

The Visitor Newsletter

Bethlehem United Church of Christ

December 2026

FROM THE PASTOR

Beloveds,

Growing up, December was a big month in the kitchen. The holiday season meant many things to our family, but one of the things I loved the most was my Grandma Buckland's Christmas baking extravaganza. We knew that the second two weeks of December were no fly zones at their house. It was an exclusive invitation only week where a select few were allowed into the secrets of my grandma's baking.

Every year, she would make around six Tupperware containers full of fudge. It was always three flavors: chocolate, peanut butter and coconut peanut butter. If that was not enough, she also baked around another twenty containers of various Christmas cookies. Yes, twenty! To this day, I am still perplexed on how she found the time, patience, and counter space to make it all happen.

If I were to close my eyes, I can still imagine that 4th street kitchen filled with smell of sugar, butter, and chocolate. I can still see the mountains of containers that looked like they were ready to tumble off the counter.

Looking back, I now realize that nobody on this earth makes this glutenous amount of sugary goodness for no reason. She did it because my grandparents did not have a lot. We also have a lot of family members on that side. My mom is one of eight siblings and a plethora of grand and great-grandchildren. This was my grandma's Christmas present to us. A way for her to spread her love throughout the generations.

When we recount the Christmas story, we often lean into the extraordinary. However, at the very center is something pretty ordinary. A mother trying to do the best with what she has; a mother, a baby, and a place to rest.

God chose to enter our story not through spectacle or through the wealthy. God chose the vulnerability of precious human life. Good took something ordinary and made something extraordinary.

Shirley Buckland wasn't changing the world with a million batches of cookies; however, she was making sure that the people around her knew they were loved. I think that's how the world begins to change. The miracle of Christmas continues whenever love finds its way into the ordinary moments of our lives.

As we enter this Advent and Christmas season together, I hope we remember that we don't need to do something spectacular to make a difference.

With Christmas Joy and Blessings,

Pastor Matthew

A Boychoir Christmas

The Boychoir of Ann Arbor, led by Music Director, Dr. John Boonenberg, proudly presents the 40th annual performance of "A Boychoir Christmas" featuring the unique and glorious sound of this outstanding local choir singing beloved classics and beautiful modern settings of choral Christmas repertoire.

Bethlehem United Church of Christ is honored to host this joyous event on December 12 at 7:00 pm in our Sanctuary. There is no cost to attend and all are invited. A free-will offering will be accepted.

ADVENT WORKSHOP & POTLUCK



Celebrate the season with good food, creative fun, and warm fellowship! Join us on Sunday, December 6, at 11:15 a.m. in the Fellowship Dining Room for our annual Advent Workshop and Potluck.

Enjoy a shared meal, connect with friends, and make beautiful Christmas crafts to keep or give as thoughtful gifts. Please sign up on the church bulletin board to bring a main dish, side dish/salad, or dessert. If you have dietary needs, please bring a dish you can enjoy. Save the date—we would love to celebrate with you!

The Education Team

BUCC OUTREACH - HOLIDAY APPEALS 2026

The Outreach Ministry Team is asking for your support of our partner organizations as you consider your holiday giving. Please click on the icons provided to be taken to the donation pages and wish lists for

Peace Neighborhood Center

food gatherers

Alpha House

Interfaith Hospitality Network

Thank you for helping to make the holidays brighter for those less fortunate.



CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP AT BETHLEHEM UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

DECEMBER 24

AT 7:00 PM

Celebrate the holiday season at Bethlehem United Church of Christ. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. Christmas Eve service will feature joyful music and celebration of Christmas.

COOKIE EXCHANGE & CAROLING TO HOMEBOUND



December 13, 2026 at 11:15 am following Worship. Member Engagement is sponsoring a Cookie Exchange during Community Hour. Bring one dozen of your favorite holiday inspired cookies to exchange for a dozen of your choice. If you have any questions please contact Jenny Foster at:

bucc.memberengagement@bethlehem-ucc.org

If you would like to brighten the lives of others, then please plan to stay afterwards to join us to sing carols to some of our members who could use some Christmas cheer. We'll leave from the church office at 12:30 pm.



LONGEST NIGHT SERVICE

December 21 at 6:30 pm

As we reach the longest night of the year, we gather in the steady warmth of God's healing love. Many of us carry losses of different kinds, and with them the weight of grief, sorrow, and pain. This service offers a quiet, sacred space to acknowledge those burdens and to bring them honestly before God.

Whatever you're carrying, whatever dims this season for you, you're welcome here. Come lean on one another and on God's enduring strength. Come for rest, for comfort, and for the light Christ brings — a light that meets us even in the deepest night.



