



First with the News

Advent / Christmas 2023

Join us Sunday mornings at 9:30am!

First United Church
7 Curtis Street, St. Thomas, ON
519-631-7570 x21
office@1stunitedchurch.ca
www.1stunitedchurch.ca



UPCOMING DATES & EVENTS

NOVEMBER

Friday 24th – *Spaghetti Dinner (pg. 5)

Sunday 26th – *RETURN DATE for Secret Santa / Socks /
Food Items for Christmas Care / Grace Café (pg. 6)

*Hug in a Mug Assembly following worship- Fellowship Room

DECEMBER

Sunday 3rd *ADVENT 1 - Tree Trimming – Worship @9:30am

*Holiday Market from 10:30am to noon (pgs. 13 & 14)

*Festival of Lessons & Carols at 7:30pm (pg. 15)

Sunday 10th – *ADVENT 2: Worship @ 9:30am

*Pageant costumes available (pg. 19)

*Holiday Market from 10:30am to noon (pgs. 13 & 14)

Sunday 17th – *ADVENT 3: Worship @ 9:30am

*Pageant costumes available (pg. 19)

Sunday 24th –*ADVENT 4: Worship @ 9:30am

*CHRISTMAS EVE: Evening Worship @ 7:30pm (pg. 19)

will include the Children's Bethlehem Pageant!

(Costumes will be available Christmas Eve for those who don't already have them)



JANUARY

Tuesday 9th - *Last Day for Donations to be credited to your
2023 tax receipt (pg. 21)

From Rev. Paul's Desk ...

One of my favourite holiday movies is White Christmas. I have fond memories of Sue and I getting the kids together each Christmas, all cuddled up on the couch with popcorn on our laps while singing, "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas..."

Watching the movie together was an easier "sell" for our daughter than our sons, but after the obligatory protests, even they settled in and enjoyed the experience. I wouldn't be surprised if they don't do something similar when they have their children.

Perhaps my favourite scene is when neither Bob nor Betty can fall sleep and they wander into the lounge of the majestic lodge. A warm fire is burning in the stone hearth, milk and sandwiches sit on the bar counter, a grand piano occupies the centre of the room and Bob moves to it as he offers this advice with his melodious voice, "When you're worried and you can't sleep just count your blessings instead of sheep and you'll fall asleep counting your blessings!"

For many of us, Christmas is a time when we find it easy to count our blessings. This year many of us will feel blessed to gather with family and friends in ways we couldn't a couple of years ago. Some of us are excited that neighbours have invited us over for some Christmas cheer. And many of us are anticipating attending our Christmas Care/Secret Santa service on Nov 26th, Festival of Lessons & Carols at First on Dec. 3rd & our Advent and Christmas Eve services.

However, before I was blessed with my own family, there was a time when Christmas was a painful time for me, with sad memories of unpleasant Christmases when I was a child. Just as Christmas can heighten our awareness of our blessings, for many, it heightens feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

It will be hard to count your blessings when you know the holiday season will come with the heart-aching awareness of the empty chair at the table. It will be difficult to count your blessings when you are uncertain about whether you have enough money to get through the extra expenses of the season. It will be a struggle to count your blessings when you wake up feeling sad before your day has even begun.

Gathering as Christians is about the only place where we can receive the comfort and joy inherent in the Christmas stories. That's why we decided to do a nativity scene on the First & Central float in the Santa Claus Parade this year. Last year there was no other representation of the "Christmas" stories.

Few people know that the Christmas stories are about providing love to people in the ways they desperately need it....an inn keeper providing shelter to a homeless couple with child...good news of liberation from violence and poverty proclaimed to shepherds...wise people of another religion travelling to protect the Holy family from Herod's reign of terror by giving them the means to flee to Egypt as refugees.

Similar challenges are in the news every day, these many years later... refugees fleeing violence...homelessness...growing inequality. And yet, with all these problems, the world has come a long way since 2000 years ago. God was with our ancestors and God is with us, helping us to be a part of God's salvation.

