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**KENT**   
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
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# The Gift of Being Present THE Messenger

THE NEWSLETTER OF KENT UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
SPECIAL ADVENT/CHRISTMAS EDITION 2023

## *The Gift of Being Present*

*The Rev. Amy Gopp, senior minister*

"Bidden or not, God is present." These words were inscribed over the door of the home of the great psychoanalyst Carl Jung as a reminder to all who entered that they were in the presence of the holy. Similarly, "The Mystic's Prayer" is one of my favorite prayers and one of the simplest: "God, we know that You are here. Help us to be, too. Amen."

It is so easy to move through our days as if on autopilot. Being present for others, let alone God, can be challenging. Sometimes we find it difficult to be present to ourselves! Our time is often spent doing, producing, and achieving rather than simply being present to those around us. And resting in God's presence, if we're honest, doesn't usually make it on our to-do list.

The holidays can be even busier amidst all the hustle and bustle of the season. Advent becomes filled with worry about finding just the right present for someone. But the perfect Christmas gift eludes us. In our heart of hearts, we want people in our lives



to know how important they are to us, and that we love them. Meanwhile, we have all been guilty of overlooking the greatest gift we could ever give another: our very presence.

How might we be more present to one another this Advent and Christmas season?

How might we be more attentive to God's presence? Instead of the usual rushing around from holiday activity to holiday activity, what might it look like to just *be* with another—paying attention, noticing, and listening to each other? What might happen if the gift of your very presence was opened on Christmas morning?

Throughout the scriptures, God's people have been reassured that "the Holy Living One is with you." Like a shepherd who never leaves the flock, we are always held close. This Advent and Christmas, let us discover that our own presence is indeed the best present we can offer — and this presence is better than any gift money could ever buy. To be present for others, I invite you to gift yourself the space and time to simply rest in the Divine Presence of Emmanuel, God-with-us, so that you might be truly present and available for others. There is no greater gift.

### Our Mission:

*Enlivened by the grace of Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Kent United Church of Christ does justice, embraces faithful love, and walks humbly with our God to serve and transform lives, our community and the world. (Micah 6:8)*

Advent/Christmas 2023

VISIT US ONLINE: [kentucc.org](http://kentucc.org)

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## **Advent and Christmas Worship 2023**

### **Kent United Church of Christ**

**First Sunday of Advent – December 3 at 10am**  
***Being Present with Hope***

**Second Sunday of Advent – December 10 at 10am**  
***Being Present with Peace***

**Third Sunday of Advent – December 17 at 10am**  
**Children's Christmas Program**  
***Being Present with Joy***

**Nine Lessons and Carols Service – Sunday, December 17 at 7pm**  
***Being Present with Tradition***

**Sanctuary Open House – Wednesday, December 20 from 5-8pm**  
***Being Present with God's Presence***

**Longest Night of the Year Service – Thursday, December 21 at 7pm**  
***Being Present with Emptiness***

**Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 24 at 10am**  
***Being Present with Love***

**Christmas Eve – December 24 at 7pm**  
***Being Present with Light***

**Sunday after Christmas – December 31 at 10am**  
**Whole Body Sunday (Intergenerational Service)**  
***Being Present with Assurance***





## Advent Workshop

### *Advent Workshop for Children*

Our annual Advent Workshop will be held right after worship on **Sunday, November 26**. A light lunch will be served for our children in VanMeter Hall where there will be many arts & crafts activities for them to explore. At the same time, our congregation will be Hanging the Greens throughout the rest of the church; parents and families are welcome to join the kids in VanMeter Hall and/or help decorate the rest of the church. There will be refreshments provided for all. This is always an intergenerational, fun-filled afternoon!

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### *Hanging of the Greens*

Right after worship on **Sunday, November 26**, we will hang the greens for our Advent and Christmas season! Refreshments will be provided for all who help decorate. This is always an intergenerational, fun-filled afternoon! Stay as little or as long as you like to deck the halls with us!



### *Children's Christmas Program*

Our children's Christmas Program will be during worship on Joy **Sunday, December 17**, to hear again the greatest story ever told--the Christmas story according to Luke's Gospel. The children will "rehearse" the two Sundays before as well as **Saturday, December 16 from 9:30-10:30am** in the sanctuary. To help us tell the story, we will sing Christmas carols along the way. Our congregation will be invited to sing along! All are encouraged to participate in this retelling of the birth of Jesus.

