

**The Beacon
January 2018**

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



JANUARY HIGHLIGHTS

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Rev. Mike Ford

Christmas Refugees

The dust has settled. The wrapping paper has hit the trash can. The tree has been exiled from the house for another year. The gifts maybe have been used at least once. The parties are over. The bills arrive. Christmas 2017 is now a memory. So, now may be a good time to review what brings us to Christmas.

The liturgical year is basically divided into two halves. For the sake of brevity, I call them the Season of Celebrations and the Season of Learning. Our Season of Celebrations begins with Advent, delivers us to Christmas, reveals the identity of Jesus on Epiphany, centers us on the meaning of faith in Lent, proclaims the Resurrection at Easter, and releases the power of God at Pentecost.

The Season of Learning (the Sundays following Pentecost) lasts half of the liturgical year (26 weeks, which is half a year if my math is correct) and is spent hearing and studying the meaning of Jesus' teachings and ministry. We get the chance to slow down and examine what we have experienced in the whirlwind time of the Season of Celebrations and draw measured meaning from them. These two seasons make for quite a busy faith life!

Now, back to Advent. Each Sunday the light of the coming Lord is increased with the lighting of a candle. As the days shorten and the natural light diminishes, we push back that growing darkness by letting the light of the coming Christ grow in our sanctuary.

The first Sunday of Advent we light the candle of Hope. To quote the liturgy from the UCC Book of Worship, "Because of Christ we not only have hope, but we believe that good is stronger than evil." The second candle we light is for Peace. "With the coming of this light there is peace, for Christ is called the "Price of Peace." The third Sunday we light the pink candle of Love. "With the coming of this light there is love. Such great love helps us to love God and one another." On the final Sunday of

Advent, we light the candle of Joy. "With the coming of this light there is joy, joy that is ours not only at Christmas but always." These four Sundays prepare us for the coming light in Christ. We are reminded of four aspects of a life of faith that provide the foundation of a way of living that cannot be given by worldly education.

During these times of preparation, we are reminded of the coming light in the story of the birth of Jesus by our Christmas Pageant. We hear of the annunciation to Mary that she would bear the salvation of the world. We hear Joseph being convinced in an angelic visit of his own that the child Mary is carrying is a holy child. We have a journey to Bethlehem to enroll in the census declared by Caesar Augustus. This journey came while Mary was nearly ready to give birth. Once born, Jesus' birth was announced to the lowly shepherds and they race to the stable to see this child. Mary ponders all these things in her heart. A week later we celebrate this story by opening gifts and having a large meal and watching football?

One thing that occurred to me this year is that the journey Joseph and Mary undertook was not of their own choice. Caesar, the epitome of Empire, had decided that more taxes should be collected to support the Empire and that the best way was by census. I feel this accomplished two objectives. First, the population could be accurately known, and the most taxes collected. Second, nearly everyone would be displaced from their communities of support and be less able to cause trouble during the census. The everyday tasks of trying to provide meals and shelter while in strange territory would keep people off balance and docile.

Most of the folks forced to travel to their ancestral lands were of meager means. For nearly all of them would have experienced severe hardships in their travels. They would have faced criminals trying to get what little they have from them. Some would have paid some for food that never was delivered. Some would have paid for lodging that never was provided. Some would have been set upon for the animals they might have brought along for milk and meat. Needless to say, they had all become refugees, forced to leave home because of empire.

We don't often examine the fact that Mary and Joseph were refugees. Nor do we look at the possibility that the journey would not only have been hard because Mary was nine months pregnant and traveling for days without food and rest. We don't often examine the perils that they would have endangered them. We don't often see the devastation to Bethlehem at having thousands of extra mouths to feed when resources are meager to begin with. We often focus only on the hardship Mary and Joseph finding no home to stay in when they arrived in Bethlehem. It isn't hard to imagine that the stable would have seemed a palace compared to the alternative of sleeping and delivering a child in the streets. How joyous they must have been to find a warm place to rest and a child to be birthed!

