



# Musical Minute

A compilation of Musical Minutes  
shared during the year 2021

McAllister Memorial  
Presbyterian Church

900 N. Alleghany  
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Covington, VA 24426

January 10, 2021

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

When it comes to ringing in the New Year, people tend to fall into two camps: those who do and those who don't. I am a longtime and dedicated participant in ushering in the New Year and I wouldn't dream of hitting the pillow until after midnight on December 31 of any given year. I think that I inherited this trait from my parents, and I feel fortunate to have married a fellow "ringer in-er" (whom, I believe, also inherited this from his parents). (There are others in my immediate family, who for safety reasons and fear of disparaging remarks, I will not name. They just go to bed . . . Who does that?!) Andy and I have been celebrating the New Year together since we began dating in 1985 and we are committed to continuing the tradition. Admittedly, over the last two or three years, we have made a pact around nine o'clock in the evening on New Year's Eve, that the one who is not asleep will wake up the other before the clock strikes midnight! I am pleased to report that neither of us needed to be awakened this year. We paced our festivities and food just perfectly and when the lull began to set in, we simply called, FaceTimed, and texted nearby family and friends overseas! There's nothing like harassing your loved ones to keep you awake.

Certainly, New Year's Eve is a time for nostalgia, and it can be bittersweet. However, reflection, introspection, and a good cry over loved ones lost, whether parents, grandparents, friends, a partner, siblings, pets or missed opportunities, is often necessary and can be cleansing for the coming year. Maybe it's my nature, or maybe my naivety, but to me a new year has always been full of such promise. Other than a few expert epidemiologists, I'm not sure that any of us could have guessed what 2020 would hold, but in my experience, a new year usually holds more positives than negatives and often holds fresh opportunities for learning and growth.

Andy and I were married in December of 1987 and in the decades since when celebrating our anniversary, we have tried to remember what exactly we talked about on our honeymoon. Papa's death in May of that year would have loomed large, of course, as would my impending mid-year employment as an english teacher

at Bath County High School, a job offer that came suddenly and cut short our honeymoon. (I was introduced as Miss Leitch to the 8th, 9th, and 10th graders in early December only to return, I think on the 17th, as Mrs. Dreszer. Oh—the comments from the kids, "We know what you did last weekend! ! ! ") In December of 1987 we thought we knew our path for the future, at least for the short term. But, in fact, we had no idea —no idea that we would be moving to Richmond, Va. in less than a year. And during our years in Richmond, we could have scarce believed that 1994 would take us to the Czech Republic, or that after celebrating the millennium in our little town in the Czech Republic, 2001 would find us moving to Austria and that 2010 would see me leaving my dear husband and our beloved Black Russian Terrier in Europe to come home to be with mom, Nick and Cathy after mom's cancer diagnosis. Each year offers up unique surprises and changes, and sometimes, as in 2020, the challenges and pain can seem insurmountable. But the promise of every new year lies not so much within the year, but within the indefatigable human spirit, a spirit made stronger by faith and community.

I wanted to play a few secular pieces for you guys on the piano in the sanctuary to post on Facebook on New Year's Eve. I chose several of my favorites with a positive outlook and lyrics, but I finally decided that after such a trying year, I didn't want to appear flippant about what so many endured throughout 2020. My list included "Count Your Blessings" from the perennial favorite holiday film "White Christmas." Written by Irving Berlin, the song is beautifully sung by Bing Crosby in his warm, resonant baritone to Rosemary Clooney. If you've never heard or seen it, it's well worth looking up on YouTube. The lyrics to the chorus are simple and pretty much perfect:

"If you're worried and you can't sleep  
Just count your blessings instead of sheep  
And you'll fall asleep counting your blessings."

So, here's to you, McAllister family. I wish you a hopeful and healthy 2021 full of more blessings than you can count.  
Take good care.

**Beth**

January 24, 2021

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

Many of us have had people in our lives who, in addition to our immediate family, helped to shape and raise us. During our 22 years away, I was always touched when I visited Covington to experience such heartfelt welcome and interest in my life from mom and dad's friends and acquaintances when we happened to cross paths in town. There can be no doubt that, next to your own folks, the close friends of your parents are your best champions. They were often right alongside your parents through the joys and concerns of your birth, your high school years, dubious dating choices, and the eventual choice of your career or life partner and are therefore very much personally vested in your health and success.

