



St. John's United Church of The United Church of Canada

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Office Hours: M-F, 9am–1pm

PASTORAL LETTER

Jan. 16, 2026

Things have returned to normal at the church. Or have they? The things that happen in Bethlehem never stay in Bethlehem...

The kings and the shepherds have made their way back upstairs to the storage room. The angel on the Christmas tree is back in her box. The Christmas trees around the building have been disassembled. The decorations and lights in the sanctuary have been taken down. The Christmas pageant costumes of angel wings, shepherd's crooks, and bathrobes have been returned to their Sunday School closet. This Christmas came and went. But, what a Christmas it was!



All through December, we made the most of it. We sang carols, old and new; we heard Advent texts calling us to be awake and aware, as John the Baptizer made his annual appearance; we shared communion in a darkened sanctuary (last year there were thirty people in attendance for this service, this year there were seventy!); we cheered the children in their presentation of the Christmas story (after a successful pizza party the Friday before); we brought Christmas to Shannex at Gordon and Ocean Halls where an Anglican declared it to be a very nice Christmas concert (which I corrected her to say that it was indeed a worship service); and we gathered in the sanctuary at St. John's on Christmas Eve where hundreds came to hear the lessons and carols of Christmastide as it snowed outside.

For the communion service in December, we have this device at the church that was created by someone who worked for CN, which is used to fill the juice in the communion trays. It's a work of genius, and each time I see it used, I think, "We should patent that!" It's as old as the hills and will outlast us all. It could just be me being a church nerd; however, watching it fill the cups knowing how faithful to the task people have to be without an instrument like this is a ministry of patience and good aim.



The week before Christmas, someone took me to lunch at Notre Dame de Parkton on St. George Street. It's near the Antiques Shop and The Laundramat. The sign is small, so if you blink, you'd miss it driving by. It's a really small space with just a few tables and a counter. We sat at the counter and caught up on life. I always enjoy it when the adult children of church members now gone on to their glory reconnect with me; it means more than I can express. It's like a continuity of



stories that I respect and rely upon. The church is generational. I ordered the Philly Cheese Steak sandwich, and let me tell you: it did not disappoint! Neither did my friend's conversation.

As we looked around, I couldn't help but notice that I felt like I was in some sort of church with the signage and statues all from a former church building, I assumed. I mentioned this to the owner, who lit up and said, "Yes! We wanted it to feel like an old church basement!" I told him that I considered myself somewhat of an expert on old church basements, and MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.



That week, friends asked us to go glow bowling at Fairlanes on Mountain Road. I am not one for leaving the house or having fun, but it was nice to get out for an evening and relax. I actually had a blast. I didn't bowl very well (Gutter Ball Billard), and I know some of my church people who are amazing bowlers would have shaken their heads, but if the goal was to have a good time, we certainly did! It's funny, each time I've gone bowling, I say to people that it's the best fun ever. It really is. The group of young people beside me asked me to take their picture, and I thought, "Here are all these people in their twenties

spending an evening at the bowling alley!" The place was filled with young and old people, all having a wonderful time together. Maybe the church isn't so different after all.



The next night was the children's Christmas pageant rehearsal. I'm blessed to say that I have now attended twenty Christmas pageant rehearsals at this church, factoring in recent times. It was a fun evening with lots of energy. The kids really do take it seriously. I am so thankful, as always, for a dedicated parent group who go above and beyond to support the children's ministry here, and I can't say thank you enough.



On Sunday morning, the kids all gathered upstairs where they put on their costumes and practiced their lines. It was glorious chaos. It's always so exciting when this time of year rolls around because of all the new friendships and kids leading worship. A number of families were away that week, but the show had to go on, and they did a magnificent job. There were lots of laughs, smiles, and joy. At one point, Mary (played by Penny Logan) is told by a Wise Man (played by Alex Kamel) that Herod has heard about her baby. Mary, who was pregnant, asks Joseph (played by Ethan MacNairn) who else knows and what else could go wrong (or something to that effect), and little Ethan, who is so used to reading in church, just looks at the congregation and shrugs, just like it says in the script. He said his line after that, but people were laughing so hard that no one could hear him because of his comedic timing. He was perfect!



