



Pastor's Column: Take Time During Advent

By the time you read this it will be Advent. Advent is an old season that goes back to the beginnings of the Christian church. It means “coming” in Latin although the season itself consists of waiting—waiting for the “advent” or coming of Christ in Christmas.

We tend to rush Christmas. Every year the big box stores put out Christmas decorations and goods earlier and earlier. Home Depot had artificial Christmas trees on display well before Halloween this year. It is impossible to avoid unless we decide not to go to work or to go out shopping.

Added to the impatience is our own procrastination. Every year people ask each other if they are ready for Christmas, as if it were an unwelcome relative or visitor. Ready for what? Having all your gifts purchased and under the tree? Ready with all the cooking and baking and housecleaning and decorating?

Anita and I try to purchase gifts throughout the year when we see something we think a particular family member would enjoy. We still end up doing some last minute shopping, but we do this to reduce stress. Christmas is not something to get stressed out about. If it becomes stressful it might be important to re-assess what we do for Christmas and what we can do to reduce the stress.

Consider the situation of others around the world who celebrate Christmas in a much simpler way than we do here. It strikes me as ironic that in our

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country people stand in line for hours and days to buy things—tickets for a sporting event or a concert, or toys—witness the recent madness over the latest PlayStation. In other parts of the world people stand in line for necessities such as food, water and medicine. We get stressed out over whether or not we will be able to find a Cabbage Patch Doll or a “Tickle Me Elmo” when others feel stress when they haven’t eaten for days, yet we experience stress in very serious aspects of our lives, in the death or illness of a loved one, the possible loss of a job, a divorce, or something else equally stressful. In Africa children get excited about having a pen to use in school (take a look at the article in this issue about programs in Africa for children affected by HIV/AIDS).

Part of this would be to take on an attitude of watchful waiting. December 25 will come whether or not we put our trees up the day after Thanksgiving or on Christmas Eve. Take the season of Advent as a time to spend some time in reflection. Sounds easy, you say? We make time for what is important to us. It is important this time of year to prepare for a time when family members will be together, with whatever that involves for our own families. It is also important to take time for God, who is with us all the time. Take some time this Advent season and spend it with God. Meditate, contemplate nature, anything that brings you closer to God. You will be better off for it!

In Christ

Church Calendar December 2006

Date	Time	Event	Place
Sun.. Dec. 3	9 AM	Church decoration for Advent/Christmas	Sanctuary
Sun.. Dec. 3	8 PM	Singing Bowl Harmonic Healing Concert	Chapel
Tues. Dec. 5	6:30 PM	Church Night at the Country Store	Country Store Thrift Shop
Sat. Dec. 9	8 PM	SUNY Orange Community Orchestra Concert	Orange Hall, OCCC campus, Middletown
Sun. Dec. 10	1 PM	SUNY Orange Community Orchestra Chamber Recital	The Mansion, OCCC campus, Middletown
Sun. Dec. 10	4 PM	Classic Choral Society Concert	Sanctuary
Fri. Dec. 15	7:30 PM	Winter Solstice Service	Sanctuary
Sat.. Dec. 16	4:30 PM	Christmas Caroling	Meet at the church
Sun. Dec. 17	11:15 AM	Christmas Pageant	Sanctuary
Sun. Dec. 24	7:30 PM	Christmas Eve Service	Sanctuary

Church News

Bring Your Pennies to Church!

Don't forget to bring your pennies and pocket change to church! The "Pennies for People" milk bottle was recently emptied and needs to be refilled! Grants from Pennies for People benefit various organizations in New York State. Linda Bull is the chairperson for Pennies for People for the New York Conference of the UCC.

Caps for Kids Tops \$24,000

The Caps for Kids project is in full swing with winter approaching. Please consider giving a cap as a Christmas gift or as a gift for any occasion. Each hand-knit cap costs \$10 and all proceeds benefit Church World Service projects to help children in Africa who have been adversely affected by HIV/AIDS. Please contact Janet Steeves at 496-3329 for more information.

From the BGUCC Children's Corner....

