

# The Harcourt Herald December 2021

The Life and Work of Harcourt United Church



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## **Harcourt Memorial United Church**

An Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Canada

We are a people of God called together and sent forth by  
Christ to... **Seek. Connect. Act.**

**Our Mission:** Inspired by the Spirit, we participate in Christian practices that strengthen us in the building of just, compassionate and non-violent relationships.

**Our Vision Statement:** To be an authentic community of spiritual growth and service.

**Our Core Values:** Risk... Respect... Responsibility... Vulnerability... Trust

**Our Purpose:** To welcome and strengthen in community all who wish to serve God and follow the way of Jesus

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## **From the desk of the Editor.**

Had you ave a chance to fill out our short questionnaire about the likes/dislikes of the Harcourt Herald???? It is important to us to serve you well.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TRRSQW2>

I had suggested that this issue look at different Christmas Traditions.

When I was in my mid-twenties I worked in Belgium and, to improve my French, I took night-classes at the Alliance Française. We all came from very mixed backgrounds. One of our discussions was about the different traditions of Christmas. Up to this point I had not realized that there existed such a thing as different ways to celebrate Christmas. What an eyeopener it was to hear the varieties of traditions!

So, read on and find out what Christmas traditions we at Harcourt cherish. There might be some surprises how other fellow Harcourters celebrate Holy Night and the season of Christmas.

All in all, we, the team of the Harcourt Herald, wish you a very good Christmas season and then..... a good jump into 2022! (Yes, it's a German tradition to jump, at midnight sharp, into the New Year from a chair or cushion!)

(And as a topic for the Herald's start of the New Year, we suggest: "What are your dreams for 2022? - your expectations, changes you hope to see happen, or events that 2022 should bring".) Please do not hesitate to share your thoughts with us.

One thing I know will happen in the New Year, Ann Middleton, my very cherished team member has resigned. I thank her for all the work she has done for the Herald since October 2021 – I'll miss her dearly.

Blessings! Marion, Ann and Julie.



## The Minister's Quill

Marcie Gibson

*Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes  
How do you measure? Measure a year?  
In daylights, In sunsets, In midnights, In cups of coffee,  
In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife...  
("Seasons of Love", Rent, by Jonathan D Larson)*

How do you measure a year? Each Christian year is a series of seasons; Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary time, Creation, Remembrance.

How have you measured *this year*, in particular? Perhaps in seasons of Second Wave, online school, Third and Fourth, Zoom dinners, adult vaccinations, easing of lockdowns, re-openings, and livestreaming. Seasons of political insurrections, springtime thaw, forest fires, elections, harvest, and flooding. For some, there have also been seasons of loss, mourning, grief, change, sickness, joy, healing, isolation, and reunions. For my time with Harcourt there has been Zoom, phone calls, Zoom, recording, Zoom, grief, Zoom, children, Zoom, keys, Zoom, wedding, Zoom, colleagues, Zoom, embodied people, and – you get the picture. A blessing to have been able to share this evolving time with you.



As we embark again upon Advent, the beginning of the liturgical church year, I am thinking a lot about time. How we mark it, marvel at it, and muddle through it. Advent is often characterized as a time of waiting. As Mary and Joseph anticipated, so too do we. And yet, waiting for a child is not a passive linear process. There is much to do and much that can turn us upside down along the way; whether waiting for adoption papers to be finalized, or a pregnancy to run its course, the foster system to discern the right match, devastating or joyous news, or results from a clinic.

I am conscious that much of the last year has been characterized as a time of waiting: waiting to get back to what we love, waiting for test results or to see if loved ones will pull through, waiting to sing together, waiting to travel or visit loved ones, waiting to lay down the constant stress / fear / assessment / negotiations of "safety." This waiting will not disappear with the sacredness of Christmas day, though it will hopefully improve.

*Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Matt 24:42)*

Our Advent calendars are a sweet but false assurance that we can predict and reach the right time. The Holy Spirit does not wait to enter our lives any more than children, pandemics,

or change. What if our Advent calendar did not stop counting at 25 (or 28 if you start on Advent 1 Sunday)? What if this was not just a tasty way to count down to Christmas, but a way to count up, indefinitely, with God? Would our senses remain alert? Would we grow weary and complacent or further attuned to glimpses of Good News?

*but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31)*

As we mark this Advent time with familiar and evolving traditions may we each and all be open to the strength and possibilities of the Spirit to set us on a good course.

*There is a time, we know the way. There is a time we watch and pray.*

*In living faith we make our way, together.*

*There is a bow within the rain. And it will come and bend again. And colours shine where we have been, together. (“There is a Time” More Voices 165 vs 3&5, by Carolyn McDade)*

Blessings, Marcie

## Council News

*Lorraine Holding, council chair*

Before writing this month's update, I looked back at my December 2020 article. What is the same this year? What is different? Where are we now, individually and collectively, as Harcourt at the end of our second year of pandemic?

First, we have worked through a year of our intentional discernment journey to focus on Harcourt's future. And, we're still working! Our two rounds of Harcourt Conversations (winter and spring) focused on our need for deep change as a community of faith and “being church”. **Tweaking the status quo, while feeling more comfortable, will not be enough for survival.**

We have talked about practical next steps for both technical problem solving (problem defined and solved) and experimentation in adaptive challenges (no expert with the right answer; required changes in attitude and behaviour; re-purposing of mission). The Transition Steering Team pulled out the many ideas gathered and have identified three themes as potential priorities for Harcourt:

- Support growth of Manna;
- Worship shift, spiritual life, and integration;
- Building partnerships through physical and technical resources.

Of course, we have continued to adapt to the challenges and changes (and the practical technical problems) created by Covid-19. Many articles this year in The United Church in Focus section of *Broadview* magazine, and the *Embracing the Spirit* and *EDGE* email newsletters have highlighted that new approaches are needed and are happening. Check out what Christopher White wrote in his Question Box column in the December 2021 issue of *Broadview* ([broadview.org/united-church-disappearing](http://broadview.org/united-church-disappearing)). Harcourt, too, has said “there is no going back” to pre-Covid days.