Mary and Joseph's story is a contemporary one. Twice in two years they became refugees. The three Wise Guys lied to Herod about where the new king was born, and they fled to Egypt because of Herod's rage and decree to kill ALL the infants two years and younger in Bethlehem.

So many people in far off lands are forced to flee every day because of Empire. They face the same hardships as did Mary and Joseph. They are lied to, beaten, robbed, denied entry, abandoned to the elements, deported, and promised a home that never comes into being. I feel that we should remember that Mary and Joseph were refugees that many in our world can relate to and that we should relate to as well. Perhaps our Christmas celebrations should include a word of thanks for

those other refugees who do find safe passage and a new life just as Mary, Joseph, and Jesus did, by the grace of God.

For all the beauty of our seasons and celebrations, we can lose sight of the realities that others face. Our giving thanks and feeling the special emotions of the season should not be diminished, but cherished. We are blessed with homes, food, friends, and family. Let us pray that ALL may find these same celebrations next Christmas. Merry Christmas and may we give thanks for God's Grace in our lives! But for that Grace, we too may become refugees.

FROM YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM Judy Minier



Moderator's Report

Happy New Year and January Greetings, dear friends and fellow parishioners. We are very glad to welcome back our folks from "up north" who contribute so much to our Congregation in the "winter" season of our church year. And a heartfelt thank you to everyone who completed 2017 pledge offerings and helped us finish last year on a more positive financial note. We are looking forward to a new year of hope, peace, and joy for all of us!

A couple of items to be aware of:

1. **Updates to our church website.** Jim DeGood has stepped forward and offered to help us move into the 21st century by making our website presence more effective and informative. Stay tuned and check out our improvements which we hope to enact by the end of January. We know that the public mostly relies on finding out who we are via the internet, so this is an important step for us to take as we improve our visibility. Thanks, Jim!
2. **Thanks to our Pastoral Relations Team** for their recent report submitted to the Leadership Team. We appreciate the work done by Bil Tucker, Lori Larson, and Linda Greenfield as they completed the annual performance review of Pastor Mike. In accordance with our Constitution, "*the PRT shall conduct an Annual Evaluation of the Senior Minister...*" Their approach was to use the 12 criteria from our Leadership Expectations list (prioritized prior to Pastor Mike's call) to offer feedback and suggestions to Pastor Mike. Pastor Mike independently reflected on his performance of these qualities and subsequently provided his self-evaluation on the characteristics. The PRT then met with Pastor Mike to compare and discuss their individual appraisals. The final report states that Pastor Mike has successfully met or exceeded our expectations in each category. Further, the PRT recommended to the LT financial support of Pastor Mike's continued professional growth by participating in the Festival of Homiletics and the UCC General Synod. Thank you, PRT and Pastor Mike, for your thoughtful work during this process!

3. **Consider signing up for one of our many enjoyable outings or events** – Girls' Lunch Out, the Living the Questions discussions/seminars, Men's Breakfast, Bible Study, or Great Decisions for example. You'll be amazed at how interesting and enlightening such events are! There is also a new Social Justice committee being formed, so reach out to Jim DeGood or Glenn and Linda Weaver if you are interested in learning about this mission and becoming more informed about issues of fairness and racism and how our church can help address inequalities our fellow citizens often face.
4. **Other important events that are coming our way to put on your calendar:**
 - **Pride Fest on January 20** is from 12 noon until 6 p.m. at Laishley Park. Please consider signing up on the schedule sheet, located on the kiosk at the back of the sanctuary, if you are available to help staff the booth for this festive and informative event. It is a wonderful opportunity to hand out brochures for the church and talk with people about who we are. CUCC members/volunteers have tended our table for several years and we appreciate Tim, Mike, Armand and Bryan for keeping us in the loop on this event and our outreach into the LGBTQ community. Thanks, too, to Bill Klossner for the loan of his pop up canopy which keeps us shady!
 - **Stewardship Drive and Pledges for 2018 are getting underway.** Our stewardship theme this year is, *Journey to Generosity, The Way of Jesus*. In the next week or two, you will be learning more about the process of proclaiming your support of the church.
 - **In late February**, we will again be collecting clothing for the pre-school children at the Baker Center so that we can present them to the Punta Gorda Women's Club in early March. I am so impressed with the collection we have each year and look forward to another successful drive for the event again. The sign-up sheet will be available with the number of outfits needed, sizes and gender. Stay tuned to this space and announcements in church!

