

February 2024 Newsletter
First Congregational United Church of Christ
1000 Willson Avenue - Webster City, Iowa 50595
515-832-2232
<http://www.firstcongregationalwc.org/>

Pastor's note: this is the redacted sermon I preached during the worship service preceding our Annual Meeting on January 21. Part of the agenda of that meeting was to begin a discussion of the future of our church; a discussion that will be ongoing!

"We are beginning a discussion about the future of our church: what we think we can expect in the years ahead, what options we have to explore and implement, how --and if-- we will continue on as a church in Webster City, Iowa. It is an important discussion to begin, and in the course of our deliberations in the coming months there will no doubt be many questions that we will have...questions we will need to ask--and answer-- as best we can.

But I want to suggest there is one question that may be the most important one we can ask; a question that supersedes all our other questions about our church and faith and our ongoing life together. That question is this: When does "Christianity" stop being "Christian?" When do WE stop being "Christian?"

Does Christianity stop being Christian when it no longer holds to all the traditional beliefs of the faith? If that's the case then the UCC hasn't been Christian for quite a while! One of the bedrock beliefs of the UCC is that "the testimonies of our ancestors' faith are not the test of ours," or in more recent terms, "God is still speaking." In the UCC you have freedom of conscience, which means that if you don't believe in the literal truth of everything written in the Bible, if you don't accept all of what the fundamentalists call the "fundamentals" of the faith...that doesn't mean that your version or vision of Christianity is no longer Christian, or that YOU are no longer a Christian.

What else? Does Christianity stop being Christian when we no longer are fulfilling the Great Commission? We don't do much baptizing in this church anymore. We haven't brought in any new members in quite a while! Does that mean we are no longer "Christian?" Now one doesn't have to be a theologian to understand that without a new generation of believers the faith eventually dies out—as do all faiths, not just Christianity. And one doesn't have to be a theologian to understand that evangelism in this current culture is a hard sell for a whole host of reasons! But because we are not raising up the next generation of believers to take our place here at 1000 Willson does not mean we are no longer "Christian."

Does Christianity stop being Christian when the bats and squirrels take over the belltower? Does Christianity stop being Christian when we no longer have a bell, or a tower? We haven't had a bell since WW2... the steeple got sawed down in the 1930's. Currently the Trustees are working on the sticky question of our belltower "guests" and the condition of our belltower. If the very worst-case scenario arises and we have to raze our belltower, are we no longer Christian?

If the organ needs \$60,000 of repairs on the leathers and we can't afford that expense, or choose not to make that expense, and the organ is idled...if we no longer can assemble a choir; if we can't keep an accompanist; if our projectors fail and we don't replace them; if due to attendance and all of the other things I have just mentioned we would choose to essentially abandon our sanctuary for worship and begin meeting in East Chapel instead...does that mean we are no longer Christian?

If we again review our constitution and reduce our board and committee structures; if we would choose to revert to a council form of governance because we can't assemble a Cabinet anymore; if the Women's Fellowship would choose to no longer meet and disband...does that mean we are no longer Christian?

And if Craig retires and this church can't find a full-time ordained pastor to succeed him, or cannot afford a full-time pastor; if the UCC Tri -Conference continues to shrink until finally there is no Tri-

Conference left; if the UCC itself closes up shop...would any of those developments mean that we are no longer Christian?

I'm sure you get my point. Christianity, at least the form of Christianity that we are practicing here in our time and place doesn't stop being "Christian" because we are ok with ordaining women and supporting gay marriage. It doesn't stop being Christian because we don't believe all the tenets of the Apostles' Creed. It doesn't stop being Christian because we can't get anyone under 50 to value our faith and fellowship here. It doesn't stop being Christian if we don't have a bell, or a bell tower, or an organ or a choir or a Cabinet or a Women's Fellowship or a full-time pastor! First Congregational doesn't stop being a Christian church as long as 2 or 3 are gathered in his name regardless of where or when that is...

And we—every one of us-- don't stop being Christians until we no longer want to be Christians! That doesn't happen because of outside circumstances; that happens when we no longer want to be Christians *in our hearts*.

For Christianity stops being Christian when we stop believing that Jesus Christ is the Light of the world, and start looking to our smart phones, or our TV's, or our favorite politicians, or our favorite commentators, or our favorite influencers on TikTok to give us our vision and be our Light! Christianity stops being Christian when we stop continuing in his word—which is a still speaking word—and choose other's words as our truths. Christianity stops being Christian when we stop loving God with all of our heart, soul mind and strength; when we stop loving our neighbors as ourselves; when we stop loving one another as he has loved us. Christianity stops being Christian when we stop letting the Spirit blow where it wills in our lives, enlivening our minds, opening our hearts, and teaching us all things--including how to trust God in all things.