PHOTOS AND FUN WITH SANTA

December 22
5:30-7:30 p.m.
Bethlehem UCC
423 S. 4th Ave.
Ann Arbor

Come meet and take photos with Santa, make some Christmas crafts and enjoy refreshments.

The event is free. Free-will donations will be gratefully accepted to benefit Alpha House, which provides support for local families experiencing homelessness.

Registration requested at www.bethlehem-ucc.org, or scan the QR code.

Come Share the Joy of Christmas Caroling!



Help us spread Christmas cheer to members of our church family who are unable to attend services this holiday season. Whether you're a seasoned singer or just love celebrating the season, we'd love to have you join us!

When: Sunday, December 13, 2026
Pizza Lunch: 12:00 PM in the Youth Room
Caroling Begins: 12:30 PM
Who: Everyone is welcome! Families, youth, and adults are all invited.

Please call the church office if you plan to attend so we can make sure there is plenty of pizza and transportation for everyone.

Let's share the joy, hope, and love of Christmas through song!



Thank you to all who donated wreaths that decorate our outside windows during this Christmas season. Below are the names of those whose memory and/or honor they were given.

In Memory of

Raymond & Elizabeth Lambarth from Joe & Jan Eadie
Norm & Helen Grob from Norma & Conrad Foster
Our Mom's & Dad's from Mike & Dindy Haab
R. L. & Shirley Buckland from Pastor Matthew
Jay Katz from Jacqueline Katz
Cliff & Pat Merryman from Ele Kotowski
Our Deceased Family Members from Pat & Shannon O'Reilly
Chuck Raab from Mary Raab
Ron White from His Family

In Honor of

Doris Whitlock from Mike & Harriette Ehnis



Dec. 2
12:00 pm Bethlehem Crafters, Lounge
12:00 pm Member Engagement Luncheon
7:00 pm Choir Practice, Choir Room
Dec. 4
8:30 am Veterans & Friends Breakfast, Alpha Koney
Dec. 6 - Communion Sunday
10:00 am Worship, Sanctuary; Sunday School during Worship
11:00 am Advent Workshop & Potluck, Fellowship Hall
Dec. 7
11:00 am Handbell Choir Practice, Choir Room
Dec. 8
9:30 am Ladies Breakfast, Alpha Koney
Dec. 9
9:30 am Cemetery Board Mtg., Cemetery
12:00 pm Bethlehem Community Crafters, Lounge
7:00 pm Choir Practice, Choir Room
Dec. 12
7:00 pm A Boychoir Christmas, Sanctuary
Dec. 13
10:00 am Worship, Sanctuary; Sunday School during Worship
11:00 am Community Time, Youth Room
11:15 am Cookie Exchange, Youth Room
12:30 pm Caroling to Homebound
Dec. 14
11:00 am Handbell Choir Practice, Choir Room
Dec. 15
2:00 pm Worship Ministry Mtg., Lounge
3:30 pm Facilities Mtg., Lounge
Dec. 16
12:00 pm Bethlehem Community Crafters, Lounge
7:00 pm Choir Practice, Choir Room
Dec. 20
10:00 am Worship, Sanctuary; Sunday School during Worship
11:00 am Community Time, Youth Room
Dec. 21
11:00 am Handbell Choir Practice, Choir Room
6:30 pm Longest Night Service, Sanctuary
Dec. 22
5:30-7:30 pm Photos with Santa, Sanctuary
Dec. 23
12:00 pm Bethlehem Community Crafters, Lounge
7:00 pm Choir Practice, Choir Room
Dec. 24 - Office Closes at Noon
7:00 pm Christmas Eve Service, Sanctuary
Dec. 25 - Christmas, the Nativity of the Lord
Dec. 27
10:00 am Worship, Sanctuary; Sunday School during Worship
11:00 am Community Time, Youth Room
Dec.28
11:00 am Handbell Choir Practice, Choir Room
Dec. 30
12:00 pm Bethlehem Community Crafters, Lounge



October 16 – November 15, 2026

MEMORIALS

BROADCAST FUND
Judy Barnett

CEMETERY MAINTENANCE FUND
Ruth Willimann

CURRENT FUND
Judy Barnett
Arlene Finkbeiner
Ruth Willimann

GENERAL MEMORIAL FUND
Judy Barnett
John & Jane Schneider

SCHOLARSHIP FUND
Judy Barnett

HONORARIUMS

GENERAL FUND
Helena Joy Zoller



Fiscal Year June 1, 2026 to May 31, 2027			
October 2026	YTD Actual	YTD Target	Budget
Offerings & Income	$125,230	$155,839	$374,013
Expenses	$165,272	$201,985	$484,764
Net	($40,042)	($46,146)	($110,751)

Thank you for your generosity. Bethlehem is grateful for your continued support of your time, talent, and treasure. If you would like to consider contributing financially online, please visit bethlehem-ucc.org/giving or use this QR code to find all of the ways to give.

