

December 2025



# FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF CHAMPAIGN



THE CHANCEL CHOIR UNDER THE DIRECTION  
OF SAMUEL STEPHENSON PRESENTS

## Lessons and Carols

**WITH BRASS**

SUNDAY **7** 09:00 AM  
DECEMBER WORSHIP

**CHRISTMAS MUSIC SUNDAY**

## Christmas Eve

Wednesday, December 24

### 4 PM Family Service

Hear the Christmas story from scripture, sing Christmas carols, a wonderful storybook to convey our Christmas Eve message and the lighting of candles as our service ends. All are welcome to join us as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

### 8 PM Worship

Join us as we celebrate the birth of the Christ Child at a contemplative worship service with choir, communion and candlelight.



## Advent, A Season of Preparation for the Coming of the Savior

BY BETH WAGNER, INTERIM PASTOR/HEAD OF STAFF  
BETH@FIRSTPRES.CHURCH

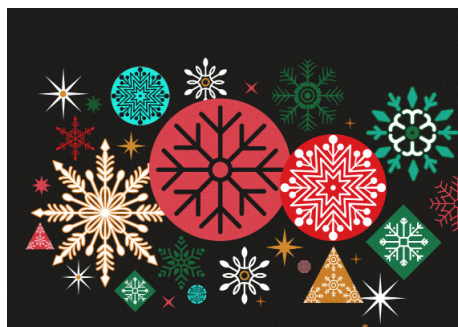
Advent (from the Latin *Adventus*, sc. *Redemptoris*, “the coming of the Saviour”) is a holy season of the Christian church, the period of preparation for to celebrate the Nativity of Christ or Christmas. It is the beginning of the Christian year.

While I was on vacation, last week I worked at getting my Indy house in order. I checked out Christmas decorations, inventorying old decorations from the past that I no longer needed and bought some new decorations for the present season. Then I spent some time cleaning the house that has been much neglected this fall. I also began reflecting on the past year, through the annual Christmas card. This year, as in years past, it will be an expression of my family’s hopes and longings, excitement, the awe of a nine-year-old granddaughter, and wondrous teenage reflections of a fifteen-year-old grandson. During this exercise, I also spend some time with what I call “heart work.” As I inventory, clean, and reflect within my own heart.

I find “heart work” to be a very important spiritual discipline. I invite you to spend time and to do some “heart work” this Advent season as well. I have been checking out what I am holding inside my heart that might need to be let go of. Who have I failed to say I love you too? And also to find out if I have old ideas that are no longer necessary in my current life. Then I move to cleaning. Advent is a great time to clean the heart; of old grudges, hurts, ideas or events

as I anticipate the birth of Christ, my Savior. And finally the hardest for me, honest reflection on what have I learned and experienced this year. I do know that if I do my “heart work” I will be assured an outstanding, joy-filled Christmas. I could not ask for more for me and for all of you.

Advent Blessings,  
Beth



Get ready for a  
wonderful time of

## Christmas Caroling

December 16 5 PM

Meet in the church parking lot at 4:30 PM to car pool to Windsor of Savoy and Carriage Crossing for holiday singing.

We will return to the church for hot chocolate and cookies in the Parlor.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Brunch December 14<sup>th</sup>

Come, enjoy brunch  
Centennial Hall

We will have a variety of  
brunch items along with  
some special sweet treats.  
Enjoy food and fellowship  
right after the 9 AM service.

Donations appreciated!

Volunteers are needed to help  
with the brunches. If interested,  
please contact Carol Ann Green,  
(cadgreen@comcast.net), Gary  
Peterson (amer\_swede@yahoo.  
com) or the church office.



### Church Office Hours

The church office is open:

Mon-Thurs 8:30 AM - 2 PM

Friday 8:30 AM - noon

Contact the church office during  
these hours at 217.356.7238.

You can also send an email to  
info@firstpres.church.



## The Heart of Mission



### Angel Tree Benefiting Courage Connection

This year's Angel Tree supports the women and children residing at **Courage Connection**, CU's domestic violence shelter. Please stop by the tree in Westminster Hall this weekend and choose an ornament with gift requests from the families.