Council’s lengthy November meeting focused on these items:

- Discussion about proof of vaccination, a possible survey of the congregation requested by Worship Committee, and Guelph’s low rate of circulating virus and very high immunization rates;
- An initial draft 2022 budget prepared by Finance Committee;
- Preparations for the November 28 congregational meeting – to present a visioning story and to present for approval an implementation plan for flexible seating;
- Support to investigate Trinity United Church’s request to work with them to bring an Afghan family from Afghanistan to Canada;
- Approval of the position description for supply minister for worship and pastoral care (40 hours/week; January 24 to May 6, 2022) to cover Miriam’s sabbatical.

As I write on this day marking Harcourt’s 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, let’s ponder what we want to celebrate at Harcourt’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in early March 2026 only four years and three months from now. Our current focus on creating Harcourt’s future can make a difference! With faith and hope, we experience Harcourt’s core values – risk, respect, responsibility, vulnerability and trust.

## Property Committee report

*Dave Hume for the Property Committee*



Several activities have taken place in November. Thirteen people volunteered at the November 6 garden cleanup. Gary Parsons mulched the leaves. Carol and Laurie Jones and Sandy Middleton cleaned up gardens around the main entrance. Limbs and twigs got picked up. Finished flowers got trimmed for winter. Now it can snow.

Committee chair Frank Webster signed a new contract with Drexler’s for snow removal and salting in the parking lot. Additives

were purchased for adding to the water that circulates in the hot water heating system. The fire system was inspected. The certificate is on file in the office. Walter Johnson created holes in Wendy's and Casey's desks so the wiring for computers can go below the desks. Walter also made repairs to the sign out front.

Rentals are increasing. The pre-school is expected to be up to 100 percent capacity in December. We're getting closer to normal!



## **Food for the journey – deep spirituality in a liminal time**

*Spiritual Life Committee*

In keeping with the United Church's new Mission Statement – Deep spirituality, bold discipleship, daring justice – Harcourt's Spiritual Life Committee will each month provide an invitation to go deeper in an intentional journey toward God, with God and in God.

This month's invitation comes straight from a workshop at the recent United Church five-day online national conference on Engaging Love and Justice. Rev. Janice MacLean, host of an online spiritual resource called [www.prayerbench.ca](http://www.prayerbench.ca) gave a workshop on how to develop spiritual practices especially for this time of transition around the world as well as in the church between what was and is no longer and what will be but remains unknown. Janice serves as minister at Trinity United in Riverview, NB. She brings experience from pastoral ministry early in her ministry life, and also from years volunteering in Israel and with the Iona Community in Scotland. She also served Maritime Conference as Minister for Christian Nurture and Enrichment. She now works half time with Trinity.

She talked about holding our post in this time of transition, by which she meant, we think, hanging on to what truly matters while letting go of what is no longer essential or important. For Janice, it is clear that a new church is being born. The signs are all around. The old forms of church will still serve those for whom they remain important, but the Spirit is moving elsewhere. Just look at where the young people are, enthusiastically serving people and the world. We probably need to stop praying that these energetic and committed young people come to us and pray instead to find ways for us to go to them!

We hold our post in holy hope: we know the Spirit remains active – only not in ways we are familiar with. For some of us, it is almost too much of a challenge to make the move toward this unknown future. There are, however, some spiritual practices to help us deal with these unsettling times.

The first is to learn to **see what is present**. This requires that we learn to read the signs of the times. What is happening – good and bad – in the world around us? Read the signs of the times with unanxious openness. **How** we see affects **what** we see. If we are fearful, we will not tend to see the signs of the Spirit. Accurately reading the signs of the times will help us respond to what in fact is, not what we would like it to be.

**Called by God, as disciples of Jesus, The United Church of Canada seeks to be a bold, connected, evolving church of diverse, courageous, hope-filled communities united in deep spirituality, inspiring worship, and daring justice.**

**The United Church of Canada**

Many of us are familiar with the various forms of breath prayer. Janice takes this one step further, borrowing from the Tibetan Buddhist practice of tong len (see <http://spiritualpractice.ca/what/what-2/the-common-christian-practices/meditation/forms-of-meditation/tonglen-giving-and-taking/>). She calls her version of this practice a kind of **cosmic dialysis**, a term borrowed from the wellknown spiritual writer Cynthia Bourgeault. A wonderfully evocative term! Once we have settled into a quiet state, we begin to breathe in all the pain and chaos in the world. Then we breathe out all the peace and warmth and love we can muster into that world. We repeat this practice for 10 minutes or so.

Her third suggestion is to ensure that, in our prayer practice, we **keep our attention focused in ourselves rather than on ourselves**. Those of us who follow the Franciscan spiritual writer Fr. Richard Rohr will remember his phrase that our life is not about us. It is about something far greater. Our spiritual practices are not a form of self improvement: they are a form of losing ourselves.

Finally, as part of holding our post, Janice suggests we **reach out to our spiritual ancestors**. The Christian tradition is fortunate to have countless mystics and holy persons through the centuries who have shared experience and spiritual wisdom. Many experienced upheavals every bit as great as the current one. Find a few favourite mystics and stay with their wisdom.

How are you experiencing this liminal time in the church? In the broader world? What spiritual practices do you currently engage in – or might you engage in – to help you leave the old and embrace the unknown new?



## Manna's Advent Spiral tradition

Pamela Girardi



During Advent in the past, you may have noticed Manna gathered around a large spiral made with evergreen boughs – with a single lit candle at the centre. You may have found children, young folks and adults sitting quietly with unlit candles, waiting their turn to walk the Advent Spiral. This quiet, peaceful tradition is one of the ways that Manna enters the Advent season.

Winding your way along the path of the Advent Spiral is similar to walking/rolling a labyrinth. Labyrinth walking is an ancient practice used by many different faiths for spiritual centering, contemplation, and prayer. Some people walk a labyrinth to focus on a spiritual question or prayer. Others walk the labyrinth to slow down and center themselves. Others might be seeking guidance.