Totenfest 2026





Community Time - Signing Christmas Cards for Homebound




Bethlehem Gardeners!

The first meeting of the Bethlehem Gardeners was October 19th! We worked in the front of the church to weed, trim back perennials and rake! We plan to resume our activities in Spring 2027. We hope to combine gardening with fellowship!



Let Jenny Foster or the church office know if you would like to be part of this group of green thumbs!

SAVE THE DATE!!!

German Pretzel-Making Tradition Continues

Come join us on Friday, January 15 and/or Saturday, January 16 to continue the Bethlehem tradition of making fresh German pretzels.

We'll begin at 8:30 a.m. both days. On Friday, we'll mix the dough, and on Saturday, we'll roll and shape the pretzels. Kitchen helpers and cleanup volunteers are also needed on Saturday.

Come when you can and stay as long as you're able. No experience is necessary!

If you have any questions, please contact Judy Coucouvanis.

Thank you, and we look forward to seeing you there!

Holiday Gift Cards

The Outreach and Education Ministry Teams are collecting **Meijer, Kroger, and Target** gift cards to make the holidays brighter for the families and children served by **Peace Neighborhood Center.** If you can donate, please bring your gift cards to the church office or place in the offering plate by **December 13**.







Outreach News

Bethlehem made donations to each of our partner organizations. Checks of $3000 each were presented to Alpha House by Mary Jean Raab, Peace Neighborhood Center by Jane Schmerberg and Pastor Matthew Hogue-Smith, and Food Gatherers by Katie Rowan.







Your pledges to the BUCC budget made these donations possible.

Thank you for your generosity!

Food Gatherers Volunteer Days

Bethlehem will have two volunteer days at the Food Gatherers Warehouse at 1 Carrot Way:

Mon. Jan. 18, 12:30 - 3 PM

Th. April 1, 8:30 - 11 AM

You can sign up here: Food Gatherers Sign Up

This is a fun way to work alongside fellow Bethlehem members to combat hunger in Washtenaw county.

food gatherers
fighting hunger where we live

Outreach Volunteer Opportunities

In addition to providing financial support, Bethlehem members also support our partner organizations through volunteering. If you would like to get involved, there are several opportunities available.

Peace Neighborhood Center Food Distribution

Fridays 8:30 - 11:30 AM

Peace Neighborhood Center

Peace Food Distribution Sign Up Fall 2026

Food Gatherers

Various shifts are available for individuals to sign up at the Carrot Way warehouse sorting produce, or at the Delonis Center Community Kitchen preparing and serving meals.

In addition to individual signup, Bethlehem will have opportunities for group volunteer days.

Food Gatherers Individual Sign Up

food gatherers
fighting hunger where we live

Hope Clinic, Ypsilanti

HOPE CLINIC

Volunteer Opportunities at Hope Clinic

Many opportunities are available including:

- Farm Stand Distribution
- Farm Stand Behind the Scenes Work
- Food Pantry Distribution
- Diaper Pantry Packing, Distribution
- Food Pantry Stocking, Organizing, Cleaning
- Grocery Packing
- Dining Room Host
- Data Entry
- Cleaning
- Yardwork

For individual signup information, please contact Katie Rowan at: rowank55@gmail.com.

In addition to individual volunteer opportunities, Bethlehem will also offer group volunteer days.



Holiday Publication Deadlines

With the holidays approaching, several Refrigerator Page submission deadlines will be earlier than usual. Please submit all articles for the following dates by December 16:

- December 20
- December 27
- January 3

We will also publish a combined January/ February newsletter. Submissions for that issue are due by noon on January 7, 2027.

Please ensure each article is complete and includes any needed call to action, along with all relevant details—such as dates, times, addresses, phone numbers, and email contacts.

Send submissions to:

churchoffice@bethlehem-ucc.org.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Bethlehem Cemetery

Oaks of Righteousness: Bethlehem Cemetery Ann Arbor Tornado Recovery

"They will be called oaks of righteousness a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor."
–Isaiah 61:3

When the April 15 tornado swept through the cemetery, the unexpected clean-up costs quickly mounted to over $50,000 and continue to rise. It is our goal to replace these monies through fund raising. The beginning is encouraging, but much more help is needed.