To help ensure each gift reaches the right family, please:

- Leave gifts unwrapped
- Place all gifts from one ornament in a single bag
- Attach the ornament to the bag
- Return the bag under the tree by December 14

Thank you for bringing joy and light to Courage Connection families this Christmas!



### Tea with Beth in December Tuesdays, 1-3 PM

Hopscotch Bakery on John Street in Champaign

Enjoy tea and conversation

### Donate a Poinsettia this Holiday Season

Poinsettias will enhance our worship during December. If you would like to donate a poinsettia in memory or honor of someone, drop a check for \$10 in the offering plate marked "poinsettia." Include a note who you are giving it for.

### Christmas Joy Offering Christmas Eve 2025

Each year on Christmas Eve, our church has its Christmas Joy Offering. This Joy Offering is one of four denominational wide offerings throughout the year and according to PCUSA, the Christmas Joy Offering has been a cherished Presbyterian tradition since the 1930's. The offering distributes gifts equally to the Assistance Program of the Board of Pensions and to Presbyterian related schools and colleges equipping communities of color. The Assistance Program provides critical financial support to church workers and their families. Presbyterian related schools and colleges provide education and leadership development while nurturing racial and ethnic heritage. This has been a Presbyterian commitment for nearly 140 years.

In order to understand this program better, here is the example of how the money was spent in 2022:

- \$1.1 million in gifts that year were used to provide critical financial support and grants for current and retired Presbyterian church workers in their time of need.
- 272 retired church workers and surviving spouses were helped.
- 223 recipients were able to stay in their homes, assisted living, or long-term care.
- 621 Emergency Assistant Grants helped people facing economic hardship.

On Christmas Eve, you will find inserts in your bulletin for the Joy Offering. Thanks for being a valuable part of this Christmas Joy Offering that supports past, present, and future church leaders! Mark your check or envelope "Christmas Joy."

## English Language Learners

BY BONNIE WARD, DIRECTOR  
BONNIE@FIRSTPRES.CHURCH

A HUGE thank-you to everyone who helped make the Thanksgiving potluck a huge success!! It was great to have so many First Presbyterian attendees join us and help welcome our ELL students. A rough count showed that we had more than 90 people in attendance.



setting up the hall and hanging all the flags. One student was thankful to see Uruguay's flag hanging with all the others.

I heard many wonderful comments from our students who thoroughly enjoyed the food and the time around the table. **Pastor Beth** and I were talking about how connection and real community happens when people sit together over a meal. Centennial Hall was loud with laughter and conversations. We hope there will be more ways for our students to connect with First Presbyterian attendees in the future.

The food was amazing and well-managed by **Gary Peterson** and his team. Many joined early to help set the tables and welcome students. A big thank-you to **Ritchie** and his team for

Put it on your calendar for next year and come join us for amazing food and interesting conversations!!



We have a few more weeks before the semester ends on December 18<sup>th</sup>. We will be on a break until January 20<sup>th</sup>. We still have about 20 students on our waiting list and more to come. Please consider becoming a volunteer tutor once a week. It will be the best 2 hours of your week!!

It is such a privilege to work with our amazing teachers and students from more than 20 countries. There are some who say diversity is a bad thing, but God says it is part of His design and a very good thing. I am grateful for this amazing opportunity.

### Blue Christmas – Sunday, December 21 4 PM

An Advent service for those experiencing grief or for whom this season is a time of grieving. It offers a space to express those feelings, but also to experience the hope we find in Christ. Members of the church and friends noted on All Saints Day along with those who have entered the church triumphant more recently will be remembered.



## Happy and Giving Thanks

Thanks to First Church for funding rice and beans for Thanksgiving. Jasmine rice and mayocoba beans were added to canned food and pasta remaining from our earlier DREAM families distribution.

Having a good time preparing to serve others are **Dennis Arthur, Gabriel Mboyo, Ginette Mukoko, Juliana Orduro Marfo and Jeanne Mpemba**. Fifteen bags were packed and delivered to our church families.



