

**Sabbatical Soundbite #5:  
How does a sabbatical help the church?**

On its own a sabbatical doesn't help the church.

On its own, a sabbatical simply gives a minister a break from the "24/7" nature of the position (even when it is a paid part time position a minister is "on" 24/7) and the church gets a break from the minister for that 3 months. On its own a sabbatical doesn't help a church and in fact, some churches will fail... even to the point of closing their doors... after the sabbatical time ends.

We do not want that to happen to our church. So, the congregation voted to apply for a sabbatical grant to increase our chance of having a successful sabbatical experience. The sabbatical team was formed to plan for, and manage, a sabbatical time that would be both renewing and spiritually fulfilling for all who participate. They created a theologically sound and thematically strong grant proposal that provides renewal activities for the church consistent with Barb's Sacred Journey theme. Based on the strength of our proposal, we were awarded "The Grant" from CTS and Lilly Corporation.

It provides nearly \$15,000 for the churches use, completely eliminating the financial stress that can come with a sabbatical. We continue to cover Pastor Barb's salary (about \$6600, for 1/4th of the year) per our budget. But, the grant will cover the additional money it would cost for a supply pastor to lead us in worship, provide pastoral care and assist with other pastoral duties during Barb's absence. Some churches cover the 3 months of worship and pastoral care with lay members of the congregation alone, both to save money and for the opportunity for spiritual growth. We chose a mix of those solutions. We chose to hire Rev. Dr. Christine Fontaine (ask if you did not get to see her bio) to fill in for Pastor Barb. And also, several lay members are excited to have the chance to lead worship.

This sabbatical (including the grant) is a true gift to our church. It will allow us to honor our mission to deepen our current relationships and increase our presence in the community in ways we haven't done before. It joyfully allows us to bear witness to God's presence in the world and in Montague Center.

**Sabbatical Soundbite #6:  
Icons: Why icons? Why the Black Madonna?**

Praise and honor to Mary, Theotokos (Mother of God), is no stranger to Catholics but we rarely hear about her in our UCC (or other Protestant) churches. How could this be, considering that Christianity would not exist without her? This question, and the thought that the absence of the feminine in our devotional practices is part of the reason for the decline of the church today are central to Pastor Barb's sabbatical quest.

During her sabbatical she will seek out images (icons, paintings and sculptures) of the Black Madonna, following the footsteps of Sue Monk Kidd, author of the book *Traveling with Pomegranates*. This story inspired our grant proposal and has been a guide for the sabbatical team as we planned renewal activities for our church.

The Black Madonna, sometimes called Black Virgin or Black Mother of God seems mysterious, moreso than the Madonna, or Virgin Mary, that we are familiar with. The black madonna "allows people to project their hopes, desires, and needs unto her, only to draw them ever deeper into divine mysteries." ([interfaithmary.net](http://interfaithmary.net)) She is the bride of the Christian God spoken of in the bible book Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) 1:5 "who represents all souls seeking union with the Divine and says: I am black but beautiful."

Many of the images of the Black Madonna can be found in the form of icons... paintings or representations of Holy beings, that when given the time and the focus, have the power to draw us into relationship with the Divine. Gazing at, or mediating with, an icon can cause a familiar but mysterious stir in the soul... like the pull one feels when gazing into the eyes of a baby.

During our sabbatical time we will have several opportunities to experience the power and sheer beauty of icons and Black Madonna's. One possibility is to visit Our Lady of Czestochowa in Turners Falls where the

priest, Fr. DiMascola will give us a tour and explain the origin of the Black Madonna by the same name. Another is a bus trip to Clinton, MA where we will visit the Museum of Russian Iconography (in the spring) and enjoy lunch together. Other opportunities are developing as we write this including a display of icons in our chapel during Advent!

We hope you will find the invitation to visit one, or all, of these so irresistible that you will rush to sign up and even invite a friend to experience the feminine divine along with you!