Christianity stops being Christian when we have hope in this world only. Christianity stops being Christian when we lose our understanding that we belong to the kingdom of God, which is today and tomorrow, here and now and everywhere--when our hearts and minds are joined to the divine heart and mind.

Christianity stops being Christian when we lose faith that all things will work together for good for those who trust God and are called according to God's purposes.

Christianity stops being Christian not because we will have smaller trees in our sanctuary next Christmas; it stops when we no longer yearn to have God born in us-- even as Jesus was born in a manger.

Christianity stops being Christian when we stop being a people of the resurrection: a people who believe that new life in Christ is a gift that we can always receive, and tomorrow's sorrows and setbacks and sins will never have the final say in our lives *if we dare to believe*, as Jesus said, that all things are possible for the one who believes!

And Christianity stops being Christian when we no longer believe that we are meant to be the light of the world right alongside Jesus; that in him we have found something worth "glowing" about and so we will not hide our light, but set it on a lampstand, so that "they will know we are Christians by our love!"

The worst thing we Christians can do is undervalue the potential of our own lives, and undervalue the potential of Christianity to enflame us with the Christ Light --which is the great Light of the world! Both lights coincide, and both lights are needed if Christianity is to remain "Christian" and not just a husk of ritual; not just a collection of stale doctrines which vaguely live in the head but not in the heart; not just a nostalgic collection of memories of church days gone by, of Sunday school lessons gone by, of potlucks gone by, of old churchy grandmas and grandpas...gone by.

Whatever the future may hold for us as individuals and as a congregation, one thing should be clear to all of us: Christianity begins-- and ends-- in our hearts! Not in a creed, not in a building, not in a certain Sunday attendance level or age demographic coming in our doors! Whatever the future may hold for us as individuals and as a congregation, we can be faithful Christians in our heart of hearts until the day we die!

And in joining our light to Jesus' Light, and in continuing in his word...we will have done all that we have been asked to do--*as faithful Christians in our time and place*. May it be so! –Pastor Craig

CHURCH OFFICE HOURS

M	8 am - 1 pm
T	9 am – 1 pm
W	8 am – 4:30 pm
Th	8 am – 4:30 pm
F	9 am – 1 pm

Church Staff

Rev. Craig Blaufuss , Pastor	
Office: 832-2232	Cell 297-4316
Pastor's email: revcraigblaufuss@gmail.com	
Michele Omgig : Admin. Assist.	269-7210
Church's e-mail: administrative.office@fcuccwc.org	
Dale Olson : Stephen Ministry Ldr	839-5619
Melissa Hindt : Organist	712-351-1074
Curt/Lorraine McCoskey : Cust's.	832-5341
Tracy Wehrhan : Church Treasurer	297-0370
Dale Olson : Financial Secretary	839-5619



FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO:

- 1 - Chris McNeil
- 4 - Leanna Ploeger
- 5 - Jane Klaver
- 6 - Sharon Perry
- 7 - Gene Royster
- 8 - Michele Omgig
- 9 - Les Ploeger
- 11 - Greta Oberender
- 12 - Blakely Ploeger
- 14 - Curt McCoskey
- 15 - Everett (Bud) Crystal
- 17 - Piper Williams
- 19 - Gretchen McGlynn
- 19 - Jenna Short
- 22 - Curtis Alan (PJ) Swanson
- 23 - Stephanie Hill
- 27 - Diana Oberender
- 27 - Adelyn Oberender
- 28 - Midge Tudor



FEBRUARY ANNIVERSARIES

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY TO:

- 13 - Dick & Midge Tudor
- 17 - Jose Burgos & Dilcia Franco

Parish Nurse News

Tips for Getting a Good Night's Sleep

- Avoid vigorous exercise, training, or competitions one to two hours before bedtime.
- Hold off on large meals, alcohol and caffeine too late in the evening.
- Create a sleep-friendly environment, a quiet, dark relaxing and cool bedroom.
- Go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day.
- Set aside at least 20 to 30 minutes before bedtime to wind down.
- Turn off all electronics and screens such as phones, and TVs.
- Dim the lights, set out your clothes for the next day and do other quiet activities.