## A Generous Congregation

We have always been a generous congregation. Thanks be to God for our Warm Winter Collection to boost the closet and the pantry at Immigration Services of Champaign-Urbana (ISCU). You donated many winter wear items for their closet as well as items for their pantry. Thanks to executive director **María Jiminez** and warehouse manager **Chris Sheeran** for joining us in worship and at brunch.



Gracias, Iglesia Presbiteriana por su generosidad.

ISCU provides comprehensive services to recent immigrants in our community. They are unique in collecting and delivering donated household items to families in empty apartments. Most current needs include: mattresses - twin through queen sizes (free of stains and still comfortable to sleep on), blankets, linens, towels, large pots, frying pans, saucepans, flatware, tupperware, colanders, kitchen tables, kitchen chairs, non-oversized dressers, occasionally non-oversized sofas, specific food and hygiene items, kids clothing 4-6T, winter wear for all ages. It is easy to arrange a pickup at your home at <https://www.isc-u.org/warehouse>

## A Devotion from our Siblings in Cuba

The Kingdom of God is a hidden treasure in our midst. *Luke 17:20 - 25*

Nor will people say, "Here it is," or "There it is," because the kingdom of God is in your midst. *Luke 17:21b (NIV)*

We often expect the Kingdom of God to be something spectacular, something manifested through grand signs and outward wonders. We want fireworks, trumpets, and drums! But Jesus teaches us that it isn't like that, and that the Kingdom of God isn't a place we go to after we die, nor a distant future event, much less a spectacle.

The Kingdom of God is here and now! It is present in the heart of every person who opens themselves to God's grace, in every act of love and compassion, in every moment of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is an inner reality, a transformation of being that manifests itself in the way we live and relate to others. It is not sought with the eyes, but with the heart. It is not found in grand temples, but in humility and simplicity. We are invited to stop looking for the divine in external things and begin to look for it within ourselves; to cultivate peace, justice, and joy in our hearts, because that is where the Kingdom of God resides. It is a hidden treasure within us that we must discover!

Prayer: Dear God, help us to look into our hearts; teach us to feel your presence in the small things, and open our eyes to see your Kingdom in our daily lives, in the people around us, and in the beauty of creation. Amen. Su Voz is a daily devotion written by the people of the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba and distributed daily by email. The sessions of our sister congregation in Havana and our session commit to a mutual agreement of joint ministry renewed every three years. We are also connected through the Cuba Partners Network.

To learn more or to request Su Voz daily you can connect here <https://www.cubapartnersnetwork.org/>

## Outreach & Nurture

### Community Engagement and Fellowship

#### Campaign for Champaign 2025



The City View room at Illinois Terminal was filled Friday evening, November 28 as the Congolese community of Champaign County gathered to praise God in song and voice. The topic, sanctification, was preached by several pastors. Music from St. Patrick's choir and instrumentalists and a second group of vocalists managed by **Jean René Balekita** energized the audience.

**John Matanga**, president of the Champaign County Congolese Association, organized the event and presented special awards. First Pres was recognized for its support of the community. Individual awards were presented to **Pastor Beth Wagner**, **Pastor Gabriel Mboyo** and **Bob Kirby**. Also representing us were **Claudia Kirby**, **Nissi Lembelembe**, and **Jose Pukuta**.

#### The Last Word by Linda Peterson

Creator God, how Holy and Sacred is your name.  
 Holy of Holies, you have the last word.  
 Death has been defeated; because of Jesus. It is not final.  
 If you are facing what feels final; the loss of someone you love or fear of  
 your own being called home.  
 Know this; Jesus is with you.  
 He is not rushing past your grief but sitting with you.  
 He feels the weight of death with us.  
 He meets us in our pain.  
 He cries with us.  
 His compassion has no end.

