

The Bell Tower

Newsletter of the First Congregational Church of Hatfield, United Church of Christ

2024

August

No. 8

The Testimony of Summer Worship

On the day I set aside to write this newsletter article, I was having a hard time coming up with something to share for August. I'll be on vacation for part of the month, and August is usually a slower time for church in general, as you can see in the month's calendar below.

Then happenstance lent me an idea. I actually had an unexpected conversation about the number 313, which is an unnecessary story to get into at this point. I was wondering why that number sounded so familiar. It eventually came to me. 313 is the year of the Edict of Toleration. With this, the Roman Empire decriminalized Christianity. Up to this point, Christians faced official persecution for their faith. It was not the Roman religion of Jupiter et al. and it was not recognized as an ancient religion either. With this Edict, Roman citizens were free to worship as they chose, which meant that they were, for the first time, legally free to choose Christianity.

In little more than a decade, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The state favoured its new religion and now persecuted its alternatives. Toleration slid quickly back into the restrictions of an imposed state religion, but now with Christianity given Rome's imprimatur.

There were obvious benefits with this shift. Christianity's growth exploded throughout the Empire. However, official Christianity was now wed to political power. The Emperor Constantine reported seeing the image of the cross in the sky before a determinative battle at the Milvian Bridge and hearing the words, "By this conquer." The same Jesus who attacked violence and power was now used to justify them. The same Jesus of the poor, the outcasts and marginalized was now depicted in gold and worshiped in monumental buildings. And faith moved from a costly choice to establishment expectation.

State supported Christianity increased its numbers, but may have decreased its integrity. Some 15 hundred years later, knowing well the history of religious conflict, these words of the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, are immortalized within the Jefferson Memorial: "All men shall be free

to profess and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion."

The Father of the US Constitution, James Madison, wrote, "Religion and government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together." We were never and are not now a Christian nation.

Rather, when our first President visited Newport, RI during his first term, he included a stop at Touro Synagogue. He promised the congregants: "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights ... the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."

The Founders knew the pitfalls of favouring one religion over others, or for that matter any religion. Even to speak of "tolerance," is to undermine faith's vitality. Sincere faith must be chosen freely to be embraced.

This finally brings me around to August. We never speak of church as an obligation. Obligation implies some type of coercion, which further implies some type of unpleasantness. To gather for worship is an invitation to come closer to God and to join a community of God's people. It is to appreciate the profound reverence expressed by the Psalmist: "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness." (84:10) The idea of worship as far removed from obligation is lived in summertime church. We gather because we want to. We become community because it nurtures us. We share in prayer, music, Scripture and meditation because they feed us.

Summer worship is testimony that religion need not be an obligation or state established. These do not trust in the inherent blessings of faith. Summer worship speaks for us and to others that church has its rewards seen and unseen, now and for always.



AUGUST EVENTS

Sun. 4 th	Rev. Bill Ault is Guest Minister for today's worship Service.
Sun. 11 th	Deacon-led worship Service.
Tue. 13 th	Online Bible study group from 7 – 8:00pm.
Wed. 14 th	CROP Hunger Walk Rally at the Shelburne Congregational Church at 6:00pm.
Thur. 22 nd	Rev. Randy will attend a COM Chair's online meeting at 3:00pm.
Tue. 27 th	Monthly meeting of the Board of Deacons at 5:30pm. Online Bible study group from 7 – 8:00pm.

REGULAR GATHERINGS

Sundays: Worship Service begins at 9:30am online and in person. Sunday School begins after the children's sermon during the worship Service.

Tuesdays: Yoga classes are offered every Tuesday in the church parlor at 5:30pm.

Thursdays: Choir rehearses in the parlor at 7:00pm, except July and August.

ONLINE BIBLE STUDY GROUP

I invite you to join our online Bible study hour. This is the perfect time to join! We have Bible, Old and New Testaments. We are now hopefully offers, and with the opportunity of beginning, I hope you will accept this invitation to look more deeply into the biblical word. We would love to have you join us. Let's read, study, and discuss the book that literally has changed the world. Send an email to randyc1897@gmail.com for the login or if you have any questions about Bible study in general.



group. We meet on alternate weeks for one recently completed our survey of the entire starting over. With the extra time summer beginning Bible study from the literal beginning, I hope you will accept this invitation to look more deeply into the biblical word. We would love to have you join us. Let's read, study, and discuss the book that literally has changed the world. Send an email to randyc1897@gmail.com for the login or if you have any questions about Bible study in general.

CROP HUNGER WALK

The annual Walk will be hosted by the Shelburne Congregational Church on Sunday, October 6th at 2:00pm. This is a fundraiser for Church World Services and the good work they do around the globe and in our neighbourhoods. Their efforts concentrate on sustainable endeavours that can help people in need to raise themselves up. Fundraising materials will be available at the Rally on August 14th. If you would like to join me at the Rally, let me know. After the 14th, anyone wishing to be a part of our team can get the materials needed to collect donations. I hope you will think about walking with us and people from throughout the area as we bring attention to the Christian obligation to love one another.



