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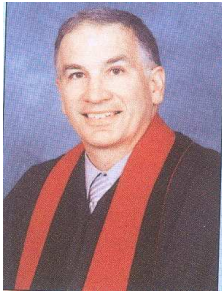
**THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

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## THOTS FROM TOM



From time to time, our church goes through a “growing pain”, a time when we experience a “glitch” in our community life together, where something occurs which people question, and a buzz is created in the church community. Such a growing pain, with

the resulting glitch and buzz, occurred on Sunday, December 23, during our morning worship service, which has resulted in the Board of Diaconate developing a policy statement about our worship service.

As has been the custom in the eleven plus years of my ministry with you, I read a list of prayer requests in the worship service on December 23, and one of those requests alarmed at least two people who were in attendance that Sunday. This was a prayer request that came to me in a phone call from a non-church member who lives down the street from me. This person was concerned about a housing development subdivision that would be built up against his property line, and he wanted prayers for himself as he coped with this disruption in his life, and for the whole town, as the town accepted another housing subdivision into its midst. I read the request, along with a few others, and invited the congregation to pray for those named in the prayer requests. I alluded to those requests, as I do every Sunday, in my prayer, by saying that “we pray for those named and those un-named who are heavy on our hearts, that they may find peace and comfort, and guidance for their lives.”

On January 1, it came to my attention through a phone call from Jerry Gerkey, our moderator, that there was a problem with this prayer request procedure. Jerry told me that numerous people were troubled and upset that I had shared the prayer request from the man who lived down

the street from me. Jerry sent me the text portion of an e-mail that he had received from someone, so that I could fully understand the context of this issue. The writer of the e-mail was troubled that I would inject “politics” into our worship service, and respectfully requested that I publicly apologize for reading this inappropriate prayer request, and that I be reprimanded by the Church Council. After reading the e-mail, it appeared to me that some saw this prayer request as an attempt on my part to make a political statement against new housing construction in East Hampton, something that I had no intention of doing.

As a result of this controversy, I temporarily stopped reading all prayer requests until the matter could be resolved by the Board of Diaconate at their January meeting. I stopped reading all prayer requests, and gave them to the Deacon assisting with our worship service to read, because I have never before intentionally censored or omitted reading a genuine prayer request made by a church member, church friend, or member of the community, and I did not want the new responsibility of deciding which prayer requests were appropriate to read and which ones were not. I firmly believe that if there is to be any decision-making regarding the appropriateness of prayer requests, or any censoring or editing of prayer requests, that this responsibility lies with you, the people of the church, and not with your pastor. In the past, I have read prayer requests from you asking for prayers for President George Bush as he prosecuted the war in Iraq. I have read your prayer requests asking for prayers for the store merchants being displaced from the East Hampton Mall, and I have read your prayer requests asking that God be with the town of East Hampton as it coped with the presence of a “big box” store (Shaw’s) coming to town.



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Most recently, I had a prayer request that asked that God be with the residents of East Hampton as we voted on the referendum for the public water system. All these prayers dealt with “political” issues, and I read them all, censuring or omitting none, and I must add, there were no complaints coming from the congregation when I read those requests.

Regarding the negative reaction to my reading the prayer request of December 23, the Diaconate faithfully and diligently wrestled with the issue, and they have printed in this Chatter their new policy regarding the reading of prayer requests in worship on Sunday mornings. With this policy in place, I am once again reading your prayer requests, and those requests given to us by individuals in the wider community, that ask that we pray for them.

I earnestly want to clarify a few things about my practice and understanding of ministry that hopefully will avoid another situation like that which occurred around the December 23 complaint. First and foremost, I would never push a particular political agenda or point of view in the context of prayer, at least not intentionally. I have shared prayers that call for the laying down of weapons and arms, and a ceasing of war, and the bending of swords into plowshares, etc., which may appear to be political, but which are actually quite biblical. At his very essence, Christ is referred to as the “Prince of Peace,” and while we might debate forever about the various ways of achieving peace, including the point of view which advocates for the occasional necessity of perhaps having a justifiable war in order to achieve peace, at its core basis, our faith teaches peace-making over war-making.