IMPORTANT REMINDER: The Annual Congregational Meeting will be held January 21 after church. Bring your cup of coffee into the sanctuary as we present and request approval of the annual budget to guide us forward through 2018.

The Leadership Team continues to seek nominees for the positions of Assistant Moderator, Clerk, and Assistant Treasurer. People who fill these posts are essential to the well-being of LT and the Congregation to keep us operating successfully and in a credible and thoughtful manner. Please, **please** consider standing for one of these offices. The work is not onerous and we have materials for each position to aid the incoming person to the position. We need YOU!

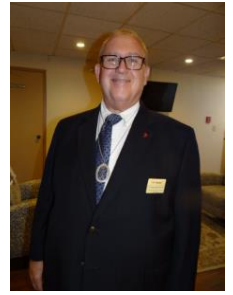
Next LT Meeting: The January Leadership Team meeting takes place on Tuesday, the 9th at 4:30. Remember, we are here to support our Pastor, our church ministries/responsibilities and operations, and one another in the congregation. The LT welcomes your thoughtful advice and input about what we are doing and what we should be doing. Please see any of us if you have questions, concerns, or suggestions about how we can more effectively manage our resources or make our church more responsive for our members and the community we serve. Let us go forth to promote justice and peace and good will in our community!

Blessings to all, Judy Minier

MINISTER OF MUSIC - Tim Sperber

Happy New Year! May you have many blessings in the New Year.

I hope that you have enjoyed our musical offerings during the Advent/Christmas season. I would like to thank the following who have contributed to our music: Melissa Brown, Mary Barnt, Joyce and Bob Baskovic, Carol Schmuhl, Mike Robinson, Kathy, Kevin, Lucia and Anamaria Rivadeneira, our Adult Choir and our Bell Choir.



I would also like to thank you, the congregation, for your support to our music program. I can hardly believe that I have been with you for three years and beginning my fourth. Truly we are blessed with many talented musicians who add to our worship experience.

Now that we are beginning the New Year, we will soon be approaching Lent and Easter. We can always use new members in our adult choir. Our first rehearsal for the New Year is Wednesday, January 3, 2018 at 7 P.M. Come and join us.

Blessings, Tim Sperber

ENDOWMENT FUND – Kathy Rivadeneira

I think one of the most important things to mention is what a great relationship we have built within the community when we unite with other Church ministries. This partnership makes us stronger. We provide funding to the Edgewater Methodist Bicycle Ministry for bike locks; they provide bikes and together we spread love and caring for others.

I reached out to Edgewater for the first time back in August when I learned that one of my students rode his bike to our school open house. He was so excited to come to school that he arrived that day even before the principals and was waiting for them to unlock the gate. His bike didn't have a seat or brakes and he had no helmet. When we told him he was getting a bike complete with lock, he was thrilled as you can imagine.

Then this December, I heard that we had a couple of kids from our school family that really wanted bikes for Christmas. Edgewater came through again and provided two more bikes for these kids. Now the boy who got the first bike asked me the last day of school where I got his bike since he wanted one for his cousin. He explained his cousin was a really good kid and deserved a bike also. We found out this boy was bringing his cousin to school every day riding on the handlebars. Edgewater is again coming through with a bike.

The bikes are an incredible gift, but this really allows me to build an amazing relationship with my students. These kids don't have much of anything, and we experience behavior problems and failing grades. I have witnessed a huge change since he received his bike. There is respect, pride, and love. Grades and behavior have shown marked improvement; and all it takes is love, right? And sometimes love has two wheels and handlebars. If there was ever a question why we need an Endowment Fund, now you know. Thanks for sharing.

