

# The LINK



UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF PATCHOGUE

Since 1791

December 2023



## Advent

Can you believe it's December already? Time has flown by, but our journey at the United Methodist Church of Patchogue has been nothing short of amazing. We've had the privilege of touching the hearts of many individuals in the community through our various initiatives such as the food pantry, Wesley dinners, Thanksgiving dinner, Holiday tea party, and Christmas shoe boxes. As Pastor, I am proud to lead a church that is so dedicated to serving the community.

Allow me to extend a warm welcome to the Advent season, where we anticipate the birth of Jesus Christ. This period is characterized by joy and hope, and it holds significant meaning in the church. Although Advent is not explicitly mentioned

in the bible, it is inspired by scripture.

Isaiah, a messianic prophet, foretold Jesus's birth centuries before it took place: *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel."* (Isaiah 7:14)

The four weeks of Advent start four Sundays before Christmas Day. This is a season of reflection, penance, and expectancy as we prepare our homes and our souls to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

The Advent wreath is the most common way to mark the passage of each week, with a new candle being lit every Sunday in Advent and on Christmas Day. Each candle has a specific meaning that relates to the Advent week it represents.

The first week of Advent starts on the first Sunday of Advent, known

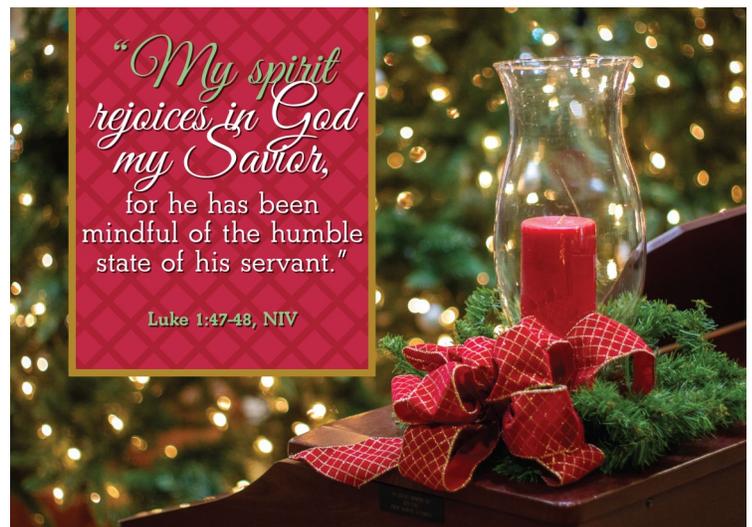
as Advent Sunday. On this Sunday we light the Prophecy Candle, which is purple. This candle symbolizes Hope, which reminds us of all that Jesus is coming and that He will lead us out of darkness and into salvation.

On the second Sunday of Advent, we light a second candle, known as the Bethlehem Candle, which is also purple. This

**Continued on Page 2**

## WORSHIP IN DECEMBER

- Dec 3**— Rev. Dr. Debbie San Pablo, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
- Dec 10**—Rev. Dr. Debbie San Pablo, Psalm 78:1-7
- Dec 17**—Rev. Dr. Debbie San Pablo, Psalm 126
- Dec 24**—Rev. Dr. Debbie San Pablo, Isaiah 9:2-7
- Dec. 24, 7:00 pm**—Christmas Eve Candlelight Service
- Dec 31**—Rev. Dr. Debbie San Pablo, Psalm 148



*"My spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."*

Luke 1:47-48, NIV

## Circle of Concern

### Bereavement

The family of **Richard Rubino**.

The **Garber** Family who recently lost a sister. (Stanita Garber)

### Healing

**Laura Clifford** who is scheduled for surgery on Tuesday. (Diane Zimmerman)

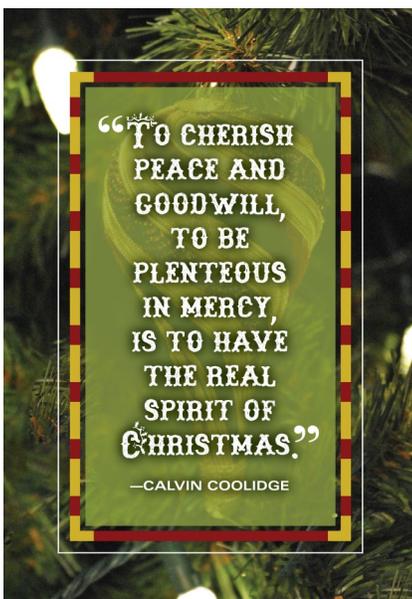
**Dawn** who has battled breast cancer and has recently had a biopsy on her uterus. (Barbara Lyons)

