

GABRIEL'S HORN

First Congregational United Church of Christ

February 2021



Dear Beloved Community,

In February, we bear witness to the beauty of winter softening toward spring. The wintry mixes are already giving way to thawing sun and rain. The seeds beginning to quicken in the dark belly of the earth will root down and break open, some even sending forth tentative shoots of green. The sunlight will lengthen our days, as birds prepare for long flights home.

The Spirit also quickens within the heart of our community, as we begin our Lenten journey toward the cross and the new life of resurrection. It is a journey that takes us straight through the realities of human suffering and Jesus' death. The 40 days of Lent are a time when we remember our frailty, brokenness, and the preciousness of human life. It is an awakening time, when we are invited to be in solidarity with those who suffer, a time when we deepen our spiritual lives.

We will begin this new liturgical season of Lent with new leadership, having blessed an outstanding slate of leaders who will pick up the torch to move us forward. I am so grateful that John Smeltzer and Susan Anderson will bless us with their many gifts as Moderator and Assistant Moderator in 2021. Commissions are convening their first meetings and selecting Council representatives and chairpersons as we continue to meet this moment with the characteristic commitment of our congregation.

Our youth too will embark on a new thing this month as we begin our Confirm Not Conform journey. Seven phenomenal youth—Myles Bohrer-Purnell, Liam Chaffee Hobbs, Jessica Chaffee Hobbs, Joseph Darling-LaGamma, Tadashi Dodge, Lucas Gerlach-Mack, and Sofia Prentice have each been paired with a mentor who will accompany them as they delve into the formative aspects of our Christian faith, ask the difficult questions, articulate for themselves what it is that they believe, and discern their role in responsibly stewarding this community of faith. We celebrate their courage in committing themselves to this journey as we prepare to visit the houses of worship of other religious traditions, serve together, and learn about some of the most exciting social justice organizations in the district. I ask you to intentionally pray for them and all of us who will be part of this journey; that God might draw near, our fellowship might deepen, and the gifts of these youth might be a blessing to all.

This month we also anticipate the launch of our Racial Justice Audit, a journey we will walk together for the coming year as we seek to faithfully respond to our calling to become a multi-racial, multi-cultural

(continued on page 2)

congregation. This journey will lead us into the interior landscape of our hearts as well as into the internal systems, identity, and ministry of our common life together. In seeking to faithfully respond to the call to racial justice, we will develop short-term and long-range plans that will help transform us into an incarnational community that embodies and expresses the fuller range of voices and gifts in our midst and beyond our doors.

Though all these journeys will begin this month, they are truly just one part of our wide, expansive journey with God. Like planted seeds, I pray that we too will root down in rich soil, break open, and send forth green shoots to greet the light. May imagination, discernment, truth-telling, and creativity quicken as they await the nourishment of rain and sun. I especially invite you to join us in this common labor of love. We need your voice, hands, and heart on this journey. I trust God will guide us straight through the realities of suffering and death, and into the new life of resurrection.

In Gratitude, Rev. Amanda

An Invitation to Our Racial Justice Audit

By Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss

As we seek to be a church that lives into our multi-racial, multi-cultural calling, this month we will launch a Racial Justice Audit. This yearlong process will invite us to assess every area of our ministry and life together through the lens of racial justice. We will ask challenging questions, conduct surveys and interviews, and talk deeply about how we might align our ministries with our commitment to dismantle racism within and without. We will do this using a resource that will be hot off the presses from the Central Atlantic Conference. In fact, First Church will be one of the few congregations serving as part of their pilot program for this resource, and through our learnings, other churches in the conference will be better positioned to enter into this work as well. We seek to undergo this audit collaboratively as we plan to develop short-term and long-range plans to live into our racial justice calling.