My Covington "circle of elders" was reliably rock solid throughout my entire life. These were the people I could count on, and they were the people, along with my family, that I wanted to make proud. Over the last ten years or so, however, my solid rock has begun to erode. It's like looking at a map of the world where you've long known the individual nations and boundaries, and suddenly pieces of it begin to disappear. The borders are changing, and it's disorienting and unnerving.

All of which is a protracted way of saying that I lost a dear member of my circle recently. Sara Lu Persinger Snyder was a longtime and cherished friend of my parents, having graduated from Covington High School with both of them in 1955. With her husband Jim she raised two remarkable sons and her contributions to our community were numerous, meaningful, and of lasting impact. The same can be said of her influence on my life. As I entered my high school and college years, Sara Lu was one of my loudest cheerleaders, whether in matters academic or musical. She was my go-to person for all matters of etiquette before such things could easily be found online: How does one respond to a formal dinner invitation? (Promptly, in writing, and cordially!) When writing on a notecard is it acceptable to write on the back of the card, or should one continue on the left side of the open card? (If your message requires more space than the right side of the open notecard, it is preferable to write on the back of the card rather than on the reverse side of the front cover.) What is the appropriate ink color for

a thank you note? (Preferably blue or black, as they are the most legible, but the most important factor is that the message is personalized, prompt and handwritten, not typed—unless your writing hand is incapacitated!).

Sara Lu was an accomplished musician and substituted at McAllister many times over the years. She had played for papa to sing since they were in high school. I am blessed to have several of her organ scores in my collection and will now treasure them all the more. She always appeared to me calm and unflappable, traits that I wish she could have passed on to me along with the etiquette tips! I always found it at odds with Sara Lu's natural organizational skills and her love of order that she was a devoted dog lover and owner. Our canine friends are the very antithesis of order! And yet, that is who she was.

After Andrew and I decided to wed, we sat down with family to begin planning the event. Sara Lu quickly became the obvious choice to be our wedding coordinator, or "Coordinator of Glorious Affairs" as I titled her in my somewhat formal, prompt, and handwritten note requesting that she direct our wedding! She responded with the following within the week (promptly), on ecru stationary (classic), in blue ink (highly legible), beautifully handwritten (of course) and with love, graciousness, and charity (100% Sara Lu):

### **Ode to the Fair December Bride**

Having received your most clear note,  
I'm decidedly flattered by the family's vote.  
With no experience in so exalted a position,  
I would not have expected such rare recognition.  
Accepting the honor with trepidation and fear,  
I'll serve with pleasure because it's you, my dear.  
I'll read and study to be up-to-date,  
So that all goes well for you and your mate.  
Advised by Emily, Amy, and Miss Manners, I  
hope to learn all matters essential to cope.

Call the job whatever you may,

It will give me joy to share your day.

Sara Lu's deep and lasting friendship with my parents became even more significant with dad's sudden death in May of 1987, barely a month after she had responded with her "Ode," and just seven months before Andrew's and my wedding in December. After visitation at the funeral home, she shared with mom, in the way that only a friend of decades could, that she wished she had kept her mother's rings when her mother passed away so that she could have given them to her sons to give to their future partners. It was a terribly difficult decision for mom to make, but thanks to that uncomfortable conversation (and with generous assistance from another beloved friend, Arnold Hostetter), the wedding bands that Andy and I wear are made from dad's gold band. And Sara Lu's dedication to their friendship didn't end there. I discovered many years later that following dad's death, she called my mother every single morning for months and months. Mom knew that whether she felt like it or not, she had better answer the phone or Sara Lu would be on her doorstep. She was steadfast in her friendship to mom through subsequent years and was a steady, unwavering source of support to mom, and to Nick and me, during mom's final year. She was quite a lady, and I do mean "lady," and I will miss her. The borders on my map are changing, and it is disorienting. Yet I know where they once were and I can still imagine them there, and I can always remember how they shaped my world.

Take good care.

Beth

February 7, 2021

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

As the old adage goes, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." Some of you may have run across the following in the "Echoes of the Past" column of the Saturday, January 23, 2021, edition of the Virginian Review. Although written ninety years ago, it could just as likely have been written by any one of us upon our return to the sanctuary last October. It reads in part:

"January 22, 1931 - Letters from the People to the Editor

Sir\_\_

It really does one good to come to church and see a real congregation present, instead of a mere handful.