I'm proud of the way the people at First rally to be a Christmas people, partnering to bring refugees to Canada to reunite a family, partnering with Christmas Care to provide families with gifts and food as well as financially supporting Grace Cafe, St. Thomas-Elgin Food Bank & The Inn (Out of the Cold).

I'm excited about our new pastoral care team and thankful for the volunteers who will provide a "Hug in a Mug" to our seniors. Because of the desire I experience from First to be a community of kindness and a place of support and inspiration, I am looking forward to the journey of deepening and broadening of our community that Spirit is leading us on.

So, as we enter these days of preparing for the Christmas season, may we open our hearts to be a blessing to others while we open our hearts to receive the blessings that God has in store for us.

Most of these blessings won't come wrapped in packages with tinsel and bows. But as we open our hearts of love and attune our spirits to the gifts that God is providing, we will become even more aware of the blessings in our lives as well as the blessings we will provide for others to count as well.

Happy Advent and Merry Christmas

Paul Browning

**HOLD
THE
DATE!**



Tickets will
be available
on Sundays
from now til
the event.

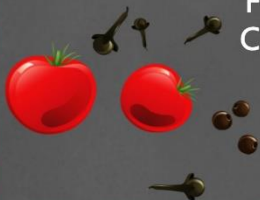
Join us at First United for a
SPAGHETTI DINNER

**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24TH
FROM 5:00 - 7:00PM**

**PRICE: Adults \$15, Children 5-15 \$10
and Children under 5 FREE**

**MENU: Spaghetti, Salad, Rolls,
Drinks & Dessert!**
(Gluten Free & Vegetarian Options Available)

For tickets please contact Lori in the
Church office (519-631-7570 ext. 21
or office@1stunitedchurch.ca)
or email Mark & Vicki Snowsell at
snowsell@rogers.com





SECRET SANTA & SOCKS PROJECT

RETURN DATE: Sunday, November 26th

OUR GIFTS WILL GO TO CHRISTMAS CARE and from there they will be distributed along with FOOD HAMPERS. *If you would like to contribute to the FOOD HAMPERS, please bring non-perishable food items Sun., Nov. 26th*

Christmas Care will pick them up the next day!

SECRET SANTA... & SOCKS!

NOW til NOVEMBER 26th

**We're collecting...
Unwrapped Gifts (to age 12)
Non-perishable food items
& Monetary Donations
for Christmas Care**

**AND SOCKS (mens, womens & childrens)
for Grace Cafe!!**

Please bag socks separately from your Secret Santa Gifts.



Thank You!

Thanks to everyone who participated in / on our float in the
St. Thomas Optimist Santa Claus Parade this year!

Special thanks to Action Trailers in Strathroy for allowing us
to borrow the trailer for the float!



We have a Tree!

*Thank you to Hunter Beamish & Beamish
Landscape for finding a tree for us this year.*

*They will deliver & set-up the tree
the week before our Advent 1 Service!*

Quarter Auction - SUCCESS!

On November 7th, we hosted our first Quarter Auction since 2019, and I am happy to report that it was a great success! I would like to extend a heartfelt congratulations to Erin Chute, who led the event, and all the volunteers who worked tirelessly to make it happen. Thanks to their dedication and hard work, we managed to raise an impressive \$2342.20!

We had a total of 11 vendors who auctioned off some amazing items, and we were pleasantly surprised by the number of prizes we received for our Raffle Table. Even our own Rev. Paul donated items to be auctioned off, and he did not disappoint with his fantastic offerings.

The evening was perfect; the air was crisp, and our guests started arriving around 6 pm. At first, we were a bit nervous about how the event would turn out, but as the evening progressed, more and more people arrived, and we quickly realized that this was going to be a night to remember! We had to bring in extra tables and chairs to accommodate the large number of people who showed up to support us and have a good night of laughter, bidding, and excitement. We were also thrilled to welcome some newcomers who had never been to a Quarter Auction before and thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Once again, congratulations to Erin and all the volunteers who helped make this event such a success. Here's to many more successful events in the future!

Blessings!
Mike Hardman

First United now has a PASTORAL CARE TEAM!



