



JANUARY 2026



## St. Francis Center Toy Drive

We had a very successful toy drive for the children at the St. Francis Center in Redwood City. Thank you to everyone who contributed a gift!

## Pastor Burke's Corner

by Reverend Burke Owens

Dear friends,

2025 was generally a harmonious year here at First Church. We had a good year financially with estimates of giving exceeding expectations, along with robust investment gains last year. All this, along with a successful Stewardship Campaign for 2026, brings us into the new year with a secure financial budget for 2026. Many thanks to our Finance Committee for their diligence and expertise, and to all of you who give and support our church.

Three new members were welcomed and a young child baptized into membership in the first half of 2025, while deep losses also occurred as long time members such as Jim Van Horne and George Carpenter passed in late summer and a more recent member, Debbie Kreuger, left us in May. (cont p. 2)

## Un-Deck the Halls

by Pamela Cutkosky



After the 12 days of Christmas have past and Epiphany celebrated, it will be time to “un-deck” the halls.

Folks are needed to take down decorations in the sanctuary and around the church, and return the trees, wreaths, garlands and lights to the storage closets downstairs.

We'll start at 9 a.m. Saturday, January 10. Breakfast treats provided!

Many thanks to those who hung the wreaths, brought up the trees, hung ornaments and strung lights on Nov. 29: Pastor Burke, John and Nancy Larson, Pam and Mark Cutkosky, Rick and Diane Allen, Nancy Glaser, Peter Colby, Steve Wood, Mira Dabrowski, Linda Grossman, Carol Kumer, Wejo Carion



(cont from p. 1) Working closely with our music team, Mark, Diane, Fiume di Musica and others, I see and hear how music is a blessing and is always central to the many elements of worship and church life. Many thanks to Mark, Diane and the choir for all they bring with special seasonal music that enlivens and inspires our church and the broader community.

The First Tongan church led by Pastor Sepuloni Feleunga worships faithfully here each week with Sunday and Wednesday services and other small group programs throughout the year. First Tongan is one of two Pacific Island Methodist churches in Palo Alto and one of more than a dozen in the California Nevada Annual Conference. It is an abiding blessing that both our communities worship and build our faith here at 625 Hamilton.

Our excellent ongoing relationship with TRU School continues to bring joy to our community, while concerts, dance groups and other users enjoy the church as much as we do. In addition, the use of Fellowship Hall for La Comida senior lunches has been an ongoing blessing. Many thanks to Susan Stephens and Trustees for their care of these programs and relationships.

Trustees also kept a good eye on the church and its many physical plant needs over the course of the year, with Steve Wood, Rick Allen and Peter Colby leading the charge with repairs and maintenance repeatedly. As always, expect to hear and see further Trustees projects in 2026!

Staff Parish Relations Committee works closely with church employees to ensure their work and skills are clearly defined and respected and that they are well compensated. As of the end of last year, the production of Insights, the church's monthly newsletter, moved from a volunteer editor, Michele Conway, to an employee, Char Cutkosky. Thank you so very much Michele for your 13 years of editing and publishing this important voice of the church!

Over the course of 2025, I have headed worship and preached most Sundays, and led other special worships, poetry salons and seasonal events, among many other duties, visits, emails, meetings and commitments. However, I find the opportunity to engage with those in and outside our church in traditional worship settings as well as other formats, with the hope of awakening people, an ongoing passion for me. I look to discern further opportunities, creating a space where people can experience the spirit within and around them, in ways that transform and inspire.

I would be remiss for not mentioning all the good work done during my renewal leave this past summer by the many laity and clergy who filled the pulpit for 13 weeks in my absence. Thank you all for your good and faithful work! In addition, the congregational care team, made up of laity as well as the clergy in our church who were available during this same time to assist those who needed prayer, visits or other pastoral needs. You all made such a difference, and the church community is stronger and healthier as result of your efforts and care. (cont p. 3)

Finally, the church as we know it would not work well or even operate without the care and time put in by numerous members and associates who set up, break down, cleanup, arrange, edit, proof, fix, cook, serve, organize, build, decorate, record, stream, video, handle sound, post, welcome, usher, speak, pray and serve faithfully. Each of you is a blessing and without you.... our church and its community would not be as active, as generous, as functional or as faithful as it is. Thank you, thank you, thank you!!!



