

December 2021



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF CHAMPAIGN

Experience Christmas

In-person or @firstpres.live

Sunday, December 12

**9 AM Christmas Music Sunday
CYF Cookie Sales**

Sunday, December 19

9 AM Interactive Christmas Pageant

Tuesday, December 21

6 PM Longest Night Service

Friday, December 24

4 PM Family Service

8 PM Traditional Candlelight Service

An Advent Devotion

BY KEVIN MURPHY

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy. *Psalm 92:1-4*

I recently learned that Johann Sebastian Bach composed an instrumental and choral cantata every week for over two years! While he was the choirmaster at St. Thomas Lutheran Church in Leipzig Germany beginning in 1723, Bach wrote a new piece based on the Gospel reading for each week. He then rehearsed it with the choir and whatever instrumentalist were available and shared it with the congregation during that Sunday's worship. These cantatas were usually at least three movements, so they weren't just little diddies. Though nearly three hundred were written, only two hundred survive – but still!

When I shared this tidbit with the Bible Study group yesterday, one comment that stuck out was, "When God gives you a gift, you use it." Another noted that, "The more we use our gifts, the better we get at them." No doubt God has given us all gifts or called us to special service. Few of us are composers of great and numerous works like Bach. Few of us can even say we stand out from the

continued on the next page

crowd with our gifts. But we all have something special we like doing and are good at. Be it teaching or nursing or engineering or parenting or caring for others or creating art, we all have gifts.

We can resist by being shy about our abilities and gifts. We can ignore God's claim on our lives. We can selfishly withhold what we have been given. Or, we can answer God's call and claim our gifts and abilities and pursue our path with passion and excitement. When we do, we will be rewarded with affirmation and maybe even praise. But we'll know it is God who deserves the glory, God who is to be praised for the good work that makes all people glad. The joy of doing what we are well-suited to and good at is thanks enough.

(Rev. Kevin Murphy is pastor of Xenia United Presbyterian Church, in Xenia, Ohio, and a seminary friend of Pastor Matt's. Kevin and Matt have been in a study group with Feild Russell, Allen Huff, and Mark Stanley who have met at least annually for over twenty years.)

If you or a loved one is in the hospital or in need of a pastoral visit, please let the church office know.

Our pastor, staff, and hospital visitors keep this information confidential. Your church wants to be in touch.

Bless be the tie that binds.



Christmas Music Sunday and Youth Cookie Sale

December 12 – 9 AM

This year's Christmas Music Sunday will include a variety of musical selections reflecting on the Christmas season...The Promise and Wonder, The Birth, and Rejoice. Some of the works include "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"; "While By My Sheep" and two movements from Vivaldi's "Gloria". The Chancel Choir will be accompanied by strings, trumpet, oboe and organ. The Upper Room Ringers, led by Libby Sternhagen will take part in our arrangement of "O Little Town of Bethlehem".

Afterwards youth will have their annual cookie sale in Westminster Hall. This year pre-assembled varieties in half pound, one and two pound increments will be available. Price is \$10/pound.



Christmas poinsettias will decorate our Sanctuary this coming holiday season. Poinsettias are \$17 per plant and can be given in honor or memory or someone. Include "poinsettia" on your check along with a note of who it is given for.

Children, Youth & Family

Children, Youth, Family

BY MINDY WATTS-ELLIS, DIRECTOR
MINDY@FIRSTPRES.CHURCH

Christmas Cookie Sale!

Our youth will be baking cookies and have them ready for sale December 12th at 10 AM in Westminster Hall in 1/2 pound, 1 pound, and 2 pound assortments. The price is \$10/pound. Proceeds will go towards registration for our participants of the Youth Triennium July 24-27, 2022.

Interactive Christmas Pageant Join us at the 9 AM worship service December 19th for a fun, interactive Christmas Pageant. The whole congregation will be invited to participate from their seats with responses and sound effects to help tell this most beloved of stories. Children present will be invited to come forward if they wish to be a cow, sheep, chicken or angels to follow the simple instructions from the narrator and then return to their seats. No rehearsal required! Families are invited to send in photos of themselves in nativity tableaux if they wish, and we will incorporate the images into the presentation.

