

# The Bell Tower

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

2025

January

No. 1

## The Nicaean Council's 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

In our online Bible study group, we have been reading what are colloquially termed the Five Books of Moses. They are the first five books of the Bible. Our Jewish brothers and sisters refer to these books as the Torah, the Law. The law-giver was Moses, a uniquely authoritative prophet who spoke with God “face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” (Exodus 33:11)

Moses' brother Aaron and Aaron's sons were Israel's priests. They presided over the cultic rites of the Tabernacle, the movable sanctuary which housed the Ark of the Covenant at its center, and the Tabernacle was erected at the center of the encamped tribes of Israel.

“Outside the camp, far off from the camp” (Ex. 33:7) was the Tent of Meeting. This is the place where God and Moses would speak and from which Yahweh would rule through Moses.

With the passage of time following the unique authority of Moses, however, the separation of the Tabernacle and the Tent of Meeting eroded. The two were folded into one entity. This most likely reflects the accumulation of power by the religious authorities through the elimination of the competing authority of the prophetic voice. Prophecy, symbolized by the Tent of Meeting, was co-opted into the religious establishment, symbolized by the Tabernacle. Many times, most of the time, however, the Old Testament prophetic voice rises up to challenge the priestly voice.

Jesus' was a prophetic voice. His relationship with the Temple, the grander version of the Tabernacle, was at the best of times guarded and at the direst of times hostile. This preference for the prophetic carried over into the earliest church. Just think about Paul. Paul considers himself an equal to The Twelve, the disciples of the historical Jesus. Paul fashions the church we know more than all the Twelve combined, and seemingly in a way they may have never envisioned. And Paul's authority is purely prophetic. He scolds that he owes no debt to The Twelve. Paul never knew the historical Jesus and boldly professed that his apostolic authority was based solely on his relationship to the risen Christ of heaven.

This reliance on charism's authenticity and authority is incorporated into the Pauline churches. 1 Corinthians 14 is one example among many. Paul must advocate for an orderly worship because so many in the congregation feel empowered by the Holy Spirit to act or speak. Paul advises, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.” (14:29) Christian prophets were a known entity in the earliest church. They are listed second among

the church's ministers at 1 Corinthians 12:28. The Spirit's powerful presence was acknowledged in and by the church.

For the next few hundred years, the church was an eclectic community of churches, and church leaders and teachers. During these centuries, Christianity was not a legally recognized religion within the Roman Empire. Scattered persecutions were authorized. Christians died, and others denied their faith. The church, however, continued to grow.

This all changed in 313 when the Roman Emperors promulgated the Edict of Milan that granted religious toleration in the Roman Empire, which established the freedom to worship any deity, and granted legal rights to Christians, including the right to organize churches. About six months earlier, Constantine won a crucial battle against one of his political opponents at the Milvian Bridge, and he credited this victory to Christ.

Eventually, in 324 Constantine became the sole Roman Emperor and struggled to unite the fractured empire. One way in which he did this was to favour the once discredited Christian religion. However, Christianity's divisions and differences were not helpful. Therefore, Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in 325, 1,700 years ago this year. He compelled the gathered church leaders to devise and accept a unified statement of beliefs now known as the Nicene Creed.

This Creed and the unity it brokered among Christians is the basis of 2025's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. On Sunday the 19<sup>th</sup> we will include the Nicene Creed in our worship Service. The United Church of Christ remains faithful to that earliest tradition of the prophetic spirit in that all creeds are testimonies not tests of faith. No one is included or excluded based on creeds. This is further explained on ucc.org as: “The United Church of Christ embraces a theological heritage that affirms the Bible as the authoritative witness to the Word of God, the creeds of the ecumenical councils, and the confessions of the Reformation. The UCC has roots in the “covenantal” tradition—meaning there is no centralized authority or hierarchy that can impose any doctrine or form of worship on its members. Christ alone is Head of the church. We seek a balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith. The UCC therefore receives the historic creeds and confessions of our ancestors as testimonies, but not tests of the faith.”

On the 19<sup>th</sup> we will pray for unity not uniformity, for unity made more powerful by our differences and the respect we have for them, as a sign of Spirit over law.

## JANUARY EVENTS

Thur. 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Online meeting of the Church Council at 7:00pm.
Mon. 6 <sup>th</sup>	Epiphany. Twelfth day after Christmas. Online Bible study group will meet from 7 – 8:00pm.
Tue. 7 <sup>th</sup>	Rev. Randy will attend the online meeting of the Association Committee on Ministry at 5:45pm.
Wed. 8 <sup>th</sup>	Monthly meeting of the Board of Trustees at 7:00pm.
Tue. 14 <sup>th</sup>	Online Bible study group from 7 – 8:00pm.
Tue. 10 <sup>th</sup>	Rev. Randy will attend the Association clergy lunch in Hadley at noon.
Sat. 18 <sup>th</sup>	Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins
Sun. 19 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Worship Service begins at 11:00am.</b> Annual Congregational Meeting begins at 12:00pm.
Wed. 22 <sup>nd</sup>	Rev. Randy will attend the HEADS Up/Heart online meeting at 6:30pm.
Sun. 26 <sup>th</sup>	Ordination of Emily Carle at the South Hadley Church at 3:00pm.
Mon. 27 <sup>th</sup>	Online Bible study group will meet from 7 – 8:00pm.
Tue. 28 <sup>th</sup>	Monthly meeting of the Board of Deacons.
Wed. 29 <sup>th</sup>	Rev. Randy will attend a Committee on Ministry Chair's meeting in Tolland, CT from 10:00am – 4:00pm.

