



ITHACA

UUU Connections

2025/2026 Issue No. 4

December 2025

Our Spiritual Journey

In her piece **Hope Lingers On** Lissa Schneckenburger wrote the words:

*I will not hate, and I will not fear
In our darkest hour, hope lingers here*

As we move toward the Winter Solstice and the longest night of the year, our literal darkest hour, hope still lingers here. It lingers in the pale light of the moon and the glistening brightness of the snow. It lingers in the wind whispering through bare branches. It lingers in the fires lit to hold and capture the light, waiting for the return of the sun. It lingers in the flames of the menorah and our own chalice. And it lingers inside of each of us, reminding us not to give in to fear, or hate, that even now, in our darkest hour, hope remains.

Hope beckons us to action. It reminds us that the future is not written in stone, and even if it was, stone can be broken. Another world is possible, but not promised, and hope offers us an avenue to realizing a more just and equitable future.

The winter holidays each offer their own stories of hope. The ancient tale of a child born, the miracle of oil burning long past the time it should have run out, the return of the light in the darkness. In each of these stories the people involved hope for something impossible, and yet it is through their actions that the miracle is made real. Someone recently said to me that in the Hebrew story of Hanukkah the true miracle isn't that the oil lasted for eight days, but that the people lit the flame in the first place.

What impossible flame will you light? What miracle do you yearn for, hope for, and what first step will you take to help that possibility emerge even as you acknowledge that none of us have any idea what the future will hold?

As the darkness settles upon us, may we remember that hope is not a promise but a practice. It lives in the choices we make, the risks we take, and the small courage of beginning. May we meet the coming days willing to strike a match, to tend a fragile spark, and to trust that even the smallest flame can offer a beacon of hope in the darkness.

Emily Richards, Director of Congregational Life

Sunday Celebration at 10:30 am in the Sanctuary.

Live-streamed on our YouTube channel.

[https://www.youtube.com/
@FirstUnitarianSocietyofIthaca/streams](https://www.youtube.com/@FirstUnitarianSocietyofIthaca/streams)

*Nursery childcare and Religious Exploration
classes for children.*

Winter Solstice and Yule Celebration

Sunday, December 21st at 5:30 pm, FUSIT Annex

Please join us for a celebration of the longest night and the return of the sun with ritual, light, and song. All who attend will be offered the opportunity to participate and everyone is invited to bring an LED candle if you have one. All ages welcome.

Dish to pass to follow.

Religious Exploration News

For information about Religious Exploration, please contact Madeline Natale at dre@uuithaca.org

Greetings from the Director of Religious Exploration

Our theme for the month of December is "Choosing Hope". In a time of so much uncertainty, we call upon hope to carry us, connect us, and remind us of the power of the people.

A prayer from Rebekah Savage,

"Spirit of Life and Love, may we perceive the needs that arise around us like a clarion call of love. May we recall with audacious hope the words of Martin Luther: 'Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.'"

With Love and Gratitude, Madeline

December Classroom Sundays

This month the elementary aged children will explore our monthly theme "Choosing Hope" through stories, activities, crafts, and games.

Middle School will begin to explore their Unitarian Universalist Values through the lens of other faith traditions using the "Crossing Paths" Curriculum.

Youth who are in *High School* participate in a Connection Circle, exploring various spiritual practices and the meaning of intentional community.

Please register your children below for the 2025-2026 Religious Exploration program! This information helps us to plan for the upcoming year.

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd25nAdfKS-DrbPQF2Xum7a_oqgzj7Ep2hOcAWcnmRxWmt3A/viewform?usp=header

Volunteer Involvement

We have so much appreciation for all of the community members who have volunteered to enrich our community through participating in our Religious Exploration programming. Volunteering for the RE program is a gift of welcome that we all have to give and I hope you will consider joining our amazing team of volunteers. This important programming can only happen with the support of the entire community.

As we begin to shift into the winter months, it is important to begin collecting new RE volunteers to join the kind and nurturing team of RE Teachers. Classrooms run twice a month for all of the 5 classrooms. We have substitutes available to cover any Sunday that you might not be available for and the schedule is already made, making it much easier for all of us to plan ahead! If you're new to Unitarian Universalism, volunteering is a great way to learn more about our values!