New year in a mountain vineyard, Napa Valley, 2011

Harmony is the topic of this month's sermon series, and I pray that this timely theme will offer tools to faithfully support and inform us in these wild and crazy times. 2025 was a distressing year, one that certainly left its mark on everyone. From the political chaos of Washington DC, and state capitals around the nation, to the loss of federal infrastructure and jobs, the weaponization of Christianity by the conservative right, needless ongoing wars and humanitarian crises, wildfires, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, the highest global temperatures on record, and the continued erosion of faith in the judicial arm of the U.S. government,

along with plummeting confidence in its legislative and executive branches.

For some time it has been increasingly difficult to turn on the news without feeling depressed or enraged with or disassociated from these bleak realities.

We live in a world that can seem discordant. Discord is when different elements conflict with one another, leading to a sense of strife, isolation, or negativity, often with a desire to close off or remove the other sounds or thoughts, or actions or feelings for they appear to be in conflict, apart from the other.

Harmony is when different elements arise among others, but instead of conflict, they may offer a balance of sound, thought, word or deed which appears to connect and further the original elements in a new and varied manner.

The former ends conversation and connection because of the differences, while the latter, counter-wise, encourages and expands the connection because of the varying notes, positions or ideas.

This month we focus on harmony from the universal perspective, the systemic point of view and in the personal realm.

See you in Church!

Happy new year and God bless us all in 2026,

Pastor Burke

# January Worship: Harmony for Epiphany

This month we travel to the end of the Christmas season for a look at harmony. Harmony is the natural, or planned, balance of life in creation, music, art, society, politics and relationship. It is not easy to achieve. Yet scripture speaks of it and our faith offers us many opportunities to discover it in our lives. As we enter the new year, we will reflect upon this subtly powerful balance in life.

## January 4 - Epiphany, Communion Sunday

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-15

Sermon: Epiphany in Harmony

## January 11 - Baptism of the Lord

Pastor Karen Paulsen, guest preacher

## January 18 - 2nd Sunday in Epiphany

Scripture: Acts 10: 34-43

Sermon: Harmony in Creation and Society

## January 25 - 3rd Sunday in Epiphany

Scripture: Wisdom 19: 18-22

Sermon: Harmony in Our Lives

# UWF Books in the Library!

by Char Cutkosky

The books chosen for UWF (United Women in Faith)'s 2026 Reading Program have been released! The books chosen by our First Church chapter are:

## **Don't Look Back: A Memoir of War, Survival, and My Journey from Sudan to America**

by Achung Deng and Keely Hutton

## **The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times**

by Jane Goodall and Douglas Abrams

## **Finding Me: An Inspiring Memoir of Overcoming Adversity, Embracing Authenticity, and Celebrating Self-Love**

by Viola Davis

## **Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference, and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls**

by Jessica McDiarmid

## **Matter of Little Losses: Finding Grace to Grieve the Big (and Small) Things**

by Rachel Marie Kang

All these books are available to check out from the First Church library--you don't need to be a UWF member. If you want to see the full UWF 2026 Reading List, including children's books, visit [bookshop.org/lists/2026-reading-program-books](https://bookshop.org/lists/2026-reading-program-books)



# Our Church is a Caring Community

by Nancy Glaser, Social Action Committee

During 2025 we donated over \$100,000 as a church through various giving opportunities. Our church has made donations through the Centennial Endowment Fund, Joy of Giving, Pastor's Discretionary Fund, Missionary Support, and the Kurian Family Trust as vehicles for supporting international, local nonprofits, and individuals. I would like to summarize our giving this year.



- Centennial Endowment Fund - \$49,360 to both local and international nonprofits
- Joy of Giving - \$21,615 (based on the 2024 Christmas collection)
- The Kurian Family Trust - \$20,000 to Tongan San Mateo Community College Scholarship Recipients
- Our Church Conference Missionary in Nepal Support - \$2,000
- Pastor's Discretionary Fund - \$9,467 for those in need

The community programs included several **Immigration** programs, **Food Security**, **Disabled Adult Employment**, and **Homeless**.

The international were in **Tonga, Kenya, Tanzania, and Nepal**.

Thank you to everyone who donated this year to help those most in need!

## Green Notes

by Nancy Olson

The new year always seems to me like a good time to review the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church. This new year presents a newly revised Social Principles in a new format which makes it fun to explore to find my old standbys.

“The Social Principles are not church law. Instead, they represent the prayerful and earnest efforts of the General Conference to speak to issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation that is in keeping with the best of our United Methodist traditions. The Social Principles are thus a call to faithfulness and to social engagement and intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit. Moreover, they challenge all members of The United Methodist Church to engage in deliberative reflection and encourage intentional dialogue between faith and practice.”