Having been your minister for a year, I have discovered that with Covid and the ministry transitions of the past 10 years, many of our members feel disconnected from First as there has been no pastoral care program. During one of my visits, a long time member expressed her sadness that when her husband died during Covid that no one from First contacted her. I apologized on behalf of our community and explained that with no pastoral care program in place, the interim minister wouldn't have known about her husband's death. She was very gracious and appreciated receiving Holy Communion.

Since coming I have been praying for the right person to volunteer to begin a pastoral care team with me. My prayers were answered when Vicki Snowsell asked me if I needed some assistance in providing spiritual care to our members.

Vicki had just retired as the "Activity Coordinator" at Caressant Care on Bonnie Place where she has been caring for residents for many years. When I asked her if she might also be comfortable having a prayer with someone, she shared that sometimes residents had no family or church connections and that when they were dying, she would stay with them and offer a prayer if they wished. Tears filled my eyes in gratitude to Spirit for prompting Vicki to volunteer and to Vicki for answering the call.

Vicki has contacted the seniors on our list, offering them a visit from her and me. Some have responded and we look forward to establishing more relationships in the future.

If you haven't been contacted by Vicki, it may be that you are not on our list. If that is the case, please call the office and let us know and she / we can be in touch.

From Rev. Paul

HUG IN A MUG

Pastoral Care Project



Spirit moved again when Sherry Johnstone dropped by my office to chat about her desire for First to better connect with its members. Sherry, Vicki and I put our heads together and came up with a way to connect with all our seniors.

With the help of volunteers we will be packing mugs with coffee, tea and chocolate (Assembly date: Sunday, November 26th following worship in the Fellowship Room) and then delivering them to members before Christmas. Inside the mug, a card with a heart will read: "Keep me in your pocket and take me everywhere. Every time you need a hug, remember that we care". On the back side of the card will be the contact info for Vicki and Rev. Paul inviting members to get in touch if they would like a visit or a chat on the phone.

Sherry is also using her skills to organize a "Holiday Market" in the library on Sundays, December 3 & 10th. The Market will be filled with delightful crafts, baking and other donations from our 'Community of Kindness', and the money raised will pay for the cost of this pastoral care project.

Thank you Sherry and Vicki!

From Rev. Paul

YOUTH *group*

We are delighted to announce that Teah Welch has joined our Youth Group team!

Teah has been a member of our Youth Group community for several years, and now, she will be utilizing her knowledge and expertise to help develop our group and enhance its presence in the community. During our conversation with her, we were impressed with her ideas for the group, and we believe that the members will have a lot of fantastic experiences and create new memories that they will cherish as they grow.

She will start helping Chris the week of November 15th . We are all excited to welcome her back and into this exciting new role for her.

**Blessings!
Mike Hardman**

**Youth Group meets Wednesday evenings from 7-8:15pm in the Gym at First. For Youth in Grades 6-12! All welcome.
Leaders: Chris Ross & Teah Welch**

**ADVENT & CHRISTMAS
SERVICES AT FIRST UNITED**

Sunday, December 3: Advent 1 – HOPE

Tree Trimming Celebration during Worship at 9:30am

Holiday Market: 10:30am to noon.

Festival of Lessons & Carols: 7:30pm

Sunday, December 10: Advent 2 – PEACE

Worship at 9:30am

Sunday, December 17: Advent 3 – JOY

Worship at 9:30am

Sunday, December 24: Advent 4 – LOVE

Worship at 9:30am

**Sunday, December 24 – Christmas Eve
with Children's Pageant**

Worship @ 7:30pm



Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love





FIRST UNITED

Holiday Market

SUNDAYS DECEMBER 3RD & 10TH

10:30AM TO NOON

GIFTS	DECOR	BAKERY
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IN THE CHURCH LIBRARY!



Continued...



This event will NOT be advertised on social media due to the smaller size of the event. But...we are asking the congregation to invite family and friends.

We would also like to ask those who would be able to, to donate items to this Holiday Market.

Market idea items: Children's gift bags, new toys or books, stocking stuffers, crafts, ornaments, home & Christmas décor (new), baking, snack gifts, jams, jellies, cheeseballs, single serving meals, candy.

