

## Council Corner

To borrow a slogan from the Toyota/Lexus Marketing Department, it has been “A December to Remember.” No, we didn’t surprise anyone in the congregation with a brand-new Lexus adorned with a four-foot red bow, but we did host a very special event here at St. Paul that was a gift to all who attended.

On Saturday, December 10, St. Paul hosted the Bach and Handel Chorale of Jim Thorpe in what was a beautiful and inspiring holiday concert. The Chorale, under the capable direction of founder Randall Douglas Perry, performed approximately fifteen musical pieces from a variety of composers, but the focus—as expected—was on the music of J.S. Bach and G.F. Handel. The audience of more than seventy-five thoroughly enjoyed the professional ensemble of approximately thirty voices as they demonstrated the joy of singing beautiful pieces of classical music with both precision and dedication. The response to the performance was very positive, and our Council has already discussed a return performance with some added events for December 2023. This performance was the Chorale’s first venture into Monroe County in their thirty-eight- year history.

On a personal note, Christmas 2022 was especially memorable for our family. Because of our family traditions, I am rarely at the St. Paul Christmas Eve service. Instead, we are in Bridgewater, New Jersey for a Christmas Eve gathering with my wife’s best friend from her high school days, Marianne (and her husband John). Anna and Marianne have been visiting on Christmas Eve for more than fifty years, and as we all grow older, each year’s visit becomes more precious. The time is coming when we will visit only during the daytime or perhaps not at all because of driving limitations. When that happens, I will be happy to join friends and family at St. Paul, but until then, I’m very fortunate to be able to enjoy the video of our service on the St. Paul website.

This year’s visit to Bridgewater included a few twists. The last time we gathered at Christmas was 2019, and Marianne and John’s daughter-in-law was admitted to the hospital on that Christmas Eve morning for an early baby delivery; Tessa was born on Christmas Day. In 2020 the family gathering was cancelled altogether because of Covid-19, and many local churches provided online services only (St. Paul was among them). Finally, in November 2021 we were all looking forward to

a Christmas reunion when Marianne's husband John was scheduled for a complicated heart bypass surgery just a week or so before Christmas. Thank God that the surgery was successful, but additional surgery may be necessary in the future.

As we gathered around the table with friends who are more like family members, three hours flew by very quickly. Marianne comes from an Italian family, and that means there was an endless stream of delicacies and delights for the adults and some special treats for their grandchildren as well. We arrived at 5:00 pm just as darkness was settling in, and we had agreed that we would stay for about three hours and then begin our 65-mile journey home. Just as we were getting ready to leave, Marianne brought out a special birthday cake for Tessa, who proudly told us that she was three years old now. In this moment, I think we all realized just how quickly time passes, how important family and friends become through the years, and how thankful we are to be able to celebrate Christmas each year in peace. As one of our holiday banners here at St. Paul suggests, *It's not about the presents. It's about the presence.*

To conclude this Christmas story, on Christmas Day afternoon, we had our customary Christmas brunch at our house with most of our immediate family in attendance. Our youngest, daughter Laura, had invited a young Ukrainian woman, Nadia, who fled Ukraine for her safety (and eventually came to New Jersey via a flight from Spain); Laura had met Nadia in the fall at a dinner event to raise funds for relief for Ukrainian families. She is from Bucha, near Kiev. (If the city Bucha sounds familiar, it may be because it was the first site of the horrible atrocities committed by the invading Russian soldiers, as covered on every major news network in the United States.) Nadia still does not know of the safety of some of her family members. Of course, we did not discuss all of this around the dinner table—the purpose of the day's festivities was to provide Nadia with an escape from the nightmare that shows no signs of going away soon. Still, while our day was filled with festivity and joy at seeing our reunited family, Nadia's day was marred by the knowledge of events in her homeland.

As you conclude your year with the consideration of possible end-of-the-year contributions to charities and relief organizations, you may wish to consider a donation to our own Lutheran World Relief, which has established an excellent

reputation for assisting those in need throughout the world, especially in Ukraine at this time. They are only a phone call or website click away, and they will be happy to accept your help.

Here are the Council highlights for the December 15 meeting. Council discussed and approved:

1. the finance report for November
2. an end-of-the-year donation to the Pocono Township Volunteer Fire Department
3. the use of Spies Hall on Monday and Thursday evenings for a Tang Soo Do karate school hosted by John Fagliarone (on a trial basis, January-June, to be reviewed)
4. a Red and White dinner for Girl Scout Troop 85 on March 11
5. a Red and White dinner for Boy Scout Troop 85 on February 26
6. a Red Cross Blood Drive on April 13 (coordinated by Linda Carrasquillo)
7. the Worship and Music Committee report for all Christmas season services
8. the use of Spies Hall as a “Legacy room” for St. Paul with community access

*On behalf of the Congregational Council, best wishes to you and your family for a healthy, productive, and spiritually fulfilling 2023!*

**Bill Below, Council President**