Secondly, if I do decide to talk about “political” subjects, it will be in the context of a sermon that is grounded in the scripture reading for the day, where the scripture offers up the possibility of embracing some alternate ways of thinking about something. While I fully appreciate that sermons where I have come out strongly on issues deemed “political” have been offensive to some, I have

written these sermons after having done a thorough examination of the lectionary scripture for the day, so as to have an appropriate biblical context for the sermon, and I do it knowing that the privilege of freedom of the pulpit is granted to me by the church. I refer you to our church bylaws, which state in [Article XVIII, “The Office of Pastor”](#), section 1, “The Pastor shall be called to be the spiritual leader of the congregation, fulfilling the responsibilities of pastor and prophet, teacher and counselor, with individual persons and the organization of the Church, seeking to interpret the word of God for each day and age. He/she shall be allowed the freedom of being a person of action in his/her own right and *shall be allowed to speak the truth in love as his/her conscience dictates* for the primary purpose of enabling the laity to grow in the use of their God-given gifts in carrying out the ministry of the Church in the world.” (The italics are mine.)

Thirdly, I have heard occasional concerns that the mentioning of “political” things in worship is a violation of the separation of church and state, an issue which was alluded to in the concerns expressed to me about the prayer request that I read in worship on December 23. The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States reads, “*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*” (Again, the italics are mine.) This amendment says nothing about the inappropriateness of religious institutions criticizing government or mentioning politics in worship. It does not prohibit any church or its members lobbying for political or governmental change. It is entirely appropriate, when times call for it, for “politics” to be brought into the church. In the colonial era, militia were recruited to serve in the Revolutionary War by clergy who were preaching that the colonies be liberated from England, in a “holy war”, there being no other visible or viable alternative to throw-

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ing off the tyrannical rule of Great Britain, and many of those clergy led those militia into battle and lost their lives doing so. Those were the days when the pastor of the local New England church was charged with preaching the gospel, collecting taxes, and raising and maintaining the local militia!

The call to end slavery in the mid 1800's, and the abolitionist movement, was a very contentious political issue in that time, and the impetus for abolitionism came largely from pulpits in New England.

Many clergy in the 1960's led members of their churches from New England down into the Deep South to participate in Civil Rights marches and voter registration drives, and stood up in their pulpits and spoke out against segregation, and in favor of African-American voter registration efforts.

Apartheid in South Africa was ended by the direct influence of churches in South Africa and around the world, where pastors and other church leaders stood with those who were being discriminated against, and railed against apartheid from their church's pulpits, often at the expense of their own personal safety and freedom.

In late January, I saw news footage of Barak Obama, a United States Senator, a candidate for president, and a twenty-year member of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois, *preaching from the pulpit* in a South Carolina church! He was not advocating in his position as a United States Senator that those congregants adhere to a specific type of religion. Rather, he was talking "*politics!*" In church!

Lest we forget, Jesus himself was a political figure. His teachings threatened to upset the established political power base of the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and the elders in the Temple. The Sanhedrin shrewdly realized that the best way to eliminate Jesus from their midst was to convince Pontius Pilate that Jesus' activities were not so much *religious* as they were *political*, because Jesus was advocating obedience to a kingdom which was other than Caesar's, a treasonous as well as a blasphemous act.

mous act.

Regarding my treatment of controversial, even "political" subjects, I want to assure you that if and when I ever bring forth a controversial issue before you in a sermon, I will continue my practice of doing this only after paying faithful, due diligence to the scriptures, and after much prayerful reflection, and scouring of my conscience and call to serve God as your pastor. I will continue my practice of doing this advisably, with integrity, mindful of the privilege that you have extended to me to serve as pastor of the Congregational Church of East Hampton. It is not a privilege that I have ever intentionally abused, nor is it one that I intentionally anticipate abusing in the future. Serving as a pastor is a sacred and honored calling, which requires that it be discharged prayerfully, with humility, integrity, and honor. It is a position that calls for the making of hard and sometimes difficult decisions, which I have always tried to make conscientiously with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the sensibilities of the congregation. I look forward to us continuing to labor together, to bring forth the Gospel, or Good News of Jesus Christ, and I pledge to continue, as I was even on December 23, to be diligent in the discharge of my calling as your pastor.