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### *Sanctuary Open House*

Our sanctuary has a special quality in Advent. Adorned in candlelight and our favorite trimmings, we've added one symbol for our theme this year (lots of presents!) that invites us to consider that the best gift we can give is the gift of our "presence" with those who need it most. We invite you to enjoy the gifts of quiet and solitude during our sanctuary open house on **Wednesday, December 20 from 5 - 8pm**. There will be others present, "holding space" and praying so you will not be alone. Come and relax, reflect, and rest in God's presence and peace in the midst of an otherwise busy season. You may stay as long as you like. By resting in God's presence, you come to recognize your own and become more present for those you love. Please park in the front loop and enter through the sanctuary doors. Give yourself this gift this year.

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### *Festive Fa-la-la Fashions*

Do you have a festive holiday outfit, fun accessories, an ugly Christmas sweater, or matching family PJs? Here is a way you can spread joy this season! On **Sunday, December 17**, please wear your Festive Fa-la-la Fashions to church as we celebrate Advent and light the candle of JOY! It is our hope that everyone comes dressed up in ugly sweaters, Christmas clothes and accessories. You will be given a bell when you come into the service to help us RING out THE JOY together! This is also the Childrens' Christmas Pageant Sunday which always promises to bring joy to us all!

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### *Bring Your Presents to Church!*

"The Gift of Being Present" is our Advent theme this year. The Worship & Arts Ministry invites the entire congregation to wrap empty boxes and bring them with you to church so we can use them to decorate for the season. Boxes can be all shapes and sizes! The more presents, the better! We want to symbolize the gift of our own presence with the visual aids of Christmas presents all around the sanctuary and narthex. Please use wrapping paper that is red, green, silver, or gold and has simple designs. We would like to avoid secular designs (such as Santa) on the wrapping paper. You are welcome to bring them to church on **Sunday, November 26** and throughout the Advent season! Just put them in the narthex as you arrive and members of the Worship & Arts Ministry will place them. Thank you in advance!



## Outreach

*Donna Hess, chair*

As we enter the Advent season with our hearts full of gratitude to God, we search for ways to share our time, talents, and treasures in our community and the world. We want to help to ensure a life of abundance for those suffering from natural disasters, social injustice, and strife.



Outreach has been working hard to identify areas of in need of support during the Advent season. We continue to work on the Habitat Build with our next build date being Saturday, December 2. We thank our many volunteers for their dedication to this project. We are also donating to several of our local partners including Freedom House, Root House, Rooted Kent, Lovelight, Ben.Curtis Foundation, and Akron Canton Food Bank.

### Christmas Eve Offering

Additionally, we will be dedicating the Christmas Eve offering to an international partner and two local partners. Fifty percent of the money collected will go to the Wider Church Middle East Support. Many of you will remember that the day after the attack on Israel, Dr. Peter Markari was our guest preacher. “The work of our partners in Palestine, and specifically in Gaza, is inspiring, especially as they cope with conditions and access that are extremely limited. Having visited Gaza, I know the dedication and commitment of our partners’ staffs to serve the whole community and offer a witness of care and service. We mourn the loss of life and pray for the end to violence,” said Peter Makari, who currently serves as Transitional Executive for Wider Church Ministries, and Global Relations Minister for the Middle East and Europe in Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ. “We must walk in solidarity with them in this time of war, accompanying them now and in the future as the impact of this war will be lasting” The other 50% of the Christmas Eve offering will be split between two local partners, Miller House and Safer Futures for their winter needs.

### Giving Tree

We have also designated the Giving Tree this year for the Mustard Seed organization that works to support the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. Gift certificates in any amount from Amazon, EBay, Visa, or Mastercard. These gift cards will help them purchase blankets, sheets, towels, hats, gloves, and other items to help with their harsh winters.

Outreach is so very grateful for the generosity of our congregation that enables us to share our abundance with so many others.

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## *UCC Daily Advent Devotional*

Once again for 2023, the Stillspeaking Writers Group and contributors offer a daily devotional to guide us through the days of Advent and Christmastide, to the celebration of Epiphany. Glow includes candle-lighting liturgies for home use and daily readings with scripture and prayer.

To download a pdf version of this Advent daily devotional, click [HERE](#)





# Do You Experience Holiday Sadness?



Sadness can be challenging to cope with when all around you people are singing about how this is “the most wonderful time of the year.” How do you handle so many movies and ads broadcasting family and togetherness if you’ve lost a loved one or you feel all alone? What do you do with so many messages about everything being “merry and bright” when, in most places, it is quite literally cold and dark?

The truth is that, for many, this can actually be the most difficult time of the year. This is why Pastor Amy offers the **Longest Night service on December 21 at 7 pm in the sanctuary**. It is a time to be present, just as you are, to feel what you are feeling, and to be supported, and to trust you are a beloved child of God. Come, for yourself, and to be present with others at this most meaningful service.

