

The Belfry Chimes

September Sundays Worship at 10:00 a.m.

September 3

"Joy in the Morning"

Speaker: Louise Wright

Immediately following worship, we will gather in the Memorial Garden for the dedication of a podium in honor of Rev. Jane Hawken. Jane and her family will join us for worship, the dedication and coffee hour.

September 10

"Celebration Sunday"

The service will include a sermon by Pastor Julie, Communion and the Dedication of the Pastoral Search Committee, followed by a festive coffee hour.

September 17

"Who Is Our Neighbor?"

The sermon by Pastor Julie will set the stage for the Renewal Gathering and important discussion focused on who we see as our neighbors, which will follow worship and coffee hour.

At 3:30 in the afternoon, a new high school youth group will hold its first gathering.

September 24

"Made Equal"

Following worship led by Pastor Julie, we will enjoy the first coffee hour of autumn.

Update on Our New Neighbors

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

In 2021, our church embarked on an incredible journey when we took the lead in forming The Portland Refugee Resettlement Group and began to prepare for the arrival of a family from Afghanistan. In March 2022, we learned that a group of artisan families (Turquoise Mountain) from Afghanistan would be relocated to Connecticut, and we welcomed the Samimi family of six to America as part of this group. We helped them get settled into an apartment in Middletown, and a friendship with our new neighbors began.

We are delighted to report that the Samimi family is doing well. The children have enjoyed their summer vacation. The three oldest attended Camp Ingersoll, and they have all taken swimming lessons at the YMCA and have been to the new Veteran's Memorial Pool in Middletown. During Eid, a Muslim holiday, they visited the Beardsley Zoo. They have also had a ride on the Essex Steam Train (pictured below) and experienced a boat ride on the Connecticut River. They have been blueberry picking and plan to go back for apples and pears. They found the Mystic Seaport interesting. They have visited several of the other families from Turquoise Mountain, and they enjoyed a visit from Ajmal's sister and her family who live outside of Montreal.

In September Suheil and Zuhra will begin 8th grade. Sohrab will be in 1st grade and Sodoba will enter kindergarten. On August 30, the family together with Dan Vacek, their pro bono attorney, went to Edison, New Jersey for their asylum interview. This is another step towards citizenship.

Ajmal and Khatera are talking of their desire to buy a house. As this is a totally new thing for them, church member Angela Aresco has agreed to help with some education and support.

The Samimis continue to express their gratitude for all the help and support they have experienced while resettling in Connecticut.



Pastor's Ponderings: A Message from Pastor Julie

Dear friends,

One of my life's greatest teachers used to always speak of "context." Context, he said, is decisive. Over time, I came to understand that the context of *anything* determines the ultimate outcome, the "takeaway," or the essence of any communication or happening. In the time I studied with this teacher, I developed a context for living my life. Are you ready? Here it is: *Everyone wins*. So simple, but a strong and abiding guiding force that has deepened over the years. This aligns with so much Scripture. For example, Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things, God works for the good for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." And there's James 1: 2-3: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials, because the testing of your faith produces perseverance. The Lord instructs us to view trials as pure joy, which is totally opposite from the human mindset." While I might object to the almost giddy way James puts it, I do believe that in every situation there is an opportunity, and often when we think things are not working out, looking back, we see they did. It relies a lot on this idea of context.

The first Sunday in September is Labor Day weekend. I have a very important family wedding in Ithaca (in which I have a role), and it's been set for well over a year. Pastor Jane's family are visiting and there needs to be a Sunday for her podium dedication so the church can be present to show your appreciation and love. Your very capable Deacon Louise Wright will be officiating alongside your other very capable Deacon Faith Fraulino. You will have a beautiful coffee hour and dedication that is fitting for your esteemed former pastor. I can go to Ithaca knowing that all will be well. Everyone wins.