It's been a busy time for the children of the BGUCC. They spearheaded the "Operation Care Package" venture of sending some TLC to Zach's army platoon in Iraq. Thank you to Susan Chewens for her financial support in mailing the package. The children hope to bring some cheer and comfort to them as they serve in Iraq.

During the month of November, the children learned about Moses. We celebrated the end of this unit with a pizza and viewing of the movie, "Prince of Egypt." It was a fun night for all.

As we enter Advent, the children are learning about the different symbols that remind us about the season. They learned about "hope, peace, love, and joy" and the symbolism of the different colors of candles used in the Advent wreath. The Christmas carol, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" and candy canes will also be discussed to learn about their Christian roots. They are busy learning lines and preparing for the pageant.

The Sunday School children would like to invite everyone to the Christmas Pageant on December 17 during worship. There will be special music, creative scenery, and a play that may shed new light on the Christmas story. Don't miss it!

Behind the scenes, Susan and Steve Chewens have been busy working on the special pageant scenery. Once completed, it will add to the church's seasonal decorations! We are also looking forward to building a puppet theatre for the children in January and February.

The Sunday School would like to extend birthday wishes to Lilja Olafsson for her sixth birthday on November 24!

Sanctuary Decorating

The sanctuary will be decorated for Advent and Christmas on Sunday, December 3 at 9 AM. Come early and join us for hot chocolate and refreshments!

Harmonic Healing Concert

The next Harmonic Healing Concert with Tibetan singing bowls will be on Sunday, December 3 at 8 PM in the chapel. Come join us for an hour of meditation and relaxation!

SUNY Orange Community Orchestra Concert

The SUNY Orange Community Orchestra will present a concert on Saturday, December 9 at 8 PM in the auditorium at Orange Hall. The program will include works by Mozart, Tchaikovsky and Massinet. Members of the orchestra will also perform in a Chamber Recital at 1 PM on Sunday, December 10 at the Mansion at OCCC. Members of our church including Erica and Emily Moore and Craig Cowing will be playing in the orchestra. Hilarie Clark Moore is the conductor.

Classical Choral Society Christmas Concert

The Classic Choral Society will present their Christmas concert on Sunday, December 10 at 4 PM in our sanctuary. The program will be Benjamin Britten's "A Ceremony Of Carols", Op. 82 and Harry Simeone's "Sing We Now Of Christmas". Admission is free but donations will be gratefully accepted.

Winter Solstice Service

We will host a Winter Solstice Service on Friday, December 15 at 7:30 PM. This is a time to relax from the stress of the holiday season and acknowledge the darkness of this time of year. Come and find renewed hope amidst the darkness of winter!

A Tribute To Dot Greene By Scott Greene

Dot Greene died on Tuesday, October 25 after a long struggle with Parkinson's Disease. A private burial service was held at Washingtonville Cemetery on Thursday, October 27. Dot and Mott Greene were both very active in the community and our church for many years, and they have left behind a wonderful legacy of community service and involvement. A memorial service was held in the church sanctuary on Saturday, November 4 with approximately 200 people in attendance. Rev. Bill Ellsworth offered some reflections on Dot's life. Linda Bull read some reflections by Rev. Michele Cjika. Below is a part of Scott Greene's reflections on his mother's life.

What does one say about a woman such as our mother. First she was dedicated to her family. She and our father, Mott did everything they could for us. They

Christmas Caroling

A group from the church will go Christmas caroling on Saturday, Dec. 16 at 4:00 pm. We will meet at the church.

Christmas Pageant

The Christmas pageant will be presented by the Sunday School during worship on December 17. Please be sure to join us!

The Mary Merriam Flower Calendar

The Blooming Grove UCC has established a flower calendar to provide altar flowers for Sunday Worship. The calendar is named in honor of Mary Merriam who lovingly and gracefully cared for the altar and flowers for many years and is warmly remembered by members of the congregation. Sharen Casazza will maintain the physical calendar and will seek donations from members of the congregation to cover the \$50.00 cost. On the first and third Sundays of the month fresh flowers from Flowers By Joan will be placed in the church's brass vases and placed on the altar in memory of or in honor of whoever placed the donation. Please contact Sharen Casazza at Box 8, Blooming Grove, NY 10914 or at home 845-496-5222 to place a donation. Please specify clearly for whom the flowers are donated and include a check to Blooming Grove UCC for \$50.00.

provided us with a wonderful childhood. As with most children, I only understood the depth of their love and concern for us as I grew older. The old cliché that the older we get the smarter our parents become was certainly true for me and my respect for both my parents.