The Advent Spiral offers a similar practice for centering and contemplation. Each person receives an unlit candle and takes a turn to walk slowly along the spiral path into the center. At the center of the spiral you are invited to light your candle, pause and be still. You can stay for as long as you need.

You leave the Advent Spiral on the same path you entered – this time holding your lit candle. As you finish your walk, you place your flickering candle somewhere along the spiral. This is another beautiful meditation of the Advent Spiral – as the spiral grows in light, we can see that whatever it is we are seeking in this Advent season, we are not alone. We are blessed and supported by one another and by our community.

I wonder what spiritual questions you are walking with this Advent? I wonder what it is you are seeking to learn or experience this season? Perhaps you would simply like a peaceful, quiet time to just be.

Our Advent Spiral service will be on Sunday, December 5 at 10:45 a.m. and all are welcome! We are excited to have musician Jane Lewis with us. The spiral will be set up in the garden starting on Monday, November 29 and available the whole week if you'd like to come walk it at another time.



## A few reflections on Christmas carols

Gerald Neufeld

For many people, Christmas carols have deep personal emotional ties to the meaning of Christmas. In my childhood, gift giving played a minor role to that of the carols we sang and heard over and over played on a simple record player. Gifts and toys could not compete with the depth of feeling about the Christmas legends found in carols. So, how did Christmas carols become so embedded in our culture that our economy would suffer severe losses without the sales initiated by their ubiquitous sounds in shopping malls?



The word “carol” originates with the Greek word “choros,” to dance in a circle. Accompanied by singing, the dance was associated with drama or religious ritual. In medieval times, celebrating the birth of Jesus was an occasion to dance in the nave of the cathedral, a space that was often used for “secular” activities. Carols often merged pagan solstice traditions with stories and legends of Jesus’ birth to give meaning to the lives of “simple folk.”

*Tomorrow Shall be my Dancing Day* is based on a dance melody perhaps originally played in a medieval mystery play. The 11 verses are an account of Jesus’ birth, life and death as narrated by him in the first person. However, the refrain is set as an archetype for human love as a metaphor for the church as Christ’s bride.

*Tomorrow shall be my dancing day;  
I would my true love did so chance  
To see the legend of my play,  
To call my true love to the dance.*

Refrain:

*Sing O my love, O my love,  
This have I done for my true love.*

In contrast to religious references, a later carol *Deck the Hall with Boughs of Holly* originated as a Welsh dance-carol for a singing competition in which competitors would dance in a circle around a harpist. Each singer was challenged to improvise new lyrics between the fa, la, las. If unsuccessful, the harp would finish the verse and that singer would drop out of the ring.

Some of the most ancient melodies sung at Christmas are Gregorian antiphons such as *Veni, veni, Emanuel.*

*O Come, O Come, Emanuel!*

*And ransom captive Israel* (meaning, Medieval Christians).

*That mourns in lonely exile here* (Israel's Babylonian exile, a metaphor for fallen humankind).

*Until the Son of God appear.*

*Adeste fideles, O Come all Ye Faithful*, has its origin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Professor Bennett Zon of Durham University suggests it was a thinly veiled call to all faithful Catholics to support the restoration of Bonnie Prince Charlie to the throne in 18<sup>th</sup> century England.

*"O come all ye faithful* (Catholics), *joyful and triumphant,*

*O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem* (England).

*Come and behold him, born the King of Angels* (*regem Angelorum*, a well-known pun on *Anglorum*, Latin for "the English." Hence, Charles, the king of the English by birth).

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, elements of eschatology crept into Christmas music with the text of Isaac Watts' carol *Joy to the World*. The opening melody descends a full octave symbolizing Jesus' descent from heaven and the first verse proclaims, *the Lord is come: let earth receive her King*. The fourth verse declares, *He rules the world... and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness*. Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*, composed in 1741, echoes a similar sentiment with the words, *The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever*. Set to powerful martial-sounding rhythms and melodic intervals, British aspirations to reign over an empire that eventually spanned the globe were already imbedded in the words and music sung by those who would try to bring Christ's salvation to the world.

In our time, composers such as John Rutter capitalize on the legend of Jesus' birth with songs such as *Shepherd's Pipe Carol*. Rutter's music dances happily along with "mall music" to images of the nativity creche St. Francis created in 1223.

*Going through the hills on a night all  
starry*

*On the way to Bethlehem*

*On the way to Bethlehem  
Far away I heard a shepherd boy piping*

*Angels in the sky brought this message nigh:  
"Dance and sing for joy that Christ the  
newborn King*

*Is come to bring us peace on earth  
And He's lying cradled there at Bethlehem."*

Alongside the baby cradled in Bethlehem we now hear “carols” about a fawn with a glowing nose leading a herd of reindeer flying through the sky with a jolly old man who originated with a legend from Asia Minor of St. Nicholas, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century bishop. And in Canada we hear the *Huron Carol*, a song based on the 17<sup>th</sup> century French Noël, *Une jeune pucelle*, that intertwines the language and customs of the Huron people with the story of Jesus’ birth.

*'Twas in the moon of wintertime  
When all the birds had fled,  
That mighty Gitchi Manitou  
Sent angel choirs instead;  
Before their light the stars grew dim,  
And wandering hunters heard the  
hymn:  
"Jesus your King is born, Jesus is born,  
In excelsis gloria."*

*Within a lodge of broken bark  
The tender Babe was found,  
A ragged robe of rabbit skin  
Enwrapp'd His beauty round;  
But as the hunter braves drew nigh,  
The angel song rang loud and high.  
Etc.*

For over a thousand years, carols have appropriated the local language of legends and songs to celebrate love, renewal and generosity at Christmas – which begs these questions. Do the carols we hear convey the message Luke intended for his readers 2000 years ago? Has each time and culture borrowed the story of Jesus’ birth to conform to its current values and beliefs? And why have carols been appropriated to accommodate the economic needs and desires of our time?



## Christmas at Harcourt, then.

Peter Gill

It was the fall of 1981 – 40 years ago! – when Ann Piper stopped me on my way into the church to ask if the Gill family would be willing to lead the Christmas day service. The Piper family had led the service for a number of years but wanted to hand it on to someone else.