On Christmas Eve, I realized that the round clerical collar, which I wear at Christmas and Easter, was broken, so I walked over to RD MacLean and Company, the local Roman Catholic goods store just around the corner from the church. The place was full of people. A woman approached me

and asked, "Can I help you?" I said, "I need a clerical collar." "Right this way!" It's amazing how the waters part when Roman Catholics think you're a priest. Here's a fun fact: clerical collars cost \$27. Made in Italy, of all places. I stood there, shocked. All eyes were on me. Rome will get its coin one way or another, I suppose. I chalked it up to supporting a local business and ecumenism.



That afternoon, I joined the choir at Gordon and Ocean Halls in the chapel there. For the past two years, we held the service in the main foyer; however, this year, they decided to designate a space. We read scripture and sang carols. I did my stand-up routine, where I tell a story based on the scripture and ask people to share memories and thoughts about Christmas. One woman, sitting next to her husband, who was in a wheelchair, said, "For years and years, my husband read 'Twas the Night Before Christmas' for everyone, and as I looked at him, he had tears in his eyes. My soul absorbed that. Rev. Mel Fawcett led the choir in an anthem called "Lo How a Rose E're Blooming", which is a beautiful Christmas song that we don't hear enough.



I'd been visiting a woman in the hospital who used to belong to another church. However, she'd parted ways with them over the years, and she had asked for me, her son told me. (He later told me that it was because she thought I was handsome! Take the compliments where you can get them...) I went, and I was charmed by her. She was what I would describe as a "lady," and we had nice talks over the past few months as she awaited placement in a nursing home. I'd been in recently, and then I received a message two days later that she was now palliative, which shocked me because we'd had such a spirited talk. Over the days, I started to see changes in her, and I knew she was not long for this earth. So, at noon on Christmas Eve, I went to see her even though there was so much to do that day. According to her family, she loved Christmas Eve, and she loved the Lessons and Carols service each year. So it felt good to be there knowing that.

Before I left, I stood alongside her bed and offered a prayer, and then I touched her forehead and said, "It's time to go home." She'd been drifting towards heaven for a while now. The family had been keeping vigil.

After the service at Shannex, I received a text from a local businessperson letting me know that they were in the cardiac unit at the Dumont Hospital. I wrote back, "I'm on my way." I've known this person since I moved to Moncton. When I arrived, I was told to "Follow the red arrows." I think I looped around a few extra times, but I found my way to the room where he and his wife and kids were gathered. It was a scary situation. He'd caught a virus that had affected his heart, and they were trying to drain the fluid. There had been damage.

While we were talking, I was watching his blood pressure and heart rate on the monitor. His son came and sat with us to talk, and I noticed that there was no change. I'd hoped that by taking his mind off of everything, he'd somehow get better, but that's called wishful thinking, given the meds he was on and the situation he was in. I gave him a hug and a handshake before I left. His son asked if he could walk me to the door. He wanted to talk about church and faith. I told him that the message of Christmas is the moments when heaven and earth meet, and this was such a moment. He was a good son who had a good dad. Heaven and earth were in that room.

When I arrived at the church, I took out my keys and opened the big black doors. Then I used another key to open a big, wooden door to my office. I like the sound of the clicks, and I made a mental note of it. I turned on the lamps in my office (I dislike overhead lighting) and hung my coat. My Christmas Eve sermon still wasn't finished, and I had a lot on my mind. I boiled water for tea and got to work.