Mom was always there when she was most needed. She and Dad let us live our lives, make our own mistakes, and were always there to pick us up when we stumbled. For that I will be forever grateful.

Mom, as you all know, was dedicated to the community. Whether it was her decades-long affiliation with Arden Hill Hospital and the Ladies Auxiliary or her devotion to her faith and the church that nurtured that faith, she could always be counted on to lend a helping hand to those in need.

Over the last few years, while Mom was enduring the ravages of Parkinson's disease, I have been struck by the countless people who have come up to me and asked how Mom was doing and then proceeded to tell

me a story about something Mom or Dad had done for them. Often it was the delivery of Mom's famous homemade turkey soup when they were ill, or perhaps the delicious chex mix that was always given to friends at Christmastime. It could have been a thoughtful gift at an important time in their life. Perhaps it was simply a phone call or an impromptu visit to see how they were doing and an offer of help if they needed it. Both Mom and Dad have demonstrated over the course of their lives that one person, in this case our Mom can have a profound effect on others, often by a simple act of kindness.

I can still remember Mom and Dad working in the kitchen of our home. Mom would be boiling the meat off turkey bones to make stock for soup. Dad would be sitting at the kitchen, paring knife in hand, cutting mountains of celery, carrots and onions for Mom's universally loved, turkey soup. I now understand the importance of what that soup represented. For me it was a symbol of Mom's selfless dedication to others. It was the practical application of what has come to be a central tenet of my life. A lesson taught to me by my Mother and Father. It is to treat others as you wish to be treated and to be there for your friends and family in time of need.

Remember, as our Mom, Dot Greene, often reminded us growing up...do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The greatest gift you can give anyone is to give of yourself.

CWS "Giving Hope" for AIDS orphans in Rwanda and Kenya

by Ann Walle (from
www.churchworldservice.org)

More than 17,500 HIV/AIDS orphans and other vulnerable children in Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya are participating in an innovative program that addresses their rights and needs and empowers them with agricultural, vocational, and life-skills training. In November 2006, CWS marketing and communications director Ann Walle visited some of the program sites in Rwanda and Kenya. In Rwanda, the program is entering its fourth year; in Kenya, the program is new this year.

In partnership with the YWCA in Rwanda, Church World Service has initiated projects supporting child-headed households to enable the children to work together to support and sustain themselves. This may mean pooling small sums to rent a plot of land and then

farming it together; or building one another's homes; or allowing for a member's smaller siblings' school supplies and uniform.

Whatever the resulting activity, the groups show over and over again that these children learning empowerment are stronger together than they could ever be alone in small family groups. After a parent's death the children most likely drop out of school, leaving them skill-less, and soon they are starving. Begging for food or work can result in the families being splintered, and the younger children even more vulnerable as the oldest siblings travel to the border of Tanzania to work for food.

The children -- some of whom lost parents in the 1994 genocide -- are learning more than income-generating skills; they are learning to speak their truth. One *nkundabana* ("I love children" in kinyarwanda) or caregiver-- usually an older woman -- observes that it has been a good day; none of the children has cried in telling their stories. She can see they are getting stronger, gathering strength as members of the group.

One of the groups, the Nyarugari group in Kibongo, is beginning to absorb other orphans, younger orphans, and to teach them simple skills that they do together in activity sections after school. Kagasa, a rural working group outside of Kigali, is growing tomatoes, a joint project through which the children are learning to create a business and use the income to run a household -- which includes paying for school uniforms and materials, healthcare, and the like. A group fund is opened, and group leaders -- including a chairperson, vice chair, secretary, and treasurer -- lead the children in deciding who among them needs what. Before the group establishes its account, it must present a business plan.

Each district has a pair of social workers employed by the Giving Hope program who lead the children in their training and business plan, and serve as advisors and parent figures. Giving Hope works in tandem with the local government, which informs the program's social workers of children in need. The Giving Hope program provides a small sum to seed the groups' projects, and the children must contribute themselves.