Candy House Creations

Join us in Westminster Hall December 19th at 10 AM for candy house making. Create some fun memories together and discuss how to invite Jesus into your home while building a sweet home together. If you wish to have a take home kit, contact Mindy at mindy@firstpres.church by December 13.

Sunday School Update

BY SAMANTHA NICHOLS, SUNDAY SCHOOL COORDINATOR
SAMANTHA@FIRSTPRES.CHURCH

Courage. Hope. Hopelessness. Sharing God's love with others. These are just some of the themes our Sunday School students have been exploring over the past few weeks. After completing a unit on the story of Esther, our elementary school students are now focused on the birth stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. Meanwhile, our high school students talked about spiritual gifts and stewardship before this month's unit on Isaiah. Thanks to the childcare team, our preschool students now have their own time and space to hear the Word of God and respond through both art and play. Our last class of the year is December 12. Classes will resume on January 9.

We started the semester with class in the park before heading indoors due to cooler weather. While indoors, we have worn masks and practiced social distancing. Thanks be to God for our

wonderful teachers, helpers, and students who have been so flexible and enthusiastic! Together we have learned about God, explored our faith, and deepened our commitments to discipleship.

As we prepare for our next semester, I invite you to consider how you can support our Sunday School program. More teachers and classroom helpers will ensure the program is sustainable. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you'd like to learn more about serving in either role. I deeply appreciate the many ways the First Pres community has already supported this impactful program.

Thank you, thank you, thank you!
Merry Christmas!

Christmas Caroling Sunday, December 19

If you're looking for ways to spread a little holiday cheer, please join us for Christmas caroling. We will meet at the church at 5:15 and carpool then sing from 5:30-7. Afterwards we will gather around the turquoise picnic table for cookies, hot cocoa and hot cider provided by the Nurture and Outreach Committees.

Mission Updates

The Heart of Missions Newsletter has been revived. Our local and global mission agencies have made changes due to COVID restrictions, as well as food and medical supply shortages. The newsletter helps summarize some of what has been in the mission news for our mission workers and agencies during the past week in case you missed it. You can access The Heart of Missions on the church website under the SERVE tab at firstpres.church/heartofmissions

English as Second Language News

BY VAL SMITH, DIRECTOR
VAL@FIRSTPRES.CHURCH

Thank You!

I am thankful for the warm reception I have received from the congregation, the pastors, church staff, ESL advisory council, volunteer tutors, and ESL students during my first month as ESL director at FPCC.

Specifically, the church staff has been friendly and has given generously of their time for my support and orientation. A special thank you goes to Mindy who set up all the systems for online work space and communication. Also, a special thanks to Ritchie and George who helped me set up my office. In addition, Marcia, Patty, Ann, and Jeannie have answered procedural questions and given instructions on how to operate office equipment.

As Missions coordinator, Rachel continues to increase my knowledge of the mission ministry and all the operational processes.

The key to an effective ESL outreach program is the ESL advisory board, including two former directors and the volunteer tutors. Vern, who led the search committee, has shouldered much of the responsibility in the transition period between directors. The tutors from the church and community are passionate, informed, and competent.

By offering zoom classes, we have been able to retain two excellent tutors who have moved but still want to continue teaching.

We will continue to offer these classes in January. Our in-person tutors have patiently waited for the reopening of classes and are looking forward to tutoring again at the church in January of 2022.

After visiting each of the classes online, I was filled with gratitude for the students we have the opportunity to serve. They are so eager to learn and appreciative of our help.

I am grateful to all of you for your heart to reach out to international visitors and permanent residents who need access to English instruction. I am reminded of the words of Jesus in *Matthew 25:35b*: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."



Please pray with us, and support our concerns for the people of Haiti, who have endured more tragedy—earthquakes, hurricanes, and abject poverty in the past few years, than most of us see in a lifetime.

We refer you to <https://pda.pcusa.org/situation/haiti/>

Presbyterians are committed to helping them clean up and get a fresh start.