Sometimes it certainly doesn't look like everyone wins. Feelings get hurt, opinions are formed and solidified, and walls are built around our hearts. "I'll never go there again." "I'll never speak to him again." "I'll just leave quietly; that'll show 'em." But with faith in everyone's goodness (along with imperfections) and the courage to communicate the truth in love, over time, we can see God's hand on our lives in general, and any situation in particular. One of the most important ingredients of this context for one's life is gentleness. Gentleness is so easily tossed aside. Why? Because it seems so soft, even weak. But it isn't weak. It takes great strength to show gentleness. It takes overcoming the ego's way of insistence on being right, in favor of God's way of love and understanding (the kin-dom way).

I am looking forward to a new phase of our time together in the interim process. I encourage our ongoing communication, the deepening of our faith, and the growing of our wisdom together as we walk together for a while.

If you would like to speak with me about the context for your life or anything else, please let me know. I continue to come into the office Tuesdays and Wednesdays, working from home on Thursdays. But you can call, email or text anytime. I will get back to you pronto!

With love and gratitude,

Pastor Julie

A Message from the Pastoral Search Committee

The Pastoral Search Committee is in the process of preparing our Church Profile. This profile defines who we are, how we relate to our community and who God is calling us to become. It will be used as a tool to help us call our new pastor. In order to prepare the profile, we are seeking your input into the process. In other words... We Will Need Your Help!

In September, we will be sending a survey seeking your input. The survey will take about 45 minutes to complete. You will have the option to complete the survey online, on paper, or via personal interview, whatever works best for you. This survey is very important, as it will help the committee in finding a pastor that most closely matches the congregation's needs.

The compiled results of the survey along with input from prior and future information sharing sessions, as well as direct input to the members of the committee will be used to complete our profile. We will then submit this profile so prospective candidates may apply for our call.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact a search committee member directly. They will take your comments back to the committee. The members of the committee are Gail Bergan, Mary Clark, Beau Doherty, Jeff Fraulino, Beth Gould-Ruitto, Cari Klick, Michael Klick, Elaine Law, Rob Lentz, Kristin Medvecky, Karen Rettich, and Louise Wright. **The Search Committee members wear pink name tags during services and coffee hours.**

An Important Message from Pastor Julie: Renewal Gathering on September 17

The purpose of the renewal gatherings is to do, as a church body, honest reflection and be together in discernment about the church's past and to create a fresh, new future. In particular, the renewal gatherings give valuable data and a powerful sense of the church's mission and identity, so the search committee may design and create a church profile that authentically reflects the church. In this way, chances are greater that you will end up with a settled pastor who is a "good match."

It's important that you show up, not only to these gatherings, but to worship and other activities as well. The search committee represents YOU, the church members. They are empowered to do their job because you participate, in good faith and with enthusiasm for their undertaking.

September 17 we will look at the next to last question together: *Who is my neighbor?* Are we inviting, attracting, welcoming all kinds of God's people? Where is the church on being Open & Affirming? A *WISE* congregation (a congregation especially focused on mental health)? One who supports families and children? A focus on the poor? The outcast? The lonely? Where is the focus? *Is there a focus?* How might the church engage in getting the word out?

Think on these things and come prepared to take a deep dive into them at our Second Hour on September 17.

P.S. It will be fun. :)

CALLING ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: THIS MESSAGE IS FOR YOU !!

There is exciting news at First Church! A new youth group is being formed for high school age students. This group will be led by Louise Wright, a newcomer to our church and Ann Labby, whom many of you know from church school and confirmation class. These two women bring years of experience leading youth groups and look forward to seeing you at an informational gathering on September 17.

Many of you have grown up in the church school, some of you were confirmed, so what is next? A youth group that will focus on living and growing in your faith. Mission work, service projects, group retreats, conversations, games, sharing. This youth group will offer all this and more, and is open to youth from our church as well as others, so bring a friend and join Ann and Louise on Sunday, September 17, from 3:30-5:00 p.m.

Weather permitting, the group will gather by the gazebo for a time of fun, food and getting to know one another, with the hope that with your ideas and input, a plan can be formed for creating a high school youth group in the church. There will be corn hole, ladder ball and can jam, snacks and conversation. In the event of rain, the group will gather in Fellowship Hall.