### Continued Prayers

Steven Rice, Rhoda Willis, Daisy Hill, Brenda Miller, Cynthia, Dolores, Ken Drury, Jason Schweitzer, Ken Cleary, Anita Helfst, Paul Halayko, Diane Lyons, James Broxton, Tony Gee, Carol, Jill Kiefer Chaskin, Phyllis Ricchi, Jazmin Kerr, Linda Werner, Nancy Ciancimino., Cheryl, Flo Carde, Brianna (child w/ brain cancer), Suzanne Tierney, Kimberly Helfst

—Kathy Keating

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## Advent (From Page 1)

candle represents Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. During the second week of Advent we are invited to reflect on God's promise of universal peace through Christ and how we can be an incarnation of that peace in our daily lives by helping those in need.

The third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday and is all about Joy. Gaudete is the Latin word for "Rejoice," and on this Sunday we light the Shepherd's Candle. The third candle is pink, which is the liturgical color that represents joy. The joy we celebrate this week is the joy of our faith, the joy that we have experienced so far this season, and the joy at the coming of Christ.

The fourth Sunday of Advent is all about Love—specifically, God's love for the world, Christ's love for all of us, and our love for our neighbors. The fourth candle on the advent wreath is once again purple, and it is known as the Angel's Candle. This candle serves as a reminder of the angel's message, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

There is a fifth candle in the center of the Advent. This candle is called the Christ Candle and it is white to represent Christ's purity. It is lit on either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day to celebrate the arrival of Jesus. Lighting the Christ Candle along with the other four candles represents the end of the Advent season.

Let me offer you this prayer of joy and peace. As we celebrate this joyful season, Father in Heaven, we ask for your guidance in sharing in the song of

the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and the worship of the wise men. Let us honor the birth of Jesus with open hearts and minds. May we close the doors of hate and open the doors of love all over the world. With every gift and greeting, let kindness and good desires prevail. By the blessing that Christ brings, may we be delivered from evil and taught to be merry with clean hearts. During this Christmas season, let us rejoice in the knowledge that we are your children. And as we lay our heads to rest, let us do so with grateful thoughts, both forgiving and forgiven. May this day and every day be filled with peace and goodwill. Amen.

From my family to yours, we wish you a Blessed Merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

—Pastor Debbie



## Messiah at Patchogue UMC

The Choral Society of the Moriches, under the direction of Martha Campanile, Dec. 8, 7:30 pm.

# United Methodist Church of Patchogue December 2023

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
					1 7:30 p.m.– Pentecostal	2
3 10:00 a.m.– Wor- ship/Sunday School 4:00 p.m.–BAFFA Concert 6:00 p.m.– Pentecostal	4 Office Closed 7:00 p.m.–AA	5 10:00 a.m.– Noon–Food Pantry 7:00 p.m.–AA	6 7:30 p.m.– Pentecostal	7 7:00 p.m.–AA	8 7:30 p.m.– Pentecostal 7:30 p.m.– Messiah Concert	9
10 10:00 a.m.– Worship/Sunday School 6:00 p.m.– Pentecostal	11 Office Closed 7:00 p.m.–AA	12 10:00 a.m.– Noon–Food Pantry 7:00 p.m.–AA	13 7:30 p.m.– Pentecostal	14 7:00 p.m.–AA	15 7:30 p.m.– Pentecostal	16
17 10:00 a.m.– Worship/Sunday School 6:00 p.m.– Pentecostal	18 Office Closed 7:00 p.m.–AA 7:00 p.m.– Blue Christmas	19 10:00 a.m.– Noon–Food Pantry 7:00 p.m.–AA	20 7:30 p.m.– Pentecostal	21 7:00 p.m.–AA	22 7:30 p.m.– Pentecostal	23
24 10:00 a.m.– Wor- ship/Sunday School 6:00 p.m.– Pentecostal 7:00 p.m.– Christmas Eve	25 Merry Christmas Office Closed 7:00 p.m.–AA	26 10:00 a.m.– Noon–Food Pantry 7:00 p.m.–AA	27 7:30 p.m.– Pentecostal	28 7:00 p.m.–AA	29 7:30 p.m.– Pentecostal	30
31 10:00 a.m.– Worship/Sunday School 6:00 p.m.– Pentecostal						