That request changed our Christmas day tradition for the next 20 years as Jill and I and our daughters (four- and one-year-olds years in 1981) organized a birthday party for Jesus. During that time there were three Christmas days that fell on a Sunday so a minister took responsibility for the service – I never understood that!

A common question leading up to the big day is “are you all ready for Christmas?” For us, the weeks of December were filled with trips to the library to find new Christmas stories or poems, select music for Lisa (piano) and Michelle (violin) to rehearse, recruit extra musicians – guitars, trumpet, flute, and persuade folks to bake birthday cakes and many other details. Christmas eve between the afternoon family service and the candlelit late service entailed a rehearsal at the church. For many years an impromptu Beatles singalong took place at our house with Andrew and Ken Phelps on guitars after the rehearsal.

This is how our daughter described her memories of that time: “I enjoyed having a reason to play Christmas music. A few weeks before the service, we would get out our Christmas music scores. Playing the piano and singing helped me get into the spirit of the holidays! It also challenged my sister, Michelle, and me to play duets together and later to play with the Phelps boys. Playing for the service gave me a leadership role that was a little nerve-racking, but it felt really good to have a way of giving the gift of music to the families on Christmas Day.”

Christmas morning was filled with nervous anticipation – were the bulletins printed, would the church key work, remember to turn the heat on in the Friendship Room, would anyone show up. Yes, they did show up – usually 40 or 50 people who wanted to take the time to include the sacred in their Christmas Day. That included the Gill family who for twenty years spent Christmas morning along with friends and fellow Christians celebrating the birth of a baby whose life and example we do our best to emulate two thousand years later.



## Our Christmas Traditions

Mike Peleschak



While our children were young, we followed a fairly regular routine every year. In late November we decorated the house. Outdoor wreaths and garlands and lights ... and snow shovels in anticipation of snowfalls. Indoor illuminated ceramic chalet and trees, and a stable, creche, and figures all crafted by Mary. Table and mantle decorations. "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas!"



In the middle of December we went Christmas tree hunting to the nearest tree farms. After diligent searching, we would all finally agree on the perfect tree, harvest it, bring it home, and decorate it. Stockings were

hung by the fireside. Now it *really* looked like Christmas!

The church was always part of our preparations. With Mike in the choir, there was all the Advent music, and lots of carols. Often there was a pageant, with both Mike and the children involved.

Finally – Christmas eve. The presents were under the tree. We attended the evening service. With the lights out, we all lit candles and, inhaling their scent, we sang Silent Night, Holy Night. Awe inspiring.

Christmas morning the children were allowed to open their stockings while we roused ourselves, prepared breakfast, and greeted their grandparents who usually arrived for the celebration. After breakfast, one of us would be the elf and hand out the presents. Lots of torn paper and exclamations of delight!

Christmas dinner was also a family affair – first at grandparents, then later at our place, and most recently at one of our children's homes with their children returning from college – six wonderful grandchildren. Merry Christmas!



## **Christmas memories of a Windsor childhood**

*Judi Morris*

Seventy years ago Christmas in our home began with all the windows being washed. Scrunched coloured aluminum wreaths with cardboard candles were then put in every window. Fifty years later I learned that this was an Irish custom. The candles told travellers that they were welcome to come in and share a meal at Christmas.



Furniture had to be moved to make space for a tree in my Irish grandparents' 875-square-foot bungalow. My father, brother and cousin Edith and I all shared this home with Ma and Da. Each year our father gave Cary and me \$5 for a Scotch Pine at the Supertest Gas Station. My brother carried the tree home on his back with me keeping the top from dragging on the ground for the block-long trip home.

Our dad took us to downtown Windsor to shop each December. Cary and I each had \$12.50 from Ma's Christmas club savings to buy something special for every member of our household. If we got it right at Kresges and Woolworths, we had change left for 25c worth of warm cashews from the Nut House.

We were reminded to put something from the \$12.50 in the Salvation Army kettles but never instructed on how much. It had to be our decision from the heart. We were taught at church, school and home about it being more blessed to give than to receive. I delivered gifts and food with Girl Guides to needy homes, a poignant and humbling experience. Many men were laid off from the car factories at Christmastime. I recall a fish tank in one house, and I asked my dad if we could drop off fish food there one day. I felt the hunger in that home, even for the fish.

After the Christmas Eve service, we opened the presents brought by aunts and uncles. Everyone – except us kids and teetotal Ma – stood in the kitchen with a highball in a glass used only at Christmas.

Cary always lent me a boy scout sock to hang on the spark screen in front of the coal-burning fireplace. We were allowed to dig into the socks early Christmas morning while the rest of the family slept, but had to wait until everyone was up and dressed to open gifts. We tip toed around our grandparents who slept on a pull-out couch in the front room, crawled under the dining room table and dumped out a fresh orange, tangerines, nuts, Christmas candy and a toy.

Myrtle, our father's girlfriend, stayed over that one night of the year. She slept in my father's bunk and he doubled up with Cary. Excitement forced us to wake everyone at 7 a.m.

and the gifts were handed out. Every year we got skates and thick flannelette pajamas and something we wanted from the Sears catalogue.

Cary and I watched intently as everyone opened the gifts we had bought, hoping to see joy on their faces. I recall one year I bought Ma a glass candle with its own stand and tiny coloured bulbs for 35 cents. To see her eyes sparkle as she held it up to the light thrilled me.



After gift opening, the dining room – which adjoined the front room – was set up with tables end to end to seat 24 people. A child's card table went into the utility room where my father and Cary slept. Babies were fed before or after the main dinner, always held at 2 p.m. All the coats were laid on the bed in the bedroom where Edith and I slept. A well in the coat stack provided space for the newborn of the year to sleep. One- and two-year-olds sat on either their mother's or grandmother's laps – there was no room for highchairs.

Everyone who walked in shook hands and greeted the others with a hug and kiss and said "Merry Christmas." All ages had lipstick on their faces from Myrtle.