Any who have patiently plodded through my “green” rambling will note that I often check my personal beliefs against the church’s Social Principles to see if I am “on track” with my sincere efforts to be a good steward to this marvelous earth God has provided. I do get carried away.....

At this new beginning time, let me encourage each of us to appreciate our earth and to be mindful that our actions and inactions have an impact on the quality of life - ours and all others. ❖

# UWF Connections

by Lucy Tompkin and Nancy Olson

May the many blessings of the Christmas Season remain with us as we begin this New Year!

I want to start our year with great appreciation to Ruth Waters for her creativity and dedication in preparing greeting cards throughout the year and especially for our annual Christmas card sale. And special thanks to Brenda Birrell for being her dependable helper.

This annual sale is our only fund-raising event; funds raised go to support UW in Faith mission projects. So my next BIG thank you is to each member of our congregation who purchased Christmas cards this year. We raised over one thousand dollars. A check has been sent to our District Treasurer to support UWF projects, including the two national projects in our area that we have supported for many years: Gum Moon Home and Mary Elizabeth Inn.

And, because of each of you who contributed cookies, we had a very successful annual Cookie Plate assembly on December 4. Due to various reasons we did not meet to dispense extra funds for the past two years. Our UWF Treasurer, Lucy Tompkin, lead the business meeting this year and prepared this report:

“Dear Friends,

This is just a brief summary of the highlights of our meeting earlier this month. We met at 10 a.m. on Thursday, December 4th in the Patio Room.

The attendees brought a beautiful array of cookies, placed on the table, for putting into special gift packages for our shut-in folks and our office staff.

Nancy Olson, Pam Cutkosky and their helpers prepared packages for thirty-six people. Thanks to all the drivers who made deliveries, including Pastor Burke Owens, Patty Bellardo, Carol Kumer, Janet Nicholls, Pam Cutkosky and Brenda Birrell.

After all cookie packages were assembled, we had a quick business meeting. After learning of our substantial bank balances, the group voted to send money as follows to these four charities:

- \$2,100 to the Global Uplift Project - Save a Girl
- \$2,000 to the South Palo Alto Food Closet
- \$2,000 Rapid Reponse Network for Santa Clara County
- \$2,000 Ecumenical Hunger Program, or EHP”



Nevada Butler at EHP  
accepting our check!

# Koinonia Puzzle Night

Photos by Pamela Cutkosky



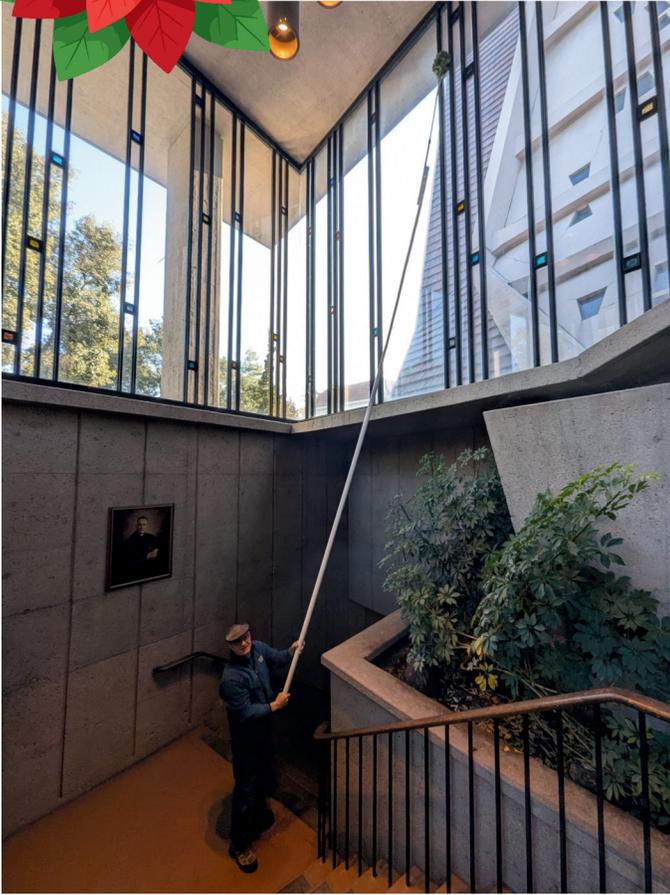
## Next Koinonia Event: Lunar New Year

It's the Year of the Horse! Join the Koinonia Fellowship Group for a Chinese lunch on Saturday, January 17, 12:30 PM at Chef Chu's (1067 N San Antonio Rd, Los Altos). Cost is \$30/person. Space is limited, so RSVP as soon as you can. Email Steve at [topgun60@flash.net](mailto:topgun60@flash.net).