Pass the word among your friends! All are welcome!

When: Sunday, September 17, 2023 from 3:30 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Where: First Congregational Church, Portland. The back lawn by the gazebo



Louise Wright (left) and Ann Labby take a break from planning the informational session for the new high school youth group to be held on September 17.

“O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!”
Psalm 95: 1-2



Do you love to sing? Please consider joining the choir!

Rehearsals are held on Thursdays from 6:30 - 7:30 p.m. and Sundays at 9:15 a.m.



**Women's Fellowship
 Celebrate Good Times - Come On!**

Monday, September 18

6:00 p.m.

Pot Luck Dinner and Meeting

Do you recognize the familiar lyrics above from the song “Celebration,” a 1980 song by the American band Kool & the Gang? Were you singing along as you read the words? Celebrating is what the Women’s Fellowship will do when they gather to honor the 187th birthday of the Women’s Fellowship in our church. What was the Ladies Benevolent Society of 1836? Who were the Ladies of the Missionary Union? Join the celebration and learn a little history of our Women’s Fellowship and view an historical display. Be part of the discussion to plan the future.

As this is a potluck dinner, attendees are asked to bring a favorite hot dish or salad. Beverages and dessert will be provided as a party would not be complete without a birthday cake. Come on and celebrate the good times that are always enjoyed when the women of our church gather in fellowship. Your presence is very important! If you cannot make the dinner, please come for dessert and the meeting.

**“We're gonna have a good time tonight
 Let's celebrate, it's all right.
 Yahoo!”**

Women’s Fellowship Booklets Available!

Beginning in September, please pick up a Women’s Fellowship booklet that will be located in the sanctuary and in the fellowship hall. Read about the programs being offered by the Women’s Fellowship, such as the Prayer Shawl Ministry now in its 18th year, and the new Mardi Gras fundraiser that will be held on February 3, 2024. The fellowship of women in our church includes every woman, young and old, member or “friend” of the church. We hope all women will be inspired to participate in some way this coming church year.

News for Children and Their Parents

Church School will resume on September 10 and is available for children in kindergarten through 8th grade. Children will begin their morning in the worship service with their families, and go to Fellowship Hall for Church School following the Children's Message.

Infant/Toddler Care will be provided in the infant/toddler area in Fellowship Hall beginning at 9:45. Parents may bring young children directly to Fellowship Hall before worship begins or anytime during worship.

**** Please note that on Sunday, September 3, although there will be no church school, children of that age will begin by attending the worship service, and will then be dismissed to the Fellowship Hall for activities.**

A SIGN UP POSTER for Church school teachers and helpers for the coming year is located in the Fellowship Hall. Please consider how you might be able to help and speak to Mary Clark if you have questions. Thank you!

Whenever you see a tree

BY PADMA VENKATRAMAN

Think
how many long years
this tree waited as a seed
for an animal or bird or wind or rain
to maybe carry it to maybe the right spot
where again it waited months for seasons to change
until time and temperature were fine enough to coax it
to swell and burst its hard shell so it could send slender roots
to clutch at grains of soil and let tender shoots reach toward the sun
Think how many decades or centuries it thickened and climbed and grew
taller and deeper never knowing if it would find enough water or light
or when conditions would be right so it could keep on spreading leaves
adding blossoms and dancing
Next time
you see
a tree
think
how
much
hope
it holds

Recap of Summer Happenings Around and About

Summer Worship Services with Middletown's First Church and South Church: The combined worship services with the two other UCC churches were very well received and have generated a great deal of positive feedback. It was great to welcome the Middletown churches as their members "traveled across the bridge" to worship with us. Being from "city churches" surrounded by sidewalks and buildings, our guests were duly impressed with our beautiful bright and airy sanctuary and our church's setting surrounded by nature, as well as the Memorial Garden. At the final service of the summer, Pastor Will from First Church spoke of his desire for the three churches to do more things together. If there is something you particularly liked in one of the worship services, or if you have an idea for further collaboration, please mail the church office. It is always enriching to have worship that incorporates something a little different and meaningful.