We would appreciate it if anyone who wants to donate items could contact: Sherry Johnstone at 519-933-5033 or sjohnstone1959@gmail.com OR Lois Whiteman at 519-631-3337 or loisjwhiteman@hotmail.com

**Timeline for donations:
Non-food items – by Sunday November 26
Food items – 8:00-9:00 am Sunday Dec.3
or contact Sherry Johnstone
to drop off frozen items prior to Dec.3**

**Funds raised for "Hug in a Mug" project "Hug in a Mug" Outreach project
(info coming out Nov.12)**



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3RD
7:30PM

JOIN US FOR A
Festival
OF LESSONS & CAROLS



PARTICIPATING CHOIRS:

BELMONT COMMUNITY CHOIR
CENTRAL UNITED CHURCH CHOIR
FIRST UNITED CHURCH BAND
PORT STANLEY COMMUNITY CHOIR
PORT STANLEY UNITED CHURCH CHOIR
ST. ANDREW'S WESTMINSTER UNITED CHURCH CHOIR
ST. HILDA'S / ST. LUKE'S CHOIR
STRING ENSEMBLE

NO TICKETS - FREEWILL OFFERING

FIRST UNITED CHURCH, 7 CURTIS STREET, ST. THOMAS

Refugee Sponsorship Update - November 2023

I am happy to provide an update on the work completed to date and information about the Refugee families that First United Church is supporting.

Their Story:

Yousef Alahmad Alzayad and his wife, Iman Mohammad are the parents of 9 children and are from Syria. They fled Syria in October, 2012 after 1.5 years of war. They could no longer stay in Syria due to the high risk to their personal safety and the worsening situation (bombing and killing of innocent people). Several family members in August of 2012 were walking to their grandparents' home when an airplane launched a bomb, killing a family member (nephew), seriously wounding another family member and one of Yousef's oldest sons 's was injured with shrapnel (left eye and ear) resulting in a three-month hospitalization. Additionally, their older sons were now at the age where they would be drafted to the Syrian army. It was these circumstances that made the family decide to flee Syria. As the Jordanian border was 3 km from their home, they fled on foot along with many people in their village, leaving their home and their belongings. It took them approximately 2 hours to arrive to the border where they received assistance from Jordanian soldiers, received medical attention and were moved to a refugee camp. Iman was five months pregnant with twins when they fled their country.

Yousef and his family lived in a Jordanian refugee camp for ~ 7 months and where their twins were born. Through assistance from the United Nations (UN), they received food and shelter (tents) during the time in the refugee camp. Yousef and his family subsequently moved to the interior of Jordan and he worked washing cars and assisted with accounting (tax filing etc.). Fortunately, in late December 2015 they were contacted by the UN offering them the opportunity to move to Canada.

Yousef, Iman and 6 of their children arrived in Canada on December 30, 2015. The three remaining children were >21 years old therefore did not meet the refugee eligibility criteria and had to remain in Jordan. Yousef and his family have tried for years to find a group that would support the sponsorship of his three grown children and their families as he is ineligible to sponsor his family per the Government immigration criteria.

Continued...

Our Sponsorship:

The United Church of Canada (UCC) have agreements in place with Immigration Canada and can provide private sponsorships. However, there is an annual quota resulting in at least a one year wait BEFORE the UCC submits the application to Immigration Canada. On behalf of the UCC, First United Church works with the refugee families, ensures completion and submission of all the required documentation and acts a liaison between UCC and the refugee families.

Our sponsorship will support Yousef's three adult children and their families to move to Canada reuniting this family.

Our application is for a total of 15 people (3 families of 5). The families are currently living in Jordan. Yousef and Iman are responsible for providing \$31,000 per family (a total of \$93,000) to First United Church. These amounts are established by UCC. These funds will be held in trust and then used to support the families when they arrive in Canada for the first 12 months. Yousef has raised \$80,000 to date and has transferred it to our Church. The remaining funds will be required within a year.