Here are 4 more things you can do to prioritize your mental health during this hectic season:

## Accept Your Feelings

The holidays can bring up a range of emotions for people. Sometimes you can even experience seemingly contradictory emotions all at once. Try your best to acknowledge and accept your emotions rather than place judgment on them. It’s OK to feel happy; it’s OK to feel sad; it’s even OK to feel both happy and sad. Give yourself compassion and allow yourself to sit with whatever you’re feeling.

## 2. Maintain Healthy Habits

For many people, the holidays lead to a massive disruption in your day-to-day routine. But maintaining healthy habits like going to therapy, getting enough sleep and exercising are critical to keeping your mental health on track.

## 3. Set Boundaries

People like to be generous during the holidays, but that generosity doesn’t have to come at the expense of having healthy boundaries. If hosting an event or buying an expensive gift is too stressful, it’s OK to say no. It’s also OK to limit the time you spend with family members in a complicated relationship with you.

## 4. Make Time To Connect

Connection and meaning are critical to our mental health. Make time for your important relationships and connect with yourself through self-care. You can even connect with loved ones who are no longer with you through a family tradition or a personal remembrance ritual. You do not need to feel guilty about finding joy.

~~taken from Daniel H. Gillison, Jr. [December 21, 2021]. *The most difficult time of the year: Mental health during the holidays*. NAMI.org

*Provided by our W.I.S.E. Ministry*



## Longest Night of the Year Service

Our Longest Night of the Year service, or “Blue Christmas”, is an opportunity to express the grief, loneliness, and sadness that are a normal part of living and loving. It is a worship experience when we ask God for healing, and become again, ever-so-gently, ready to face a future sustained by hope and grace. At this annual service, we gather together to look to the Light on the longest night of the year, when the darkness often seems as though it might overcome us. But we know to look for the Light of the World. All are invited to come searching for this Divine Light, the Christ-Light that we trust to pierce through our darkness. Whether you are grieving, feeling lonely and blue this holiday season, or would like to

accompany a friend who may need comfort, you are wholeheartedly encouraged to join us for this beautiful and healing service, held in our sanctuary on **Thursday, December 21 at 7pm**.



## I'M DREAMING OF A GREEN CHRISTMAS

*Julie Wallace, Green Team chair*

Here we go again. It's that time of year when we are being bombarded with ad after ad telling us we must purchase all these fabulous gifts to make Christmas perfect! Consumerism does not equal happiness and is certainly not what the celebration of the birth of Jesus should be about. There is nothing wrong with giving meaningful gifts to those you love but please be mindful of the gifts you choose and the wrappings that surround them.

Before purchasing anything, try to envision where that gift will be 5 years from now: Consumed? Still in use? In a landfill? Broken? Treasured?  
In short, BE MINDFUL OF WHAT YOU PURCHASE.

**Here are a few ideas for gifts you can feel good about giving:**

- Olive oils, vinegars and other gourmet foods
- Soy based, environmentally friendly candles
- Home-made Goodies from your Kitchen
- Fair Trade Coffees, Teas and Chocolates
- House Plants and Vegetable or Flower Seeds
- Books
- Handcrafted Soaps
- Cloth Bags for the Grocery and Mesh Bags for Produce
- Dryer Balls and Essential Oils for them (replacing fabric softener)
- Cloth Napkin Sets

Minimize the waste of wrapping paper, bows and boxes by using your imagination and creativity. Re-cover boxes you have with recycled paper or fabric. Decorate paper bags from the grocery. Reuse old tissue paper (just give it a quick press with an iron!) Pine cones, branches, and dried flowers make a natural and decorative finish to gifts. Not only will you save money, your unique presentations will show you care for both the recipient and the environment.

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## WHAT'S CHRISTMAS WITHOUT COOKIES?

*Julie Wallace, Fellowship*

Please join the Fellowship Team at Coffee Hour on **December 10** when we host the second annual **Cookie Exchange**. When we decided to try this out last year, we were surprised by the positive reception and large turnout of people who participated. It was such a success that we knew it should become an annual tradition. Here's how it works:

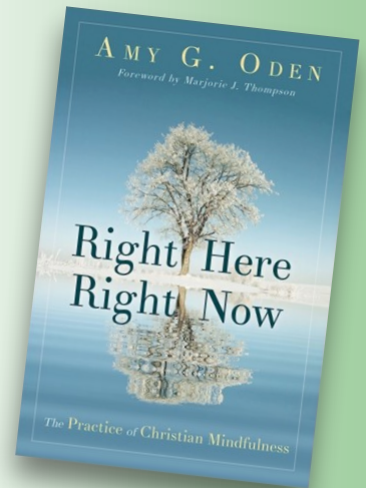
- ◆ Bring 2 ½ dozen of your favorite, homemade Christmas cookies to church on December 10.
- ◆ Drop them off in the church kitchen BEFORE church and make sure to label what they are.
- ◆ The Fellowship folks will then make a table tent to display with your cookies.
- ◆ Two dozen of your cookies will be on the Exchange Table, the ½ dozen will be served during coffee hour.
- ◆ Each person that participates will receive a take home box to fill with 2 dozen cookies to take home.