## 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.

## EPIPHANY

The New Testament shares two distinct accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke gives us the Christmas story about the birth in the manger and angels shepherds in the field. Matthew offers of the Jews whose birth is announced to Bethlehem star. These two distinct they be. We tend to combine them in however, tends to short-change

Epiphany is celebrated on the twelfth remembers the visit of the Magi to the

They bear rich and prophetic gifts. Gold symbolizes Jesus as Son of David; incense represents Jesus as Son of God; and myrrh warns of Jesus' mortality as Son of Man. We hold no special Service on Epiphany, but if you can, remember this distinct story of Jesus' birth on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Remember that this initial outreach beyond the people of Israel is the first step that brings Jesus to all the world, including us today.



announcing the Saviour's birth to us the Epiphany story of the newborn king all the world by the epiphany of the accounts cannot be reconciled, nor should our worship for practical reasons. This, Epiphany.

day after Christmas, January 6<sup>th</sup>. It home of the Holy Family in Bethlehem.

## ONLINE BIBLE STUDY GROUP

The New Year is a time of beginnings. It is a time for resolutions. What will we do in this New Year of 2025 that will make us better people? For some, these resolutions will focus on the better diets, more exercise, and the such. For some it might be undoing some habit or investing in some previously avoided good habit. And for others it is time to resolve to grow spiritually. This can take a myriad of paths, one of offer, is to engage more actively with the Bible. To help do this, you are join us for our online Bible study group. If you may be interested in joining our group, please send an email to [randyc1897@gmail.com](mailto:randyc1897@gmail.com) for the Zoom login. Our group meets on alternate weeks for one hour. Currently, we are working our way through the first books of the Bible. If you would like to learn more about this crucial period of biblical history, I hope this may be one of your New Year's resolutions.



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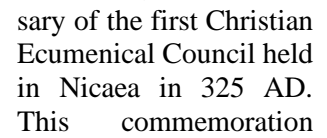
## STUFF OUR STOCKINGS SOCK COLLECTION

The collection of new socks will be accepted until January 12<sup>th</sup>. Then, they will be donated in the cold of January to help the homeless in our area stay a bit warmer. It must be a horrible thing to live without shelter in the winter,

but a warm, dry pair of socks makes it a bit more bearable. Thank you for your donations offered in the truest spirit of Christian generosity to those most in need.

**WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY**

For this year of 2025 the prayers and reflections for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity were prepared by the brothers and sisters of the monastic community of Bose in northern Italy. This year marks the 1,700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Christian Ecumenical Council held in Nicaea in 325 AD.



This commemoration provides a unique opportunity to reflect on and celebrate the common faith of Christians, as expressed in the Creed formulated during this Council; a faith that remains alive and fruitful in our days. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2025 offers an invitation to draw on this shared heritage and to enter more deeply into the faith that unites all Christians.

**NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE**

The Annual Congregational Meeting will be held on January 19<sup>th</sup>. In preparation for the Annual Meeting, the Nominations Committee will be asking people to serve the church on Boards and Committees. We are a thoroughly democratic church. This only works when the congregation’s members invest themselves in the work of the church. You are needed. If asked, please consider seriously the offer to serve our church. And you do not need to wait to be asked. Please volunteer to serve. And thank you.

**ANNUAL CONGREGATIONAL MEETING**

Our worship Service on January 19<sup>th</sup> will be at the special time of 11:00am and the meeting will follow directly afterwards in person and via Zoom. At the Annual Meeting we will receive reports, plan for the new year, and commit to the financial budget for 2025. Try to make the time to attend church and then to stay afterwards for the meeting. The two go hand in hand. Both are participating in the life and work of the church. When we gather for the meeting, it is the Holy Spirit who remains with us from worship and guides and inspires our deliberations. It is both a privilege and a responsibility to participate in the life of the church.

**REMINDER**

Every year I like to remind the congregation that if they would like to have a name added to my monthly visitation list, to let me know. Also, if you would like to be one of our Sunday readers, please let Randy know.

**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](http://www.findhopenow.org). The site is a concerted effort to offer messages of hope when so much involving religion is defined by judgment and aspersion. As the site grows, it will allow individual congregations such as ours 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 Linda M. 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](http://www.hatfieldchurch.org) Facebook: [www.facebook.com/First-Congregational-Church-of-Hatfield-UCC](https://www.facebook.com/First-Congregational-Church-of-Hatfield-UCC)

Pastor: Rev. Randy Calvo 413-824-1630 [randyc1897@gmail.com](mailto:randyc1897@gmail.com)

Music Minister: Anthony Tracia [anthonytracia@gmail.com](mailto: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>	