My father and Da always won 30-pound turkeys from their bowling league. An aunt cooked one of the turkeys at Christmas and another aunt cooked the New Year's bird. Ma prepared potatoes, turnip, carrots, hard peas and canned peas.

Before we ate, all heads bowed. Da said, "For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful," and we responded "Amen."

After dinner women cleaned up while men entertained the children and made highballs. Da played checkers and dominoes with some of the kids for a penny a game. Children with Christmas skates and hockey gear followed Cary and me to a neighbour's ice rink. Cary's fold-up billiard table came out, squeezed into the front room.

The one- and two-year-olds slept off their Christmas dinners under the dining room table with a blanket tossed over them, oblivious to the noise of laughter, singing and loud talking.

After a supper of turkey sandwiches, the dining room table was collapsed, the rug rolled up and we danced till 10.

Some adults slipped away to visit their in-laws, but all returned and sometimes brought a friend. The cardboard candles in the windows gave a clear message –all who came through the door were welcome.

This happened every year until Da died at the age of 76 and the house was sold.



## **One Christmas we sang with the dolphins**

*Jean Hume*

Our family has never established traditions as we have spent a couple of years in Ghana and New Zealand and several in Florida. Family has always been an important part of the celebration whether with new friends or Humes or Fullers and over the past 25 years we have accommodated our children's families too.

The one constant has been a church service and often two. When our children were very young, the Piper family organized a birthday party for the baby Jesus on Christmas mornings in the friendship room where we ate birthday cake after the reading from Luke.

One memorable Christmas Eve on Sanibel Island in Florida we followed the lanterns on the beach to a large gathering of carolers. The dolphins joined us just off shore, responding to the music and creating great joy among us.



I will say that when our children come home for Christmas with the grandchildren, they want the familiar Christmas decorations like the Ghanaian Nativity Scene. And they expect a chocolate yule log for Christmas eve and peppermint chiffon pie sometime during the holidays.

As I started out to tell you that we have no traditions I was surprised to find that yes we do!

## **Christmas in a minister's family**

*Mary Lou Funston*

Since my father was a Presbyterian minister who had answered the call to serve in British Columbia, I grew up there. But Dad's family was in Ontario and my mother's was in Saskatchewan, so at Christmas we were always alone as a family. As a result, most of our traditions do not include other family members nor, interestingly, the church, except for the annual Christmas concert. However, that does not mean we didn't enjoy Christmas! We certainly did and it was a nostalgic journey with my sister Gwen and brother Robert to recall them.



Christmas preparations always started a few weeks before the day with the making of Christmas fruit cakes. There were always three – small, medium and large. Because Dad loved fruit cake, Mom had to find a hiding place for them or he would have devoured them all before Christmas. It was not until very recently that my sister and I found out where that hiding place was. Mom told my brother before she died that she used to put them in the washing machine! Dad was never home on Mondays so it was safe to do the laundry. We used to receive many boxes of chocolates from friends and members of the congregation and Mom also hid them in the washing machine. Dad never found them.

When we got the Christmas tree (a week ahead of time), it was put in bucket of water in a corner of the living room and decorating began. Dad always put up streamers across the living room ceiling – attached kitty-corner. These were red and green crepe paper strips put together and twisted as they were hung. Once they were firmly tacked into the corners, they were strung with single strands of tinsel. Then string was tacked up on the walls to hold the Christmas cards. When this was done, the tree was decorated. First, the strings of lights had to be checked and dead bulbs replaced, then all ornaments placed and lastly, tinsel strands

carefully added. After Christmas, all decorations, including the tinsel, were carefully packed away for the next year.

On Christmas eve, we hung up our stockings by the fireplace in the study. These we were allowed to “open” on Christmas morning before breakfast. There would be a small gift and an orange in each one. Then we had to dress, have breakfast as usual, including cleaning up the dishes, have family worship and then the gifts under the tree. These were handed out one at a time, each to be opened by the recipient and commented on, before the next one was handed out. Mom kept a list of the names of givers. When all the gifts had been given out, we spent the rest of the day playing or reading.



I don't remember Christmas dinner as being special (although it must have been) except for the dessert of steamed pudding with brown sugar sauce.

In 1950 we moved to Saskatchewan and were able to spend Christmas with our maternal grandparents and cousins. That happened each Christmas for the three years we were there.

After my sister married a farmer and I moved back to Ontario, we gathered together, first in the manse in Paisley, then after Dad died, on the farm. In recent years, except for the last two, we have all gathered at my oldest niece's for Christmas dinner in London. I look forward to the day when this can happen again!

## Decorating for Christmas

Sarah Lowe

I hear there's a plan to string lights up on one of the big blue spruce trees in front of the church this Christmas. What a great idea! Light in the darkness: one of the oldest traditions for mid-winter, and what a fitting symbol for Christmas!

My earliest memories of Christmas traditions are from growing up in post-war England. Looking back now it seems almost Victorian. We decorated our Christmas tree with candles, in the European tradition. Yes, live candles! Each one was positioned very carefully on its branch so that the candle was absolutely vertical and far enough below the next branch so it didn't catch fire. A tree lit with live candles is magical.

We decorated the rest of the house with plants gleaned from the outdoors. Sprigs of holly from the garden, and garlands of ivy pulled off woodland trees were draped over pictures, the mantelpiece and banister. With luck, we would cut a twig or two of mistletoe, if they weren't growing too high, to hang from the ceiling inside the front door. Later on, I learned to plant mistletoe on apple trees, squishing a sticky berry onto the bark on the underside of a branch, where it germinated out of the sight of birds.

Nowadays, I wouldn't dream of lighting live candles on a tree, but Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without sprigs of holly laden with berries. I am fiercely protective of my holly bushes! They get wrapped in a cage of chicken wire each fall to keep the rabbits out (they almost killed the male plant two years ago). The best sprig of berries is reserved to decorate the top of the Christmas pudding. Longer branches will join teasels, native milkweed and cedar in an outside planter on the porch, in a happy blend of the old and new worlds. Ivy is another matter. I wish I had never planted it!