2025-2026 RE Classroom Schedule

We are looking for an RE team to support existing and new RE programming. If you are a parent or caregiver, a long time UU, or new to it all, we invite you to join. Meetings will take place once a week either in person or online. RE Team members may help with classroom set up and clean up, brainstorming ways to continue to engage and serve FUSIT families, maintain colorful and comfortable classrooms, and recruit new volunteers. Contact Madeline if you're interested.

2025-2026 Religious Exploration Engagement Sign Up

Please join our [First UU Ithaca Parents Facebook Group](#)!

Religious Exploration Schedule for December

December 7 - Classroom Sunday

December 14 - Creative Sunday, All ages Ugly Sweater Party

December 21 - No Rehearsal Holiday Pageant

December 28 - No RE programming, Nursery is closed

Religious Exploration Wishlist

If you are looking to support the RE program and would like to purchase a gift, here is a list of items that would be useful and deeply appreciated.

[RE Wishlist](#)

December Religious Exploration Events

Ugly Sweater Party

Sunday, **December 14**, during RE

Join us in RE to upcycle an old sweater into the ugly sweater of your dreams! This is a bring your own sweater event. If you do not have a sweater to upcycle and can not obtain one, please email Madeline with the sizes needed. Madeline will be thrifting all ugly sweaters so please let her know no later than December 10th. After the 10th, we can not guarantee we will have a sweater for you. We are taking donations of tinsel, bells, plastic ornaments, twinkle lights, fabric, pom poms and felt. Everyone is welcome to this event, bring a friend or family member to join in the silliness!

Coat and Gift Exchange

Saturday, December 13, 10 am-1 pm

Join us on December 13th for a winter gear and gift exchange in the parlor. Items must be in good condition, clean with no rips or tears. You may drop things off ahead of time, items can be placed in the middle elementary classroom. If you are hoping to drop off on a day other than Sunday, please email Madeline.

Cooking Decorating

Sunday, **December 21**, after service

Join us for cookie decorating fun after the No Rehearsal Holiday Pageant. We would be happy to accept donations of homemade frosting and sprinkles and we need sugar cookie bakers, please email Madeline if you can help!

Connection Circle for Parents - Childcare Provided

Sunday, **January 18**, 12 pm-1 pm

Sophia Lyon Fahs Room

Our Connection Circle for individuals who are actively parenting will begin meeting again this month. Gatherings will take place monthly on the third Sunday of the month from 12 pm-1 pm, with childcare available. We invite you to join us for an opportunity for fellowship and community within our larger First UU community, in a safe, confidential and nurturing environment.

Music for Little People

Wednesday, **December 17**

12 pm-12:45 pm, Arch Room

Share in the joy of music in this class which is free and open to the public. Children 0-5 and their caregivers are welcome to meet us in the Arch Room each month. Sing, play, dance, explore instruments, and connect through music.

DECEMBER

Worship Services

The theme for December is "Choosing Hope" and the Celebrations Team is looking forward to speakers whose voices can help us to explore this theme as individuals and as a community.

Sunday, December 7, "The Work of Hope" Rev. Janet Shortall

The Feminist theologian Dorothee Sölle once said that hope is "a refusal to accept the world as it is." Not a naïve wish, but a sacred defiance. Hope says no to cruelty and indifference, and yes to the slow, holy work of change. It is the power that joins imagination to action - faith to the future.
Music by Ana Florencia

Sunday, December 14, "Hope Often Chooses Us" Rev. Peaches Gillette

It seems that we don't have to beg and call on hope. Even at the end of our days, it appears, disguised in memories of loving and being loved.
Music by Roberta Crawford, viola

Sunday, December 21, No Rehearsal Pageant, Emily Richards, CRE

This all-ages service is filled with the wonder of the holidays. Come and take on the role of a child born, the star above, a menorah, yule log, a sheep or donkey, one of our choir of angels, or even one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa. Together we will create a joyful tale of the miracles of the season. Costumes are provided and cookie decorating to follow.
Music by Laura Ramos

Wednesday, December 23, Candlelight Christmas Services, Sage Chapel,

5:00 pm and 7:30 pm, Emily Richards, CRE

We continue our Christmas tradition of a holiday worship service for everyone in the Ithaca community at Sage Chapel on Cornell's campus. A Christmas celebration with music, story, and candlelight, where we explore ancient tales of miracles followed by hardship and perseverance that can inspire hope within us all.

