

September 30, 2026



PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins

Wise as Serpents and Innocent as Doves

Rev. Liz Garrigan-Byerly's mother recently received an email from her pastor that read, "Hello, I hope you're doing well. I wanted to reach out to see whether you might have some time for a brief conversation." Her mother answered, "Sure." Immediately another email from her pastor arrived that explained, "I need Apple gift cards for a sick member. It's a surprise so please don't tell anyone. I'll pay you back with cash or check soon. "

It was a scam email. Someone had accessed the church's or the pastor's email list and was sending out emails trying to scam people out of their money by using the church pastor's email as a vehicle.

Thanks to AI, scammers are able to create incredible natural sounding contact messages. Garrigan-Byerly explained that "the 'voice' of the original email was very similar to how her pastor writes; the pastor's name was spelled correctly, and the signature matched his normal emails. When we looked more closely, we noticed some classic signs: the email was not personalized to my mom; the sending address was a Gmail address, not the church's email address; and that last sentence was a bit awkward." None of us are immune from such fake emails or texts, however.

Several churches have recently experienced a disturbing trend: Someone posted on the church's Sunday worship livestream that they were feeling suicidal. This is a scam to entice individuals to enter a private chat with them where they can then eventually ask for financial support. The danger is not just that someone gets "hooked" into financial loss, but that it could increase vulnerability for those who struggle with depression or other mental health challenges.

And it's not just bot farms and financial schemes. There are times when someone known to a church will use the church's lists to email anyone connected to the church – members, neighboring churches and pastors, Conference staff— about an unsubstantiated grievance. These often include inflammatory language, come across as authoritative, or warn you of some imminent danger.

What are we to do as people of faith? I hear Jesus' words to the disciples: "Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). Rev. Garrigan-Byerly reminds us that we need to be in the world but not of the world; we need to know what's going on and respond but not let it change who we are as disciples of Christ. We need to keep our hearts open without letting our defenses down.

She gives some helpful guidelines that I'm sharing with everyone.

- Use extra caution when an email/post has a sense of urgency, uses a lot of legal language, insists on a specific action, or makes it seem like you are the only one who can help.
- Take an extra look at who sent the email; do you know the person? If so, is it the normal address they use?
- Pay attention to your body. Has your heart rate increased? Do you feel extra fidgety? Do you have a gut feeling? Your body may be signaling that something is not quite right. These scammers prey on people becoming anxious or flustered by the urgency they communicate. When we are anxious or flustered, we are more apt to not be thinking clearly and simply reacting without knowing what we are doing.
- If anything feels off, contact the real person using the phone number or email you know is theirs and check with them. Respond to their contact with you in another way or at a number you trust.
- If it is a scam, let others know (If it's a new style of scam, or references the wider church in any way, let your pastor, the association, or regional executive know so they can support you and others.
- Have a plan for responding to disruptive behavior during worship (onsite and online).
- Double down on connecting with others in community, do things that strengthen your sense of trust and ground it in lived experience with others.
- Double down on your practices of caring for the most vulnerable among us, including each other and ourselves when we get hooked by one of these scams.

None of us are exempt from these scams and AI has enhanced the capacity of scammers to sound and write more suspicion-free emails. No more misspelled words or awkward phrases. Wider knowledge about who they are contacting so they can add disarming details.

Rev. Garrigan-Byerly, who serves on the regional UCC staff, urges all of us to educate ourselves and stay alert to emails and text messages that may not be from the people or institutions they want us to believe we are responding to. And remember I will never call, email or text you asking for you to buy gift cards for me.

With prayer,

The real Pastor Thomas (not the one who asks you to buy gift cards for me.)

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

NOTE OF THANKS from last Sunday's service

First a great big thank you to everyone who helped in collecting change for my children's sermon!

We collected \$86.30 of just spare change from everyone. This little amount of money from all of us is going to have a big impact. I am going to double the amount collected and give \$172.60 to the crop walk. Just as I used the parable in Luke of not storing the grain but putting it to use. What better use than to use our stored spare change and turn it into food for hungry people?

The news keeps getting better! We have an anonymous donor who will double it again! If you want to make a last-minute contribution, please put it a collection plate in an envelope marked "crop walk" so we can get it into use Sunday afternoon.

YOUTH GROUP

****Church friends and members are welcome to join us in the Crop Walk****

Next Event: Sunday Oct. 4th 1:30 ~ 4 pm

What: Crop Walk through Forest Park: We are again raising money for CWS – Church World Service, that supports hunger prevention both locally and globally. Currently there is someone that is matching all our donations 100%

When: Arrive Sunday Oct. 4th by 1:30, if meeting us at the church (7 Somers Rd). We will drive over to Trinity United Church for the start of the walk at 2:00pm. Kids can be picked up back at the church around 4:00.