Faithfully,

Tom

## MUSIC

### CLOTHING, LINENS AND BOOK SALE

The Clothing, Linens and Book Sale will be held on Saturday, February 23 from 9-2. Items in good condition can be placed on the stage February 1-16. Volunteers are needed to help sort items on Wed - Fri evenings the week of the sale and selling items the day of the sale. Contact Whitney Fielding for more information.



### **Y2K Calendar**

Wednesday February 6  
5:30-6:45 p.m.

Bring \$3 for pizza! Friends Welcome

### **BOWLING**

at East Hampton Lanes  
Wednesday February 20  
4:00-5:30

Meet at the lanes  
(call Jill if you need a ride)  
\$10 for bowling and shoes  
Bring \$\$ for snacks  
Friends welcome!

### **WOMEN'S POTLUCK**

Monday February 4  
at the home of  
Nancy Dolde

10 Bevin Blvd 267-6195

Bring a dish to share and join  
us for fellowship. This is a great informal  
way to  
meet new people or catch up with friends  
and-  
we always have an incredible meal!

### **PRAYER CIRCLE**

Prayer is our intentional connection with God.  
Prayer allows us to share our hopes, our needs, to  
offer thanks, ask for guidance and comfort as we

travel through life. We have started a new time of prayer that hopefully you will embrace. At 9:45 on Sunday mornings we gather in the library (2<sup>nd</sup> floor), to share a time of prayer before joining our church family for worship.

A lay leader will be present each week to offer a gathering prayer and a time of silent prayer. Those present will have the chance to share their personal prayer concerns. You may have someone in your life needing to be touched by the power of prayer. Praying in a small group can bring a feeling of oneness with God. Being present for others can help us sense how connected we are when we ask God to be with us. Bring your prayers to our circle. Let them be lifted up by others sharing the moment with you.

### **KUDOS KORNER**

Thanks to Deb Robinson for providing a Helping Hands ride last month. And to Liz Whitty for taking charge of removing an unwanted "church mouse" from it's point of capture!

### **SEEDS OF HOPE UPDATE**

\*\*Thanks to everyone that enjoyed our Pre-Souper Bowl lunch that followed the Annual meeting.

\*\*Thanks to everyone that purchased Little Caesar's Pizza Kits and Cookie Dough. The pick up date is Tuesday February 12 from 5:00-6:30 p.m.

\*\*Butter Braid Breads will be on sale February 17 until March 2<sup>nd</sup> with pick up on Sunday March 16- in time for serving on Easter! Stop by the table in Fellowship Hall for a sample on February 17<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*As of January we have collected \$60,000 worth of Shaw's receipts to be redeemed for \$564! Wow! Please bring in your receipts of \$30 and up and place them in the box on the Seeds of Hope table. By purchasing Shaw's scrip cards and then bringing in your receipts we are earning money twice on food you use everyday anyway!

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\*\*Next Seeds of Hope meeting is February 3 at 11:30 in the lounge.

## ADULT FELLOWSHIP “Game Night” at a variety of host homes 7:00 pm Saturday February 16

Do you enjoy playing cards, board games, team challenge games and more? We're organizing our first Game Night (adults only, singles and couples) and you're invited to participate!

Here's how it works: sign up in Fellowship Hall on the Church Life bulletin board. Once all those interested have signed up (2/12 deadline) we will contact you to let you know who your host for the night will be. (Sign up sheet also has a place to check if you are interested in hosting up to 6 people). On Saturday February 16 simply arrive at your host home with a munchie food to share. Enjoy an evening of getting to know some folks and playing some fun games, chosen by the host. Talk to Jill Walker for more information. Sponsored by the Parish Life and Development Committee.