News From the Green Team

BY PAT PHILLIPS
P.PHILLIPS42@SBCGLOBAL.NET

Styrofoam Recycling Day Will be January 8, from 9 to 11, in Doxology Lane. The container in the southwest corner of Westminster Hall is for weekly deposits, but Christmas often brings large pieces of Styrofoam packaging and take-out containers.

Just "dump and run"; all will be taken to the DART location in Urbana.

Save Energy, Save Money, Save the World!

Clemmie Ackermann and **Tom Ulen** took part in two energy webinars, focused on analyzing church energy uses and potential savings from managing lighting, heating and air-conditioning and re-directing savings to other church missions and needs.



All the lights in the chapel have been replaced by LED lights, and that's a great idea for homes and Christmas decorating.

Stuff a Green Christmas Stocking!

Buy local or fair trade products, including special consumable gifts, socks that support conservation, soy candles, something home-made, or donations to charities, including opportunities in the Presbyterian Giving Catalog, presbyteriangifts.org.



Young people are passionate about environmental issues! The Environmental Stewardship committee welcomed high school senior and eco-ambassador **Sam Laufenberg**, who has lots of ideas. Anyone who cares about being stewards of the environment can contact **Clemmie Ackermann** coletta.ackermann@gmail.com, **Kathy Schoeffmann** kschoeffmann@yahoo.com, or **Pat Phillips** p.phillips42@sbcglobal.net with ideas or interest in becoming involved with the Green Team.

but Cuban revolutionaries demanded total independence from Spain.

President William McKinley fearing US properties in Cuba in danger sent the battleship USS Maine to Havana Harbor in 1898. The Maine exploded leaving 266 of 355 American sailors dead. The cause of the explosion is still unknown but the US press sensationalized the disaster leading McKinley to offer purchase of Cuba for \$300 million. Spain refused. A US blockade went into effect as the US congress demanded Spain give up its authority. Congress declared war on April 25, 1898.

War ended on December 10 with the Treaty of Paris favorable to the United States. No Cubans were represented. More than two-thirds of Cuban wealth had been consumed during the war leaving Cuba more vulnerable to the growing power and manifest destiny of the United States.

Next month: José Martí

Cuba Study Sign Up

This January we will have a special Cuba zoom study. You can sign up at rachel@firstpres.church.

Wednesdays, January 5, 12, 19, and 26 from 7-8 PM, we will look with fresh eyes at the history, culture and hopes of Presbyterians in Cuba, our hermanamientos. This will be a zoom study only. If you are interested in praying with and for our brothers and sisters in Cuba, if you are interested in dreaming about a future trip to Cuba, if you are wanting to experience a little Cuban culture, this will lift your spirits during January. Sign up and join us. We need your email address to send you a zoom link.

Here is the link again for all CUBA PARTNERS who want to read the wonderful devotional from Cuba, Su Voz <http://cubapartnersnetworksuvoz.blogspot.com/2021/>

The Republic of Cuba

Cuban Wars for Independence From Spain

The Second War 1895-1898

BY BOB KIRBY, CUBA PARTNERS

RWK3213@GMAIL.COM

The Second War for Independence from Spain was a part of the Spanish American War in which the United States forced Spain from Guam, Puerto Rico, The Philippines and Cuba. Cuban exiles in the United States had begun a public relations campaign to gain support of the US government against Spain. Then, in 1895 they incited another rebellion in Cuba. Most US businessmen with investments in Cuba hoped for a political settlement



Several months ago, CPN received a request from the IPRC for a container of commodities to be shipped to Cuba. Finally this fall, after delays due to both hurricanes and red tape, our container was shipped from the port of New Orleans to the port of Mariel in western Cuba.



Isaiah 54:10 Though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, my love shall never leave you nor my covenant of peace be shaken, says the Lord.

Romans 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Revelation 22:21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. AMEN

May we all be aware of angels (messengers) speaking to us about LOVE, HOPE, JOY and PEACE.



A Gift That Opens Doors December 24

Proverbs 18:16

In the story of God, as we tell it, there is a barrier that exists between the Created world and its Creator. A wall. Sin, we say, separates us from God, and separation from God is unbearable.