Ladies Lenten Lunch, March 14

Thursday, March 14 – a few days before the first day of spring – please gather with us at Asbury United Methodist Church, 921 Des Moines St., for the Lenten Lunch at noon. Calyn Thompson, WHO news anchor and breast cancer survivor, will share her story. The catered lunch menu features chicken, with a gluten-free option. Cost is \$12 and is to be paid when the reservation is made, either to Michele in the church office or to Marjorie Groves (marjoriegroves1@gmail.com). Please make your check to First Congregational UCC and write “Lenten Lunch” on the memo line. Reservations need to be made by March 5. Asbury has an elevator, located inside near the center doors.

On Forming a Task Force to Vision our Church's Future

As outgoing cabinet moderator, incoming moderator and next year's moderator, Gayle Olson, Curt McCoskey, and I met with Pastor Craig Thursday, January 24. Our goal was to set parameters for establishing a task force to explore possible directions our congregation might pursue in the next 5-10 years. We identified church members to ask to form this task force and we are contacting them. We plan to formally create the group at the next cabinet meeting, February 20, to begin the process. Pastor Craig contacted Kendy Miller, our Tri-Conference Associate Conference Minister, and she has offered to assist as needed. She has had experience working with churches working through this type of visioning process. She will be a ready source of useful information. We will post updates in the monthly newsletter and seek your input as we move ahead.

Wil Groves

Pecans

Haystack Circle still has pecans for sale. They are in the chest freezer in the kitchen. \$12 a bag.

Cabinet

February's Cabinet meeting has been rescheduled to February 20.

Lent Begins February 14

First Congregational will begin the observance of Lent with an Ash Wednesday Service on Wednesday, February 14, beginning at 1 p.m. in the East Chapel. Please note the time change! Ash Wednesday is a day of penitence and preparation which begins our Lenten season; it is a day which reminds us of our mortality, and our need for repentance and renewal. We will observe Ash Wednesday with the Imposition of Ashes, and share the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper February 13

Shrove Tuesday is an old tradition that prepared for the austerity of the Lenten fast by using up all the eggs, butter and fat in a household prior to Ash Wednesday. And what better way to use up those ingredients than to make pancakes! On Tuesday, February 13, from 5-6 p.m. we will host a Pancake Supper in Fellowship Hall, with

a free-will offering to offset the cost of the meal. There will be a pancake bar with various toppings for your pancakes, eggs, sausage links, coffee, juice, milk and water. There will be gluten-free pancakes as well! Join us for a great pancake supper on the eve of Lent!

The Shalom Circle Continues During Lent

The Shalom Circle, our prayer and meditation group, will continue to meet during Lent. If you have not yet chosen a Lenten discipline, the circle is a wonderful opportunity to explore spiritual practices and deepen your prayer life. We have a place for you in the East Chapel; if you are interested or want to know more, please speak with Pastor Craig.

KLAB Snacks

Our Wednesday after-school Christian Education program, KLAB, continues to need donated snacks for our kids! We currently have 8 participants and 3 adults for a total of 11. The kids enjoy a variety of snacks—both sweet and salty (Oreos and Pepperidge Farm goldfish are favorites), and fruit is a healthy choice to supplement the commercial snacks they like. Homemade treats are always welcome! Please remember to provide a drink that is not RED. It will help the adults who prepare the treats to have them in the kitchen by Tuesday afternoon, so we are sure we will have treats lined up for class the next day. Thank you for continuing to support this ministry to our kids!

Thank YOU

Thank you for the lovely card shower for my birthday. It was so fun to receive all the greetings. We have the best people in our church. Mary Vavroch

Cats

KLAB toured the Cat Hut on January 24, presented a \$139 donation check to them, learned about their work-- and played with the cats!





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Treasurer's Report

INCOME	December	YEAR TO DATE
Pledges and Offerings	\$26,614.46	\$210,220.07
Other Income	0.00	.00
TOTAL INCOME	\$26,614.46	\$210,220.07
EXPENSES		
Outreach and Mission	1,666.67	\$18,048.00
Pastoral Services	8,909.43	104,139.76
Maintenance and Repairs	6,570.42	50,791.67
Church Office	5,874.98	40,459.82
Music Ministry	508.33	5,599.96
Christian Education	35.70	494.49
Local Ministry	2,025.68	2,041.94
Misc. Expenses	164.92	1,218.11
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$25,756.13	\$222,793.75

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Webster City, Iowa

Cabinet Meeting held on January 9, 2024

Members Present:

Moderator: Wil Groves
Vice Moderator: Gayle Olson
Finance Sec.: Dale Olson
Treasurer: Tracy Wehrhan
Staff/Parish: Cindy Henning
Christian Ed: Patty Gescheidler (phone)

Pastor: Craig Blaufuss (phone)
Trustees: Nick Oberender
Women's Fellowship: Patti Gescheidler (phone)
Mission: Gayle Olson
Worship: Curt McCoskey
Clerk: Stephanie Hill

The meeting was called to order at 7:05pm by the Moderator, Wil Groves in Fellowship Hall. Pastor Craig opened the meeting with a prayer. The December Cabinet minutes were read. The Moderator approved the minutes.

Board and Committee Summaries:

Treasurer's Report: December offerings were \$26,614.46 and expenses were \$25,756.13. Though December offerings are \$850.00 over expenses, year-to-date expenses greatly exceed offerings. Tracy Wehrhan moved and Curt McCoskey seconded a motion that the report be put to audit. The motion passed. **Pastor's Report:** The Advent activities were very successful this year. A Celebration of Life for Kay Harfst is scheduled for January 27, 2024 at 10:30. There will be no visitation, but family and friends are welcome to visit after the service. Because Pastor Craig is ill this week, there will be no KLAB. On January 24, KLAB kids will visit the Cat Hut to present funds raised during Alternative Giving Fair. **Finance Board:** Tracy Wehrhan spoke about the increasing expenses for the church such as insurance, electric and gas expenses. Gas costs alone in 2023 was more than twice what was budgeted, so the 2024 budget for gas is doubled from last year. **Trustees:** Though none of the contractors giving estimates directly said the entrance was unsafe because of the bell tower issues, Trustees believe being prudent is best and have closed off the entrance. They are proceeding with obtaining bids for the repairs. **Mission:** Five casseroles were sent to Lotus as part of the Alternative Giving Fair. And for the Soup Supper following the Annual Meeting on January 21, 2024 cabinet members will provide desserts. **Women's Fellowship:** There will be no January meeting. Patty expressed her thanks for all who bought items for the potato bar. The Lenten Luncheon is being planned for March 14. The meal will be catered. Marjorie Groves and Joyce Gelhaus will attend a planning meeting this week. **Worship:** February 13 is Shrove Tuesday so there will be a pancake supper. February 14 is Ash Wednesday and this service is being planned. Melissa Hindt as organist may not be available on some Sundays, so substitutes are being lined up. **Christian Education:** Has not met. **Staff/Parish:** The committee has met with all employees.

New Business: a. The east sidewalk was not shoveled, which is a concern because it is an evacuation route for emergencies. Tony Jones will be contacted. b. Wil Groves read the Moderator's Report which will appear in the Annual Report calling for a discussion about the congregation's relationship with the building. What does the future look like for us? This will be presented at the Annual Meeting asking for opinions, ideas of what could or should happen. The idea of a taskforce formed to dig deep into our options was presented. An expert on situations like this, Kendy Miller, may be contacted to speak to us.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10pm. The next meeting is February 20, 2024 at 7:00pm in Fellowship Hall.

Respectfully submitted, Stephanie Hill, Church Clerk

BOARD AND COMMITTEE REPORTS

Worship Board Josi Greenley will be the organist for the Christmas Eve service. Will have pew communion.

Christmas Eve morning service will be held in East Chapel at 10:00 a.m. Marjorie will lead the service on December 31.

January 7 the Christmas decorations will be taken down after the worship service.

The two Christmas trees in the sanctuary need to be replaced. This spring we will ask congregation members to sign-up to form a committee to investigate this.

Communion February 4 and March 3.

February 13 is Shrove Tuesday. Craig will prepare a sign-up sheet for people to head the preparations for another pancake supper. Gretchen has decorations from last year.

Ash Wednesday is February 14.

Mission Board Auction raised \$1760.00 silent and live auction. Auction went very well. 4 casseroles prepared, and in freezer for Lotus. Gayle will deliver.

Blue recycling tote is now behind the church. Curt monitors this, and takes to curb when needed.

Annual meeting scheduled for January 21, Sunday.

The mission team will prepare the soups for the Souper Supper. The cabinet will bring desserts. Pastor—vegetable soup, Gayle—vegan cauliflower soup, Andrea—chili and potato soup, Stephanie—turkey noodle soup, Sherry—chicken noodle, Jose—relish tray, Gayle—crackers

New business

Discussion about members to the Mission board. Susan Meinders, and Sharon Perry signed up. Pastor, Sherry, Gayle, Jose, Stephanie, and Andrea (focusing on Beacon of Hope) will remain in board. Gayle will speak to Sharon Perry.