In the first quarter of the year, we will move through the Inquiry Phase of the audit, in which we will begin to discuss what the audit will include, its theological foundation, and develop a common framework of language and understanding. On Sunday, February 14, please plan to attend the after-church nurture to learn more and join the conversation. To read more about the Inquiry Phase, as well as those that follow, [click here](#) to view the working Racial Justice Audit Plan. While this work will be rooted in our Commissions, the process will include reaching out to members and friends of our congregation as well as sibling congregations, so their voices can inform our inquiry. Our Council will be responsible for guiding us through each phase, and our newly re-formed Anti-Racism Task Force will serve as a resource and provide active voices informed by our collective journey to dismantle racism.

How do we raise our consciousness about patterns of privilege, paternalism, and control? How do we honor the labor for racial justice that is part of our history and carry forward this precious legacy? How do we acknowledge the nuances, knowing we have made mistakes? How can we develop and deepen our fellowship with and accountability to communities of color? How might we reform our commitment to inclusive decision-making and power-sharing on all levels? How do we act in solidarity to stand against racial injustice and oppression? How are we called to change? These questions are difficult, but

we will sit with them together, trusting that God's creative, healing power will compel us to find our place in the divine movement for justice. Please join this crucial conversation in the life of our community. We want to hear from you. If you have questions, affirmations, concerns, or gratitude that you wish to express about this process, please connect with me by email, phone, or Zoom. You can also be in touch with our new Moderator, John Smeltzer, and our new Assistant Moderator, Susan Anderson. We are in this together. May God bless our journey.

Church Council

Annual Meeting of the Congregation on January 24, 2021

The Congregation met after church by Zoom and voted to approve the slate of nominations for 2021 church council, officers, and commissions. The congregation then approved the draft 2020 Annual Report with corrections. Thank you to all authors and especially to Cindy Dobbs for rapid turnaround on this massive document sent to the congregation on January 21, 2021.

Moderator Kim Darling introduced the draft plan for a First Church Racial Justice Audit (also sent to the congregation by email on Jan. 21, 2021) This working plan and the Central Atlantic Conference Racial Justice Audit tool will guide the congregation throughout 2021 in an examination of all aspects of our church community. Learn more at a nurture to be held in February.

Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss noted the many accomplishments of the year in living our life as a church in a distanced, online world. Despite the distance First Church welcomed 10 new members, generated a Comprehensive Plan for Dismantling Racism to stand in solidarity with Black Lives, reinstated the Anti-Racism Taskforce, and deepened relationships within the church through the creation of three new small groups. Rev. Amanda thanked Council, staff, and extraordinary volunteers whose leadership and willingness to step up enabled us to have a rich year. She thanked all for caring for each other and participating in the life of the church. In 2021 we will integrate what we have learned about accessibility online into regathering on a hybrid basis, continuing online worship and programs, even when we can regather in person in some measure.

Treasurer David Greer reported on 2020 finances as documented in the 2020 Annual Report. Pledge income at the end of 2020 was 99%, nearly meeting a budget goal set before the pandemic. Building rental brought in 62% of the rental income we anticipated. Actual 2020 income (which included the regularly scheduled transfer of 3% from investment funds) was roughly 50% of revenue projected in the original pre-Covid 2020 budget. We used recent bequest funds to cover the end of year \$74,000 shortfall and balance the budget.

The congregation approved the 2021 budget after Lucille Dickinson, chair of the Special Budget Committee shared details. See the complete budget document in the 2020 Annual Report.

- The budget assumes we will increase onsite use of the building in the second half of 2021 (i.e., rental, worship, and programs)
- Pledge income for 2021 is projected to be steady at \$288,000 with \$276,000 in pledges to date.

- Shared building use agreements income amount reflects an expectation that the flex space will be leased by July. We expect an increase in occasional use rental over 2020, in which only 28% of income expected was realized.
- The endowment benefitted from uneven spikes in stock market earning 13 percent in 2020. As is usual practice 3% of 2020 endowment earnings will support the 2021 budget. See details in the Investment Committee report in the 2020 Annual Report.
- \$520,000 in 2019-2020 bequests have been held apart from the endowment, so that they can be used for strategic investments, and a portion of this will be used to balance the 2021 budget.
- We continue to make an annual investment (\$42,000 in 2021) to our Capital Fund to be used for major system replacement over 50 years.
- Staff salaries, benefits and hours are the same as in 2020. Office expenses are steady. Program expenses are down somewhat. Parish program budgets are similar to 2020, but slightly lower in 2021.

The Budget Committee looked at all requests from commissions and made reductions in a few places given a projected income shortfall of \$110,000 in 2021. Concerns about cuts can be reviewed later in the year, brought to the congregation at spring and fall meetings, so that the budget can be adjusted as needed to reflect reality. Nan McConnell urged the new council to ask bigger questions about the budget, that is, to use bequests to fund bold programs, not just budget deficits, and to address the issues in the sustainability report. Rev. Amanda reminded "there is no reason why we should not grow, membership growth is part of my work and our work together. It is part of becoming more sustainable."

Kim Darling passed leadership responsibility to new 2021 officers John Smeltzer, Moderator and Susan Anderson, Assistant Moderator, and thanked the congregation "for support, for sharing information and for saying yes."

New Moderator John Smeltzer thanked Kim Darling with the gift of a framed image of a middle church stained glass window, for the parable of the wise who built on the rock rather than on shifting sands. He thanked Kim for leadership and for being "the rock that enabled Rev. Amanda to thrive, learn and succeed in her first months at First Church."

Council Capsule for December 2020 and January 2021

Council met on December 1, 2020 and took the following actions.

- Approved the Regathering Taskforce recommendation that First Church continue to worship remotely at least through March 2021.
- Approved Sasha Bruce Youthwork's request to distribute meals and PPE in front of First Church on Mondays 6-8 PM.
- Thanked Alyx Cheng and the Outreach and Membership Commission for church website enhancements which it more easy to use.
- With Rev. Amanda and Rev. Sam thanked all for extensive preparations for Advent and Christmas.

- Reviewed a draft First Church Racial Justice Audit plan, recommended to send the plan to the congregation in January before kick off at the annual meeting on January 24, 2020.

Council met on January 5, 2021 and took the following actions.

- Received the slate of nominations for 2021 council, officers and commission members from Melissa Ho and Nan McConnell.
- Gratefully received a bequest from the estate of Maria Snyder.
- Made implementation suggestions for the Racial Justice Audit Plan addressing accountability and effectiveness.
- Learned that the DC Metropolitan Police Department had reached out to Rev. Amanda. The Captain assigned to our area assured her that foot patrols would be present around Black, O&A or social justice-oriented churches during the expected January 6, 2021 protests.
- Reviewed the proposed 2021 budget in preparation for the January 10, 2021 hearing.
- Approved a draft agenda for the January 24, 2021 annual meeting.

Social Action & Awareness Commission

February 2021 Second Sunday offering

The Second Sunday offering on February 14 will be split between ThriveDC and Seabury's Age-in-Place Program.

ThriveDC works to prevent and end homelessness by providing vulnerable individuals a comprehensive range of services—meals, showers, laundry, and more—to help stabilize their lives. Originally founded and housed at First Church from 1979 to 2009 (when it was known as the Dinner Program for Homeless Women), ThriveDC is comprehensive, professionally staffed, bilingual, and located at 1525 Newton Street NW. It is unique in providing the last available safety net for people facing economic crisis and housing instability while also providing the first step toward independence for people experiencing extended periods of homelessness. They currently serve over 250 people a day and 153,000 meals a year. They keep overhead costs low with a small staff and over 2,000 volunteers a year. As a result, more than 86 cents of every dollar donated to Thrive DC goes directly to serving homeless and low-income men, women, and children. Go to their website at www.thrivedc.org for more information.

Seabury's Age-In-Place program. Having a healthy, safe, and comfortable place to call home is important for all of us. Seabury's Age-In-Place program supports older adults in Washington, D.C.'s Wards 4, 5, and 6 through transformative volunteer service projects that help people stay in their own homes. Age-In-Place engages volunteers as a critical piece of the safety net in D.C. by providing yard work and house-cleaning services.

Age-In-Place services are completely free for clients, which means the program supplies all tools and supplies. Our financial contribution will complement the volunteer component. An intergenerational group from First Church has volunteered with the program several times in the past few years. Go to [Seabury Resources for Aging | Age-In-Place®](#) for more information.

Please give generously for the benefit of these two programs.



Report on Just Peace Offering to Sembrandopaz (Sowing Peace) in Montes Maria, Colombia

Last summer, First Church sent our Just Peace Offering to Sembrandopaz in Colombia in support of a project called "Ecological Protectors" to empower a team of young people to protect and preserve their environment. Montes de Maria is one of the poorest and

driest areas of Colombia where forests have been clear-cut for cattle grazing and small towns dump their garbage into the rivers. It is also an area still recovering from massacres and massive displacement during Colombia's long civil war.

Here is report from Ricardo Esquivia and Lillian Hall on how those funds are being used:

During the pandemic, while people have been quarantining, Sembrandopaz has been working on an eco-tourism project at their farm, Finca Barbara, developing trails, fixing up cabins where visitors can stay, developing places for people to leave their recyclables. They have been running workshops on bio-diversity, including a recent one on snakes and their importance in the eco-system. In the process they have been making some good allies with others who are working to conserve the tropical dry forest. It's been a really good time with masks, social distancing and outdoors.

Now that things are looking up, we have had our first meeting with the local youth to do a walk using the funds your church sent in July. The idea is to walk the creek that starts at a little farm, right next to Villa Barbara, and follow it to where it connects with the Pechilin stream, which has already been documented by the Youth Protectors. The youth will be documenting the conditions of the creek, meeting and integrating those landowners whose land is along the creek, working with them to improve conditions, with the ultimate goal of creating a biological corridor so that the monkeys and other wildlife at Villa Barbara can travel to the Pechilin stream and onward to the Coraza nature reserve up in the Alta Montaña, near another community that Sembrandopaz works with.

We have investigated this on Google Maps and see that this is possible. We have met with youth from the community next to the farm who have no jobs or educational possibilities and are at great risk for getting involved in drugs and crime. We have made contact with the two communities downstream and will be having community assemblies next week to explain the Riverwalk. The walk itself will be within the next two weeks. And while the distance isn't great (12 km) and will only last two days, it will be a great experience for these youth who will learn about their territory, the environmental conditions of the creek, biological corridors, how to use a GPS and carry out an environmental survey, mark critical spots along the way on the GPS to later upload to Google Maps, keep a field journal, and document with photos and videos. Once we have that information, we can make plans with the neighbors not only to protect and reforest, but to promote community eco-tourism as a way to generate income.

YouTube link to the land the Colombian youth will be surveying. [Sembrandopaz](#)

Reflecting on a Year of Remote Worship

When the pandemic hit in March, it upended our congregation's worship life. We Zoomed in to church from our homes, grieving the loss of our sanctuary as a community space, and singing hymns to a recorded choir. We sheltered under blankets and cradled mugs of coffee as we watched Rev. Amanda's sermons from a screen. In moving to online church, we've lost a lot. Yet there are ways my faith has grown and changed for the better in 2020, as we've adjusted to a remote world.

This year we were called, as individuals, to use our creativity to keep our faith active. I never imagined eating "the bread and body of Christ" by way of Cheezits and Trader Joe's wine. I never imagined lighting a vanilla bean Yankee candle for Advent. Without in-person worship we've had to make do. This "making do" has helped me build a faith that emphasizes thoughtful, individual practice.

Practice has always felt secondary to belief in all three of the congregational churches I've been a part of. Congregationalists comfortably ask the big questions, but when it comes to individual practice, we can be lax. While the most conscientious of us may prioritize prayer and Bible-reading Monday through Saturday, I've been more likely to forget about God until Sunday rolls around. I always knew religious practice could be a way to strengthen my faith. I've heard some of my Muslim friends explain their practice of prayer five times a day as "faking it till you make it." They pray five times a day for that one-in-one-hundred chance that they'll feel God's presence and be touched by the divine.

This year, for the first time, I was forced into an individual religious practice of my own. In the spring, I found that the only way to ease my anxiety over the vicious spread of the coronavirus was to sing hymns for a few minutes each day. On Palm Sunday, Rev. Sam encouraged us to find something to wave during worship, so I made a palm frond out of paper towel tubes. For Advent, Rev. Amanda taught us the meaning of each candle in the Advent wreath. I built my own wreath out of branches from my apartment's backyard, using Rev. Amanda's YouTube tutorial as a guide. I lit the candles and closed my eyes for a few minutes each day. In the darkest moments of 2020, I prayed.

My individual practice is led by this church. Thanks to the outstanding work of our ministers, and the thoughtfulness of the Worship Commission, I've been able to take advantage of resources that keep my practice strong, even as my belief in God and grace this year has been challenged—by mass death, by a burning planet, by the people who prayed to our God before they ransacked our Capitol. There aren't many silver linings of a global pandemic. Mine is that this pandemic has helped me figure out how to strengthen my faith through practice, something I hope to continue when the stay-at-home orders lift and we can gather once again.

Abigail Cipparone

A Word on Singing in a Pandemic:

The Wisdom of Alice Parker, Noted American Composer and Arranger

"I have with me, very much in my mind, the image of a New England farm family 200 or 300 years ago, where there's no electricity, there's no telephone, there's none of our modern devices that take us out of where we are. They really are stuck where they are with the people in their particular pod. We have to go back to learning to be happy singing with the people that are right there—not always needing the accompaniment, or the other trained voices, or the great music to hold. That still exists, but what we can do is go back and discover the music that we can make ourselves. Individually we can sing for our own enjoyment, and our own education. We can also sing with the one other person that shares the space with us. Or the family singing with children, as a family, I think, is one of the most important things anybody can do, and we have time for that now—except for the electronic devices if they're always on. We don't do this exploration of sound and making sound ourselves in small groups. We have to get used to being satisfied—not only satisfied but fulfilled by the music that we can make ourselves. Whether it's with voices or instruments, whether it's with toddlers, or primary school kids, or high school kids. There's always a way to make song, but we have to get out of this feeling that we need all this other equipment around us in order to do it. To learn to listen to what goes on when we sing well ourselves."

"When I think of, say, the Continental Congress meeting together and speaking together, there were wildly different points of view, but they were all using the English language well—with emotion, and with feeling. Then we ended up with these incredible documents written in the most beautiful English! There was plenty of turmoil, but there was always this huge common purpose of establishing a country bringing together these 13 original colonies, and they had to be able to keep talking. I also have a lovely memory of reading about Ben Franklin in his old age, walking down the street to the Continental Congress in the afternoons and listening to their debating. There would be about a half an hour left in the day, and he would say, "all right, gentlemen, you've had all your fun of talking. Now let's get one thing done today!" Yes, that is what we so much need. We need a school teacher for Congress to get them in line and thinking about all of the things we have in common. All the things that need doing that we don't do because we're so busy airing our differences. It seems to me just tragic that we cannot be exploring politely, and with respect and affection for one another. We can't be exploring those and getting something done every day the way any housewife has to get something done in order to get the meal on the table, or the garbage out the door. You know the country lives on those things and we just are so embroiled in stamping on other people and in airing our dissatisfactions, that we spend no time at all quietly resolving our very real problems that are all around us."



Worship with Us on Ash Wednesday, February 17

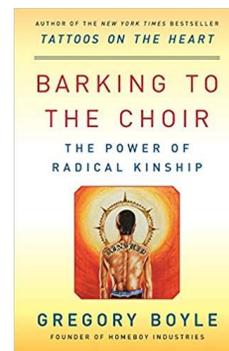
[Click here](#) to worship with us by Zoom at 7:00 PM on Ash Wednesday, February 17, as we participate in an ancient ritual that reminds us of the frailty of human living and our need for healing—the imposition of the ashes. This year, Rev. Amanda will send out a video explaining the meaning of the ashes and offering options for making your own or

opting to use anointing oil as a way to observe this ritual from home. This service marks the start of our six-week Lenten journey together as we prepare our hearts to receive the mystery of Easter. The service will feature personal sharing from members of our congregation. Please join us.

Theology Book Group: Tuesday, March 2 at 6:00 PM

The Theology Book Group will next meet virtually on Tuesday, March 2, at 6 pm, to discuss Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. Boyle, a Jesuit priest, is the founder of Homeboy Industries, the largest program in the world to assist in rehabilitation of former gang members. This book gives theological and spiritual reflections on Boyle's joyful ministry. The link is

<https://georgetown.zoom.us/j/99900391268>. All are welcome.



Outreach and Membership Commission

Updating Our Church Directory

As many of you know, we have moved to an online church directory. Every new year we ask you to please take a moment to go online and update your profile. You can share as much or as little of your contact information as you like. We'd really like to have up-to-date information, especially pictures. A printed version will be coming soon and you may request one from the church office. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact Cindy in the church office at churchoffice@firstuccdc.org

- Use this link to access the directory: <https://servantkeeper.com/member-portal/firstuccdc>
- Use the email that you use for church emails
- Click on "forgot my password"
- Create password
- Edit profile
- To view the full church directory, click on "visit your church or organization's directory"
- If needed, use church password "First1865"

February Calendar

Monday, February 1

6:30 pm Sanctuary Group
7:00 pm Finance Commission
7:30 pm Christian Ed. Commission
7:30 pm Care of Parish Commission
8:00 pm Young Adult Group

Tuesday, February 2

6:30 pm Church Council

Wednesday, February 3

12:15 pm Break Away Meditation

Thursday, February 4

7:30 pm Choir Zoom Meeting

Friday, February 5

2:00 pm Hand Chime Rehearsal

Sunday, February 7

9:30 am Sunday School
10:30 am Worship

Monday, February 8

8:00 pm Young Adult Group

Wednesday, February 10

12:15 pm Break Away Meditation

Thursday, February 11

7:30 pm Choir Zoom meeting

Friday, February 12

2:00 pm Hand Chime Rehearsal

Sunday, February 14

9:30 am Sunday School
10:30 am Worship
11:30 am Adult Nurture
7:00 pm Confirmation

Monday, February 15

8:00 pm Young Adult Group

Tuesday, February 16

Staff Holiday
President's Day (observed)

Wednesday, February 17

12:15 pm Break Away Meditation
7:00 pm Ash Wednesday Service

Thursday, February 18

7:30 pm Choir Zoom meeting

Friday, February 19

2:00 pm Hand Chime Rehearsal

Sunday, February 21

9:30 am Sunday School
10:30 am Worship
7:00 pm Confirmation

Monday, February 22

6:00 pm Monday Small Group
8:00 pm Young Adult Group

Wednesday, February 24

12:15 pm Break Away Meditation

Thursday, February 25

7:30 pm Choir Zoom meeting

Friday, February 26

2:00 pm Hand chime rehearsal

Sunday, February 28

9:30 am Sunday School
10:30 am Worship
7:00 pm Monthly Sunday group
7:00 pm Confirmation



**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Ministers – Friends & Members of the Church
Designated Senior Minister – Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss
Associate Minister – Rev. Sam McFerran
Director of Music – Mr. John Horman
Building Manager – Mr. Byron Adams
Administrative Assistant – Ms. Cindy Dobbs
Sexton – Ms. Ines Marquez
Members in Discernment – Dwight Davis, Lynaya Morris

945 G Street NW, Washington DC 20001
Phone: 202.628.4317 • Fax: 202.347.4911
www.firstuccdc.org