

GABRIEL'S HORN



First Congregational United Church of Christ

December 2025

Beloved Community,

Even as the holiest of seasons unfolds, a jarring statement appears on the editorial page of this month's Christian Century: "It is increasingly difficult to maintain that the United States is even a democracy anymore. We have entered an era of what political scientists call a hybrid regime: part democracy, part autocracy." In the fierce urgency of now, a voracious hunger captivates our hearts—for God to break into this broken world and into our lives once more.



Advent marks a new season in the liturgical year of the Christian calendar, a time of longing for the Word to be made flesh among us. What does it mean to devote four weeks to longing—to that profoundly human desire to see God's justice roll down like waterfalls, to behold the face of Love in the ruins of a world marred by hatred and violence? Our Advent theme this year is "What do you fear? Insisting on Hope this Advent." It invites us to change our relationship with fear—to name it. To gently sit with it. To beseech God to prepare a table before us in the presence of our fear. To walk alongside it compassionately; to breathe into it until we begin to witness its transformation. For our fear tells us what we value. What we cannot live without and will risk everything to save. Our fear reveals our deepest hopes. Please join us after worship on December 14 & 21 for an Advent nurture series "the hopes and fears of all the years" when we will hear stories of where glimmers of hope appear in a fearful world.

The Christmas nativity reminds us that the holy family has been born into this world too—separated by cruel deportation policies, threatened by the powers that would extinguish any threat to their own prosperity. How do we hope in times like these? We begin by telling the Christmas story of old and inviting it to transform our fear into hope, peace, joy, and love. For we believe that the incarnation of God made manifest in the birth of Jesus Christ truly is good news of great joy for all people. Perhaps there is someone in your life whose heart longs for the beauty, wonder, and good news of this season. From our Christmas Pageant (Dec 7) to our Christmas Cantata (Dec 14), and our candle-lit Christmas Eve service

(5:30pm), we hope you will extend personal invitations and offer a warm welcome. Many may need the space for lament and healing provided by our Blue Christmas service (Dec 18 at 7pm).

There are also ample ways to give this season—volunteering at the Drop-In Center, giving through our toy drive, lending your voice or gift of music in worship, supporting our special offerings on the second Sunday of Advent and on Christmas Eve. Each one, an act of hope. Let us prepare the way, readying our hearts to receive God's longing to be with us this Christmas in this blessed, broken world.

In Hope,
Rev. Amanda

Council Capsule

Council Capsule: November 2025

Council convened on November 11th for the tenth meeting of the 2025 term. Key topics included the following:

- Looking back on the many celebratory events that have taken place over the past month, including two baptisms, four new members, and Rev. Sam's tenth-anniversary celebration.
- Preparation for Commitment Sunday and stewardship season.
- Planning for the upcoming Lenten season, including Lenten learning circles.
- Discussion of capital expenses and the bridge fund.
- Planning for next year's fall retreat.

If you have questions, please reach out to Dwan Reece, Moderator (dreece111@verizon.net) or Peter Tracey, Assistant Moderator (peter.l.tracey@gmail.com).

Submitted by Michael Enseki-Frank, Clerk

First Church Annual Staff Appreciation Gift

The First Church Council invites you to participate in this year's Annual Staff Appreciation Offering. This offering is a way for **us to express our gratitude to the staff of First Church**, who work tirelessly to lead and care for our church community.

With this designated offering, First Church will make financial gifts directly to our staff members: Reverend Amanda Hendler-Voss, Reverend Sam McFerran, Byron Adams, Whitney McColley, Ines Marquez Reyes, and Ulung Tanoto.

During the Advent worship services, from December 1st to December 21st, you can

contribute by placing a check (noted as "Staff Appreciation Offering") or cash in the special envelope found at the Usher table. You can also [give online](#) by selecting the Second Sunday option and writing "Annual Staff Appreciation Offering" in the notes.

If you have any questions, please reach out to Dwan Reece or Peter Tracey. Thank you for your support!

Christian Education

Upcoming Volunteer Opportunities at Tommy's Pantry

We have some wonderful opportunities for **all** church members to serve at Tommy's Pantry in December. We have found Tommy's Pantry (tommyspantry.org) to be an excellent organization that helps us love our neighbor through serving individuals and families who are facing hunger and food insecurity. Many of the families that Tommy's Pantry serve are immigrants. Tommy's Pantry is located at the Church of the Ascension (633 Sligo Road, Silver Spring, MD, 20910). Please sign up [here](#) for any of the times listed below and/or email Rev. Sam if you have any questions at mcferran.sam@gmail.com.



- December 13 from 10am-12pm Tommy's Pantry Packing (Grades K+)
- December 20 from 6am-8am Tommy's Pantry Distribution (Grades 5 +)

Christmas Pageant, December 7th

First Church is excited for this year's Christmas Pageant! This wonderful tradition allows the children and youth to joyfully tell and embody the story of Christ's birth, the message of God's love and hope to all of us. This year the theme is "From Wilderness to Home."

Children/Youth Schedule

- 1) Rehearsal – December 6th, 8:30 – 10:00 in Sanctuary
- 2) Performance – December 7th (Arrive by 9:30)





Advent Nurture Series: The Hopes & Fears of All the Years

*And in the dark streets shineth, the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the year are met in thee tonight.*



Join the Rev. Barbara Gerlach on December 14 and December 21 for an Advent nurture series featuring the personal sharing of members of our congregation as we reflect on the theme "The Hopes & Fears of All the Years", from, "O Little Town of Bethlehem". This series will take place following worship from noon - 1:00 in the Community Hall and on Zoom. We will reflect on our hopes and fears, how hope meets fear and lifts, shifts, enlarges us and opens a way. The leading characters in the stories of Advent and

Christmas--Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, the shepherds, and the magi--all experienced fear. But their fear did not stop them from responding to the voice, vision, dream, challenge before them. In saying "yes" to God, they found the courage and encouragement, comfort and joy, the strength and resolve to follow their call. By sharing our stories, we cultivate the courage to also say "yes" to God in fearful time, moving from fear to resilient hope. This Advent, we open ourselves the 'good news' which is louder than our fear. We hope you'll join us.

December 14

Sharing: Angie Ofori Atta, Kenneth Ofori Atta, Anne Mascolino

December 21

Sharing: Jody Kenney, Mike Kenney, Diana Gomez de Molina

Care of Parish

Save the Date for Upcoming Care of Parish Events!

December 7: The Great First Church Cookie Showcase – bring cookies (or other hand-held baked treats) to share and enjoy sampling everyone else's! Bragging rights will be liberally distributed. Extra treats will be left for the Drop-In Center. Leave your contributions in the kitchen before church. Please mark anything that has nuts, is vegan or gluten free.

January 25: Annual Meeting with a soup lunch youth trip fundraiser. Care of Parish and our youth will provide soup, bread and dessert prior to our Annual Meeting. There will be vegan and gluten free options. This is a fundraising event for our youth, so come prepared with some small bills to place in the collection vase.

Coffee Hour

Thank you all for supporting our Coffee Hour time this year. It's a vital ministry of hospitality to visitors to our church, and your support helps ensure that the post-worship time continues to be a warm and welcoming space for all.

We will begin sign ups for 2026 this month. If you want to get ahead, you can go to [this link](#) and sign up for the Sundays that work best for you. We encourage everyone who is able to sign up at least once per 6-month period.

If you're looking for additional information on our Coffee Hour Tradition you can go

- [here](#) for background information
- or [here](#) for instructions

If you have any questions, please email us at copfirstuccdc@gmail.com.

Facilities

Coming up this December

The **Heritage Signature Chorale** will present two holiday concerts at First Church:

- Saturday, December 13th, 6:00 pm. Holiday Concert/Curator's Choice Series 2: "Emmanuel"
- Sunday, December 14th, 7:30 pm. Holiday Concert/Friends & Family Series 1: "Great Joy: A Jazzy Christmas"

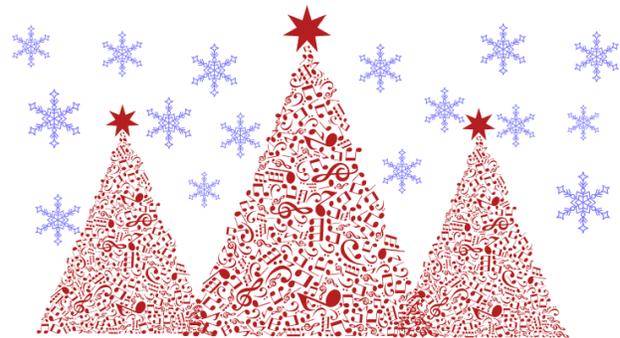


The **Heritage Signature Chorale** is committed to preserving, at the highest artistic level, the performance art traditions of African-American choral music, especially the Negro Spiritual; to elevating the African-American singer and composer in all musical genres; and to bringing a unique interpretation of classical music from America, Europe and other regions of the world. Further details and ticket information can be found [here](#).

Music Ministry

Christmas Cantata: December 14

This year's Christmas Cantata will include familiar carols, exquisite orchestra instrumentation, and the voices of the First Church Choir under the direction of Ulung Tanoto. We will be blessed to welcome many musical guests. Please save the date and invite your friends and family to join us for "A Thrill of Hope" by Joel Raney.



CHRISTMAS CANTATA: A THRILL OF HOPE

COME CELEBRATE THIS HOLY SEASON
THROUGH MUSIC
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC OF DC
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14, 10:30 AM

Nominating

Pledging Time and Talents to First Congregational UCC

At this time of year, the Nominations Committee is in the process of identifying individuals who will give of their time and talents to serve on the Church Council and Commissions. The Council and Commissions, as well as some ad hoc groups, work with our dedicated staff to carry out our ministries.

The Church Council is comprised of Church officers (Moderator, Assistant Moderator, Clerk, Treasurer), representatives of Commissions, and two at-large members. The Council meets monthly to discuss matters that affect the congregation beyond those considered in Commissions. It is also the place where Commissions report on their work to ensure coordination with the Church calendar and communication.

Care of Parish Commission cares for our faith community through monthly potlucks, Sunday fellowship times, and support for special and seasonal events and activities; organizing visits, cards and/or meal trains for members with special joys, sorrows, or illnesses; and planning and facilitating special events including the Easter pancake breakfast, the Christmas cookie swap, memorial and wedding service receptions, and regional member cluster dinners.

Christian Education Commission works closely with the Associate Minister to help the community grow in faith. This team designs adult programming to deepen our faith and imagine how we can live out our faith as agents of compassion, healing, and justice in the world. We develop Sunday School with the goal of helping each child develop an authentic relationship with God that will help the child navigate their journey through life. We foster an intergenerational community where children and youth have a strong sense of belonging to the larger church community.

Outreach and Membership Commission works closely with the Senior Minister to increase the visibility of the Church and grow our membership. We contact visitors, host meetings with those interested in joining the Church or deepening their connection with us, and arrange for current members to mentor new members. We will continue to discuss and plan a more robust "public identity" of the Church, considering the different ways that members, friends, and visitors get information on the church's programs. We also organize a team of ushers to greet those who walk through our doors each week.

Social Action and Awareness Commission works closely with the Senior Minister to provide leadership in social action and justice. We recommend priorities for the congregation's involvement in issues of social concern; collaborate with the national and regional UCC initiatives; take a leadership role in coordination and advocacy; and provide communication and education for the congregation about those issues and priorities.

Committees that fall under our Commission include: the Sanctuary Committee (focused on immigrant justice) and the Anti-Racism Committee.

Worship Commission works closely with the Senior Minister and the Director of Music Ministry to create weekly and special worship services, evaluate and develop themes for worship, and provide set-up and clean-up of the sanctuary. We conduct long-range worship planning; encourage involvement of lay persons in worship (newcomers and members representing a variety of identities with regard to age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability); and examine hymns, prayers, and other forms of liturgy and worship used at First Church for the purpose of enriching our worship experiences.

Finance Commission is responsible for the financial affairs of the Church. Our operating budget is funded from 40% pledged income, 30% building use income, and 20% income from the Endowment Fund. The Commission reviews monthly actual-to-budget comparisons and recommends necessary adjustments to make sure that the budget stays balanced. From early fall through January, the Commission manages the budget development process for the following year (the budget is approved at the annual congregational meeting in late January), and is responsible for the stewardship campaign. The Commission, which includes the Treasurer, also reviews financial processes and procedures, to ensure efficiency and sustainability.

Investment Commission develops an Investment Policy for ratification by the congregation and manages the Endowment Fund. The Investment Policy, ratified in May 2012, contains objectives for maintaining and/or increasing asset value in relation to inflation, growing the endowment, and providing reliable income for the Church's annual operating budget, as well as guidelines for asset allocation and diversification of risk.

Facilities Commission works closely with the Building Manager to develop and implement policies governing the management and use of the property of the Church. Renters include tenants in office space, weekly shared users, and numerous occasional users. The Commission seeks to find the right balance among the maintenance of the church building, the income expected from the building users and, in coordination with Social Action and Awareness, using the building for mission.

If you have an interest in the work of a particular Commission and would like more information, please indicate your interest on your pledge card, or contact a Nominations Committee member: Peter Tracey (Chair), Diane Brenneman, Abigail Cipparone, or Thaddaeus Elliott.

Submitted by Peter Tracey, Nominating Chair and Assistant Moderator

Stewardship

Stewardship – Looking Back, Looking Forward

As First Church's stewardship season has drawn to a close, I have two tasks. First, I want to thank everyone who contributed to making it a success. We seem likely to make our goal! Commissions developed their asking budgets, Finance Commission and Treasurer, John Smeltzer, reviewed the numbers, members gave moving testimonies about what the Church means to them, and you stepped up to pledge. The invaluable Lucille Dickinson worked [and is still working] the numbers. Rev. Amanda offered guidance and encouragement throughout. Thank you all!

Second, if you have not yet pledged, it is NOT TOO LATE! Please do pledge before the month is out. We need to refine the actual budget for 2026 in time to be discussed at a congregational budget hearing on January 11 and finally approved at the Annual Congregational Meeting on January 25. Let's give First Church the means to advance toward realizing God's Dream for justice and peace.

Submitted by Peter Byrne, Finance & Stewardship Chair

Social Action & Awareness

December's Second Sunday Special Offering: UCC's Christmas Fund

In December, we will take up a Second Sunday Offering for the [UCC Christmas Fund](#). The Christmas Fund has been caring for active and retired clergy and lay employees of the United Church of Christ for over 100 years, providing emergency grants, supplementation of small annuities and health premiums, and Christmas "Thank You" gift checks each December to our lower-income retirees. Your gift ensures more healers receive the loving support of the Church in their moment of deepest need.



Antiracism Training in 2026: Save the Dates!

In keeping with our covenant to live into God's calling to be an antiracist church, our Antiracism Committee is excited to share the news that we will offer a six-week antiracism training during Lent in 2026. As we seek to build a critical mass of members accompanying one another on the lifelong journey of antiracism, we especially invite new members and anyone active in church life, especially if you anticipate serving in a leadership capacity. The training will focus on content from the UCC's Sacred Conversations to End Racism. We will offer an online training co-facilitated by Dr. Vivian Jackson of Peoples Congregational UCC and the Rev. Dr. Marty Kuchma, Senior Minister of St. Paul's UCC in MD. The online cohort will meet Monday nights from 7:00-8:30pm on Feb 9 & 23, March 2, 9, 16 & 23. We will also offer an in-person training co-facilitated by Dr. Vivian Jackson and Saskia Campbell, member at Hope UCC and Executive Director of the George Mason University Career Services. The in-person cohort will meet on Wednesday nights from 7:00-8:30pm on Feb 11 & 25, March 4, 11, 18 & 25. The class will cost \$25 (scholarships available), and spaces will be limited. Sign-ups will begin in January. Questions? Connect with Rev. Amanda. We give thanks for this opportunity to connect more meaningfully with God and one another as we face and dismantle racism in our hearts and in the world.

SACRED CONVERSATIONS
TO **END** RACISM



Social Action & Awareness Survey: Please Complete



Following a robust conversation about our justice ministries at the fall retreat, our Social Action & Awareness Commission is conducting an asset-mapping of members and friends in our midst--what justice issues interest you; what work are you already doing; to which organizations are you meaningfully connected? Please help us broaden our understanding of what "doing justice" through our congregation means to you by completing this survey no later than December 15th. This will help us plan for 2026, the 250th anniversary of our nation's independence, as we focus on "Engaged Citizenship: Showing Up in Community." [Click here](#) to complete the survey today.

First Church Annual Christmas Toy Drive

Please consider supporting First Church's Annual Holiday Drive. There are three wonderful ways to help bring joy and cheer to children and families in the DC Area. Please inform Rev. Sam of your gifts so that he can track our progress to each goal. As always, we are deeply grateful for First Church's generosity. We will support three wonderful partners:

Shaw Community Center (shawcommunity.org) – this UCC ministry provides tutoring, mentoring and support to youth in the Shaw neighborhood in DC. Our goal is to raise \$650 for the executive director to purchase the perfect gifts for each youth. To support this cause, please send a check or donate via Paypal to First Church with "SCC" in the note.

Drop-In Center Gift Cards – We are hoping to raise \$500 for holiday gift cards for the Youth at our Tuesday night Drop-in Center. To support this cause, please send a check or donate via Paypal to First Church with "DropIn" in the note.

A Wider Circle – This national leader in helping reduce poverty in the DC region is providing two meaningful ways to bring joy to children and families.

1. **Their annual Toy Drive for children in the DC Area.** Each year, A Wider Circle leads a toy drive to provide gifts to thousands of children in the DC region. Our goal this year is to purchase 100 gifts toward the cause. Here is the [Toy Drive Wish List](#). You can either have them delivered directly to A Wider Circle via the Wish List or bring them to church on Sunday and place them in the Toy Drive box. Remember to inform Rev. Sam of your gifts so we can meet our goal.
2. A Wider Circle's 8th Ward Hub's **Highland Family Gift Partnership.** There are three ways A Wider Circle has invited us to support our neighbors in the Washington Highlands Neighborhood. Learn more at [Highlands Family Gift Partnership Program](#). Through grocery cards, retail cards, or wrapped toys and educational items, we can help our neighbors make the holidays a little more special. Please bring to First Church by December 14th. Rev. Sam will bring all donations to the 8th Ward Hub on December 15th.

Since the pandemic, First Church has sponsored 3 families by providing their children with Christmas gifts. Rev. Sam will receive these gifts by December 14th, and deliver them to the families that week. If you'd like to sponsor one of these families, please contact Rev. Sam. The families include:

- a. Family 1 – a 12 year old boy
- b. Family 2 – an 11 year old girl
- c. Family 3 – an 11 year old girl and 8 year old boy.

Worship

What Do You Fear? Insisting on Hope this Advent



Beginning November 30, Advent ushers in the holy season of anticipation as we prepare our heart to receive the mystery of incarnation through the birth of Jesus Christ into the world. It also marks the start of a new year in the Christian calendar. During Advent, each week we light a candle in our Advent wreath representing hope, peace, joy, and love. We encourage you to create your own Advent wreath with candles at home and to light the candles week by week over meals or in your meditative time. [Click here](#) to view Rev. Amanda's DIY video from a few years ago explaining the tradition of Advent wreaths and how to make one. This year's Advent theme asks "What do you fear?" even as it invites us to show up with courage. Advent devotionals will be available on Sundays in the narthex. With trembling hope, we insist that fear will not have the last word this Advent.

Order Christmas Flowers

As we journey toward Christmas, we anticipate Christmas flowers decorating the sanctuary. We invite you to order a plant in honor or in memory of a loved one whose name will be listed in the worship folder. Please complete either the [digital form](#) or the paper form enclosed in worship folders. You may pay online via Vanco or PayPal (indicate Christmas Flowers) or you may mail a check (with Christmas Flowers on the memo line) to the church at 945 G Street NW, Washington, DC, 20001. The cost per plant is \$20. All orders must be received by December 14th.



Blue Christmas Service: December 18 at 7:00 PM



Join us for a Blue Christmas service on Thursday, December 18th at 7:00 PM in the sanctuary or [click here](#) to join us by Zoom. This year, many of our hearts crave a space for grief and lament amidst "the most wonderful time of the year." As we approach the longest night of the year on winter solstice, we await the birth of an inner light and dare to imagine that God will come to us again. Together we are mindful of the stress, the amplified grief of loss, the sorrows of those living on life's edge, and the realities of a broken world. We will lean into the ancient lament of our ancestral faith as we seek God's comfort. This service will meet us in our grief and struggle, and lead us out toward the light with healing music, words that nurture, and the warmth of community. Join us to hear moving personal testimonies by Jaimie Orr and Karen Pence. Casey Capsambelis, Katie Koza, Michael Hopkins, and Diane Brenneman will lead our music. Join us and tend to your soul.

Candle-Light Christmas Eve Service: 5:30 PM



Join us at 5:30 PM on Christmas Eve in the sanctuary or [click here](#) to join us by Zoom for a beautiful candle-light service on the holiest of nights. The service will include the lighting of the Advent candles, a time with our children, sacred readings, meaningful reflections, and gorgeous music. It will end with the lighting of our candles as we sing Silent Night. In Bethlehem is born the one who is for all, the light of the world, the hope of the ages, as God's love comes to us once more. Join us for this special service, and be sure to invite your family and friends as well.

Sign-Up to Serve as a Scripture Reader this Advent - Epiphany

[Click here](#) to sign up to serve as a scripture reader or liturgist in worship this holy season of Advent and Christmas through Epiphany. We welcome members and friends, local and far-flung, adults, youth, and children to participate. Your voice helps make us who we are, so please take a moment to sign up. Our worship is enriched by your participation.



This Month at First Church: December 2025

Tuesday, December 2

10:30 am Staff Meeting
6:00 pm Drop-In Center
7:00 pm Worship Commission

Wednesday, December 3

12:15 pm Break Away Meditation
7:00 pm Care of Parish Commission

Saturday, December 6

8:30 am Christmas Pageant Rehearsal

Sunday, December 7: Christmas Pageant

9:30 am Bible Workbench
10:30 am Worship Service
& Sunday School
11:45 am Cookie Showcase

Tuesday, December 9

10:30 am Staff Meeting
6:00 pm Drop-In Center
6:30 pm Council Meeting

Wednesday, December 10

12:15 pm Break Away Meditation
6:30 pm O&M Commission

Sunday, December 14: Christmas Cantata

9:30 am Bible Workbench
10:30 am Worship Service
& Sunday School
11:45 am Coffee Hour
12:00 pm Advent Nurture

Tuesday, December 16

10:30 am Staff Meeting
6:00 pm Drop-In Center

Wednesday, December 17

12:15 pm Break Away Meditation
7:00 pm SAAC Commission
7:00 pm Facilities Commission

Thursday, December 18

7:00 pm Blue Christmas Service

Sunday, December 21

9:30 am Bible Workbench
10:30 am Worship Service
& Sunday School
11:45 am Coffee Hour
12:00 pm Advent Nurture

Tuesday, December 23

10:30 am Staff Meeting
6:00 pm Drop-In Center

Wednesday, December 24

5:30 pm Christmas Eve Service

Thursday, December 25

Church Office closed

Sunday, December 28

9:30 am Bible Workbench
10:30 am Worship Service
11:45 am Coffee Hour

Tuesday, December 30

6:00 pm Drop-In Center

We are an Open & Affirming congregation, welcoming all LGBTQ+ individuals and families into the full life and leadership of our church.



**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Ministers – Friends & Members of the Church
Senior Minister – Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss
Associate Minister – Rev. Sam McFerran
Director of Music Ministry – Ulung Tanoto
Building Manager – Byron Adams
Administrative Assistant – Whitney McColley
Sexton – Ines Marquez
Member in Discernment – Lynaya Morris

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