#### Presbytery of SE Illinois Recognizes Francophone Bethesda Fellowship

Francophone Bethesda Fellowship was recognized at the 461<sup>st</sup> Stated Meeting of the Presbytery of Southeastern Illinois on November 8. "At this stated meeting we approved the first New Worshipping Community in the Presbytery of Southeastern Illinois! The Francophone Bethesda Fellowship (housed in the Champaign, First, congregation) has its genesis in a group of French-speaking congregants, mainly from Congo, who desired a worship service in French as well as a worship style that felt more comfortable and meaningful to them. With the support of a \$10,000 Mission Program Seed Grant from the PCUSA, this Worshipping Community not only shares a rich worship service with the Francophone community in Champaign-Urbana, but also is poised to engage in outreach to their neighbors in this community.

**Gabriel Mboyo**, who was present at this stated meeting, and his wife, **Solange**, along with other Francophone Bethesda leaders affirmed that "the help of the Holy Spirit encourages us to adopt an attitude of compassion, kindness and generosity to our neighbors, to reach out to those in need, to cultivate relationships based upon respect and kindness, to build a community where peace and harmony reign. Please welcome our friends in ministry in the Francophone Bethesda Fellowship."



### Verse of the Day

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? - James 2:15-16

### Voice of the Day

When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, "Now is that political or social?" He said, "I feed you." Because the good news to a hungry person is bread. - Desmond Tutu

### Prayer of the Day

God, in the face of forcibly withheld needs, nurture any outrage we may have into determination to mutually aid one another as witnesses of good news. - Sojourners

## Sharing Our Lives Together

We have wonderful fellowship at First Pres. Sharing important life events we lift each other in voice and prayer.

Congratulations to **Fiona Leakey** on her selection to the all area tennis first team. Fiona, a junior at Central High, is the daughter of **Andrew Leakey** and **Lisa Ainsworth**. Fiona and her mom teach in our Sunday school.



Congratulations to **Dennis Arthur Amoaka** and **Juliana Orduro Marfo** on their marriage on October 26. Welcome Juliana.

**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. Blest be the tie that binds.**

## *Jays & Concerns*

**We extend sympathy to the families and friends of:**

- **June Cullum** who died November 3, 2025;
- **Becky Grant** who died November 9, 2025;
- **Steve Gritten** who died November 11, 2025. A Memorial Service for Steve will be held Saturday, January 17, 2026 at 1 PM at the church.
- **Harvey Hodges** who died November 6, 2025;
- **Marianne Kellerhals** who died November 16, 2025;
- **Don McKay** who died November 17, 2025.



## Face to Face with Stephen Kogei Kemboi



Stephen and Parclat share smiles in Sunday School.

### Tell me about yourself and your family.

I am the second of five siblings raised by my mom. My father passed when I was four. I attended boarding schools for my primary and secondary education, then attended the Technical University of Kenya, majoring in mathematics. I then did a master's degree in Ghana, followed by three years of teaching in Kenya.

### How did you get to Champaign-Urbana and the University of Illinois?

I came to Michigan State University to study industrial mathematics for two years and then came to the University of Illinois where I will spend five years on a PhD in actuarial sciences. You may think I live to learn and that is true. Ultimately, I hope to teach at the university level.

### How would you describe your experience in the US?

Everything is big here-big schools, big homes and big expenses.

### How have you adjusted to the culture?

First, while my native language is English, the pronunciation, volume and rhythm are different. We use some words different from British English. Another difference is that professors in the U.S are like buddies but in Kenya or Ghana, they are formal authoritarians and do not consider students their friends. Public communication with strangers is also different. When you meet an American, they keep the conversation formal, but when you meet a Kenyan, you get a deep detailed life story.

### Tell me about your faith journey.

I grew up in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. We have three Sunday worships. There are similarities to First Champaign in what we call "main worship". The difference I see is that our order of worship is a bit different and we have more congregational participation in worship. We also have a Youth Forum for ages 18-35 when we eat and have bible-based discussions. Prayer groups meet in person twice a week and on weekends. Everyone is expected to participate in a small group and there are many choices to choose from.

### What else would you like people to know about you?

I am happy to be in Champaign and at First Presbyterian Church. I enjoy helping in Sunday School, Easy English Fellowship, Trunk N Treat and Family Game Time. I am settling into my first semester but hope I can become more involved with the congregation going forward. Thank you for including me.