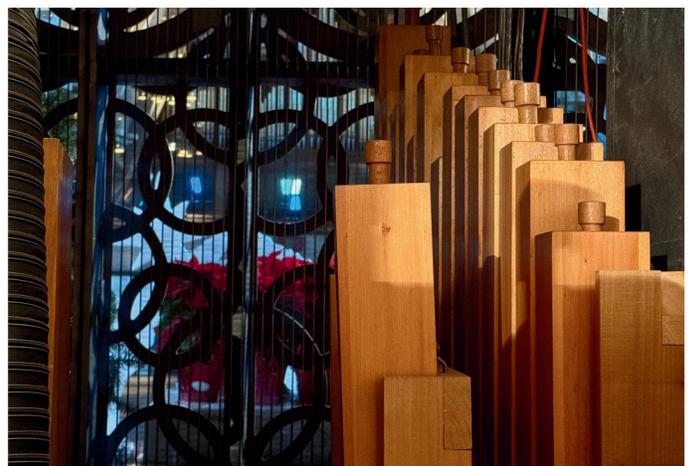
# Volunteers Make Advent Bright!



Clockwise from left: Steve Wood sweeps the narthex (photo by Rick Allen); Nancy Olson, Patty Bellardo and Carol Kumer at UWF cookie plates; Brenda Birrell arranges cookie plates (Pamela Cutkosky); Peter Colby hangs sanctuary banners (Burke Owens)



the most  
Wonderful  
Time  
of the year



*Photos by Burke Owens*

Clockwise from top: caroling in Downtown Palo Alto; Winter Solstice Gathering; poinsettias from behind the reredos; Pastor Gerardo and Santa (Mike McCartney); Mark and Pamela Cutkosky set up the nativity

# A Christmas Eve Thank You

by Pamela Cutkosky



Many thanks to all who helped with the Family Service on Christmas Eve: Pastor Burke, who narrated the Christmas story pageant; Bill Davidson and Alice Peterson, who lit the Christ candle; Daniel Fifita, Tutu and Tuli for ushering; our “actors” – Chad Yoshikawa and Azi Mokhlessi as Joseph and Mary, Lou Bellardo as the Innkeeper/King Herod, Jasmine as the Lead Angel, Mike McCartney, Steve Wood and Maksim as the Wise Men, and many young angels and shepherds; our costumers, Ruthie Waters, Linda Grossman and Irene Chavez; Peter Colby, who kept the patio fire going; and the many folks who generously brought cookies so we could provide hospitality afterward to our visiting families.



*The Memorial Garden in autumn  
Photo by Burke Owens*

## Did You Know About the Memorial Garden?

by Janet Nicholls, Chair,  
Memorial Garden Committee

I recently became Chairperson of the Memorial Garden Committee. A little-known program of our church is the Memorial Garden, off the North Lobby on the Lower Level. It is a beautiful little garden in which Members’ cremains (ashes) can be interred. The program was started many years ago and is watched over by a church Committee and the Board of Trustees. Many members have been interred there in the past, either after a memorial service in the Sanctuary or with a service right there in the Garden. On an adjacent wall are the names of all who are buried there. It is a special and serene place, so please go down and take a look.

We believe that death is not the end of life, but merely a transition into eternal life on another level. The Garden is a place to honor and memorialize those in our church family who have passed away to that eternal life with God.

Most people plan in advance for their burial, so we recommend members plan in advance for their ashes to be placed in the Garden. This is an alternative to purchasing a cemetery plot and coffin, which takes up a lot of space and is quite expensive. If you are interested in exploring this alternative for yourself or spouse, please contact me at [sweetjanet@aol.com](mailto:sweetjanet@aol.com) or 650-814-0278. I will be glad to talk with you about what you need to do to reserve a place. The cost is \$1,000 for everything. \$800 is tax deductible, as it goes into the Memorial Garden Endowment, which pays for care of the garden. The remaining covers the cost of interment and the plaque with your name and dates on it.

# Great Decisions 2026

by Lou Bellardo



As we turn the page on 2025 and move into 2026, we are preparing for the return of the Great Decisions program that has been sponsored by First Church for more than 30 years. Each year we examine eight international issues and their policy implications for the United States. The program this year will begin on February 15th and continue each Sunday until April 12th except for no session on April 5th (Easter). The sessions will be held on Sunday evenings from 7:00 to 8:30. The sessions will be in person but will also be accessible via Zoom. All are welcome to join and we encourage you to attend as many or as few as you wish.