Nyarugari -- "Let's improve together."

In a room provided by the local authorities outside Kibungo, a group of three children -- heads of their households -- works on creating cards designed with banana leaves, while a group of younger orphans talks and weave crafts in a brightly lit back room. They look up as visitors enter and sing a song of welcome. Some are weaving banana leaves into carrying bags; some are embroidering; the littlest are braiding twine to make cord to hold animals.

The group's name *Nyarugari* means "Let's improve together." The children are pleased when a visitor tells them that he uses their cards to send all his notes.

Group member Nyakarime says, "We understand that all support for our program comes from Church World Service. Thanks to CWS that's why we can do what you see. We are happy to hear you like our projects, and we thank God for your visit. And we pray that God will protect you. You may look older than us but you are young in your mind."

Says John, the coordinator of the civil community, "We appreciate the Giving Hope program because it prevents the children from being street children or vagabonds. It helps them to lead their own lives. Our commitment is that we bring our contribution as we can" by giving the space.

As in other Giving Hope gathering, before learning about each other, we pray.

The group began on February 12, 2006. "We are 28 children who are orphans. Some live with caregivers, some live alone. The older Giving Hope group taught us these crafts, after classes or during weekends and vacations."

"Who has already benefited from the program?" asks program director Epiphany. The answers reveal that they have already learned many lessons from their Giving Hope elders: the importance of schooling, hygiene, and sharing whatever you have. Seven stand to tell of their successes.

"I have made four cords, I sold them, and I could buy a pen and soap."

"I have made five cords, and bought these clothes, 12 notebooks, and two pens."

"I have made a bag. I got seven notebooks, two pens, and soap."

"I made two bags. I bought these shoes."

"I made this crocheted square. I bought these clothes and plates and spoons."

"I embroidered a big tablecloth. I got these shoes for school and 14 notebooks, two plastic plates, and two spoons."

Each child also mentions that the nkundabana (the group's chosen caregiver) sold the items for them.

"I was a street child. Nkundabana brought me to school. I got soap, clean clothes and the barber shop, clothes, and shoes."

All of the children have shoes on; shoes are required for school.

"Thanks to the nkundabana we can be transformed from a street child to a very good kid!"

"The important thing about this group is that before we were hopeless children. Now we are people who are happy and courageous!"

"Doing this, even those living with caregivers, we are no longer a burden because we contribute our own part."

One girl tells of being visited by the nkundabana when she worked by herself on her small farm plot. The group's president came and encouraged the girl to join the group. "Now I can make the bags -- I have soap, salt, and I buy food. On top of that, I returned to school and I am in the fifth grade. That's what I appreciate from this group."

Twelve-year-old Francine is so shy and soft-spoken. It takes much bravery to stand in front of her group and some strangers to tell her story:

"I experienced a very hard life in my household. I don't know how old I was when I was brought to an orphanage. I lived there with other children and had food. One day a woman came to adopt me. When I went with her she made me a house helper and mistreated me. I was beaten when I tried to go to school.

"I told a girl from town, and this girl talked to the nkundabana. She helped me to get a school uniform, and brought me to this group. The good thing the group has done for me is get me back in school, and I can make baskets."

The nkundabana, also named Francine, spoke: "Before I was selected, I didn't like children. But when the children selected me, I was ashamed to say no. In the meetings, I grew to love and admire them. It made me open my eyes to see other children who were in need.

"I could see, when I visited, that they had problems. That broke my heart. I went together with another child to bring them to the group. I planned a party to attract others. Since then we started to gather together.

"But it is hard; they are children with problems. They are not sure we will respect them. This is why we started these activities -- learning together, talking, this has results."

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*In this issue of The Newsleaf:
 Lots of Church News
 Church World Service in Africa
 A Tribute to Dot Greene
 . . . and more!*

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for December 2006

Start of Cycle C:

3 December 2006

First Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

10 December 2006

Second Advent

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

17 December 2006

Third Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

24 December 2006

Fourth Advent

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:47-55 or

Psalm 80:1-7

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

24 December 2006

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

31 December, 2006

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Psalm 148

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:41-52