Music by UU Choir

Sunday, December 28, "Reflections on the New Year and Beginning Again"

Magdalen Lindeberg

Music by Cynthia Riggan, cello, and Myra Kovary, harp

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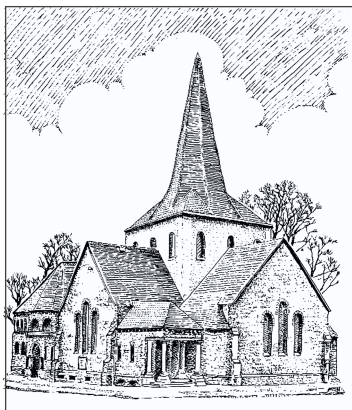
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**First Unitarian is a UUA-recognized (LGBTQ)
Welcoming Congregation**

The First Unitarian Society of Ithaca
306 North Aurora Street
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Visit our Website and get
your newsletter:
www.uuithaca.org

Possible Ponderings

The theme for December is Choosing Hope.

*Possible Ponderings is an offering of ways you might consider engaging more deeply with the theme or reflecting on the ways the idea of **Choosing Hope** shows up in your life.*

December 1-6: If hope could speak, what do you think it would most want to say to you now?

December 7-13: If you could magically infect someone with hope, who would it be and why?

December 14-20: Might life be inviting you to bring an old hope back to life?

December 21-27: We all carry within ourselves the hopes and fears of those we've loved. Is it time to put one of those down so you can make your path your own?

December 28-31: Who carries hope for you when the weariness of the world wears you down? Who needs *you* to carry hope for them?



Holiday Poinsettias

Purchase a poinsettia to honor someone in your life or the memory of someone special.

Purchasing a poinsettia plant adds festive color to the sanctuary and brings joy to fellow congregants. After service on December 21, you are welcome to bring your plant(s) to another congregant as a gesture of community or take it home to add holiday cheer for your family. Cost is \$10 per plant. A list of individuals honored in this way will be listed in the order of service on December 21.

Orders will be accepted until **December 15** or until we sell out.

To order your poinsettia click here: [Poinsettia orders](#)

Current Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteering is a great way to meet others in the First Unitarian Community and give back at the same time! Current Volunteer Opportunities can be found here: <https://unitarian.ithaca.ny.us/index.php/connection/volunteer/>

FUSIT Listserv

If you would like to be added to the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca listserv, please fill out the form at <https://fusit.breezechms.com/form/oe48af>. If you have any questions, email Michelle at office@uuithaca.org.

Social Justice

We hope you will consider joining us in our social justice efforts and encourage you to reach out and learn more about how you can get involved. Find more information about various teams on our website.

Side with Love and Shared Plate

Teams, Committees, and Small Groups are invited to sponsor a month for our Side with Love and Shared Plate Collections. The group would be responsible for choosing the organization, communicating with that organization about needed items for Side with Love, delivering goods, and communicating any pertinent information to Michelle and Loretta for the Newsletter, Weekly Announce, and Order of Service.

This is a wonderful opportunity to lift up and support local or national organizations that do work that is meaningful to your team or group. Sign up information can be found below.

Side With Love and Shared Plate 2025-2026

For the month of December, FUSIT's Babies First program will be the recipient of the Shared Plate and the Side with Love collection. Items to be collected every Sunday in December will include:

Newborn diapers, wipes, nursing pads,
Pack 'n play sheets, pacifiers, receiving blankets,
newborn socks, newborn mittens, burp cloths, bibs,
and wash cloths.

Democracy Circle Meets on the Second Sunday

The 8th Principle Action Ministry (8PAM) has been gathering on the second Sunday of each month as a Democracy Circle to share ideas and companionship, engage with one another and educate ourselves and each other during this turbulent time in our history.

We'll meet Sunday, **December 14th** at noon in the Sophia Lyon Fahs Room.

We discuss actions in which we can engage and listen to one another. Any and all are welcome, whether you attend once or often. Please bring your suggestions, ideas and thoughts. Initially small groups were formed to focus on various areas including Engaging with Others, Engaging with the Community, Communication and Action and Constitution Study. We continue to evolve with our ideas and actions.