# Finance

## Financial Update

BY ANN WEBBINK, FINANCE TEAM  
ANWEB2@YAHOO.COM

### Contributions

Total October contributions: \$46.6K from plate and pledge plus \$7.9K from prepaid= \$54.5K This is \$23.1k more than last year and \$10.6K under budget. Total contributions YTD, including prorated prepaid pledges: \$624.1 K which is \$16.1k more than last year and \$26.9K under budget. At 83.3% of the year, we have 81.9% of the budgeted contributions, including all prepaid contributions.

### Expenses

October expenses were \$84.6 K, which is \$17.2 more than last year and \$5.6k over budget. Expenses YTD are \$787.3K, which is \$3.3K more than last year and \$2.7K under budget. At 83.3% of the year, we have spent 83.1% of the budget.

### Balance YTD

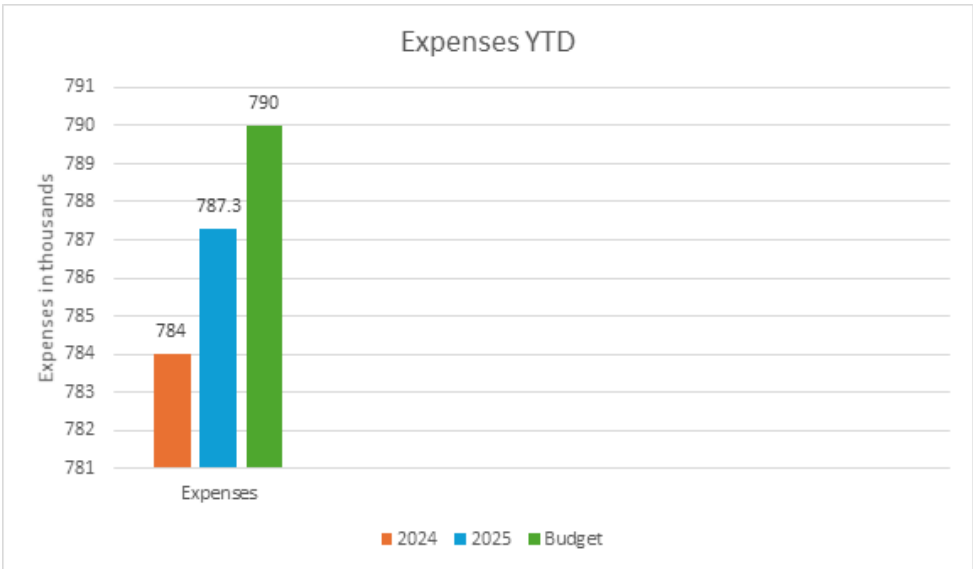
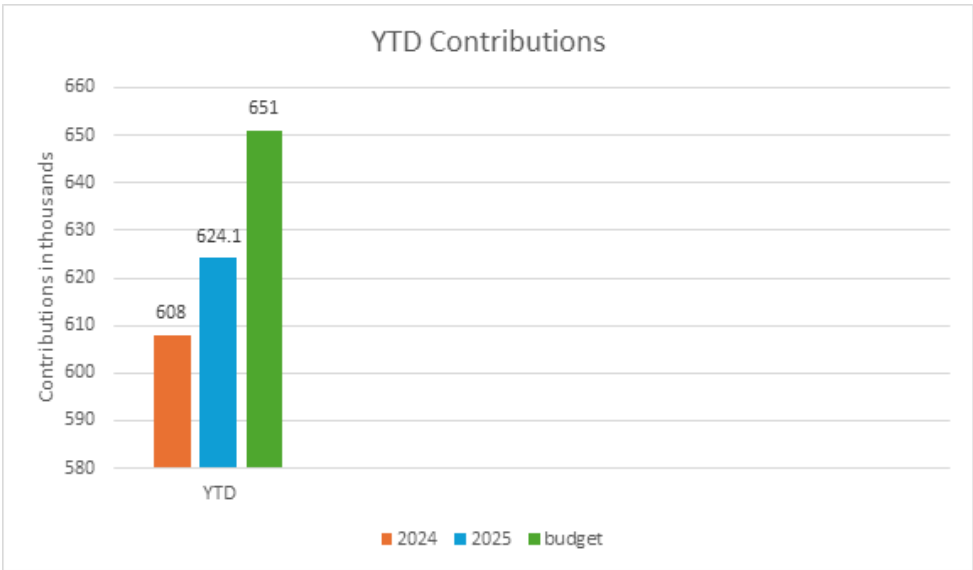
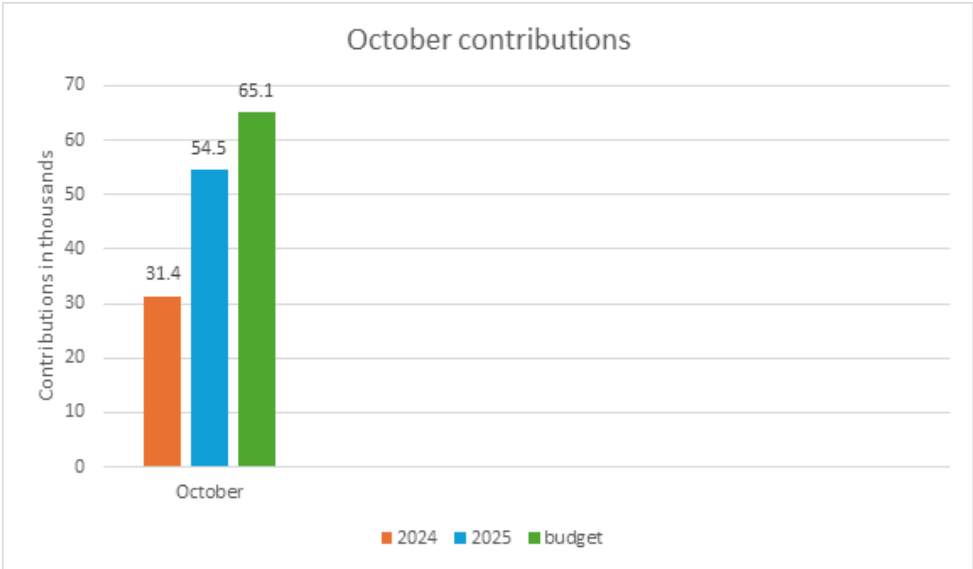
Revenue from all sources exceeded expenses by \$20,903. Last year at this time there was a deficit of \$76K.