This is noticeable at McAllister Memorial Church. Within the last month, the Sunday school has increased from 185 to 220, or more.

Since the pastor [Rev. Mr. Hoyt] has recovered from his recent illness, the congregations in the evening are exceedingly large. In fact, the church is packed. This is remarkable for this time of the year."

Signed, "A Member," the letter goes on to recount what exciting activities are taking place at McAllister, including something called the "Christian Endeavor" and weekly prayer meetings. If you subscribe to our local newspaper and have followed the events of ninety years ago in the "Echoes of the Past" column over the last months, you have also been reading about the extreme anxiety, anger, and upheaval caused by the Great Depression which began in the United States in October of 1929, just over a year before this letter was written. While we are familiar with the painful images of panicked

investors, extreme poverty, and long breadlines brought about by this years-long economic crisis, it is almost inconceivable today to imagine heading to one of our local banks to find the doors locked and our deposits unavailable for withdrawal. And yet that is exactly what the "Echoes of the Past" column has related in recent editions. Even Covington felt the aftershocks of the earthquake that was the Great Depression. But McAllister Memorial was finding things to celebrate.

Rev. Dr. Carl Utley from the Presbytery of the Peaks spoke at McAllister Memorial's 100th Anniversary celebration in 2018. I appreciated the historical perspective that he attached to the birth of "the church on the hill." He enumerated multiple world-shaping events that occurred in the year 1918, including the first recorded case of the Spanish flu in March of that year. (Dr. Utley related that in October of the same year, 21 ,000 US citizens would die from the disease in one week alone.) World War I, the "war to end all wars," officially ceased "at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month" of 1918. The list of events was varied and historic. And in the midst of chaos and change, the Presbytery and First Presbyterian Church had the faith, vision, and optimism to establish McAllister Memorial Presbyterian Church.

The past year has been a difficult one for the world, our nation, our region and our church. Still, McAllister's leadership has found ways to keep our church family united. Thank you to the Session and to Pastor Jim for constantly evaluating current circumstances and putting the safety of our congregation first. I don't think anyone could have imagined during 1918's pandemic that over one hundred years later, we would, in the midst of another deadly pandemic, be "livestreaming" our services through something called "Facebook." I know I didn't imagine it even 30 years ago. Just as the Great Depression reached all the way to Covington in the 1930s, Covid-19 has impacted our community, and sadly, even our church. Still, in reading the letter to the editor from the anonymous McAllister member and considering the decade in which it was written, I was reminded that every generation and every individual faces obstacles and even tragedy. After 102 years, McAllister still exists because of the faith of its members, their ability to adapt to changing and challenging circumstances, and their seemingly inexhaustible store of human resilience. If you find your faith or your resilience waning during these trying times, here's a reaffirming "booster shot" in the form of a hymn to keep in mind:



"O God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy  
blast, And our eternal home!"

Take good care.

Beth

February 21, 2021

McAllister Messenger

## Musical Minute:

When Nick and I were little, mom often sang the following to us:



"I see the moon, the moon sees me,

Under the shade of the old oak tree.

Please let the light that shines on me Shine on the one I love.

Over the mountains,  
over the sea, Back where  
my heart is longing to be,  
Please let the light that  
shines on me Shine on  
the one I love."

Based on an old rhyme from Great Britain, there is another version that reads,

"I see the moon and the moon sees  
me, The moon sees the one I long to  
see.

God bless the moon and God bless  
me; And God bless the one I love."

Mom used to blend the two versions, depending on the occasion, and I can't tell you how many times during my adult life, I arrived home to find it on my answering machine. When we lived overseas and there was a 6-hour time difference, I would often come home midday and see the blinking light on the machine. I knew even before I listened to the message that mom had phoned during the wee hours of her morning, perhaps while gazing out the window at a crescent or full moon that Andy and I had seen in our night sky just hours earlier. There is something comforting about the benevolent presence of the moon and the constancy of the changing nighttime sky, and I've found myself humming or singing this tune many times during the last year during which we've had to remain distanced from family and other loved ones.