New Roof: In the heat of the summer and under the watchful eyes of church president Joe Aresco and facilities chairperson Linda Cunningham, a new roof was installed on the church. Thank you to all those who contributed to the fund to make this a reality. Your generosity is heartwarming and most appreciated!

Fellowship Events: Whether having a dish of ice cream and playing a game at the Ice Cream Social on July 29 or the relaxing and listening to the musical concert provided by the Foley Brothers and Dave Porteus on August 20, attendees at these summer events enjoyed seeing old friends and welcoming guests. The "free will offering" at the concert totaled \$365, which was split between the Portland Food Bank and Amazing Grace in Middletown. In addition, 48 pounds of food was also collected. Thank you one and all for your donations.

Donations Needed for Hawaii Disaster Relief

The Hawaii Conference of the UCC has used existing disaster relief to issue aid for gas, clothes, toiletries and other immediate needs for victims of the recent fires. The missions board is collecting to assist in the effort to support those impacted by the recent wildfires in Hawaii. There are envelopes in the pews or checks may be mailed to the church, noting UCC Hawaii relief fund in the memo. Thank you for your support!

Looking Ahead: Dates to Remember

- September 3: Podium Dedication in Honor of Rev. Jane Hawken
- September 5: Church Council Meeting
- September 7: Choir Practices Resume
- September 10: Celebration Sunday
- September 13: Diaconate Meeting
- September 17: Renewal Gathering Second Hour
- September 17: Youth Group Informational Gathering
- September 18: Women's Fellowship Meeting and PotLuck
- September 19: Membership Committee Meeting
- October 1: World Wide Communion Service with Zion Lutheran Church

A MESSAGE OF INSPIRATION FROM SUZANNE ROBERTS MY MS STORY 2023

Here we go again! 20 years of biking in BIKEMS - wow! How did time go by so fast? In 2003 I was diagnosed with Relapsing-Remitting MS, a relief to have answers to symptoms I had for years. Relief also comes with uncertainties - will I be able to walk (my diagnosing Neurologist said likely not in a year due to the severity of my symptoms), will I be able to work, be physically active which is my salvation and my therapy, what can I expect to feel/happen? Well, your mindset can carry you deeper into the "what if's" in a negative way or soar you through the "what if's" in a positive way - anyone that knows me knows I am a glass half-full, optimistic person - I deal with reality but also always try to find the good/positive and believe immensely in the power of our thoughts. I chose to focus on the WHAT IF in a year I WILL be walking, WHAT IF I have some problems but I am okay, WHAT IF, I can continue to bike hike run, have my life? Well, that is what happened! I biked my first BIKEMS in 2003 and did 175 miles! I have had relapses and face daily struggles/ reminders I have MS, but I know how to navigate these difficulties and I am so thankful to be here and be able to bike in my 20th year anniversary of BIKEMS! I have complete 200 miles in 2 days for most of these 20 years - only thing stopping me - weather and a crash one year! Mind over matter!

I was recently diagnosed with another auto-immune disease, Addison's Disease, which is even more scary and life-threatening, but again, relieved to have answers to health issues I have had for years, but also many uncertainties. I choose to focus on the RIGHT NOW and how I am verses how I may be- again, mind over matter. If I gave into how I truly feel most days, I would not be doing much in my life- I am very thankful for my positive attitude and the ability to do this- I 100% get this from my mom who exuded positivity, radiance and grace no matter what the adversity.

September 2023 my team, Rebels With A Cause, will be biking to raise money and awareness of MS- this is the biggest fundraiser for the MS Society in the Southeast, attracting thousands of cyclists and support. My team and I are hoping to raise 20k for 20years- we can do it with your support- every dollar counts and I am so thankful for any support that is given. THANK YOU! Keep on keeping on!

Please note: If you wish to make a donation to sponsor Suzanne, google BIKEMS which takes you to the MS Society website, where you can search for her team by name.

The First Congregational Church of Portland, CT

United Church of Christ

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**Our congregation is open and affirming.
No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,
You are welcome here.**