## Memories of Christmas in Lincolnshire

Margaret Settle

My birthday, 17<sup>th</sup> December, marked the beginning of the festive season for my family. Paper decorations made up of streamers, brightly coloured chains made by my sister and me, folding stars and balls were hung across the ceilings. An artificial Christmas tree was trimmed with traditional and well-loved ornaments – the same ones year after year – tinsel and candles. Live trees were not available in England. The cutting down of a real tree, that had been carefully selected, was a new and cherished experience for my family when we came to Canada.



The wonderful smells of mixing the Christmas cake and pudding filled the house. We all took turns stirring and sticking a finger in to taste the delicious mixture, scraping the bowls to be sure nothing was left behind. Then there were the mince pies which had to be made, lots of them! The custom was to eat one at each house you visited during the season to ensure a happy month for everyone. I never heard anyone mention calories.

Carol singing, Christmas pageants and plays, church services with the stories surrounding the birth of the baby Jesus all contributed to the build-up of excitement towards Christmas eve with its anticipation of Christmas day. In our house Father Christmas always managed to put a pillow case full of toys and other good things at the bottom of the bed without waking us. How did he manage to collect all these gifts from aunts and uncles in Ireland and places all over England, as well as those from Mummy and Daddy? We didn't know and didn't ask. Always at the very bottom of the sack was an orange.

The morning of Christmas day was spent enjoying the new games and toys, surrounded now by the smells of roasting turkey which had been cooking at a slow heat all night. The meal which followed never varied its menu and was always delicious. Even during the war years these traditions were upheld, or perhaps memories of the wonderful childhood Christmases have left a glow which does not allow for any unpleasant intrusions.

*Christmas with family is still the most cherished season of the year.*

# **Our German Christmas tradition**

*Marion Auger*

Christmas is the smell of cookies, glühwein, and oranges, Christmas is the noise of nutcrackers, children playing, Christmas carols, the reading of the bible story, and good conversation.

It begins at 5 p.m. on Christmas eve, when the doors to the living room finally open, church bells ring (from the stereo and nearby churches), and the Christmas room (former living room) is lit with candles everywhere, especially on the Tannenbaum – the Christmas tree. Yes, real candles. When Andre celebrated his first Christmas with us he ran frantically out of the room to bring a pail of water – just in case!



We all sit quietly, listening to the Christmas story, and sing some carols.

And then it is time for gift exchanges. Over the past weeks, activities of gift creation have occupied our time. Now the children start to hand out their gifts, receive kisses, hugs and thank yous, and then finally the children can unpack their gifts, thank the giver and play. Many of the gifts are practical, like socks, underwear or nightwear, knitted or sewn pullovers, shirts and ties. But the occasional Lego set is known to have appeared.

Later on we have a typical Christmas eve dinner: wieners with potato salad, followed by the “bunte Teller” – “colourful plates” – loaded with apples, oranges, nuts, cookies and chocolates. The adults retreat to glühwein – hot, mulled wine – or other refreshments and conversations; the children play till bed time, usually around 9 p.m.

And then it is time to sleep into the next day, wake up and go to church.

## Taking comfort in rituals old and new

*mary harding*

My mom was a primary school teacher and a United Church deaconess working in Christian education, so I grew up with daily devotions at the breakfast table and an observed Sabbath Sunday.

High seasons within the church year got the special attention they called out for. During Advent, we had a family Advent corner and each Sunday we had a ritual of readings, carol singing and lighting of candles. Aside from our artificial tree, the main decoration was this corner with a nativity scene. Mom read scripture and we enacted it at the nativity.

At church, there was always an evening carol service with a procession of choir members, battery-operated candles in hand. We in the junior choir came in last – itchy tinsel on our heads – an attempt at halos. The church was lit with candelabras. I loved the glowing, hushed atmosphere.



In our household, Christmas was about Jesus' birth. Santa was de-emphasized, though he delivered regularly until the year I turned 11 and my dad died. Perhaps that's when there was a big shift for me. Grief jumped from its relegated Lent/Easter spot and entered Christmas. With so many losses since, including my son and my mom, I often feel fragile during the season. As we approach the solstice and the hope of increasing light, I can find myself cocooning rather than engaging. Covid has magnified this.

Still, each year I set up the Advent wreath, share stories, light the candles, and look for meaning. While I busy myself in Christmas preparations, I am also on alert and waiting, hoping for signs of tender green shoots, strengthening of neural pathways, deepening of relationships, invitations to generosity, pulls of curiosity, understanding what illuminates my way.

The comfort of slipping into living remembrances and engaging in known rituals can be sources of healing for me. In my adult life, rather than holding fast to prescribed traditions, I endeavour to move with inspiration, the creative flow and the invitation to keep birthing new things. Little daily deaths and births are part of a life of connection and compassion, if they are acknowledged. Now I create rituals, as so moved, and keep with ones that still provide nourishment and connection, like lighting candles of hope, peace, joy and love.



## **Unwrapping the mysterious gift of Christmas**

*Megan Ward*

Many years ago, 25 at least, I decided that I was done with the trappings of Christmas. It wasn't that I was unwilling to shop for gifts, decorate the house, prepare special foods, host and attend festive gatherings. Rather, it was that I was finding it difficult to connect all of those activities with the meaning of the season. So I made a pact with myself to finish all such preparations by the end of November and I've pretty much stuck with that decision. That left December wide open for something else. But what?

December is a cozy month for me, the increasing hours of darkness, the contrast between the cool outdoors and warm indoors, the need for an extra sweater. It lends itself to candlelight and firelight, to longer books and conversations, to forest walks and snowflake watching. There is an invitation in this month to listen for the still, small voice. I am the light of the world, says Jesus. Really? What mystery is this?