The Environmental Interest Circle

The Environmental Interest Circle meets to discuss/exchange ideas and actions that further sustainable living for each one of us, for the FUSIT congregation, and for our congregations' role in the greater community. We will meet on **December 3** at 7 pm in the Parlor and over Zoom, and continue to meet every first Wednesday of the month.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://uso2web.zoom.us/j/81644753524?pwd=SDBQaTN5eIM3ejltbGdJcGhPa3QxQT09>

Meeting ID: 816 4475 3524 Passcode: 894885

Joys and Sorrows

Joys and Sorrows are shared during Sunday Service. Please send notices to the team at joysandsorrows@uuithaca.org. When considering what is shared in Joys and Sorrows, please note, these services are live streamed and available to the public on our YouTube Channel.

—Our congratulations go out to Tim Ball Lydia Dempsey on the birth of their daughter Hazel Nora Ball Dempsey, born on November 5. There is a Meal Train for the family here: <https://www.mealtrain.com/trains/dongov/>

Appreciations

As we nurture a culture of appreciation at FUSIT, let's sing praises to the many people who help make our community the wonderful place it is. Who here at First Unitarian Society of Ithaca have you noticed doing something above and beyond, who has been a quiet unsung hero, or who is doing an exceptional job? It can be a member or staff or friend to our community. Send your submissions to joysandsorrows@uuithaca.org.

—Many thanks to all the wonderful volunteers who helped make the LIVE Service Auction in October such a huge success! This fun community building event made over \$13,000 towards the operating budget and provided an evening of great food and exciting bidding. A round of applause goes out to all the Sunday announcers, publicity promoters, dessert makers, dinner cooks, servers, set up and clean up crews, greeters, bartenders, auctioneers, recorders, runners, computer inputers and cashiers. And an enormous amount of gratitude to all those who donated their amazing items and all those who bid so generously on them.



Care Team

The Care Team provides pastoral care and support for congregants who are going through challenging times. If you or any member or close friend of FUSIT need some assistance, contact Kathy Hopkins at 607-582-3025 or Care@uuithaca.org.

Pastoral Care Emergencies

Please contact Rev. Janet Shortall at pastoralcare@uuithaca.org or 607-218-2088.

Care Café - December 14th and 28th

Thank you for joining us for Care Café, held every other Sunday during the church year from 12:00 -1:30 in the Library after service and coffee hour.

The conversations we share during Care Café are rich, honest, and designed to offer meaningful insights about our journey through life together. The diverse personalities and perspectives we bring only deepen our understanding of how each of us navigates the challenges and joys we encounter. I hope to have you with us.

As we look ahead, here are upcoming dates:

December 14th and 28th	March 8th, and 22nd
January 11th and 25th	April 5th, 19th
February 8th and 22nd	May 3rd, 17th, and 31st

Rev. Peaches Gillette



Red Cross Blood Drive

Thursday, December 11th, 1-6:00 pm in the Parlor

Message from the Board of Trustees -

At the last Board of Trustees (BoT) meeting, we spent a lot of time on gratitude. Not because it's the Thanksgiving season, but genuinely because we were all feeling a profound sense of appreciation for this congregation, our staff, and all of the volunteers that come together to lead us.

We have all probably noticed how it's hard to find a seat on Sunday mornings and you're sitting a little closer to your pew neighbor. Attendance at our services is up, giving us both the validation that we're offering something that the community needs, as well as a greater sense of connection, belonging, and purpose. Also, in the last month, the generosity and engagement of this congregation, as well as the hard work of volunteers to pull off an epic auction night, has closed our budget deficit. This allowed BoT to gladly avoid having to make budget cuts that would affect our staff and programs.

We're also working in greater unity this year as part of our Annual Action Priorities (AAPs). As a reminder, our AAPs are annual congregational goals that were set over the summer at an All Hands meeting involving staff, leadership, and volunteers. We all agreed to work collectively on our most relevant needs: *Living our Fiscal Reality*, *Increasing Relevance and UU Values Visibility Within Our Programming*, and *Strengthening Congregational Ownership*. And this wasn't just something we said we'd do. Members of our staff, leadership, and teams have spent the last month reflecting deeply on how they can advance those AAPs in their work and reporting out. Their ideas - *which have ranged from ways to increase revenue and reduce costs through bartering, to encouraging discussions about UU values in services and strengthening outreach, to improving membership pathways and tapping into the unique gifts and talents of our congregants* - are creative, powerful, and actionable. Many of these are already underway and benefitting our growth.