When my sermon was finished, I drove home to get my daughter, Allie, so that she could rehearse the piano for the Christmas Eve service. We sat and talked for a few minutes in the quiet of the church before anyone else arrived. She's been playing at Christmas Eve services here since she was a little girl, and now as an adult. Shelley had rehearsed with her earlier in the week, and now it was time to shine.



When you come to St. John's on Christmas Eve, you get lessons, carols, kids, and candles. What else could top that? We play to our strengths, and one of them is the Casavant pipe organ so expertly played by Shelley Arsenault, backed up by a large choir of the faithful. To use words outside of our tradition: it's all magical. The sparkling lights, the music, the powerful words from scripture, the presence of the children, the strangers, the night itself. That night, it doesn't matter to me if you come to church once a year. People need this. I need this.

Among the traditional churches, there are Christmas Eve services that open with "Once in Royal David's City", and there are churches that open with "O Come, All Ye Faithful." St. John's is the latter. In the final verse of "O Come, All Ye Faithful" are the words, "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing..." That's my Christmas Eve moment. I live for it. The organ seems stronger. The voices sing louder. I wait for it and anticipate that moment each year. Jesus is born for me in that moment once again. It sustains me.

During the children's time, one of our faithful church kids asked about "Biblically Accurate Angels", which is code for those of us who know: angels don't always appear as white, shining men in the sky. If you search it on Google "Biblically accurate angels" you'll learn the complex, often terrifying, and non-humanoid descriptions of divine beings in scripture, contrasting with common depictions of cute cherubs or winged humans, and includes creatures like Seraphim (six wings, fiery), Cherubim (man/lion/ox/eagle faces, many eyes), and (Ophanim) (whirling wheels full of eyes) from Ezekiel and Isaiah, emphasizing their roles as powerful, awe-inspiring messengers/guardians rather than simple figures.

Which is why it makes more sense on Christmas Eve when the angel appears and says, "Fear not!" "Do not be afraid!" Because there are lots of reasons to be afraid...

During the Christmas Eve service, as we were singing, "In the Bleak Midwinter", a man approached me from the side of the chancel where I was standing and singing. He motioned for me to come down, which I did, and he said, "My mother just passed." It was the same woman I'd visited earlier that day. She'd died during Lessons and Carols. Her son later told me that it was in tribute to his mother that he went to church that night. I processed all of that as I tried to remain present to the worship service. For her to die on Christmas Eve during Lessons and Carols may have been her way home.



Some Christmases, I preach a sermon as fluffy as an angel's wings. But this Christmas, given all that is happening in the world, I decided to burn the barn. And you know what? At the door, I received so many hugs and handshakes from people I've never seen before who sat in a church maybe for the first or last time. They heard a Gospel to which they could relate. Here's the thing: we may never see them again. Or, maybe we won't see them until next Christmas Eve. But, for a moment, they felt part of the church. I also had hugs from a lot of regular church people who needed a Word, too. I'm always fascinated by the messages I receive when I get home, and that night, I was able to sleep in heavenly

peace! But some of the people are frozen in my mind. It's like they were surprised to hear what I said in church. It's important for people to know the church is a living, breathing community filled with compassionate, justice-oriented people who have empathy for the world.

One of the perspectives I have is the ability to look over a congregation of people and families and to see their stories. Some stories may not apply to you. You may wonder why I'm going off on a tangent on a certain subject. But, when I see a little family who are working through just those things, it all makes sense to me, and I thank the Holy Spirit for giving me words when I may be more tempted to appease the crowd as opposed to preach the Gospel. That's the true 'Word of the Father.' The word that touches a weary world and anxious hearts.

My wife asked me what I wanted to do for New Year's Eve. My tired self said, "Honestly, let's just stay home and eat snacks and watch TV and play piano." We normally spend it with friends, but people were away. So, we went to Sobeys to get some food for the evening. On the way home, I suggested we go get a drink somewhere. She said, "Let's try St. James Gate, it's near the church." So off we went. When we arrived, the place was empty; it was Happy Hour, and we were happy. We sat at the bar, and the waiter asked us what we wanted. I noticed that it was \$2 per oyster, so I ordered half a dozen. My wife prefers them barbecued, but on the shell with a slice of lemon will do. Our lives are hard, but this moment was right. The staff treated us like royalty since we were the only customers, and they presented us with the platter of oysters on ice and explained that these were Blue Pearl oysters from Grand Digue with two sauces.