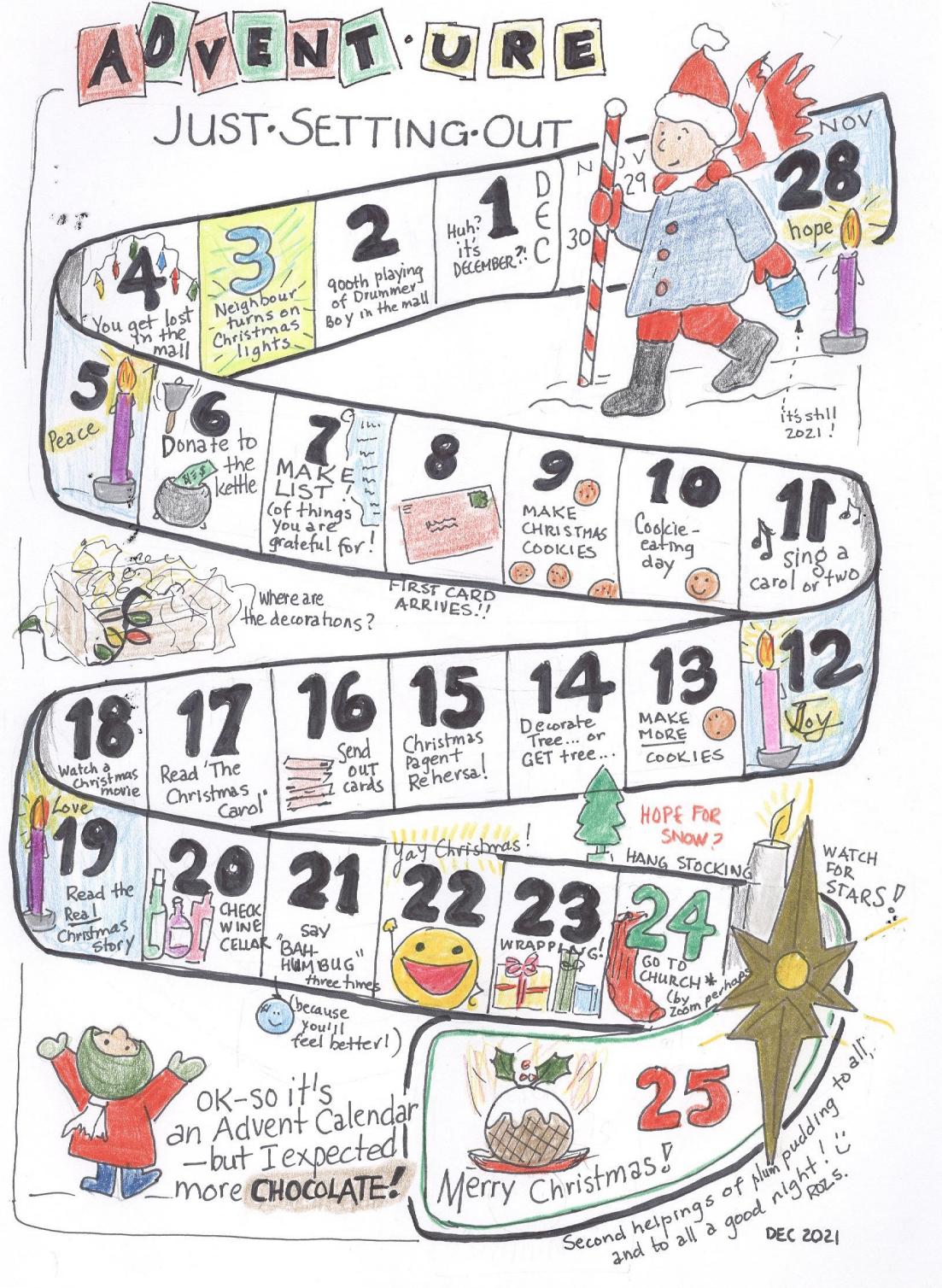
Some years I have a guide along the way. A favourite book, an Advent guide, a meditation practice. Other years it is simply the darkness, the candlelight, the wind rustling the branches outside my window. It's a patient form of listening. The signs are subtle and they appear in their own good time, rarely as a Christmas package, more often as a fragment of conversation, a feeling gazing at a painting, a fragrance along a river trail. Christ is with me, do I care to notice?

Each of us has our own traditions, our own ways to celebrate this good news. It's a glorious and mysterious gift, just waiting to be unwrapped.

Happy Christmas.



**Advent Study Guide** The Spiritual Life Committee is pleased to announce an Advent Study Guide they have prepared that is now available [here](#). Printed copies are available from the help-yourself box outside the Harcourt building doors that open onto the parking lot.



## **Doing daring justice**

*Andre Auger*

The theme for this month's issue of the Herald is totally appropriate: as we enter the Season of Christmas, it is right to share our favourite Christmas traditions. But something else is weighing on my mind: my experience at the United Church of Canada's recent five-day online conference called Engaging Love and Justice.

The themes of the conference were taken from the church's new Motto: "Deep spirituality, bold discipleship, daring justice." It was already exciting for me to see the United Church declare deep spirituality as one of its denominational pillars. Maybe the Spiritual Life Committee hasn't been flogging a dead horse all these years after all! And bold discipleship reminds me of the shift a number of us have been pushing for some time: a move away from a membership church toward a discipleship church. This declares that our identity is not as members of a congregation, but as disciples of Jesus. That shift has significant implications.

The conference, however, added courageous community to its topics. I attended a workshop on that theme. The workshop presenter sent us off into our small groups with one question: How is your congregation courageous?

When I entered the breakaway group I had been assigned to, I realized two uncomfortable truths: I was the only white person there, and I had to confess that I could not identify a single instance in my recent congregational life that had required courage. (If I had thought of it at the time, I would have remembered the courage it took to become an affirming congregation.) Everyone else talked about their congregations being on the front line working with the marginalized, dealing with unfair legislation, or blatant discrimination, or insensitive community practices. Everyone talked about dealing with backlash, hate mail, stonewalling. Everyone talked about having to be courageous communities in the face of adversity.

At one point, someone said that "privilege" was "living without inconveniences." Yep, that fit me. In what ways am I ever inconvenienced in my lived experience? So, I had to confess to my small group that I was the poster child for white, middle class privilege.