### Session Designated Funds

\$1,008,462 which is \$1619 more than last month.

### Summary of Restricted Accounts

\$500 was given to the general memorial fund, \$300 to the Christmas offering and \$500 to missions.





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CHURCH** OF CHAMPAIGN

302 West Church Street  
Champaign, IL 61820

Change Service Requested



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CHURCH** OF CHAMPAIGN

302 West Church Street  
Champaign, IL 61820

**P:** 217.356.7238

**E:** [info@firstpres.church](mailto:info@firstpres.church)

[www.firstpres.church](http://www.firstpres.church)

**Sunday:**

9 AM Worship

10 AM Coffee and Fellowship

10:10 AM Sunday School/Adult Discussions

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.

**Pastors:**

Beth Wagner..... Interim Pastor/Head of Staff  
Joseph Lundy..... Associate Pastor for Discipleship

**Staff:**

Yuxi Chen..... Organist/Pianist  
Ritchie Drennen ..... Facility Manager  
Patty Farthing..... Office Assistant  
Robert Ferrer ..... Audio-visual Technician  
Fred Foster ..... Evening Custodian  
Marcia Franks ..... Office Administrator  
Samuel Stephenson..... Director of Music  
Jill Stewart..... Accounting  
Bonnie Ward..... English Language Learner Director

Staff email addresses are the person's first name followed by  
[@firstpres.church](mailto:info@firstpres.church) For example, [beth@firstpres.church](mailto:beth@firstpres.church)

**Church Office hours:**

Mon-Thurs 8:30 AM - 2 PM

Friday 8:30 AM - noon

The newsletter is published monthly.

Deadline is the third Monday of the month for the following month's edition.

Send submissions to [marcia@firstpres.church](mailto:marcia@firstpres.church).