**“The Messenger”**

 **St. Paul’s UCC (513-422-4519); Rev. Rich Luh, Pastor (937-993-5464)**

**DECEMBER 2024**

**“tis the season!”**

Now that Thanksgiving has passed, it is time to get ready for the most celebrated and somewhat crazy season of Christmas. We become so hung up on the secular aspects of the season that we often fail to stop and really think about the spiritual impact of it all.

We get so frazzled with our gift lists for family and friends that we forget to bring a gift for the precious Christ Child, whose birth we lift on Christmas Day!

We become obsessed with decorating our homes, our churches, other buildings, streets and trees, that we lose sight of the simple, humble and plain beauty of the atmosphere surrounding the Holy birth.

Emmanuel, God with us is something we all need to remember about this season. God in His infinite wisdom and love, decided that it was time for Him to make an appearance on earth to be with his sons and daughters, to show them what wonderful possibilities there are for them to grab onto to make their lives more fulfilling than they ever dreamed of.

God did not look for fancy wrappings or billboard announcements to give this gift of His, either. This precious gift was wrapped in swaddling cloths and rested in a manger – a feeding trough for cattle in a cave, with straw and hay and the smell of animals all around. He didn’t present this child through a royal couple, adorned with jewels and fancy garb. No, this child came to earth via a very young handmaiden and a carpenter, by the names of Mary and Joseph.

It's no wonder too many people forget about this gift because it pales in comparison to all the glitter of presents seen displayed in department stores, on TV and the internet. Plus, most gifts are given to people because that’s what they want the most. God gave us this gift because it was what his children needed the most. Our presents are temporary at best – sometimes lasting barely a few days after Christmas. God’s gift to us last for eternity. Our gifts provide immediate comfort and enjoyment for those who receive them; but God’s gift comes with a stipulation that by really accepting this gift and letting it become a real part of your life, may cause some trials and tribulations along the way. It may cause you to change the way you think – how you live and what you say as you go along in life.

It's not a reward for being good - but a guideline for us to be better human beings to each other – to put LOVE, JOY, HOPE, AND PEACE into action through what we do every day of our lives. Now, there are a number of people that would find this gift to be a stumbling block, because making changes in their lives is not easy or, in some cases, not really wanted. So, they reject this gift and don’t get excited at all about celebrating it.

I say it is too bad for them! They don’t know what they are missing out on. But we as Christians do know what this gift of God’s is all about. Therefore, we do celebrate by coming to worship and rejoicing through carols and scripture, the wonderful story of the first Christmas. And, through church community gatherings, we discover what the true meaning of the season really is. Remember, Christmas is not so much about opening our gifts, as opening our hearts!

Alleluia, Christ is born! Thanks be to God for this wonderful, precious, life-changing gift. Wishing you and your family a most blessed Christmas and a happy, healthy New Year.

**Shalom,**

**PASTOR RICH**

**“IT’S NOT HOW MUCH WE GIVE, BUT HOW MUCH LOVE WE PUT INTO GIVING.” Mother Theresa**

**OUR CHURCH IS A VERY GIVING CHURCH!**

Jennifer Batliner and Julie Ratliff co-chair our Mission Outreach and below is what we (St. Paul’s) have given this past year:

January – Shalom ($250.00); Hope House ($250.00)

February – Crossroad ($250.00)

March – Shared Harvest ($250.00)

April – Crayons to Computers ($250.00)

July – Parachute ($250.00); UCC Church Home ($250.00)

September – St. Jude ($250.00)

October – Susan Komer ($250.00); Kiwanis of Middletown ($250.00)

November – MANY ($750.00); Christmas Fund UCC ($250.00)

This does not include the special offerings taken each month or scholarship monies presented to our college students – or monies in the budget to help people with their utility bills.

So, you can see that your church takes special care to share with those who are in need of financial assistance for their outreach programs. Our hats Off to all who have been so generous in their special giving this year. You truly make a difference in a lot of people’s lives.

**WHAT IS CHRISTMAS? It is tenderness for the past, courage for the present, hope for the future. It is a wish that every cup overflows with blessings rich and eternal and that every path may lead to peace. Agnes M. Pahro**

 **READERS GREETERS USHERS**

1 – HILLARY FRALEY RICK LYONS LARRY/DARLENE ADAMS

8 – CINDY BURNETT JOHN WILLIAMS CARL/JENNIFER BATLINER

15 – CARL BATLINER TOM/MARCIA SHIBLEY JUDY/STEVE GREEN

22 – DAN FLORY M. MINGE/C. LOWMAN BRYAN CANTER

***WELCOME ABOARD!***

We welcome our newest Church Council member into the fold – Steve Schnabl. He will be handling the Fellowship Committee. He is a member of our Future’s sub committee which is trying to find a church to come in with us. Steve was confirmed here a number of years ago with Jennifer Batliner and Jim Rockwell. He was unanimously welcomed on board at the November 10th Council Meeting. WELCOME AND THANKS FOR YOUR INTEREST AND ENTHUSIASM!!

**OUR MONTH’S BIRTHDAYS**

6 – Brandi Adams Spitler

14 – Ruby McQuade 27 – Brielle Adams

May you all have a wonderful celebration!