This is a great and easy way to get some of your holiday baking accomplished. Even if you do not wish to participate in the exchange, you can still enjoy coffee, cookies and fellowship with your church friends. See you on December 10!

## Individual or Small Group Book Studies and Articles for Advent (or any time!)

As we focus on what it means to be truly “present” to God, to ourselves, to each other, and to the world this Advent, I commend to you Amy Oden’s book, [Right Here, Right Now: The Practice of Christian Mindfulness](#). This book is a wonderful look at the history, theology, and practice of “Christian mindfulness.” Many of us have heard of “mindfulness” and it has become such a known practice in the last two decades. Amy Oden shows us how *prayerful attentiveness* (“mindfulness”) is a long part of our tradition, including the practices of Jesus. And she helps us see how being more attentive in our daily lives can have a personal and communal effect for the good. You could read this as an Advent devotional/study or meet with others in a small group.



In addition to Amy Oden’s book, here is Pastor Amy’s recommended reading list on our theme:

- *A Testament of Devotion* by Thomas R. Kelly
- *Contemplating Christ: The Gospels and the Interior Life* by Vincent Pizzuto
- *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to the Awareness of God* by Tilden Edwards
- *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* by Ann Voskamp
- *The Contemplative Heart* by James Finley
- *The Rebirthing of God* by John Philip Newell

### Articles about Being Present

For a shorter read, there are many articles about being more present...in relationships, for ourselves, and in our giving. Just click on the links below to read the articles.

### Being more present in relationships:

[How to Be More Present in Relationships](#)

[How to Be More Present in Your Friendships](#)

[How to Be a Better Friend](#)

[5 Practical Ways to Become More Present with Other People](#)

[The Ultimate Guide on How to Be a Better Friend](#)

[5 Ways to Be More Present When Talking to Someone](#)

- Knowing your relationship values can help motivate you to show up more fully in relationships.
- Identify when mindfulness matters. When it comes to relationships, you can't be mindful all of the time.
- Practicing deep validation is one of the most powerful ways to be present with someone.

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## Practicing mindfulness and staying present to ourselves:

[9 Ways to Be More Present](#)

[The Benefits of Journaling for Stress Relief](#)

[The Power of Now](#)

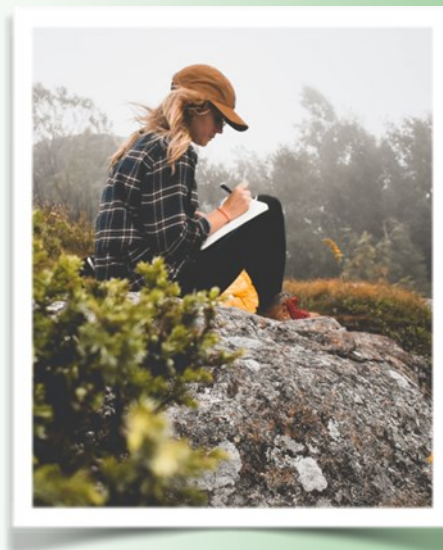
## Mindful Giving:

[The Art of Mindful Gifting](#)

[The Psychology of Gift Giving](#)

[10 Tips for Mindful Gift Giving](#)

[Mindful and Sustainable Tips for a Festive Season](#)



“Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery,  
today is a gift of God which is why we call it the present.”  
- Author unknown

## *A Message from Stewardship Thank You, Church Family!*

Because of you, **we** are able to provide an Abundant Life to a world that needs more community, more compassion, more justice and love – through your giving. For it is through our giving that the annual budget is not just simply numbers on a page; however, it is more mouths fed... more homeless housed... and more love for the lost and lonely. We give sacrificially and lay down our gifts to respond to God’s offer of an Abundant Life.



Thank you for committing your time, talents and treasure throughout this stewardship season; as we have explored what this “abundant life” may be and celebrated the many ways **Kent UCC** participates in God’s graceful love for the world.

With joy in abundance,  
\* The 2023 Stewardship Ministry \*  
Chair: Crystal Shanley, Member: Lori Babbey, Member: Donna Hess,  
Member: Jen Case, Member: Don Williams, Member: Jamie Baughman





# KENT

## UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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[kentucc.org](http://kentucc.org)

*No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!*

"But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." ~Luke 2:10