Kathy Rivadeneira, Endowment Team



TREASURER – Melissa Brown

Treasurer’s Report

Operating Financial Results	November-17	2017 Y-T-D	Budget
Donations and Other Income:	\$9,906	\$132,072	\$161,608
Expenses	\$13,404	\$151,280	\$161,608
Net Income	-\$7,092	-\$19,208	-

Please note that the above results do not include the contributions to the solar panel project, which are not included in operating earnings.

The above numbers are through the end of November. December 2017 operating receipts were \$24,816, boosted by several large contributions. Unfortunately, we will still end the year with a deficit, which will be addressed in the 2018 budget.

The 2018 envelopes are at the back of the church. Several boxes have already been picked up, but check to see if there are envelopes for you. If your 2017 envelope number was above 100, it has been reassigned. We only purchased 100 boxes of envelopes this year. If you don't need your envelopes, please return them to the office. If you wish to have envelopes and there is not a box there for you, please let me know, and I will get a box of 2018 envelopes to you.

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.

FELLOWSHIP MINISTRY TEAM - Jan Tulk

Ah, December. That exciting and busy month in the church. We've had the Hanging of the Greens, the Pageant, the Candlelight Christmas Eve Service, and our northern friends returning for our warm weather. Except for the Christmas Eve Services, we had fellowship following church. I would like to thank the following people for helping during December: Jim DeGood and Mary Farnquist, Keith and Sandy Weber, Mike and Carol Robinson, Linda Greenfield and Jan Tulk.



The January sign up sheet is a cheery yellow, and the last time I looked, it was empty. Please consider signing up to host. I know we have more people each Sunday. It seems like providing for a lot of

people. If you would talk to your friends, you could break it down and make it easier on yourself. One person could be responsible for the coffee and cleanup of that area. Another person could provide the food and wipe off the tables afterwards. You could even have 2 or 3 people each bring one thing to eat with our coffee. Many hands make the work go faster (and easier). Please consider signing up to host in January. May 2018 be your best year. Happy New Year!

LIBRARIAN – Sandy James-Nogaj



Book Talk Tea for February will be February 9 at 1 pm. The time and place are to be determined. I will make an announcement when I have the information. Thanks to Linda Greenfield for hosting the January Tea.

GREAT DECISIONS 2018 -Lori and Jerry Larson

It is Great Decisions time once more. Great Decisions is a non-partisan discussion group focused on foreign policy issues that affect American decision makers. The topics this year include: The waning of Pax Americana; Russia's foreign policy, China and America: The New Geopolitical Equation; Media and Foreign Policy; Turkey: a partner in crisis; U.S. Global Engagement and the Military; South Africa's Fragile Democracy; Global Health: progress and challenges.

Sign-up will be in January, with the discussion group meeting on Tuesdays from February 6 to March 27 from 1:30-3:00pm. The sign-up sheet will be on the kiosk at the back of the sanctuary. Please sign-up by January 21st to allow time for books to be ordered.

LIVING THE QUESTIONS CLASS

The Living the Questions class will meet this year on Monday afternoon from 3:30 to 5:00 pm. beginning on Monday, February 5 and running through March 19th. Jim De Good, Myra Nagel, Glenn and Linda Weaver will be coordinating the class.

This year, we plan to study and discuss Prophetic Faith: Exploring Social Justice issues as a Congregation. We are planning to read and follow the material in the short book "Prophetic Faith: Exploring Social Justice Advocacy as a Congregation" by Trish Greeves. We welcome different perspectives and approaches within our commitments of faith. We hope to share and listen to the journeys people have followed as they seek to witness to God's love.

Everyone is welcome, whether you can join us for most of the classes or only a few. We plan to order copies of the book before the end of January. The charge is \$8.00. If you would like to join us, there is a sign-up sheet at the back of the sanctuary by the kiosk.

MEN'S BREAKFAST -New Location

The Men's Breakfast, held every Tuesday morning at 8:00am, has moved to the PGI Grille in the shopping complex behind the 7-Eleven at the corner of Aqui Esta and Bal Harbor. Check the weekly bulletin for updates and cancellations.