How You Can Help:

Give Online: You can make a secure credit card donation anytime on our website at bethlehemcemeteryaa.org. *(Note: On the donation form, you can select the "Cemetery Tree Replacement Fund" or "Cemetery General Maintenance Fund" to direct your gift).*

Given by Check: Please make checks payable to **Bethlehem Cemetery** and mail them to: Bethlehem Cemetery c/o Bethlehem UCC Church Ann Arbor 423 S. Fourth Ave. Ann Arbor, MI 48104

Year-End IRA Giving: As the end of the year approaches, please consider designating your Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) from your IRA to Bethlehem UCC and specifying that it be directed toward the cemetery clean-up fund.

Thank you from the Bethlehem Cemetery Association Board of Directors

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Dear Cemetery Deed and Certificate holders:

We are asking for you to update your contact information with us, and also let us know if through death of holder, the deed and/or certificate should be moved to another person.

Please help us keep our records current which will also help family members when the time comes to use the plots and spaces.

The best way to get the process started is to send an email to Bethlehem Cemetery Ann Arbor at this email address, fill out the contact form.

Bethlehemcemeteryaa.org/contact/

If you have questions, you can reach us at 734.761.6878 and leave us a voice mail.

Thank you for your help

Bethlehem Cemetery Ann Arbor Association Board of Directors



Bethlehem Veterans & Friends
Monthly Breakfast
December 4th 8:30 am
Alpha Koney Island
4389 Jackson Rd., Ann Arbor
Questions? Contact Tom Ziesemer
734-476-7515 or via email at:
ziesemerth@gmail.com



Bethlehem Women & Friends
Monthly Breakfast
December 8th at 9:30 am
Alpha Koney Island
4389 Jackson Rd. , Ann Arbor
Contact Susan Irwin at 734-255-5661 or
or: siirwin46@gmail.com
for more information.
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BETHLEHEM
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

(734) 665-6149

423 S Fourth Avenue
Ann Arbor, MI 48104

Office Hours
Tue - Fri: 9:00 am - 2:00 pm

info@bethlehem-ucc.org

www.bethlehem-ucc.org

Church Staff

Pastor	Rev. Matthew Hogue-Smith
665-6149 ext. 215	pastor@bethlehem-ucc.org
Associate Pastor	Rev. Diane White
665-6149 ext. 214	pastordiane@bethlehem-ucc.org
Music Director/Organist	Naki Kripfgans
musicdirector@bethlehem-ucc.org	
Hand Bell Director	Jim Rowan
jrowan@umich.edu	
Church Administrator	Gwenda Mayes
665-6149 ext. 218	parishadministrator@bethlehem-ucc.org
Administrative Assistant	Lisa Reach
665-6149 ext. 210	churchoffice@bethlehem-ucc.org
Maintenance	Bill Husted

Our Mission

To worship God,
to learn and live the Word of God,
to engage in Christian fellowship and service,
to invite others to join us
on our faith journey in the ministry of
Jesus Christ.

Our Core Values

- Growing spiritually in our faith journey together.
- Worshiping together to seek and share God's love.
- Connecting with god and each other in a supportive, nurturing way.
- Reaching out to our members, community, country, and the world through support and service.



Executive Committee

President: Jim Rowan
Vice President: Ron Dechert
Secretary: Teresa Beagle
Treasurer: P.J. Lindemann
Ex Officio: Rev. Matthew Hogue-Smith

Leadership Council

President: Jim Rowan
Vice President: Ron Dechert
Secretary: Teresa Beagle
Treasurer: P.J. Lindemann
Business Ministry: Steve Darr
Member Engagement Ministry: Judy Coucouvanis /Jenny Foster
Outreach Ministry: Katie Rowan
Worship Ministry: Michelle Loukotka
Education Ministry: Diana Slaughter
Ex officio: Rev. Matthew Hogue-Smith

Ministry Team Chairs

Business Ministry Team Chairs:
- Finance Sub Committee: P.J. Lindemann
- Facilities Sub Committee Steve Darr
- Personnel Sub Committee: Ron Dechert

Education Ministry Team Chair: Diana Slaughter
Member Engagement Ministry Team Co Chairs: Jenny Foster & Judy Coucouvanis
Outreach Ministry Team Chair: Katie Rowan
Worship Ministry Team: Michelle Loukotka
Pastoral Relations Committee Chair: Kurt Schmerberg
Bethlehem Cemetery Board Members:
- President: Mary Jean Raab
- Vice-President: Mary Friend
- Secretary: Shannon O'Reilly
- Treasurer: Jamie Dylenski
- Elected Members: Marilyn Pearson & Susan Irwin
- Ex officio: Rev. Matthew Hogue-Smith