Where: Meet at the church and we will caravan Trinity Church.

Questions? Contact anyone from the leadership team.

ADULT BOOK STUDY

The second adult book study is on short novella, *The Foster* by Irish author Clair Keegan. It is a short read less than 100 pages. *The Foster* was produced as a film in Ireland and won an 2023 Academy Award nomination for best foreign film.

We will meet after worship on Sunday, October 11, from 11:30 – 12:30 to discuss *The Foster*.

The Western Massachusetts interlibrary loan system has 107 copies of *The Foster*.

The Foster, writes the publisher, "is story of childhood, loss, and love... It is a hot summer in rural Ireland. A child is taken by her father to live with relatives on a farm, not knowing when or if she will be brought home again. In the Kinsellas' house, she finds an affection and warmth she has not known and slowly, in their care, begins to blossom. But there is something unspoken in this new household-where everything is so well tended to-and this summer must soon come to an end."

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flower committee invites you to remember, and honor loved ones or offer celebration for a joyous event. We have following open dates are all Sundays in November. Call the church office if you are interested or sign up in Butler Hall.

UPCOMING CHURCH FAIR

Hello Church Family!

The Christmas Collection Craft Fair is scheduled for Saturday, November 7th from 8:30am to 3pm.

Planning is well underway! Our well-known and well-attended craft fair cannot happen without many, many volunteers before, during and afterwards. Helpers of all kinds are needed. Please make a small commitment of your time by attending, shopping, baking or making chili for the bake sale, helping with a church booth for an hour or two, as a shuttle driver, or any other task! Many hands make light work.

The Christmas Collection Craft Fair committee also needs ANYONE WILLING to assist in relocating classroom furniture and setting up tables on WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 4th at 6:30PM to prepare for the fair on Saturday, November 7th. ANYONE WILLING TO ASSIST WITH clean up, replacing furniture, sweeping and vacuuming? We'll also need help immediately following the fair at 3:30pm on SATURDAY NOVEMBER 7th.

Our well-attended fair has an excellent reputation, and is an amazing fundraiser for our church. We have a plan...we just need helpers. Thank you!

YOU HAVE ALREADY NOTICED...IT'S GETTING COLD

As you are once again able to take out your heavier winter clothes, remember that you have neighbors who have nothing to keep them warm. The First Congregational Church on the rotary will once again be collecting **gently used, clean, warm clothing** until **NOVEMBER 22** for men, women and children (even infants and toddlers). NOW we will also collect **CLEAN**, warm blankets. Everything will be donated to the critical work of the Springfield Rescue Mission serving your neighbors in the greater Springfield area.

Please place your donations in the box in the breezeway, or the big, blue bin outside. We accept warm clothing: coats, sweaters, vests, sweatshirts, hats, scarves, gloves, mittens, boots, etc. We also ask for **NEW** socks and underwear. Thank you for caring and taking the time to go through your closets. Your continued generosity will warm the lives of our neighbors in need during the coming cold winter months.

Mission & Outreach

WEDNESDAY MORNING WORK CREW SUMMER REPORT

Carriage House:

Prime and paint 5 front doors

Repair screen door

Remove, rebuild and paint 3 front stoops

Gardens around church:

Remove dead and low branches on 3 small trees out front

Trim shrubs

Weed and mulch

Mow hill behind parking lot

Weed whack steep hill

Tool shed:

Dig and remove dirt against building

Place cinder blocks to keep dirt away

Paint tool shed

Clean out shed and install shelves

Around church:

Scrape, prime and paint bulkhead

Scrape, prime and paint door to shed behind office

Butler Hall:

Install ceiling projector

Miscellaneous:

Organize closet in balcony

Hard wire Sunday School computer

Run Ethernet cable to live stream computer in balcony

Clean Sunday School and nursery rooms

Purchase and set up dehumidifiers

PRAYER

Holy God: You gather the powers of love and strength to guide our world and our lives. Bring your fierce love and gentle strength to our struggles with inner dragons of anxiety, resentment, or fear that we may triumph over all that separates us from each other and from you. May we enter into this new autumn season with renewed courage and hope. Amen.

Yesterday, September 29, is celebrated on traditional church calendars as St. Michael and All Angels Day. In the British Isles St. Michael and All Angels is called "Michaelmas" and marks the official end of the summer season. (And Charles Dickens' first sentence in Bleak House thus includes a reference to Michaelmas). This prayer is based on the traditional church prayer for Michaelmas.



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