well-although Pam and I are still threatening Cajun sometime. - Bill Weiner

Ministry Report

Ash Wednesday falls on St. Valentine's Day this year! We will observe the former with a brief service at 7:00pm for the distribution of ashes. During the season of Lent, our theme is "Wandering Heart – Figuring Out Faith with Peter." In this Sanctified Art series, we will be looking closely at Peter, "a person who is both steadfast and unsteady, a dear friend and a betrayer, a follower and a wanderer. By following Peter's journey, we watch the story of Jesus unfold through the eyes of a very normal human trying to figure it all out just like us. This Lent, we will look for ourselves in the stepping stones of Peter's story. We will reflect on the stages of our own faith journeys as well as who and what has shaped us along the way."

There will be a Lenten study from the same series on Tuesday nights in person at 7:00pm or on Zoom on Wednesday nights also at 7:00pm. See Pastor Liz if you would like a copy of the booklet. There will be opportunities for worship during Holy Week, please watch the weekly emails and the March calendar for details on the dates and times. Good Friday service will be in conjunction with other local churches at Manistee First Congregational church at noon. Our congregation heads upstairs to the sanctuary for Palm Sunday. (We will hope that the weather isn't unseasonably cold!) Easter celebration of the risen Christ is at the very end of March. We look forward to sharing study and good discussion together this Lent.

~Nanci Swenson and Joanne Cotugno



Starword Update

My star word is adopt.

What a perfect word to describe my year! After 22 years of living in Colorado, my husband and I retired to Manistee and have "adopted" it as our forever home.

After waiting 3-1/2 years, we just got word from my daughter in Montana, that my foster grandson will be adopted within the next two months! Louie came into our lives during Covid as a one-year old baby. We have watched him grow into a jolly soul who has brightened our lives in so many ways. Just as importantly, Louie has adopted us and loves us as the only grandparents he has ever known.

So the word adopt is my star word for a year of life changing and life-giving change--adopting a new grandchild, a new home, and a new church.

God is great!
Gladys



Lenten Faith Formation

Join us on Tuesday Nights for Lenten Bible Study
Starting February 20th
and
Take Home Lenten Devotionals
Available February 4th

Craft Update

We had a great year, The Bazaar, Makers Market, and our sewing day made \$7,000 for the church.

We are now working on next year's bazaar. We are using the flannel that has been donated and purchasing some to go with it to make baby blankets, burp-clothes, are being made with the left over fabric. We are looking for wool sweaters if you have any to donate to make mittens. If you see one at a garage sale or estate sale pick them up for us! They need to be at least 80% wool.

Also scraps of 2x6 or 2x8 lumber are needed. They need to be at least 8-12 inches tall. If you have any, please drop them off. We will make them into snowmen.

Our group is growing stop by any Wednesday. We are here from 9-2ish.

We will be hosting a day long craft and sewing camp Wednesday March 27th 9:00am-6:00 pm, please bring \$5 for lunch. Stay turned for more information on our June crafting and sewing weekend in June!

The craft group

MINI CRAFTING AND SEWING CAMP!
1ST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
WEDNESDAY MARCH 27TH
9:00AM-6:00PM
\$5 (INCLUDES PIZZA AND SALAD LUNCH)

BRING YOUR PROJECT (OR PROJECTS) YOUR SEWING MACHINE AND COME CRAFT/SEW WITH US. THERE WILL BE TWO CUTTING STATIONS, AND AN IRONING BOARD SET UP FOR USE. LUNCH, COFFEE, TEA AND WATER WILL BE PROVIDED. PARTICIPANTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO BRING SNACKS AND A BEVERAGE OF THEIR CHOICE. TO SIGN UP PLEASE MESSAGE OUR FACEBOOK PAGE OR CONTACT PASTOR LIZ

Fellowship Report

The Fellowship has been very happy to see so many stay after worship to engage in some conversation and coffee. For some it is the highlight of their Sunday. We have had many new people sign up which is wonderful, and, if you would like to host, Stu and I are always willing to help.

Mary and Stu

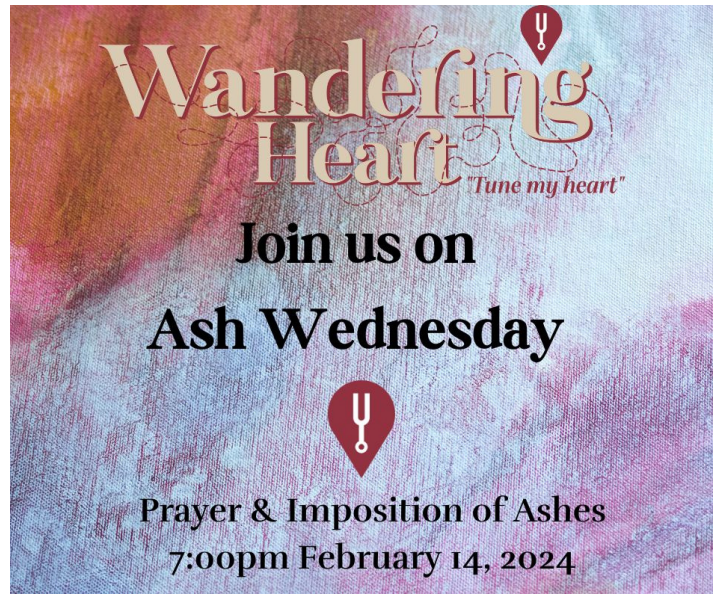
Easter Flower Order Due Tuesday Feb 20th

It's time once again to place your order for Easter Flowers. You can order Lilies and Mums for \$14, or Tulips and Hyacinths for \$10. Order forms can be found in the Sunday Bulletin, or through a link in the weekly email updates.

Or you can call Deb in the office at 723-5361 Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday 9:00am-Noon.

<p>MARDI GRAS</p> <p>PANCAKE DINNER AND KARAOKE PARTY</p>	
	<p>JOIN US ON FEBRUARY 13, 2024</p> <p>6:00PM</p> <p>FREE DINNER AND FUN FOR ALL</p>

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
412 4TH STREET MANISTEE MI**



**Wandering
Heart** *"Tune my heart"*

**Join us on
Ash Wednesday**

Prayer & Imposition of Ashes
7:00pm February 14, 2024

Get to know our People Project

We have a new church project to consider. How well do we know our people, our church community? What do we really know about the Story & History of the people sitting next to us (or listening at home) in our church community? Adriana Persenaire would like to work on gathering these stories, starting with those from our elders. If this sounds interesting to you & you would like to know more about recording your or your family's history with our church, please call Adriana (269-491-9091) or email her at anja0052@yahoo.com

Manistee First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
412 4th Street
Manistee Mi, 49660