In addition to raising the funds for the settlement costs, Yousef and Iman also send money regularly to Jordan to assist in supporting their children and grandchildren. They shared that everyone in their household (even their 10-year-old twins) work multiple jobs and even the children are required to give 50% of any money they earn from babysitting, grass cutting etc. towards bringing their family members from Jordan.

Yousef and Iman are well established in London and have a great deal of support through the Mosque and are part of a large Syrian community. In addition to providing the funds for settlement they will provide a great deal of support and assistance with their grown children and families.

Where are we in the process?

I am pleased to share that we have completed all the required forms and applications and formally submitted to UCC! We have a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) in place with Yousef outlining roles and responsibilities related to settlement and funds. We are now on the UCC wait list where we will likely wait at least a year before the UCC will formally submit the paperwork to Immigration Canada. Recent media stories have highlighted the delays in the government process; therefore, we anticipate at least a 20 month wait BEFORE Immigration Canada begins to review the application. Once approved by Immigration Canada we will be notified and the families typically arrive within 10-20 days. *Continued...*

Final thought:

I have had the privilege to get to know this family. They are generous and kind people and have taught Bill and I so much already about their faith and community. We have always known that we are fortunate to live in Canada and enjoy many freedoms, however as we listen and learn from Yousef and his family and the horrors they have been through (including being separated for years from their children and grandchildren), our appreciation for our Country and gratitude has deepened and we are very motivated to help this family be reunited.

Respectfully submitted,
Heather Tales
Heathertales108@gmail.com



Outreach Program Ideas

Dear Fellow First members,

Hello! I hope you are doing well and enjoying the beautiful Autumn season in Ontario in all its glory. The crisp air and vibrant colors of the trees make this season truly special. As the Advent season quickly approaches, I wanted to reach out and ask for your help in identifying some outreach programs that we can participate in as a community.

I have been giving this some thought for a while now, and I believe that the time to take action is now. If you have any ideas or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact me at mhardman766@gmail.com. Your input would be highly appreciated. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Blessings!

Mike Hardman



Rev. Paul laying the First United Church wreath at St. Thomas' Remembrance Day Service, November 11, 2023.

CHRISTMAS EVE PAGEANT COSTUMES

will be available on Sundays,
December 10th & 17th
in the Music Room

Join us for Christmas Eve Worship
Sunday, December 24th at 7:30pm

You are invited to join us for our
CHRISTMAS EVE
Worship Service

Sunday,
December
24th

Service
starts at
7:30pm

A golden silhouette illustration of a nativity scene. In the center is a manger with a baby in a manger, a woman kneeling, and a man standing. Two camels are on either side. Above the manger are two angels. A bright star is in the sky above. The background is dark with golden stars and rays of light.

First United Church

7 Curtis Street, St Thomas

Check out our other upcoming events on our website:
www.1stunitedchurch.ca

Merry Christmas from your Stewards Team (Formerly the Finance & Property Committees)

We're sorry we can't bring you better news for this festive season, but we are still losing money. Our operating loss on Oct 31st amounted to almost \$60,000. On average our revenue/donations are short about \$6000 per month. The good news is that our investments remain strong enough to sustain our church into next year. The Board continues to investigate alternate uses of our building to create additional revenue streams, but this will take some time.

So, what do we do in the interim? Although this is a joyous time of the year celebrating the birth of Jesus, we do realize that for many, Christmas puts a strain on family finances. However, we do need financial help. So, for those who are financially able, we ask that you put on your virtual Santa Hats and send a Christmas gift to your beautiful church. Additional donations of any amount would be helpful and very much appreciated. Hopefully, with your continued support and all our prayers we will continue on a path to revitalize our church and guarantee it has a long and thriving future.

Thank you,

Your Stewards Team: Justin Chute, Mike Hardman,
Lori Hoffman, Don Renaud & Bill Turvey



Scan the
QR code
to make a
donation



More from your Stewards Team

Have you ever considered going on **PAR** (Pre-Authorized Remittance) or donating online through **Paypal**?