And our story goes on to say that God, seeing that we had no hope in ourselves of getting over, or through or around what separates us, offered us a gift in Jesus Christ who opens a door — a door we could not open ourselves.

What a gift!

By giving to the Christmas Joy Offering, you honor God's gift of Jesus Christ by providing assistance to current and retired church workers in their time of need and developing our future leaders at Presbyterian-related schools and colleges equipping communities of color.

Joys & Concerns

We extend many blessings to...

- **Eliana Zawadi Johnson**, daughter of **Claris Mushengezi Bondo and Olando Rashun Johnson**. Eliana was baptized on Sunday, November 21, 2021.

We extend our sympathy to...

- **Bruce Rainey** on the death of his mother, Arlene.
- the family and friends of **John Goin** who died November 12, 2021.
- the family and friends of **Charlie Wittler** who died December 2, 2021. A Memorial Service will be held at the church Saturday, December 11, at 1 PM with visitation before the service.
- the family and friends of **Wanda Tuchel** who died December 3, 2021. A Memorial Service will be held sometime in 2022.

Finance

Financial Update

BY MARK SCHOEFFMANN, CHAIR FINANCE
MSCHOEFFMANN@MCHSI.COM

Contributions

Contributions in November to the Operating Fund were \$19.3K less than in 2020 and \$25.9K less than the budget at \$45.2K. The Year to Date total is below last year by \$29.5K and below the budgeted amount by \$29.6K. These figures include prepaid pledges (those paid in the year prior to the budget year) that are prorated over the year with 1/12 added to each month's contributions. Including all revenue sources, at 91.7% through the year we have received 91.7% of the expected year's revenue.

Expenses

Year to Date expenses are \$8.1K above the budget at \$967.3K and more than in 2020 by \$73.2K. At 91.7% through the year we have experienced 92.4% of the expected year's expenses.

Balance

Considering all sources, revenue exceeds expenses by \$31.8K which is \$96.2K less than at the end of November in 2020.

Restricted Funds

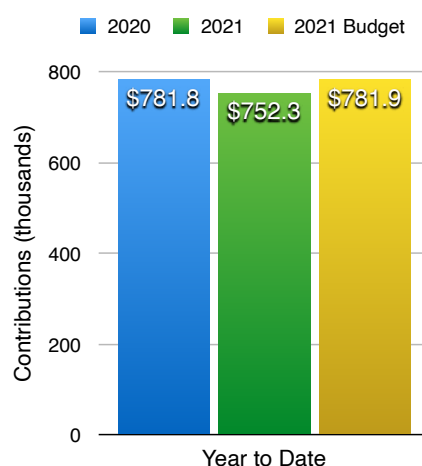
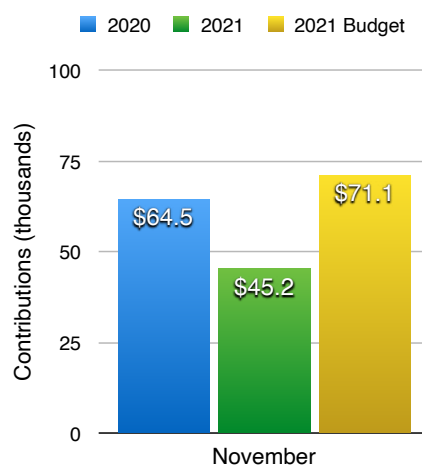
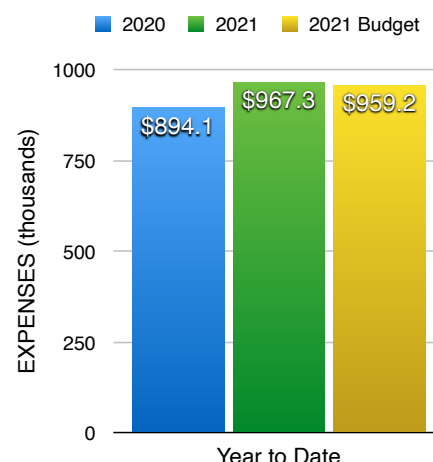
In addition to contributions to the operating fund there was \$2,264 donated last month to special offerings and funds restricted to specific purposes such as missions supported by our church.