“WE LIVE IN DEEDS, NOT YEARS; IN THOUGHTS, NOT BREATHS; IN FEELINGS, NOT IN FIGURES ON A DIAL. WE SHOULD COUNT TIME BY HEART THROBS. HE MOST LIVES THINKS WHO THINKS MOST, FEELS THE NOBLEST, ACTS THE BEST”. Phillip James Bailey

***BIBLE STUDY NEWS***

We will not have any Bible Study on December 24 or 31st because of the Christmas holidays; but we will resume on January 7th as we begin to study the Apocrypha. These are books that were not included in the Bible. However, in the Catholic Bible, these 15 books are included, and we will look at these scriptures beginning with the New Year.

***OUR UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST NEIGHBORS***

By Steve Schnabl

Returning to St Paul’s membership and my family roots in the UCC has proved a blessing to me,

I volunteered to be a member of our Futures Committee. Through it, I became more aware that many mainline Protestant churches face similar self-examination. Curious, I began to phone other nearby UCC churches, usually having interesting and informative conversations with the pastors.

I learned about Southwest Ohio/Northern Kentucky Association (SONKA) that serves as the link between UCC churches in multiple counties, and also our link to the Ohio (Heartland) Conference; then to our national UCC office and our world missions.

I became aware that SONKA, too, is in a state of change. I chose to attend the SONKA fall gathering at Shiloh church in Trotwood on November 9. At least 100 UCC pastors and lay people also attended. I’m glad I did.

The major topic was to adopt or reject a proposal from the Governance Council (five voting members who represent all UCC members in SONKA). The idea sprang from the intention to build stronger relationships with each UCC congregation from Darke County (Greenville area) south to Boone, Kenton and Campbell Counties in Northern Kentucky.

The assembled body unanimously voted to accept the proposal. In summary, the SONKA administrator’s position will be reduced from full time to 20-25 hours per week (the position was recently vacated by the pastor who is returning to minister at a Dayton UCC). Seven regions are created, gathering several congregations that are geographically close. A regional pastor will be chosen from each region to serve as its two-way communications link with the SONKA Governance Council. Local churches can share their challenges, strengths and opportunities to Council who will link congregations with similar interest; share ideas and information; and otherwise create more interaction among UCC congregations.

Governance Council remains at five voting members (a combination of lay and pastoral people) and adds five non-voting members representing advisory councils focused on particular missions and ministries.

I had volunteered to become more involved as a layperson, and I was nominated – and elected – to be the Vice Moderator of the Governance Council.

So, this article is my first effort to make our congregation more aware of the friends and affiliations we have that may help us move into St. Paul’s future.

The congregations in our REGION are Bethany, Lebanon; Lakeview, Mainville; Nexus, Hamilton; Pilgrim South and Springboro, Springboro; St. John’s, Germantown; St. Paul’s, Middletown.

***COME AND JOIN US FOR WORSHIP***

1 – “Sign of Things to Come” – Sacrament of Holy Communion

8 – “Make Ready” – Church Council meets after in Church Parlor

15 – “Look Forward” – special guests from Springboro UCC – special coffee hour after

22 – “Moving with Mary’s Song” **Bell Choir** performs

24 – 4:00pm – **CHRISTMAS EVE** “Don’t Judge the Gift by it’s Wrappings”; Sacrament of Holy Communion

29 – “A Baby That Will Take Care of You”

***RING OUT, WILD BELLS***

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky, the flying clouds, the frosty light; the year is dying in the night; ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new – ring happy bells across the snow. The year is going, let him go; ring out the false, ring in the true. ALFRED LORD TENNYSON

***SPECIAL GUESTS TO OUR DECEMBER 15TH SERVICE***

Pastor Terry Carlisle and some of his parishioners from Springboro UCC will be attending our worship on this date. Pastor Terry and I have been in communication about our churches working together in the future and it was thought that by them visiting us and we visiting them (at this point set for January 19th) both congregations can get to know one another better. We will have a special Coffee Hour after our December 15th service.

Indeed, this could be the start of a very good relationship between us. God does work in mysterious ways and perhaps this is an example of one of them.

**Pastor Rich**

***TOTEN OUR FEST SERVICE***

On November 24th we had our Annual Toten Fest Service, and the following people were celebrated: ***James Rockwell***, a faithful member of our church family, who died on February 6th; ***James A. Clark***, brother of Chuck Clark, who died on February 17th; ***Janice Elzey***, wife of Stephen Schnable, who died on February 18th; ***Ryanne Mae Carver***, niece of Darlene Adams and Corrine Lowman, who died on August 31.

And belatedly, we remember ***Jay Patrick Williams***, son of John Williams, who passed away on November 28,2023. We remember these people and how they touched the lives of their families and friends. May God continue to give comfort and strength to those who lost loved ones, and remember that although they are no longer physically present, their influence in your lives will continue to live on as long as you are here to share their special qualities with others.

***CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE***

We hope you will join with us for this special service as we celebrate the birth of the Christ Child on **TUESDAY AFTERNOON AT 4PM, DECEMER 24TH,** with special music and the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

**CHRISTMAS SPIRIT BY E.C. BAIRD**

I AM THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT!