## 'Tis The Season

When I was a child, the Christmas holiday season was magical. It was-



n't just the anticipation of gifts under the tree or the decorating of that tree with sparkly tinsel, decorated

glass ornaments and multi colored lights. It wasn't just stretching out under that tree, while operating my dad's American Flyer trains and inhaling the heady scent of pine. And it wasn't just the singing of carols at church or at home, gathered around my mother's piano, while she played song after song and we sang enthusiastically, if not entirely on key.

Actually, it was all these things and more. Much more. Even to this day, whenever I think of Christmas, a more peaceful mood descends and nudges out the worries and irritations of daily life. The weather may be cold, even bitter, but the atmosphere seems softer, gentler.

Since time immemorial, human beings have sought to bring light to the darkest part of winter, the winter solstice. To relieve the unremitting greyness of short days and long nights. To reassure themselves that life will continue and Spring will return. Ceremonies and celebrations took place; families and communities gathered together. The early Christian church, recognizing the profound human need for hope, and wanting to override the ancient solstice celebrations, placed the celebration of Jesus birth right in the solstice time frame.

(Most Biblical scholars think Jesus was born in the Spring.)

Who better than the Prince of Peace to restore hope? Who better than the one who came to teach us how to live in God pleasing ways, to offer redemption and reconciliation with the Divine? And who taught us how to live in harmony with each other.

When the Magi left their homes and observatories, it wasn't just to gain more knowledge or confirm ancient prophecies. They were following the innermost yearning of their hearts. They were hoping that their long journey that ended at a shabby manger would confirm that we are, in fact, accepted and loved by the Divine, by that which is so much greater than we are.

To me, this is the foundation of Christmas joy and celebration. That Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, came to us to offer hope. We can learn to love one another as God loves us. We can learn to accept one another as God accepts us. We can appreciate our differences and cherish our commonalities. We can be what God has always wanted us to be.

I continue to delight in the outer trappings of Christmas—the decorations, the caroling, and, yes, the presents. I truly cherish the time spent with family and friends. But, I also know that the true joy of Christmas lies with in our hearts and spirits, when we open them to the teachings of Jesus.

May true joy be yours and those you love this Christmas and through the coming year.

—Barbara Becker

## Bishops Call For Peacemaking in Holy Land

Amid Israel's ongoing bombardment of Gaza in response to Hamas' terrorist assault, the United Methodist Council of Bishops called for both prayer and work toward lasting peace in the Holy Land.

The bishops also denounced the antisemitism, Islamophobia and hate crimes that are brutalizing people well beyond the war-torn region.

"We value all life," the bishops said in a statement released Nov. 10 during their fall meeting. "We encourage every effort toward a peaceful solution. We call for the release of hostages and for the killing to stop. We also call for the immediate allowance of unrestricted humanitarian assistance."

The bishops' statement comes amid growing international calls for a cease-fire in Gaza to provide basic necessities to civilians, treat the wounded and halt the killing — especially of children.

Also last week, the Churches for Middle East Peace and 30 U.S. Christian leaders called on U.S. President Biden and his administration to support an immediate cease-fire, de-escalation and restraint by all involved in the conflict. Among the letter's signers were top executives of three United Methodist agencies: Roland Fernandes of Global Ministries, John Hill of Church and Society, and Sally Vonner of United Women in Faith.

"Peace with justice is the only lasting solution that will protect the long-term security and sustainability of the State of Israel and the self-determination and independence of

Palestinians,” the Christian leaders’ letter said with **bolding** for emphasis. This most recent convulsion of violence began when Hamas attacked southern Israel during the festive Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah on Oct. 7 — killing an estimated 1,200 people and seizing hostages. It was widely reported as the deadliest day for Jewish people since the Holocaust. Israeli officials estimate about 240 hostages remain held in Gaza.