If you have participated in the past, we probably have your contact information, but whether you are a returning or new participant, we encourage you to contact Lou Bellardo ([lou@bellardo.com](mailto:lou@bellardo.com)) so that we can send you updates and the Zoom link for each session. You will also find instructions for registering on the Church website. It will be necessary to register for each of the weekly sessions. Reminders and Zoom links will be pushed to all who have registered on the Thursday before each Sunday session.

At this point, we know the topics that are covered in the Great Decisions workbook prepared by the independent and non-partisan Foreign Policy Association, but we do not yet know the order in which we will discuss the topics. It is not necessary to purchase or read the workbook, but if you want to do so, you can use the Foreign Policy Association website, <https://fpa.org/great-decisions-2026-topic-announcement/>. Then, click on “Bookstore” at the top of the page. This will take you to the Bookstore page where you select, add to cart and place your order for the workbook.

The topics we will cover are:

- America and the World: Trump 2.0 Foreign Policy
- Trump Tariffs and the Future of the World Economy
- U.S.-China Relations
- Ruptured Alliances and the Risk of Nuclear Proliferation
- Ukraine and the Future of European Security
- Multilateral Institutions in a Changing World Order
- U.S. Engagement of Africa
- The Future of Human Rights and International Law

The order in which the topics will be discussed will be determined by the schedules of those we hope will lead the discussions. We will announce the schedule as soon as possible. Tom Fingar will serve as coordinator of the program; Lou Bellardo will handle logistical arrangements.

You need not be a foreign policy expert to attend; just bring an open and eager mind. Newcomers and guests are welcome! If you have general questions, please contact Tom Fingar ([tom@fingar.net](mailto:tom@fingar.net)). ❖

# San Francisco Chamber Orchestra New Year's Concert

January 1, 3-5 PM in the Sanctuary

Ring in the New Year with the SFCO and the exuberant music of three groundbreaking composers: Louise Farrenc, Niccolò Paganini, and Ludwig van Beethoven! The concert is free, but it helps to RSVP for a headcount: [tinyurl.com/sfcony2026](http://tinyurl.com/sfcony2026)



# JANUARY Birthdays & Anniversaries

1/02 Pam Cutkosky  
 1/02 Diane Keller  
 1/03 Jose Irizarry  
 1/09 Peggy Foiles  
 1/09 Carl Herbert  
 1/11 Tom Fingar  
 1/12 Samantha Sasaki  
 1/18 Andrew Breen

1/19 Kyle Trammell  
 1/20 Joseph Witte  
 1/24 Andrew Michel  
 1/25 Ally Yang  
 1/27 Chrissie Blair  
 1/28 David M. Gherardi  
 1/29 Al Nilsen  
 1/30 Scott Thomas

1/22/1994 Keith Perry,  
 Heather Perry



Florence Jensen celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in December--Happy Birthday Florence!



The Finance Committee thanks you for your generous and gracious support and requests that you continue to keep your pledges current. Please direct inquiries to Lou Bellardo: [lou@bellardo.com](mailto:lou@bellardo.com).

November Income and Expense 2025 Summary	November 2025 Actual	Actual YTD 2025	Budget YTD 2025	Budget Annual 2025
<b>Income</b>				
Member Giving	18,755	377,567	305,251	426,040
Income from All Other Sources	29,488	522,890	297,814	349,207
<b>Total Income</b>	48,243	900,457	603,065	775,247
<b>Expenses</b>				
Conference Tithe	7,070	79,482	61,865	73,000
Council on Ministries	3,872	21,485	33,095	41,450
Staff Parish Relations	38,812	446,105	476,011	518,669
Office and Finance	1,604	17,316	19,491	21,400
Board of Trustees	7,702	163,483	185,491	198,100
<b>Total Expenses</b>	59,060	727,871	776,043	852,619
<b>Receipts Over Under Expenses</b>	-10,817	172,587	-172,978	-77,372



FIRST UNITED METHODIST  
CHURCH OF PALO ALTO

First Palo Alto United Methodist Church  
625 Hamilton Avenue Palo Alto, CA 94301-2016  
[www.FirstPaloAlto.com](http://www.FirstPaloAlto.com) | @firstpaloalto

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## FIRST PALO ALTO UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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