Stewardship

We have received 137 pledge commitments for the 2022 budget in the amount of \$730,263. This compares

with \$780,118 in commitments for the current year. The 2022 budget is based on our commitments for 2022 exceeding those for 2021 by \$20,000.

Thank you to everyone who has submitted their commitment for 2022. If you have not yet submitted your pledge commitment please prayerful consider your ability to support the continuation of our programs and ministry. You may respond by completing and mailing a pledge card or going online at <https://www.firstpres.church/pledgecard>.



Do you enjoy soccer? DREAM is looking for volunteer coaches (adults and teens) to help teach and empower kids!

DREAM is kicking off 2022 with indoor soccer for children in K - 5th grade. We are looking for volunteer soccer coaches in Champaign, Urbana, and Rantoul to teach skills, drills, and have fun with kids. Availability on at least two Saturday mornings in January or February is required. Volunteer training will be provided. Sign up at www.dream.org for more info!

Worship

From Your Worship Team

BY JUDI GEISTLINGER

JUDIGEISTLINGER@HOTMAIL.COM

Advent and Christmas is the perfect time to spend time in worship of our Lord. Your worship committee has put together a variety of opportunities and times to really get in the Christmas spirit.

- ✳ Music Sunday on December 12 at 9 AM by the Sanctuary Choir and at 11:15 for The Gathering Service
- ✳ Interactive Nativity program on December 19 at 9 AM led by CYF
- ✳ Longest Night Service on Tuesday, December 21, at 6 PM
(the longest night of the year) where we will have a quiet, thoughtful service focusing on scripture, poetry and prayer with candle lighting. While not full of bright happy songs, we will be focusing on how Jesus is the light of the world and lighting candles together to drive out the darkness as we lift our prayers.
- ✳ Christmas Eve
4 PM for the Family Friendly service
8 PM for Traditional Worship with candlelight, communion and the choir.
- ✳ Worship and Carol Sing (Sunday, December 26) will feature a carol sing and brief message in this 9 AM relaxed worship service.

*May the joy and peace of
Christmas be with you all
through the year.
Wishing you a
season of blessings.*

*Merry Christmas and
Happy New Year!*

Your staff

Church Officers

2023	2022	2021
<u>Session Elders</u> Moderator: Matt Matthews		
Mary Gritten	Ken Chapman	Greg Cozad
Carol Miles	Celeste Kim	Ron Deering
Steve Tock	John Muirhead	Mark Schoeffmann
Tom Ulen	Ann Stout	Eric Stickels
<u>Community Mission Deacons</u> Moderator: Sandy Carr		
Kathy Schoeffmann	Bruce Rainey	Sandy Carr
	Leslie Thomas	Richard "Itch" Jones
		Lola Ruthmansdorfer
<u>Congregational Care Deacons</u> Moderators: Amy Born & Pam Knox		
Jean Brunson	Sue Fischer	Amy Born
Pam Knox	Mary Jane Kelley	Nancy MacGregor
Marge Olson	Buddy Selin	Jean Smith
		Julia & Tom Ulen

Ugly Christians

BY SCOTT PAUL-BONHAM

Pastors were bemoaning the precipitous drop in church attendance before the COVID pandemic. For many congregations the return to in-person services of worship after the widespread availability of the vaccines in this country has been anemic, around 50% or even less. Of course, some are still tuning into virtual worship for numerous reasons. Still, for long periods since World War II, church attendance in the U.S.A. led the world. What has happened?

Recently for a Narrative Journalism class, I was asked to read the article Nickel-and-Dimed: On (not) getting by in America by Barbara Ehrenreich which first appeared in Harper's Magazine in January 1999. This writing was a masterpiece of investigative journalism, as the author strove to live a month on minimum wage as a waitress in Florida. The paragraph that struck me most profoundly, however, was Ehrenreich's description of her consistently worst customers: "The worst, for some reason, are the Visible Christians—like the ten-person table, all jolly and sanctified after Sunday-night service, who run me mercilessly and then leave me \$1 on a \$92 bill. Or the guy with the crucifixion T-shirt (SOMEONE TO LOOK UP TO) who complains that his baked potato is too hard and his iced tea too icy (I cheerfully fix both) and leaves no tip. As a general rule, people wearing crosses or WWJD? (What Would Jesus Do?) buttons look at us disapprovingly no matter what we do, as if they were confusing waitressing with Mary Magdalene's original profession."