Like I said, the feeling of shared purpose, growth, and connection was palpable at our meeting last night, and we hope that you're feeling it too. If you're not, let us know, and get involved in making FUSIT a place that gives you that feeling. We love you.

Megan McCormick, President

December Board of Trustees Meeting

The Board is now meeting on the third Wednesday of the month and will meet on **December 17**, at 6:30 pm. Board meetings are a hybrid format, taking place in the Parlor and through Zoom.

All FUSIT members are invited to attend these meetings. Ten minutes are set aside at the beginning of the meeting for congregation feedback. Please join us! Join Zoom Meeting:
<https://uso2web.zoom.us/j/88258776990pwd=VUxUTUMraVZDUFRQzQndSVFRraFlPdz09>

Meeting ID: 882 5877 6990 Passcode: 602445

Stay Connected

Curious about events and happenings at First Unitarian Society of Ithaca? Check out our Facebook page and stay current with what's going on in the community!

[First Unitarian Society of Ithaca Facebook Page](#)

Soul Matters Material for December

The Soul Matters theme for December is *Choosing Hope*. This month's packet includes a few short readings, spiritual exercises, and discussion questions for you to consider. The material can be found at:
<https://tinyurl.com/SoulMattersDec2025>

Office Hours

For the month of December, Michelle will be in the office Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays and working remotely on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. If you have in person office business, please send an email to office@uuithaca.org to make an appointment.

Holiday Closing

*The office will be closed
December 24-January 2
and will reopen January 5.*

Our Mission

Our mission is to create connection,
find inspiration and engage the world.
Connect. Inspire. Engage.

FUSIT Finances #7 Expense Comparison

This column has been reporting on our financial condition. I'm sure many of you are asking how our expenses compare with similar entities. Last Fall Rev. Lydia shared that of the 58 NYS congregations, FUSIT was 6th in number of members, 11th in annual operating expense budget, 5th in pledge dollars, 5th in RE enrollment, and 10th in endowment balance. This indicates we have reasonable expenses.

But there's more: We have 270 members, and our 25-26 expense budget is \$483,000 which calculates a cost/member of \$1800.

The UUA website states: For our current year, congregations who spent at least \$2,156 per member on operating expenditures are considered High Expense Ratio congregations.

Using these two data points: 6th in NYS membership and 11th in expenses and 83% of the cut off for high expense UUA congregations, my conclusion is that our expenses are reasonable for the size of our community.

Don Barber, Treasurer, Board of Trustees



LGBTQ+ Group Meets Monthly

This Small Group is especially for FUSIT's LGBTQ+ community and meets monthly. ***All who identify on the LGBTQ+ continuum are welcome.***

Come enjoy this opportunity for fellowship and community within our larger FUSIT community, in a safe, confidential and nurturing environment. Please reach out to Madeline at dre@uuithaca.org for more information.

UUs of Color

We invite people of color (having African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, Middle Eastern, Native American, Pacific Islander identities) to gather with us. Our purpose is to commune with one another, amplify our voices, and promote diversity in our UU community. Activities may include having meals together, welcoming new POC into the congregation, planning a service, collaborating with other groups at (or beyond) FUSIT, and more. We meet the first Monday of the month at 6:00 pm and around meaningful events. Please contact poc@uuithaca.org for more information.

Women's Circle Meets on December 22

Women's Circle usually meets via Zoom on the 4th Monday of the month from 7-8:30 pm. All who identify as women are welcome. This is a drop-in group, so no need to sign up; just come. Anyone is welcome to bring a poem or a reading. For information or questions contact Nancy Miller at ananda7733@gmail.com or 607-539-7733.