## THANK YOU LETTER

January 17, 2008

The Reverend Tom Kennedy  
Congregational Church of East Hampton  
Main Street  
P.O. Box 237  
East Hampton, CT 06424

Dear Reverend Kennedy,

Thank you for your additional gift to Middlesex Hospital. We are in receipt of a check for \$100.00 to support the Pastoral Services Program at Middlesex Hospital. Your generosity is sincerely appreci-

ated.

Spirituality is an essential component to one's health and well-being and we are grateful for the collaborative relationship we have with the local faith communities to ensure timely and effective delivery of pastoral services to those in need. Your partnership is vital in carrying out this important ministry.

As an expression of our gratitude for your giving this year, we are pleased to list the Congregational Church of East Hampton as an Associate in the Crescent Society. As a member, the Congregational Church of East Hampton is among our most distinguished contributors.

On behalf of Chaplain Dennis McCann and those who will benefit from the program, thank you for your continued support of the Pastoral Services Program.

Sincerely,

Bobbie Fergione  
Director of Philanthropy

## DEATHS

Our church family extends our love and sympathy to the family and friends of:

**Frederick Everett, Sr.**, who died January 7, 2008, husband of Anne Everett;  
**Peter Berwick**, who died January 14, 2008, father of Helen Curylo.

## COSA NEWS

### Blood Drive

Donate Blood . . . The gift of life!



Every day in Connecticut, hundred of patients rely on donated blood for the treatments they need to improve – or save – their lives. Together, Red Cross workers and blood drive sponsors work every day to make sure blood is available when patients need it.

Donated blood is used to treat accident and burn victims . . . premature babies and their mothers . . . surgery patients . . . people struggling with sickle cell disease . . . and cancer patients receiving chemotherapy, to name just a few.

**Amazingly, each person who gives blood can help to improve, and even save, the lives of up to three people every time they donate!**

The American Red Cross, Connecticut Blood Services Region is the state's primary provider of blood. As such, they have the critical mission of providing safe and adequate blood supply for patients at the state's 31 transfusing hospitals. Amidst today's medical advances and technological miracles, there remains only one source of this precious gift of life: generous volunteer blood donors. In order to meet the constant demand for blood, they must collect about 600 pints of blood every weekday!

Our church is sponsoring a Red Cross Blood drive on **Saturday, February 16<sup>th</sup>. Become a donor!** Sign up in Fellowship Hall during coffee hour, or call Darlene at 267-1311 to schedule an appointment,

## Gifts of the Heart

We are collecting small items to put together Health kits for Church World service to distribute. In the face of natural disasters, violence, or grinding poverty, Health Kits can mean the difference between sickness and health for struggling families. Items we are looking for are as follows:

Hand Towel  
Wash Cloth  
Wide Tooth Comb  
Nail Clippers  
Bar Soap  
Toothbrush  
Band-Aids

Look for the Gift of the Heart board; take a tag or two and purchase and return the items to Fellowship hall by March 2<sup>nd</sup>. If you would like to help but can't find the time to shop, you can make a donation and the money will be used to purchase any additional items that we may need or for shipping the kits to the families in need.

## DEACONS

The Board of Deacons would like to make a policy statement regarding prayer requests. A concern was raised regarding Reverend Kennedy's reading of a prayer request at a service a few week's ago. This concern was brought forward to the Board of Deacons to discuss and resolve. At the January 13th meeting of the Board of Deacons, the Diaconate discussed this concern and agreed that we should initiate the following policy:

It is most appropriate that the Pastor, as spiritual leader of the church, read and offer the prayer requests submitted to him.

Prayer requests will not be edited.

The purpose of a prayer request lifted up by the pastor, is to invite the worshipping community to join in prayer for those in need.

It is up to each of us as individuals, to consider the requests and decide whether or not to pray for the concerns that have been raised.

Prayer is a personal conversation between you and God and public prayer can be a catalyst for community intercession and connection.

If you have any questions or comments on this policy, please contact a member of the Board of Deacons.