I ENTER THE HOME OF POVERTY, CAUSING PALEFACED CHILDREN TO OPEN THEIR EYES WIDE, IN PLEASED WONDER.

 I CAUSE THE MISER ‘S CLUTCHED HAND TO RELAX, AND THUS PAINT A BRIGHT SPOT ON HIS SOUL.

I CAUSE THE AGED TO RENEW THEIR YOUTH AND TO LAUGH IN THE OLD, GLAD WAY. I KEEP ROMANCE ALIVE IN THE HEART OF CHILDHOOD AND BRIGHTEN SLEEP WITH DREAMS WOVEN OF MAGIC.

I CAUSE EAGER FEET TO CLIMB DARK STAIRWAYS WITH FILLED BASKETS, LEAVING BEHIND HEARTS AMAZED AT THE GOODNESS OF THE WORLD.

I CAUSE THE PRODIGAL TO PAUSE A MOMENT ON HIS WILD, WASTEFUL WAY, AND SEND TO ANXIOUS LOVE SOME LITTLE TOKEN THAT RELEASES GLAD TEARS – TEARS WHICH WASH AWAY THE HARD LINES OF SORROW.

I ENTER DARK PRISON CELLS, REMINDING SCARRED MANHOOD OF WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN, AND POINTING FORWARD TO GOOD DAYS YET TO BE.

I COME SOFTLY INTO THE STILL, WHITE HOME OF PAIN, AND LIPS THAT ARE TOO WEAK TO SPEAK JUST TREMBLE IN SILENT, ELOQUENT GRATITUDE.

IN A THOUSAND WAYS I CAUSE THE WEARY WORLD TO LOOK UP INTO THE FACE OF GOD, AND FOR A LITTLE MOMENT FORGET THE THINGS THAT ARE SMALL AND WRETCHED. I AM THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT!

**CHRISTMAS CAROL**

The earth has grown old with its burden of care, but at Christmas it always is young. The heart of the jewel burns lustrous and fair, and its soul full of music breaks forth on the air, when the song of the angels is sung. It is coming, Old Earth, it is coming tonight! On the snow-flakes which cover thy sod the feet of the Christ-Child fall gentle and white, and the voice of the Christ-Child tells out with delight, that Mankind are the children of God.

PHILLIP BROOKS

***PASTOR’S YEAR-END REPORT***

Greetings to everyone at St. Paul’s! As this is the end of 2024, I thought I would recap some highlights from the year: We had some interest expressed from several churches as to possibly moving in with us here and sharing our facilities – but nothing panned out. But who knows what the new year will bring forth?

We engaged in our Lenten Lunches with First Baptist, First Christian, and First United Methodist Churches and had good turnouts for them. I also participated in a Joint Maundy Thursday Service with First Baptist and First Christian at the Christian Church. We had another successful Joint Service/Picnic at First Christian Church in August; and we donated candy for First Christian’s Trunk or Treat on October 30th.

We currently have two young people going through Confirmation this year – CJ Barraclough and Austin Schultz.

Our Bell Choir is up and running. They already performed several times in November and will again on December 22nd. We thank Barb Flory and Marsha Minge for coordinating and directing this group. We hope more will come on board next year. We also thank these women for their wonderful musical talents they share week in and week out at our services.

We lost some people’s services this past year – Chuck Clark, Abbey Blessing, and Judy Brewer. But fortunately, we have other people who have stepped up to replace them on our Council – Darlene Adams now serves as Secretary; Corrine Lowman now does the Treasurer’s post, and Steve Schnabl recently joined us to do Fellowship duties. Indeed, we are blessed to have these people step in and we are grateful for the efforts of those who have left.

As I have begun my fifth year with you in September, I look forward to working with you in 2025. May the new year bring forth wonderful opportunities for us to be in service to the Lord. Blessings to you all!

**Pastor Rich**

***ANGEL TREE***

Again, this year we will be buying presents for residents of majestic Nursing Home through our ANGEL TREE. The angels will be available for you to select on December 8th.

This project enables us to buy gifts for those who have no family or any family that comes to visit with them. We try, through this gift-giving to show them that someone does care about them – especially at this time of the year.

So, we encourage you to pick an angel for which you can bring some brightness into one of these people’s lives.

***REMEMBER OUR SHUT-INS***

Especially during this holiday season, let us not forget about our members who are shut-in: Charlene Hale; Anne Turner; Jack Kiniyalocts, Ruby McQuade, and Becky Hall. Let us also keep in our thoughts and prayers those who are serving in the Armed Forces and are unable to return home for Christmas.

**SANTA CLAUS**

Little fairy snowflakes dancing in the flue;

Old Mr. Santa Claus, what is keeping you?

Twilight and firelight shadows come and go;

Merry chime of sleighbells twinkling through the snow,

Mother’s knitting stockings, pussy’s got the ball.

Don’t you think that Christmas is pleasantest of all?

WISHING YOU ALL A VERY BLESSED CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY, HEALTHY NEW YEAR!