### **Sabbatical Soundbite #7 ... 10 Weeks to go!**

Today, this first Sunday of Advent, we begin a countdown to the beginning of our Sacred Journey together. Ten weeks from today will bring us to February 7th, Pastor Barb's final Sunday with us before she heads out on her three month sabbatical leave. On that day Rev. Dr. Christine Fontaine, (aka Pastor Chris), the one who will lead us in worship and care for our spiritual needs during Barb's absence, will join us. On that day, during worship, we will make our promises (covenant) with one another for the sacred journey on which we are about to embark. February 7th is also the date of our annual meeting. Instead of the usual pot luck luncheon that precedes the meeting, the grant monies are providing for a catered farewell meal featuring foods from the various places in the world Barb and Larry will be visiting (France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the East coast of the US down to Florida!).

Six days later on February 13th as they begin their journey by traveling south to Florida to visit friends and family, we will travel north to the first of our two retreats at Hallelujah Farms in Chesterfield, NH. Second retreat will be with Barb and Larry after they return.

Whether chatting together in sun drenched rooms by the warmth of a crackling fire, or gathering for worship in the gorgeous space called Mary's chapel we will be well cared for by our retreat leaders, the Reverends Roger and Sandy Daly. During our time together we will consider questions of wonder, and share times of laughter and times of doubt... and fill our belly's with some great food too...nourishment for both body and soul!

This retreat will be not so much task oriented as relational... being in conversation with one another, discovering, or rediscovering, our love of, and trust in, one another so we might return better equipped to do the work of our church in this time and this place.

You will have the opportunity to meet Sandy during coffee hour one Sunday in early January. She will also share examples of what we will be doing on retreat and answer any of your questions. This is where the congregation's sacred sabbatical journey will begin. Let us all retreat in spirit together!

### **Sabbatical Soundbite #8 ... 9 Weeks to go!**

#### **Why the interest in Icons?**

"We are called to come out from our own deserts this Advent to be washed white and to learn how to reflect the Divine presence in our everyday lives. The icon is a sacred text that leads the viewer into the silence of the desert where Christ becomes our question more than our answer. Who is he for me and when will he come? In the Byzantine mind the Word (Logos, God) writes the icon and writes us as divine and human wisdom and energies are held transfigured in the compassion and humanity of the Incarnation.

We have to be curious and resilient in order to keep looking into the icon as we are led into gazing with our contemplative eye to our inner desert where the icon begins to question us. The gift given is a transformation of consciousness and I begin to dare to trust that in Jesus' eyes I am blessed and good." (edgeofenclosure.org)

We invite you to visit our display of icons in the chapel. Sit with them for a while. Which one(s) are you drawn to? Which hold no interest in you? What is it about the image, the icon, that causes you to pause or to wonder? In the spring our sabbatical journey will take us to the beautiful Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton MA. Grant monies provide for transportation by bus, entrance fee and a luncheon for up to 30 people. The sabbatical

team will let you know the date to set aside once it has all been arranged. If we do not fill the bus with our own members, the invitation will be extended to sister churches and the community.

### **Sabbatical Soundbite #9**

**Five weeks to go** until sabbatical blessings rain down on us all! What a year we are going to have this year! Blessed with gifts from many sources we will have the opportunity for spiritual growth beyond any we have seen in many a year.

We are blessed to have been awarded a grant that will cover all sabbatical related expenses. That means that we do not have to “find” any extra money to cover the time that Pastor Barb is away. All costs for pastoral and worship coverage are covered by the grant monies.

We are blessed to have a sabbatical team that has worked tirelessly over the past several months to plan for that coverage. They have also visioned ways we can use this sabbatical time to grow together as the body of Christ rather than just sit and wait for Pastor Barb to return. All plans have been thoughtfully made, researched, chosen to match the sabbatical theme of “sacred Journey,” designed for fun and fellowship and will be paid for by the grant monies.

We are blessed to have an active and involved team of deacons and council board to maintain the standards we have come to love in our worship and governance of our church during the sabbatical time.

We are blessed that Rev. Dr. Christine Fontaine was available and agreed to lead us through this time. Her long tenure as an ordained minister, her love of arts and of Mary and the divine feminine blend well with our sabbatical focus. Additionally we are gifted by her training as an interim minister. She knows the particular needs of congregations going through many types of transitions.