The next uncomfortable truth I had to face was that I don't particularly engage in "doing justice," let alone "doing daring justice." I was reminded that privilege tends to do "charity." We give, but we ourselves remain in our comfortable privilege. To do justice, one has to be in solidarity; one has to leave the place of privilege. This has given me a whole new



# *Charity/Justice*

meaning to that old book title by Pierre Burton, *The Comfortable Pew*. I give, but I remain comfortable. I do charity; I am not engaged in justice.

Maybe I am being courageous just to write this article about privilege. Sure, some may be upset by what I am writing, but I don't expect much hate mail or other backlash that would call upon my courage. We're too polite for that. And surely writing this confession doesn't qualify as "doing justice." Yes, I can increase my charitable contributions to causes doing the front line work. It's still just charity. I can change what I consume; I can write letters to politicians; I can read books on fragile privilege and Indigenous issues; I can help others wake up to the issues. Would that be enough for me to speak of "courage"?

On the positive side, I discovered at this conference a United Church of Canada that I didn't know existed: young, vibrant, diverse, energetic, passionate and engaged. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the new Mission Statement has emerged out of conversations with these young Christians. This has given me hope. What is attracting these young people from diverse cultural backgrounds to throw their lot in with the church at this point? In what ways could Harcourt show itself to be a courageous community, ready to do daring justice, because we are bold disciples of Jesus, fed by our deep spirituality?

## What is winter without warm socks and gloves?

*Ann Middleton*

I just bought 400 pairs of winter gloves for people in our city. And another volunteer was despatched to buy 400 pairs of socks. Don't thank us. It wasn't our money. The generous donors to Chalmers Community Services provided the wherewithal. But I was shocked by the need in our community.



When the gloves were all packed up for delivery, there were four full big outdoor garbage bags in our family room. Those gloves and socks go in the Christmas bags that are given out to guests at Chalmers. Although they start with 400, there will be many more socks and gloves needed over the cold months.

When you're thinking about Christmas presents, please don't forget to write a cheque for Chalmers Community Services, 41 Macdonell St., Guelph N1H 2Z4.



## FESTIVE FLOWERS

Submitted by Barb Friend, Chair Chancel Committee

Annual traditions are back at Harcourt!!

We will once again be decorating the sanctuary with poinsettias on Dec 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>.

If you would like to donate towards the purchase of a plant in remembrance of a loved one or to honour a special occasion, please contact Barb Friend

**Deadline: Dec 6th**

Home #: 519-763-5032

Cell #: 519-803-5032

Email: [barfriend52@gmail.com](mailto:barfriend52@gmail.com)

PS: You are welcome to take your plant home following the service on Dec 19<sup>th</sup>.

## **Life Events:**

### **Passages**



#### **Ben Fear 1924-2021**

Ben died at his home in the Village by the Arboretum (VBA) October 26. Ben and Norma Fear were very involved in the Guelph community (U of G Arboretum, Guelph Public Library and River Run Centre in particular) and the life of Harcourt and the VBA after they moved to Guelph in 1997.

For 15 years they travelled back and forth to Uganda where they helped build a school and created scholarships that enabled Ugandan students to get a good education.

Ben and Norma were a team – as parents and grandparents, world travellers, Sudoku and crossword buffs, and volunteers. When Norma died two years ago, they had been married 72 years. They met in high school science class in Niagara Falls. The chemistry worked and the couple began a relationship that was interrupted by the Second World War.

As soon as he was old enough, Ben put his pharmacy studies on hold and enlisted with the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, 4th Field Ambulance, 1st Canadian Division. In July of 1943, he took part in the Invasion of Sicily. After contracting hepatitis, he was treated at the Canadian Army's No. 5 General Hospital where, after recovery, he stayed on to work in the pharmacy until the end of the war.

When he returned home, Ben completed his studies, married Norma and became a partner in Thornburn Drug Stores in Niagara Falls.

Ben and Norma are survived by their four children: Janet of Oakville, Jon of Kitchener, Jeanne Kenney-Dunn of Cambridge and Jeff (Kim Baldwin) of Warwick, RI, as well as four grandsons. They were predeceased by son-in-law Garr Dunn of Cambridge and daughter-in-law Caroline Oliver of Kitchener.

**Ben's funeral was held at Harcourt on Nov. 26.**



**Ruth Monkhouse**, who died November 7, age 93, was a long time member of Harcourt. In fact, extended family report the Monkhouses were involved in Harcourt before it moved from Martin Street to Dean Avenue. Although Ruth had not been actively involved in church activities for many years, she stayed in touch through the weekly bulletin mailings and the Harcourt Herald. Pastoral care visitor and friend Joan Bowland says that Ruth was a very positive person who always made visitors feel uplifted even if she was not doing well herself. Ruth was predeceased by her husband Francis in 1998. The Monkhouses had three daughters, Debra (Elwood Briese), Donna (Harvey Hazard) and Barbara (Kirk Piper) and one son, Bruce (Chantal). Ruth had numerous grandchildren, great and great grandchildren.

**Connie Johnston** died November 4. Daughter of David and Divera Lockwood, she was born in Milton in 1975, but spent most of her life in Guelph. She is survived by husband David Thomas and teenage children Eric James and Hailey Marion. Connie was an accomplished gymnast as a girl and was Miss Guelph in 1994. She loved working with children – most recently as a lunch monitor at Rickson Ridge Public School – and was a dedicated and protective mom to her son and daughter, enthusiastically encouraging all their activities and remembered for her contagious laugh. The funeral has taken place.

## A Harcourt Lord's Prayer

Eternal God, God of mystery, mentor, friend,  
named in holiness – a holiness drawing us together.  
Nurture our inner soul with hope and goodness.  
Help us to know what is good for your creation.  
May you clear our hearts and minds that we  
are not smothered from vast poverty, disease  
and wars of our world.  
Help us to become an instrument for serving you,  
Help us to know your goodness, oh Lord.  
Jesus' way may lead us.  
We thank you for sending him to us  
that we may follow his footsteps.  
Help us to form good choices,  
in respect for self and humanity.  
As Jesus, may we too name you "Abba".  
Thank you, God, for your creation – we are not alone,  
we live in God's world.  
Thanks be to God. Amen  
Jean Pipes