Since the incursion, Israel has responded with air and ground strikes in Gaza in an effort to root out Hamas — which has mixed in with the civilian population. The highly urbanized Gaza Strip has a population of about 2.3 million living in an area only about 20 square miles bigger than Little Rock, Arkansas.

Palestinian health officials estimate the recent violence has killed about 11,000 people — including more than 3,600 children. According to the global charity Save the Children, the number of children in Gaza reported killed in three weeks has surpassed the annual number of children killed across the world’s conflict zones since 2019.

Over the weekend, hospital staff reported that fuel had run out at both Shifa and al-Quds hospitals in northern Gaza and that they are no longer operational. Gaza’s health ministry says that at least five patients have died in part due to the lack of fuel, including at least three babies. The hospitals’ struggles come as Hamas militants and Israeli soldiers clash nearby. Israel and Hamas are exchanging blame over the lack of fuel at Shifa hospital.

The United Methodist bishops’ statement makes no mention of the phrase “cease-fire.” It came out the

same day U.S. leaders announced that Israel had agreed to begin daily four-hour pauses in northern Gaza to allow people to flee hostilities.

Indiana Conference Bishop Julius C. Trimble, who chairs the bishops’ Justice and Reconciliation Committee that drafted the statement, said he sees hope for the pauses to address some humanitarian concerns. However, he said the bishops are calling for something more enduring than a cease-fire.

“The essence of our concern is to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and not ignore the pain that has been experienced by people in Israel, the Palestinians, the people who are being held hostage,” Trimble said. “So, we think that the role of the bishops is not only to call on people to pray but also to call on us to encourage the investment in peacemaking.”

Trimble has traveled nine times to the Holy Land, where he has gotten to know both Israelis and Palestinians. He urged United Methodists to remember that many Jews, Christians and Muslims living in the Middle East have worked together for peace for a long time, though as the current crisis shows, not always successfully.

“It’s not sufficient to identify who’s to blame or who’s responsible for one tragedy after another,” Trimble said. “But how can we as a human family really invest in the hard work of peacemaking?”

On the same day the bishops released their statement, Christian leaders in Jerusalem announced they were preparing for a solemn Advent and Christmastide.

Usually, this time of year sees a number of pilgrims from around the globe traveling to celebrate Christ’s birth at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and other sacred sites in the life of Jesus. This year, the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem encourage their flocks to avoid unnecessary festivities, focus on the spiritual meaning of Christmas, advocate for peace and bring relief to the afflicted.

“In these ways, we believe, we will be standing in support of those continuing to suffer — just as Christ did with us in his Incarnation,” the Jerusalem Christian leaders said in their statement.

They add their hope that “all of God’s children might receive the hope of a New Jerusalem in the presence of the Almighty, where ‘death shall be no more, neither mourning, nor crying, nor pain, for the former things have passed away’ (Revelation 21:4).”

The United Methodist Council of Bishops President Thomas J. Bickerton previously released a statement on the council’s behalf immediately after that brutality. That earlier statement condemned the attack on Israel and decried the deaths of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire. The full council’s most recent statement also offers solidarity with those in pain and seeks a better way.

“We cannot stand by as though God is not weeping when the innocent, including children, are dying,” the bishops’ Nov. 10 statement concludes. “We cannot abandon the way of Peace.”

—Heather Hahn, UMNS

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The deadline for the January issue  
of **The Link** is December 22.  
Please email your copy to [gbhoag@optonline.net](mailto:gbhoag@optonline.net).

## Artificial Intelligence and Church

Artificial intelligence technology, the subject of buzz and anxiety at the moment, has made its way to religion circles.



Pastor Jay Cooper, who heads Violet Crown City Church, a United Methodist congregation in Austin, Texas, took AI out for a spin recently at his Sept. 17 worship service.

The verdict? Interesting, but something was missing.

"They were glad we did it," Cooper said of his congregation, "and let's not do it again."

Cooper used ChatGPT to put together the entire worship service, including the sermon and an original song. He said the result was "a stilted atmosphere."

"The human element was lacking," he said. "It seemed to in some way prevent us from connecting with each other. ... The heart was missing."