Next meeting will be scheduled after annual meeting. Andrea

Pastor's Cabinet Report Worship: We enjoyed cooperative weather and meaningful services as we concluded our 2023 Advent season. Don, Kolleen and I led care center services Sunday, December 10 after our morning worship service. The service on December 17 saw the return of Buddy the Christmas curmudgeon who brought some laughter and joy to the congregation. On December 24 we observed the 4th Sunday of Advent in the East Chapel at 10 a.m. and then at 5 pm we held our annual Christmas Eve service with pew communion and candlelight. Following the service Vicki and I travelled to Burlington for our Christmas, and so on December 31 Marjorie Groves led the service in my absence utilizing a video sermon. I returned to lead the service on Epiphany Sunday, January 7, and following the service the few remaining Christmas decorations were taken down. A huge thank you to Curt and Mario McCoskey for taking down the rest of the decorations earlier that week! On January 14 a severe blizzard shut down our church--and just about every other church in town.

WCMA: The Angel Tree Christmas Gifts were distributed to families on December 10, 2-4 pm. American Tap volunteers met at the Asbury parsonage and handled the pickup of gifts for 100 Angels—amazing! Foster Funeral in partnership with members of the WCMA led a Christmas Remembrance service on Sunday, December 17, 5 pm at Asbury UMC. It was to my mind poorly attended (25?), so I am unsure if the service will continue in the future. We met as a group on December 14, but cancelled our January 11 meeting due to covid and a lack of pressing business.

CE Programming: Adult Ed studied “keeping Christ in Christmas” leading up to Christmas recess, and on January 6 we discussed our respective Christmas celebrations and our thoughts about New Year’s resolutions. KLAB recessed after meeting December 13 and returned January 3 to study Epiphany. January 10 we learned about the miracle of snowflakes and tried our hand at recreating them with glue guns and popsicle sticks. We will visit the Cat Hut on January 24 to tour the facility and give them a check with the money raised from the KLAB Christmas ornament sale.

Baptisms: On December 23 I baptized Bradley and Nicholas Bogenrief in our sanctuary. Following the baptism there was a luncheon in fellowship hall for the family, sponsored by Katie Short. The boys received quilts made by the Piecemakers group.

Care Center Caroling: On Wednesday, December 13, we had a dozen volunteers bring joy to our 3 care centers as we caroled each. It was a festive and beautiful evening of sharing our voices and bringing Christmas cheer to residents!

December 17 Meal and Auction: What a wonderful event we shared after church that day! We enjoyed a filling and delicious baked potato bar hosted by the Women’s Fellowship, and then we enjoyed a live and silent auction of all the goods and goodies donated by our members. Curt McCoskey was our auctioneer, and we raised an impressive amount of money--and had a great time doing it! Thanks go to the Mission Board for organizing the auction, and a big thank you to everyone who donated or purchased items!

Shalom Circle: We took a break for Christmas, and reconvened on January 5. Weather and Covid caused us to suspend our January 12 session.

Covid: on January 11, I tested positive for covid. Vicki tested positive yesterday, January 15. I will return (masked) to full duties Wednesday, January 17.

The breakdown of my ministry since December 7:

Worship services led: 11; Christian Ed.: 6; Meetings: 7; Visitation: 15

1 week vacation Dec. 25-Jan 2

Board of Trustees Last fall the congregation approved the proposal from Wood Roofing to complete an array of repairs to the roof and flashing. They started a bit late in the season and consequently have been delayed completing the project. Late November they billed us for the materials (\$15K) and have stated they would be submitting a Progress Bill for the work they have done. But until the weather gets warm enough to avoid breaking the shingles when handled the project is on hold.

The front entrance – under the bell tower – remains closed. Just to be clear, we have not been told there is any concern of it collapsing, nor have we been advised to close it; however, the Cabinet and Trustees agree, it is the SAFE thing to do, at least through the winter. The Trustees are in communication with two commercial contractors for repair proposals. We are also seeking bids to cover the windows in the bell tower to prevent animal access.

We are working with Peterson Construction to replace the light fixture in the office and replace the breaker box located in the Ladies Room.

We will be getting a new water meter, along with everyone else in the city, in the coming weeks.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Address Service Requested

God is still speaking
to everyone in the home of:

