

**CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF
CHRIST
OF PUNTA GORDA**
An Open and Affirming Congregation



DECEMBER 2020
FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Conversion to Conviction

Probably most of us are familiar with the term “conversion experience.” It describes when one first feels the stirring of faith and the distinct possibility that there is something beyond the self, a something that calls you to a higher purpose. Mine came as a teenager. I had gotten off my school bus at my usual stop. I was waiting for my mother to come pick me up (I got dropped off four miles from home). So, to occupy myself until she arrived, I wandered over to my church, which in those days was not locked, and headed up to the pulpit for a little daydreaming. To fill the quiet space with sound I read Psalm 23 out loud. On the back wall, opposite the pulpit and where only the preacher could see it during worship, was a tapestry of Da Vinci’s, The Last Supper.

I was not really paying attention. As I finished reading, I looked up. I had never really looked at the tapestry before because, well, I was not the preacher. Usually, when worship was over, I was headed for the doors and not looking up as I passed underneath it.

This time I looked, really looked. I saw the characters locked in intent conversation, some of it not looking so polite. Then my eyes met those of Jesus. Now, I knew this was cloth and color, but for some reason this time I felt more. As I looked into his eyes, I felt as though he was telling me that I was loved. He seemed uninterested in what was going on around him. He seemed interested in me. In that moment, I knew, without doubt, that my Savior lived, in me. It was an odd feeling. I told no one except my Pastor of that day and the feelings it brought to me, until now that is. But I never forgot.

Today it is as fresh as the day it happened. My ride home was full of emotion. I did not know what had happened, but I knew it was important. By the time supper (yes, I said supper) was over, the feeling had faded into a memory.

Many years later, I was now a Pastor of a small rural church trying my best to be a servant. In that setting, we had Associations in the Conference. Each Association had quarterly meetings. In the winter, these were a particular penance to observe. It was our custom that the host church (you guessed it, mine was picked) design the opening worship for the meeting. It just so happened that Matthew 25:31-46 was the Lectionary Gospel reading for that next Sunday. Wanting to be “different” I decided on an interactive rendition of the Gospel to open worship. On the altar I arranged a pitcher of water, a loaf of bread, a folded bandage, a key, a chain made of construction paper, and a flannel shirt.

I asked five volunteers to come forward as the Gospel was read and act out that portion of the Gospel they were hearing. They had no idea which “prop” they would handle, but they were to use it as if it were a demonstration of the words. So, I began with a Call to Worship, a Gathering Prayer and the Lord’s Prayer (sounding familiar?), then a reading of Matthew 25:31-36.

As the reading took place each “character” came forward to handle their Word. There were about a hundred of us in the sanctuary. They were transfixed, as was I. It was as if each object was sacred and tender. Each person lifted their item slowly and showed it to the gathered worshipers. Then they would turn slowly and return it to the table. The bread was broken, the water poured, the key offered, the shirt embraced, the bandage unfolded and refolded, and the chain lifted then broken before being returned to the table. When the participants were back in their pews, I spoke a simple, “Amen”. It was obviously not something I could have devised. It was a sacred moment of Spirit flowing through all of us. I was changed.

After the meeting I had people coming to me asking if they could repeat that at their next Committee, Leadership, Council gatherings. I told them I did not own the experience and they should feel free to offer it. A friend of mine, Jeanne, a “converted Lutheran” told me she had never “seen” that passage that way before. She was on our Conference Mission Committee, but she told me she felt a change that day. Jeanne was convicted to begin a Prison Ministry (we had a lot of them in my small state, two Federal ones). She told me that she would never be the same. I was speechless. I knew exactly what she meant. I had been convicted too.

That day, with a simple demonstration of Gospel, I knew I would never be the same. That day I was convicted to become an advocate for Social Justice. Just as sure as I had felt the eyes of the Savior on me that day in my home church, offering me love and forgiveness I knew my Calling had changed. I think before that moment I had been searching and questioning and saying, “there must be more?” I felt more. I knew what Jesus meant in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats. I had felt it in my soul.

So, if you were to ask me what my favorite passage in the Bible is.... well, I think you can guess. And I think you can see why I am so passionate about our living this Gospel out. Are you convicted too?

FROM YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM



MODERATOR'S REPORT - Bill Colson

I am afraid that I have lost track of time in November. I thought I had another week or two until the next Beacon article. It is not Thanksgiving yet! (Mary Tulip says it has to do with deadlines.) So, let's get started.

The Leadership Team's virtual meeting started with a Capital Campaign update. The finishing touches on the new entrance to the Sanctuary, are being applied. The metal fabricator has installed the railings, and handrails are being finish coated. We will get to see the final results very soon. The Campaign Team will review what projects will be next in January 2021. Campaign funds have been set aside for replacement of Air Conditioning units, as they are beginning to fail.

The new Scholarship Team held an organizational meeting to elect officers. Kathy Frantish is the new head of the Scholarship Team, within the Endowment Team. They designed an application for Scholarship Funds, and distributed it to the high schools in Punta Gorda and Port Charlotte. It has been posted on the school's web sites. See it there, it looks very good.

The Nominating Committee reported that potential candidates had been contacted about serving on the Leadership Team, for a term of service. The only remaining positions are Assistant Moderator, and Fellowship. The Nominating Committee will continue to seek candidates for the two positions.

There was a discussion about worship protocols during this year's Advent season. The Leadership Team agreed to the following, in order to limit each person's possible exposure during the Hanging of the Green's Sunday's installation and decoration of the Church. There will not be a large Christmas Tree this year. The Giving Tree will take the place of the Large Tree. Poinsettias, wreaths, and a Creche will be installed, as usual. The Advent Candle lighting will continue. The Leadership Team agreed to hold one Christmas Eve service, but there is late breaking news regarding the Christmas Eve Service. See below.

Other items discussed at the November Leadership Team meeting were: The proposed 2021 Budget was distributed and reviewed. Because of time, the proposed budget was tabled until the December meeting.

The Moderator and the Treasurer finalized a new agreement with Comcast Cable, for cable and wifi access. Thanks to Melissa Brown the new agreement is lower in cost than the previous agreement. The Moderator signed the agreement mid-month.

Eldon Wick, head of the Stewardship Team, announced dates for the upcoming Stewardship Campaign. The Campaign will feature several Stewardship Moments during future worship services, culminating is Commitment Sunday on January 17th, 2021, when financial pledges for 2021 will be received.

One last Item, there has been an ongoing water leak, which has damaged the ceiling tiles in the hallway along the library and restrooms. Boyett Miller Contractors, who installed the latest roofing, was contacted for an inspection to determine the source of the leak, and repairs. During the inspection, and after applying water to the affected area, it was discovered that the source of the leak was not the roof. It is the clearstory windows along the east side of the Sanctuary. The windows have developed leaks in the seals and caulking, due to age and exposure to the elements, allowing water to run down the interior of the wall. A repair order, to correct the window leaks, was issued to Boyette Miller, with completion expected momentarily.

Due to the continued rise in positive cases of Covid Virus in Charlotte and surrounding counties, during the third week of November, the Leadership Team discussed and agreed by consensus that the potential dangers of infections with an indoor service were too great. The Christmas Eve service is still under consideration. Please stay tuned to announcements from the Church Office, as Staff is working on a plan for an outdoor Christmas Eve service.

The other change agreed to is for in person Sunday Worship. The Leadership Team feels that in person worship should be suspended until either the infection rate falls to October levels, or vaccines for Covid inoculations are widely available and used by worshipers. Online worship will continue without interruptions.

As I have ended prior Moderator's Reports, we the Leadership Team welcome your comments and input. We want to hear from you. Our only reason for service is to serve you. Please contact me via bill.colson@gmail.com, or 402-762-5702.



ENDOWMENT TEAM – Bill Ringelstein, Chair

Your Endowment Team has recommended and the Leadership Team has approved a distribution of \$8,200 to the Scholarship Fund. This money will be held as a non-budgeted line item on the church books and used exclusively for the Scholarship program.

Also, a very heartfelt “Thank You” to Dick Sommerfield, who with Nadine, is moving back “up north” at the end of the year. Dick has been a valuable member of the Endowment Team for the past 4 years and will be missed. Olin Lyons has been appointed to fill that vacancy, and we welcome Olin to this exciting ministry.



TREASURER’S REPORT – Melissa Brown

October 2020 Treasurer’s Report

Financial Results	Oct 2020	2020 YTD	Budget
Donations and Other Income	\$11,691	\$141,982	\$145,500
Expenses	15,920	134,775	145,500
Donations Above/ Below Expenses	-\$4,229	\$7,117	\$0

Financial Results	Oct 2019	2019 YTD	Budget
Donations and Other Income	\$14,140	\$128,542	\$126,250
Expenses	13,093	129,087	134,637
Donations Above/ Below Expenses	\$1,047	-\$547	-\$8,387

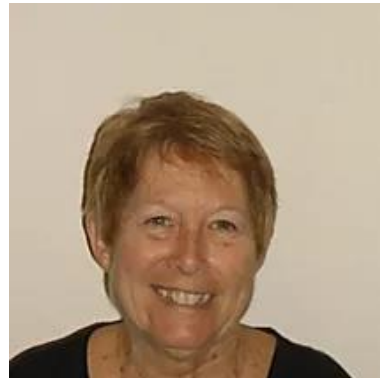
2020 versus 2019 (Better/Worse)	October	YTD
Donations and Other Income	-\$2,449	\$13,440
Expenses	-2,827	-5,688
Donations Above/Below Expenses	-\$5,276	\$7,664

October expenses exceeded our donations by \$4,229, but we still have a YTD surplus of \$7,117 to get us through to the end of the year. We are ahead of last year's October YTD net of donations over expenses by \$7,664.

As I always do at this time of the year, I am starting to worry.

December collections are key to our continuing fiscal health. With the recent decision to suspend in-person worship during this latest surge in COVID cases, it will be extremely difficult to eclipse December 2019 donations, which were in excess of \$16,000. Those of you who use giving envelopes have a special envelope for a Christmas donation. For those of you who do not use envelopes, consider upping your year-end donation. Until there is widespread availability of a vaccine, I expect our cashflow will be negative. Don't let virus fatigue affect your giving.

If you would like an easy and cost-free way to contribute to the church, you can set up an automatic payment through your bank by using electronic banking. Payments are mailed from your bank to the church. If you would like to pursue this form of payment, please be advised that the address that should be used for mailing the check is Congregational United Church of Christ, Punta Gorda, PO Box 510838, Punta Gorda, FL 33951-0838. Most banks do not charge for this service—not even for the postage to mail the payment.



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRY TEAM – Linda Greenfield and Linda Weaver, Chairs

Communion: Dec.6
Jan. 3

Advent Activities: Decorating the church-Many thanks to those who helped decorate the church for Christmas. As always, it looks beautiful and worshipful. Special thanks to Pastor Mike and Guy Greenfield for setting up the Nativity Scene in front of the church.

Advent Candle: Each Sunday in Advent, beginning Nov.29, members or friends of the church will be reading scripture and lighting the 4 Advent candles on the Advent wreath. The candles symbolize hope, peace, love and joy and are lit in that order. On Christmas Eve the large center candle, the Christ candle, is also lit.

Giving Tree: Our Giving Tree is waiting to be decorated with gift cards for students at Charlotte High School. If you cannot bring a gift card to the church office, you can mail a check to the church post office box and write Giving Tree on the memo line. Thanks to Emily Klossner for taking all the cards to the high school! (CUCC of PG, P.O. Box 510838, Punta Gorda, FL 33951-0838)

Education: Select your favorite Advent devotional for a special holiday treat. Or go to UCC.org and type in “Advent Devotional” in the Search box in the top right corner.

Merry Christmas from the Lindas!!!

STEWARDSHIP – Elden Wick



Our Calling: Three Great Loves

By the Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President

“Three Great Loves,” a shared initiative of United Church of Christ congregations, conferences, and the national setting, engages all of us in faith-inspired work for a more just world. Together, we change lives.

This initiative reflects the deep purpose, mission, and vision of our Christian movement.

Our purpose arises from Jesus’ greatest commandment: we will love the Lord our God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves.

Every congregation names its mission slightly differently, but as I travel around the country, I find our congregations living out their purpose through a missional commitment to love, welcome, and justice. Spoken in different ways, we share a common mission: united by the Holy Spirit and inspired by God’s grace, we love all, welcome all, and seek justice for all.

Our mission as the United Church of Christ points towards a shared vision: a just world for all.

Many of us came to the United Church of Christ because of this sense of purpose, mission, and vision. But we need to ensure we do more than speak words. We make our commitment real by embracing Three Great Loves:

The love of Neighbor
The love of Children
The love of Creation

Over the next few weeks, leaders in your congregation will share stories of the ways your congregation and our wider movement live out these Three Great Loves. And then, you will be asked to make a commitment of financial support to the work of your local congregation and the wider United Church of Christ.

We believe an entire Christian movement that is willing to engage in an extended time of mission to serve these "Three Great Loves" can change the world. We know that your part in this mission matters – no matter where you are located or how large or small your community.

Friends, the world needs our great love. Together, our love for the world can transform it.

SPECIAL MISSION OFFERING FOR VETERANS OF THE CROSS: The Veterans of the Cross is a Special Mission Offering that congregations have been supporting for over 100 years. The offering is administered through the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance, the charitable arm of the Pension Boards. Funds provide direct financial support to those who serve the church and are facing financial difficulties. Active and retired clergy, lay employees, and their surviving spouses may be eligible for the Supplementation of Small Annuities, Supplementation of Health Premiums and Emergency Grants. If you would like to donate to this annual special offering, please send a check to the church or drop it off in the church office, Mon-Thurs. between 8:30 am – 12:30pm. Please be sure your check indicates that it is for the Veterans of the Cross offering and send your donation no later than December 20th.



MUSIC DIRECTOR – Isaac James

Music touches the hearts and souls of people in a way that words often fail to do. The poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow famously said: “Music is the universal language of mankind.” It is hard to argue with this. Music accompanies us throughout all the experiences of life. Music is used to celebrate and to mourn, to worship and praise, to bring joy and express sorrow, to forget and to remember, to relax and motivate. The impact of music on this world cannot really be calculated. Its capacity to inspire is clearly seen in

the arts. Riddled throughout the scriptures are different ways that music is in existence to praise our creator.

In the recent weeks, you may have heard more classical music selections than in the past. J.S. Bach is one of the most prolific church music composers in music history. Even in his own words, his music was composed for the Glory of God and used in services at the church in Leipzig where he was the organist.

Music that you hear in our services does not exist to please us as congregants and listeners. If that is what is required, we are at church for the wrong reasons. The intent behind music in our services is for the praise and worship of our creator, not for a feel-good moment within ourselves. This is one reason why I personally prefer no applause after music in the service. It is not a performance. I see no difference between applauding for a piece of music and after a sermon/scripture reading.

Believe it or not, two years ago this month I came to this church family. On the Sunday church service before I started, I stood in front of you all and stated that I play for the glory of God and none other. Not even for you or myself. I am a tool to bring music before you in the service as another form of worship. No matter the music that is played or sung...if it is for that purpose and for His glory, that is all that should matter. Since I have been here at PGCUCC, you have heard music ranging from Handel’s Messiah to a boogie-woogie rendition of *Just a Closer Walk with Thee* and everything in between. All of this was meant as a form of worship to our creator.

I do give thanks to God for bringing me here. It is honestly hard to believe it has been two years. I am so thankful for my church family that has become just that-family. More so than any other congregation I have served in. You are all so loving and caring. All the cards, emails and letters of support, invitation to wine nights, dinners lunches etc. it all means so very much to me. I am thankful and blessed to be here.

The novelist Jane Austen once said, “Without music, life would be a blank to me.”

LADIES' LUNCH OUT – Neoma Remiger

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, our ladies luncheons are on hold. We will keep you posted as to when we will resume Ladies' Lunch, so keep reading your email updates from the church



LIBRARIAN – Sandy James-Nogai



The first Book Talk Tea will be on Friday January 8 at 12 noon at Gilchrist Park by the gazebo. Please bring a lawn chair and a brown bag lunch. We will practice social distancing and wear masks. If you are interested in attending please call me at 941-639-2770. Hope to see you there!!

I want to thank Nadine Sommerfield for donating the entire Mitford series of books by Jan Karon. They are a welcome addition to the library. On a sad note, Nadine and Dick are moving back to Wisconsin permanently. Nadine has been an enthusiastic member of the Book Talk Tea group for many years and she will be sorely missed. We wish her and Dick good luck and safe travels.

I wish everyone a safe and healthy holiday season!

SOCIAL JUSTICE MINISTRY TEAM – M. E. Steele-Pierce and Glenn Weaver

This month's social justice moment is devoted to unity in our nation. Following a long and exhausting and contentious election season, we may wonder: Is there a way to move forward as a country and as a community? When we watch the rightly news or read social media, we might feel hopeless. But we know that there is a way forward. The words of our Constitution's preamble give us guidance:

“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution”

In 2020, in application, what might that “more perfect Union” look like? Consider this. What if, every day and at every opportunity

- we encourage open discussion with others
- we strive to create joy and good memories for others
- we show respect consistently by considering others' emotions
- we listen to and treat people in ways we want to be treated
- we compromise and negotiate to respectfully seek solutions

we notice, value, and protect the natural world around for today and for posterity.

We can do this. We're in this big and diverse country together, and we can decide how to make it work. Living these principles can bring justice and joy to be a part of creating kindness and walk humbly with our God.

Together we pray. Oh Lord, as we work together to build Your empire, let us be the light that leads the world to You. God teach us to be good role models to the people around us, so that when they see You and Your love within us, they would want to know You more and more. God grant us the patience to work together, bring us all together as a family. Let us work together with understanding and compassion in our hearts. Let us not be rude or arrogant towards one another, as we light the way to Your heavenly kindom. Amen (prayer source: Xavier.edu unity prayers)

We remain devoted to our goal to heed the words of the prophet Micah: To seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). You are invited to join us. Write or call any of the CUCC's Social Justice Ministry team: co-facilitators Glenn Weaver or M.E. Steele-Pierce, Mary Cassidy-Anger, Jim DeGood, Jerry Larson, Lori Larson, Elizabeth Pitcher, Carol Schmuhl, Linda Weaver, and Elden Wick.



THE CHURCH SCRIBE – Joyce Schenk

In loving memory of Joyce Schenk. The following is the article that Joyce wrote for the December 2017 Beacon. We thought you might enjoy it again.

CAN YOU IMAGINE IT?

At this time of year, our world is caught up in the rush and crush of the season: gifts and parties, cards and long-distance calls, cooking and cleaning. From morning till night, the days simply slip past with little thought of the meaning behind it all. We've become increasingly removed from the simple story of that long-ago first Christmas. But today, I'm inviting you to slow your personal merry-go-round for just a moment. Right now, right here. Stop and consider how it all began. Let your imagination take you back.

It all happened more than 2000 years ago. Mary, an unmarried teen, was in her 9th month of pregnancy. She and her betrothed, Joseph, were making a long journey to the small town of Bethlehem. No comfortable, cushioned car carried these two over the rough and rutted roads. There were no rest stops along the way to help a pregnant woman relax and refresh. Instead, Mary rode a donkey, bumping and swaying with every twist and turn. By her side walked strong, silent Joseph, helping Mary to keep her place on to the donkey's bony back. They exchanged few words. Each was thinking of the amazing assignment for which God had chosen them. When at last they reached Bethlehem, they were tired and hungry. But the town was crowded. Despite Mary's condition, the couple was turned away from the inn. There was simply no room for them.

Can you imagine it?

Joseph led the donkey, bearing Mary, to the stable. There, among the livestock, on the hay-covered floor, Mary's time came to deliver her baby. There were no comfortable beds dressed in clean sheets. No gloved hands reached out to help. No doctors were present. No nurses stood by.

There were only Mary, Joseph, the animals....and God. With no crib, no cradle, no baby blankets, the young parents gently wrapped this precious new life in "swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger." In the fields nearby, a group of shepherds rested among their flocks. Weary at the end of the day, they might have been dozing.

But, can you imagine it? Suddenly, the heavens were filled with a magnificent light. And, above, an angel appeared to the frightened shepherds. This wasn't CNN. This wasn't the New York Times. This wasn't a "breaking news bulletin." This was a message sent from the Lord God Almighty directly to a group of humble workingmen. There in the field, with their restless animals looking on, the shepherds were given news of the greatest miracle of all. God had sent them a Savior. And He came in the form of a baby.

Can you imagine it? The shepherds were told where to find this miracle child. And, the men didn't hesitate. They didn't check the postings on Facebook to see if others had shared this odd experience. They didn't call 911 to report a strange sighting. Instead, they simply believed God's messenger and followed the angels' instructions.

Can you imagine it? The shepherds made their way to the lowly stable and quietly joined the little scene. They gathered around the tired young mother, the protecting form of Joseph and God's son, that glowing baby boy, lying contented in the humble manger. That setting--not the glittering Christmas lights, not the presents piled under the trees, not Santa in his sleigh--but that simple, unforgettable scene in the stable reminds the world that Christmas marks the birth of God's son.





CHURCH OFFICE HOURS: The office will be open Monday through Thursday from 8:30 am – 12:30 pm. We will be closed on Fridays. Phone # 941-637-8443.

Please note: To have an event listed on the Sunday bulletin, please have the information in to the church office by Tuesday at 12:00 PM.

Updating Your Information

We are always trying to keep our information on members and visitors up to date. We need your help! If you have had a change of address, new email address, home phone or cell phone change, please let us know so we can keep our records current which will help us to keep good communication with all of you. If you are not receiving emails or the Beacon newsletter, please let us also know that. Thank you so much. Your help is very much appreciated.

Send Changes To: office@puntagorda-ucc.com OR you can drop them off in the church office.

Name Tags: Just a reminder, if you would like a magnet on the back of your name tag instead of the pin, just leave your name tag in the blue bin on the name tag rack and it will be changed and ready for the next week.

Birthdays and Anniversaries: Is your birthday or anniversary missing from the bulletin or screen on Sunday morning? Please let us know. It probably is missing because we do not have that information for you.



BIRTHDAYS

Dec.	10	Elaine Erickson
Dec.	12	Emily Klossner
Dec.	15	Mary Tulip
Dec.	16	Annie Robertson
Dec.	17	Armondo Mascarenaz
Dec.	18	Lee Swift
Dec.	22	Sally Benson
Dec.	24	Steve Brown
Dec.	29	Jerry Oscarson
Dec.	31	Elden Wick

ANNIVERSARIES

Dec.	15	Donald & Myra Nagel
Dec.	18	Robert & Joyce Baskovic

Did we miss a birthday or anniversary? Please email the office, and we will try to make sure it does not happen again: office@puntagorda-ucc.com