LADIES' LUNCH OUT – Neoma Remiger

The next Ladies' Lunch Out will be on Friday, January 26th at 12:00 noon at Nino's. The signup sheet is on the kiosk in the back of the Sanctuary.

February's lunch out will be a "Welcome Back Snowbirds- Soup and Sandwich" and will be on Friday, February 16th at 12:00 noon at the church in Faith Hall. Be sure you put it on your calendar. More information will follow.

FROM THE CHURCH SCRIBE – Joyce Schenk

My January Son: A Half-Century Plus Three



When son Tim joined the family in 1965, he was already three months old. Let me explain. At the time, the news was full of dire predictions that the world-wide population explosion would cause the earth to run out of food unless the baby boom could be slowed.

Though George and I had given birth to two healthy daughters, we wanted to add a third child to the family. In view of the population concerns, we decided rather than having another the natural way, we would look for a child who needed us as much as we wanted him...or her.

We started our search process early in 1965, contacting agencies throughout the region. In April, one of them called from central Pennsylvania. They explained they tried to place children as quickly as possible and were eager to find a family for a little three-month old boy.

After giving us the background information, they asked if we wanted to come and see him. No pressure. No commitment. .Naturally, we said "yes." When the day came, we were shown into an office where we waited nervously for the introduction that might change our lives. The man from the agency brought in a little bundle and handed it to me. Over the next half hour, as I held the little one in my lap, we talked casually with the representatives of the agency. We might as well have been discussing the weather, not the future of this baby.

At last, the gentleman who had brought the child in, asked, in effect, "Well, what do you think? Do you want him?" What a ridiculous question! From the moment I looked into those dark brown eyes, from the instant that little hand wrapped itself around George's finger, we were committed. We tried to stay composed as we said, "Yes, we'd be happy to take this little one home." Papers were signed, handshakes were given all around and we left the office.

Back in the car, we probably broke a few speed records driving out of town. We were both convinced the folks from the agency would never really let us leave with this little treasure. By now, I knew I wouldn't give the child back if my life depended on it.

That dramatic scene took place fifty-three years ago this month. Today, that tiny baby has grown to be a six-foot-three son to be proud of. And those deep brown eyes still warm my heart.

As with all families, we've had our ups and downs, our joys and sorrows, but the day we took "Baby Timmy" into our lives remains one of the high points on the Schenk family's time line. In December of 2013, Tim's beloved dad, my priceless husband, George, lost his battle with cancer. But, before he died, I overheard a conversation the two had. George told Tim, "Be sure to take good care of your mother." Tim promised his Dad that he would. And, that's exactly what he's been doing. The little bundle I held in my arms so long ago is now a tall and strong son who often wraps his arms around me in welcome hugs.

There are those who think they could never love an adopted child like one born to them. But I can assure you, parenthood by adoption and parenthood by the standard Mommy and Daddy route are simply two different ways God has of accomplishing the same result. It's not basic biology that turns a couple into parents. Parenthood comes from sleepless nights, bedtime stories, report cards, scraped knees, homework sessions, tears and laughter, hugs and kisses and a thousand other things, large and small. And whether natural born or adopted, that child will always be your baby. Even at 53.

JANUARY CELEBRATORY DATES

JANUARY BIRTHDAYS

January 9	Wyona Crosley
January 11	Clif Trudeau
January 12	Polly Engelbrecht
January 23	Tim Schenk and Mary Grieger
January 24	Archie Coll
January 25	Duane Belseth
January 27	Lucille Begin
January 28	Mary Barnt
January 29	Lynn Stayner and Walt Piotrowski
January 31	Sandy Armstrong

JANUARY ANNIVERSARIES

January 3	Joanne Stoughton & Herb Henry
January 10	Cathyann & Bill Colson
January 11	Tim Sperber & Michael Stonier
January 19	Carol & Charles Salisbury
January 20	Sandy & Bob Armstrong



January 22

Mary and Dick Tulip

January 24

Jean & Bill Ringelstein

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