AI "leverages computers and machines to mimic the problem-solving and decision-making capabilities of the human mind," according to the IBM website. It has been around since the 1950s, and is used to power web search engines and self-driving cars, can compete in games of strategy such as chess, and create works such as songs, sermons and prose by using data collected on the internet.

AI-based software transcribed the interviews for this story. The remain-

ing Beatles created a new song, "Now and Then," using AI to extract John Lennon's vocals from a poorly recorded demo cassette tape he made in the 1970s.

"The CEO of Google said that this is bigger than fire, bigger than electricity," said the Rev. James Lee, director of communications for the Greater New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania conferences. "I really believe that ... this is going to be how we do everything within the next five to 10 years."

Cooper said he has "strong feelings" against using AI to write a sermon again.

"Even if it's not as eloquent or if it's a little messy or last minute, it needs to be from the heart of the pastor."

Lee concurs. "ChatGBT is pretty bad at writing good sermons. That's my own opinion, but they're very vanilla," he said.

Philip Clayton, Ingraham Professor of Theology at Claremont School of Theology, said that religion tends to be slow to pick up on new technology.

"I think our fear of technology is not a good thing, especially when we're trying to attract younger people to be involved in churches," he said. "AI is a means to get something done, like using a typewriter years ago," he added. "For us as Christians, the key question is, 'Do the means become the end?'"

A sermon is an attempt to speak the word of God to people of God assembled at a particular time and place, Clayton said.

"It takes prayer, it takes the knowledge of the people, it takes allusions to my community in my country and all kinds of frameworks," he said. "If I don't do that task, what have I carried out? What are my responsibilities as one who rightly divines the word of God?"

Lee suggests treating AI technology "as an intern."

"They are able to do a lot of work for you and support you, and almost treat them like an additional member of the team," he said.

The Rev. Stacy Minger, associate professor of preaching at Asbury Theological Seminary, believes AI could be helpful as long as the preacher does their due diligence of preparation.

"The way I teach preaching is that the preacher invests in praying over the text, reading the text and using all of their biblical studies and skills, and then they consult the commentaries or the scholars," she said.

"If you're maybe missing an illustration or missing a transition or there's something that just hasn't kind of come together and you're banging your head against the wall, I think at that point, after you've done all of your own work, that it could be a helpful tool."

It is important to verify the work of programs like ChatGPT, said Ted Vial, the Potthoff Professor of Theology and Modern Western Religious Thought and vice president of innovation, learning and institutional research at Iliff School of Theology.

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## A.I. In Church (From Page 7)

“There’s a lot of bad information (on the internet),” Vial said. “My experience with the current level of (AI) sophistication is they can produce a ... clearly written and well-organized essay. ... They’re not very inspirational.”

AI programs do not include the most current information, he said. “I think ChatGPT is built on data that goes through November of 2021,” Vial said. “So, if sermons are supposed to relate what’s happening in the world to the Bible, it’s going to be out of date.”

Humans have emotions and creativity that are hard for a computer to emulate, he said.

But the technology continues to improve.

“Whatever humans can do, I’m pretty sure AI will be able to do it

soon also,” Vial said. “So, the question isn’t, ‘Would you need a human?’ ... The question is, ‘Are you and your congregation OK with a service that’s produced by a machine?’”

Even if the answer to that is “No,” there will be pastors who want to use it because it makes their lives easier, he added.

“If it’s a personal connection between the pastor and a community, then it’s important to have the pastor’s voice and personality,” Vial said. “If it’s exegesis of a text, there may not be anything wrong with having a computer produce it.”

Looking at it from another direction, a pastor might be cheating themselves as well as their congregation if they skip doing most of the work, Minger said.

“I would be concerned that if you’re not spending that time, using

all of your biblical study skills and prayerfully invested in the reading of Scripture, that you as a preacher are skipping over a wonderful formative opportunity in your own life,” she said.

“As I’m hammering out a sermon, I’m really wrestling with it,” she said. “You need images and metaphors, word choices and illustrations.

“And so, as preachers, it’s not only that we would be short-circuiting the congregation, I think we would be tamping down our own creative outlets in the effort to become more efficient.”

—Jim Patterson, UMNS

## December Birthdays

**Dec 8** Gavin Reese Bende

**Dec 10** Janet Alt

**Dec 14** Steven Rice

**Dec 19** Michelle Ryan