PAR is a once-a-month withdrawal from your bank account (around the 20th) to help support the ongoing ministry of First Church. **Paypal** is a secure online payment service that gives you the flexibility to donate using your credit or debit card.. and there's a link on our website (<http://1stunitedchurch.ca/ways-to-donate.html>) or you can scan the QR code above and it will take you to our Paypal website)!

Why are we promoting these services?

Both of these options are quick, easy and they save the church money!

With **PAR & Paypal** there's no waste and no worries! The money is automatically deducted from your account, credited to the church and you still receive your tax receipt at year end. Both services do NOT charge you for using their systems, so there is no cost to you personally. **SO SIMPLE, SO COST EFFECTIVE!**

If you would like to sign up for **PAR** (we need a form filled out – available in the church office or on our website – & a void cheque) or would like more information on either of these options, give Lori a call in the Office (519-631-7570 ext. 21) or send her an email (office@1stunitedchurch.ca).

Please remember, by signing up for any of these alternate methods of donating, you are saving our church money and contributing toward the maintenance of our Church into the future.



Looking Ahead.... Year End Giving

**Lori will be on holidays
from Friday, December 15th
to Monday, January 8th inclusive.**

If you would like to make a donation for the 2023 year:

- See Lori in the Office before December 15th**
- place it through the Curtis Street mail slot**
- slip it under the Office Door when you are at Church**
- mail it to the Church – Attention: Lori Hoffman**
- You may also come in on Tuesday, January 9th to make a final donation.**

**The final deposit for 2023 will be made at 3pm on Tuesday, January 9th.
Donations received after this time will be credited to your 2024 Givings.**

Committee Updates

Membership

We want to thank those who have offered to help with juice, coffee and/or treats after the services on Sundays. It is appreciated! If anyone would like to help out, there is a sign-up sheet on the table in the Fellowship Room.

We are also looking for ideas from the congregation about how they'd like to connect with one another. Games night? Movie night? Paint night? Concert? External event at a restaurant? Let us know! We want to do some fun things with you and want to know what you consider fun!

We hope you have a blessed Christmas season.

Submitted by Debbie Alward, Erin Chute, Carol Gagen

Property – Concrete Work

A new sidewalk is being installed on the south side of the church from the stairway to the Curtis Street sidewalk.

The work is being completed the weeks of Nov. 6 and 13, and cars need to stay off it for 2 to 3 weeks.

You can walk on it this coming weekend.

Pylons are placed in front of the pour to restrict vehicle movement.

Submitted by Richard Auckland

Trustees

As trustees it is our role to look after property matters. It is so nice to see our Education Wing being used for Education. We are committed to working with King's Academy for these next two years at which time we will review our arrangement.

We have had to sell some of our investments in order to pay back \$40 000 to the federal government for the \$60 000 loan we received during COVID (\$20 000 is being forgiven as we are paying back the loan prior to December 31, 2023).

We continue to work with our lawyers and insurance companies over two lawsuits that have been brought against the church.

Submitted by Richard Auckland

Regional Council

The work on regional council is rewarding. I have learned so much during my 5 years with Antler River Watershed. For the last 4 years I have served as chair of the Discipleship & Justice Commission which promotes social justice issues like Truth & Reconciliation with our Indigenous neighbours like the Remit that the United Church has raised to give the Indigenous Church some autonomy within the United Church of Canada.

Additionally, our group reviews and awards Mission Support Grants within our geographic area. Your Mission & Service dollars do stay local to help out camps like Pearce Williams, the London Community Chaplaincy which serves the underprivileged in the area, and chaplaincies on area campuses like Ridgetown. If you'd like to become involved please see me.

Submitted by Richard Auckland

SAVE YOUR POP TABS



**First Church Friends!
Please save your POP TABS to help a little girl
named McKenna ("Smiley"), who has cerebral
palsy, get a new wheelchair!**

**There is a container in the Fellowship (Coffee)
Room to collect your donations.**

First With the News – November 2023

If you don't receive our Weekly Update emails (on Thursdays) and you'd like to start, email Lori in the Church office: office@1stunitedchurch.ca

If you no longer wish to receive Newsletters from First United Church, please send an email to office@1stunitedchurch.ca or call 519-631-7570 x21 and leave a message.