Zoom Link: <https://uso2web.zoom.us/j/82169260621?pwd=ZDkyaRKMmo2czhqSWgtSVhmbGFqdzo9>
Meeting ID: 821 6926 0621. Passcode: 015515



December 21, 2025

On the winter solstice, the Northern Hemisphere experiences the shortest day and longest night of the year because its pole is tilted farthest from the sun. This astronomical event marks the official start of winter in the Northern Hemisphere, and the days begin to get longer after this point.

Adult RE

Building a Better World

Explore a Better world through the table top role-playing game curriculum "Building a Better World". This RPG group will meet in room 213 at 2 pm on **December 7th**. Reach out to Mike Timonin (Mike.timonin@gmail.com) if you have any questions.

Pub Theology

Tuesday, **December 16**, 6:30 pm

Liquid State Brewing, 620 W. Green Street, Ithaca

Join us at Liquid State Brewing for an evening of good fellowship and conversation at our favorite local brewery (owned by FUSIT members!). We will gather at 6:30 pm and reflect together on our monthly theme of *Choosing Hope*. Non-beer and non-alcoholic drinks options available! 21 and over please. Bring your friends! Hope to see you there! Pub Theology will meet on the third Tuesday in December due to the winter holidays.

Join the Choir!

The FUSIT CHOIR is growing! Come join us. We rehearse in the church Annex on Thursdays (except holidays) from 7-8:30 pm.

Come sing for the Sage Chapel Candlelight service choir on **December 23!** Rehearsals are underway. Contact Jayne for more info and to register at choir@uuithaca.org.

Expanding Community

For many this continues to be a time of increased feelings of isolation and being cut off from others. We always welcome new members to our community and faith and hope to provide a safe space of connection and learning for all. Please continue to invite any and all people that you know that you believe could find meaning by exploring what the Unitarian Universalist faith can offer.

Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that our church is located on land that is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee People and the Cayuga Nation. Their presence is imbued in these lakes, valleys, gorges, and hills. May we nurture our relationship with our Haudenosaunee neighbors, and our shared responsibilities to this Place of their homelands where we mutually reside.

What is Code Blue?

Code Blue is a New York State-mandated emergency program that ensures overnight shelter during freezing conditions

Tompkins County has approved and signed a contract with Volunteers of America Upstate New York to run its Code Blue shelter in Ithaca, located at 227 Cherry Street. They are providing well-trained, experienced staff for 24/7 coverage and security, including weekends, evenings, and overnight. The shelter operates nightly during freezing temperatures from 4 p.m. to 8 a.m., continuing through April 15.

Crucial support is provided by numerous local non-profit organizations, churches, and businesses who help prepare and deliver meals for the residents.

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca is one of the organizations actively involved in the effort to provide dinners for the shelter. FUSIT Code Blue dinner organizers are Sara Catterall, Jackie Jablonski, Loretta Heimbuch, and Sue Rakow. Contact any of us if you would like to help with shopping, food prep, meal delivery, or would like to donate funds towards the ingredients for the meals. Our first dinner is scheduled for December 3 and we'll be providing dinners twice monthly going forward. There will be a donation basket in the parlor for contributions on the first and third Sundays.

For any questions about Code Blue, please contact Tompkins County Department of Social Services.

"Hope is the thing with feathers—that perches in the soul—and sings the tune without the words—and never stops at all"—Emily Dickinson.



RE Team: Let's work together to support families with kids!

We are forming an RE Team for FUSIT. This Team is open to anyone - currently parenting or not - who wants to support children and youth members of FUSIT, and to keep our RE work thriving. You can contribute a little or a lot - whatever works for you. We need everything from ideas to actual labor to get events off the ground.

Meetings will be held weekly, and members can come however often works for them.

Join us to keep RE alive & thriving for your young ones, and to build the next generation of UUs doing good in our congregation and our community. If you are interested please email Madeline at dre@uuithaca.org.

Community Candlelight Christmas Services



Sage Chapel, Cornell campus

Tuesday, December 23, 5:00 pm and 7:30 pm

Featured speaker Emily Richards, CRE

Our 65 voice choir has gathered from all corners of the Ithaca community to sing for both services. Special music by Russ Posegate, organ; Cynthia Riggin, cello, and Laura Ramos, flute. In addition to a Gregorian Chant and an African American spiritual, the choir will sing the traditional *O Holy Night* featuring harp and a special guest young soloist.



***Music.
Story.
Candlelight.
Miracle.***