MARK YOUR CALENDARS

Homecoming Sunday is September 8th. Our worship Service will begin at 11:00am on this Sunday and will be followed by fellowship. Square Dancers will perform in the dining hall on this day. If anyone is interested in joining their group, they will be meeting at the church on Fall Wednesdays.

Also on September 8th, an interactive discussion on Antisemitism will take place at the Sunderland Congregational Church at 3:00pm. More information is on the flier below.

HOSTING PROJECT PROCLAIM

Project Proclaim is made possible through a Lilly Foundation grant of \$1.25 million to the Conference. Rev. Dr. Chris Davies will offer an overview of *Project Proclaim*, which includes the following: it is a hub for innovative, experimental and non-traditional preaching; it is a place to explore the art and science of proclamation; and it is these four compelling programs –

1. PROCLAMATION LABS
2. LEARNING COHORTS (Fall 2024)
3. PREACHING CAMP (Spring 2025)
4. REVIVAL (Fall 2025).



PROJECT PROCLAIM
Compelling Preaching Initiative of SNEUCC

We are the third offering in the Proclamation Lab series. The first, "The Art of Proclamation," was held in Rhode Island in March. The second, "Rituals of Hope," at the Hartford Stage Company, will take place on August 21st. For more information and to register for this free event please click on this link:

<https://www.sneucc.org/eventdetail/proclamation-lab-pl2-rituals-of-hope-hartford-ct-18414943> . On September 22nd our church will host the third gathering, “Writing for the Local Newspaper,” from 3- 5:00pm.

Tyrone Brown, who has more than 20 years of experience in the arts and theater, has been hired as the Program Manager for the Compelling Preaching Initiative. He will be present as well. For more on Tyrone Brown please click on this link: <https://www.sneucc.org/newsdetail/program-manager-hired-for-compelling-preaching-initiative-18270079> .

The principal speaker at the event we host will be Scout Opatut, Religion Page Editor of the *Greenfield Recorder*. She will help participants learn how to write articles for the local newspapers on church events and matters of importance.

Project Proclaim is an ambitious program that can help us grow our churches. It is open to anyone from the Conference and from our congregation who would like to learn the skills of sharing the Good News inside and outside of the church community.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Don’t forget to check in at our website and FaceBook page. The links are directly below. They are updated several times each week and often share information from the larger church that we may not know of otherwise. Please like our pages and posts and share them as you choose.

The Conference has created and constantly updates a new social media presence called *Find Hope Now*. It can be found at www.findhopenow.org. The site is a concerted effort to offer messages of hope when so much involving religion is defined predominantly by judgment and aspersion. As the site grows, it will allow individual congregations such as ours the opportunity to maintain a presence and to reach out to people in the southern New England region who are looking for churches of hope. Take a look if you have a chance.

GROCERY CARDS

Big Y grocery card sales are a continuing fundraiser of our congregation. Please contact Marty Z. if you would like to purchase any. The church earns 5% on all sales. Thank you.

CONTACT INFO: HATFIELD CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Website: www.hatfieldchurch.org Facebook: www.facebook.com/First-Congregational-Church-of-Hatfield-UCC

Pastor: Rev. Randy Calvo 413-824-1630 randyc1897@gmail.com

Music Minister: Anthony Tracia anthonytracia@gmail.com

Committee Chairpersons:

<i>Benevolence, Amy N.</i>	<i>Music Committee, Sue M.</i>
<i>Christian Education, Anita W.</i>	<i>Real Folks Society, Amy N.</i>
<i>Church Moderator, Jonathan B.</i>	<i>Trustees, Ed M.</i>
<i>Deacons, Jeff F.</i>	

UNDERSTANDING AND COUNTERACTING

ANTISEMITISM

An Interactive Discussion

Sunday, September 8, 2024, 3:00–5:00 pm

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF SUNDERLAND
91 South Main Street, in Sunderland Center



In this **interactive discussion**, which is free and open to people of all backgrounds and beliefs, participants will learn to recognize and counteract antisemitism. We will explore **the mechanism of antisemitism, why it is so confusing and hard to talk about, and what it means to be an ally.**

Registration is encouraged but not required: <https://tinyurl.com/y7ctxpks>



Facilitators **Amy Leos-Urbel** and **Betsy L. Ames** have taught classes together on this subject at the Sojourner Truth School for Social Change Leadership and at other community organizations in western Massachusetts and beyond.

For more information, please contact us at SunderlandHRTaskforce@gmail.com

This program is sponsored by the Sunderland Human Rights Task Force, The First Congregational Church of Sunderland, the Sunderland Public Library, and the Committee on Understanding Antisemitism.

Additional support and funding provided by Harold Grinspoon Foundation, Beit Avahah/Florence, Temple Israel of Greenfield, the Deerfield Inclusion Group, and the Hatfield Equity Alliance fighting against Racism Together. Light refreshments will be served.