Jump forward two decades and to a Starbucks in Michigan, where my daughter, who is a professing Christian, worked for five years. Andrea reports that Starbucks' servers shudder when someone comes in wearing a cross outside their clothes or a Bible verse shirt, for consistently these are the most demanding, rudest, and poorest tipping customers of the day, every day, throughout the year. Not to mention the current view that so-called "Evangelical Christians" are a most adamantly resistant group against face-mask wearing and COVID vaccination. Consequently, we face at least a generational perception of "Visible Christians" as being mean-spirited, stingy, obnoxious, and ill-informed. In a word, ugly. Who desires to voluntarily associate with any group with this kind of reputation?

None of these words describe the Christians I know, who wear their crosses under their shirts and who carry Bible verses in their hearts and minds. The Christians I know are gracious and generous, reflective and responsible, but most groups are judged by the minority of its members, not its majority. This overall perception of a group is powerful and persuasive. In Rome in the first centuries of the Church, Christians walked through the streets at night picking up girl babies and deformed boy babies that were left out on doorsteps for the mongrel dogs to dispose of. When facing execution in the Coliseum, many of these same Christians calmly sang Psalms and hymns as they faced death. These actions baffled the Romans, and intrigued many to find out what inspired believers to act this way.

Of course, not all Christians at the time were so noble and courageous, maybe not even most of them were, but that was the perception of the group as a whole, and it drew people into the Church at an exponential rate.

The current "ugly Christian" perception is a challenge for everyone in our country. For those who profess faith in Jesus as the Christ, we need to be aware how important it is to exhibit the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that are the fruit of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22) all the time and to everyone we meet. Let us live empathetically. Let us see Jesus in everyone and then act accordingly. For those who are not Christians, and have experienced firsthand "ugly Christian" hypocrisy, I am deeply sorry. There is no excuse. Please do try to remember that those Christians, no matter what they are wearing or how they tip or whether they vaccinate, do not represent the whole of the faith or the goal of the faith. Several local Christian congregations have courageously fed the hungry during the pandemic and stood strong against racism and gun violence. These congregations who have put their faith in action are worthy of returning to, or checking out.

Scott Paul-Bonham and his wife Donna are the Matthews' dear friends. Scott is a PCUSA chaplain retired from the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Terra Haute, IN.



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CHURCH** OF CHAMPAIGN

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E: info@firstpres.church

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Sunday:

9 AM Worship/Sanctuary

10:15 AM Sunday School

11:15 AM The Gathering/Chapel

Online Worship is also available at 9 AM on Sunday mornings thru YouTube, Facebook, and our church website. Go to FirstPres.Live.

Contact the church office for more information.

Pastor:

Matt Matthews..... Senior Pastor/Head of Staff, Ext 213

Staff:

George Almasi Facility Assistant
Brendan Barker..... Organist
Ritchie Drennen Facility Manager, Ext. 237
Patty Farthing..... Receptionist, Ext. 211
Robert Ferrer Audio-visual Technician
Marcia Franks Administrative Assistant, Ext. 210
Judi Geistlinger..... Commissioned Lay Pastor
Joe Grant..... Director of Music
Sam Haupt Director Contemporary Worship Band
Rachel Matthews Mission Coordinator/Parish Associate, Ext. 219
Samantha Nichols..... Sunday School Coordinator, Ext. 216
Blaise Pascal..... CYF Connections Assistant, Ext. 216
Ann Petry..... Accounting, Ext. 224
Val Smith ESL Director, Ext. 235
Libby Sternhagen..... Bell Choir Director
Mindy Watts-Ellis..... Director Children, Youth & Family, Ext. 212

Most of the staff email addresses are the person's first name followed by @firstpres.church. For example, matt@firstpres.church.

The newsletter is published monthly. Deadline is the last Monday of the month for the following month's edition. Send submissions to marcia@firstpres.church.