I toasted to my wife, and she toasted to her husband. I may not know how to have fun, but I do know how to appreciate a moment. And for a moment, life was good.

Happy New Year to you and yours. Thank you for being the church.

The Rev. Aaron Billard
Minister



January 18-25, 2026



The bulletin and pastoral letter are dedicated in Loving Memory of
our mother, M. Joan Steeves
by Bonnie Steeves and Shelly Steeves

NOTICES, UPCOMING MEETINGS & EVENTS

Check our website at www.stjohnsmoncton.ca
for **Sunday online Worship links**, calendar, and more.

Jan. 18	Sun.	11:00 a.m.	WORSHIP and Sunday School - Music Director: Lorilee Redmond	
Jan. 18-25			Week of Prayer for Christian Unity	
Jan. 18	Sun.	12:45 p.m.	Worship & Music Committee (Norman Sinclair Room)	
Jan. 19	Mon	7:00 p.m.	AI-Anon (weekly-Owen Fraser Hall)	
Jan. 20	Tues.	7:00 p.m.	Finance & Property Management Committee (monthly-Owen Fraser Hall)	
Jan. 22	Thur.	7:00 p.m.	Choir (weekly-Choir Loft/Fellowship Room)	
Jan. 22	Thur.	7:15 p.m.	Pathfinders, Girl Guides of Canada (weekly-Social Hall)	
Jan. 25	Sun.	11:00 a.m.	WORSHIP and Sunday School - Kirkan' O' the Tartans - wear your tartan or bring your colours - Grocery Sunday (see note)	
Jan. 27	Tues.	7:00 p.m.	Church Council (monthly-Owen Fraser Hall)	
Feb. 1	Sun.	11:00 a.m.	WORSHIP and Sunday School	
Feb. 1	Sun.	2:30 p.m.	Worship with the Rev. Aaron Billard at Peoples Park Tower Chapel , 960 St. George Blvd., Moncton. If you are a resident there, we ask you to help us spread the word to members of the congregation who live there.	

Announcements from other United Churches, Fundy St. Lawrence Dawning Waters Region 14 and the community are shown on the TV in the Owen Fraser Hall and also located on the bulletin boards located at the Alma St. entrance and outside the Church Office.

SOBEYS & SUPERSTORE GIFT CARDS are sold each Sunday in the Sanctuary before and after Worship and at the Church Office M-F, 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.

We make 4% on every card sold. Your support is needed and appreciated.



GROCERY SUNDAY FOR KARING KITCHEN

(Jan. 25 – last Sunday of the month)

The Outreach Committee would like to bring your attention to the Karing Kitchen's need for these groceries: cream of celery soup, honey garlic sauce flakes of ham and hot dogs. *White baskets will be at the main entrance for your donations.* Thank you.



DEDICATE THE BULLETIN/PASTORAL LETTER in memory of a loved one(s). The cost is \$50.00. Upcoming dates available: Jan. 25, June 7, Sept. 9, 2026 and Jan. 10, 2027. If you dedicated last year, you will be contacted to see if you want to dedicate again.

STEWARDSHIP SECOND – In Jesus you are loved and made holy, enriched in many ways: not lacking in any spiritual gift; ready and willing to share generously; called by God, as disciples of Jesus.

ST. JOHN'S UNITED CHURCH CARES... To notify the Minister of personal concerns, anxieties, illnesses, hospitalizations or deaths, or to pass along a prayer request, contact Rev. Aaron Billard at 506-858-8289 or sjucrev@gmail.com