Since we begin the season of Lent this week, let me share another way in which our celestial neighbor influences our lives by determining a significant date in the Christian calendar. (Many of you may already know this, but I find it fascinating enough to warrant a mention.) The celebration of Christ's resurrection occurs on April 4 this year. In 2020 the date was April 12 (Papa's birthday back in 1936 was also April 12 and Easter Sunday. I was told it snowed!). Some years we even celebrate Easter in the month of March. What exactly determines when Christians begin the observance of Lent and when we celebrate Easter? You guessed it—the moon (and the arrival of the spring equinox).

Pope Gregory XIII codified the rules for Easter in the 1500s: Easter would be observed on the first Sunday following the full moon (officially called the paschal full moon due to its proximity to Passover and Easter) that lands on or just after the spring equinox, the day that there is an equal balance between daylight and darkness. The date of Easter is set first and then the days are counted back to determine the start of Lent.

This year the vernal equinox occurs on Saturday, March 20. The first full moon following the equinox occurs on Sunday, March 28, 2021. That puts Easter on the following Sunday, April 4. When you count back 40 days on the calendar (not counting Sundays) that puts Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent this week on February 17, 2021. What a fun puzzle! (Occasionally there are exceptions to these rules when astronomical events don't line up exactly with the ecclesiastical calendar, but, no worries, there are established practices regarding these exceptions. Apparently, these rules were called into play in 2019 and most of us were unaware. Based on what I read on the internet, we won't need to worry again until 2038!) If you are interested there is a wealth of

information on this subject to be found online. It might be a fun way to while away a gray, wintry day, dreaming of the coming spring and the approaching Easter celebration.

And in the meantime, I'll think of all of you as I hum, "God bless the moon and God bless me; And God bless the ones I love."

Take good care.

Beth

March 7, 2021

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

About twenty years ago I came across the poems and prose of Ted Kooser, a native of Iowa and 13th Poet Laureate of the United States. I can't even remember now how his writing came to my attention, but his works quickly became like a longtime, trusted friend. At least one of his books is usually on or near the nightstand so I can drop in for a visit and reread his thoughtful commentary on nature, his friends and neighbors, his family and his life. I was reminded recently of one of his essays when Andy, after raking leaves before the latest snow, ice, and rains, uncovered a hopeful sign of spring in the strappy foliage of daffodils emerging from the winter ground. He came in and pointed out the window at the bright greenery under the trees. It made us both smile. In his collection entitled "Local Wonders," Kooser writes about the delight of finding things that bring one unexpected moments of joy, or as he calls it, "hap." He writes, "To be happy, according to Webster, is to be favored by luck or fortune, and the first syllable of happiness, hap—with its luckiness, its chanciness, its sudden surprise—is a source of much delight in my life." After reading this for the first time years ago, the concept of "hap," or happenstance that brings joy, stuck with me.

A few years ago, I looked out the window above the kitchen sink one morning to find our berry-laden hawthorn trees full of dozens if not hundreds of cedar waxwings. Until

this moment, I had seen only one single cedar waxwing in my entire life, and suddenly, by pure chance, there was this living, flitting explosion of color in the trees. If you've ever seen one in a bird book or in person, you'd have to agree that they're one of nature's loveliest creations. The tawny brown male sports a dashing black mask and a jaunty crested cap. The wingtips are dotted with red, and both the male and female have a band of bright yellow at the very tip of the tail that looks as though it has been painstakingly painted by hand. They feasted on the berries for fifteen minutes or so and then departed to continue their journey to destinations unknown. What a treasured moment of "hap." Had I glanced out the window just a half an hour later, I would have never known that they were ever there.

I feel the same sense of marvel when I get to study a beautiful butterfly feeding on a bloom in the pots on our back deck, or when I come across a tiny, but exquisite trout-lily, or sometimes even a small patch of them, while on a mid-spring walk. It's easy to get lost in petty daily frustrations, or to become anxious or even fatigued by the noise all around us, but I find that when I can leave those tumultuous thoughts behind and observe and appreciate the world and the many kind people in it, there are moments of "hap" in even the most mundane day.

We'll be back to in-person services next week for those who feel comfortable attending. And we'll continue livestreaming on Facebook for those who prefer to stay home and for those who are out of the area. And while we're certain to have some more cold days, spring is truly around the corner and Easter is approaching quickly. It appears that there are now three vaccines available to help us over the final hurdle of this pandemic. Soon we'll be able to visit with our family and other loved ones again—maybe masked and with some social distancing, but we'll be able to rest our eyes on them. Things are definitely looking up. And while you're looking up, make sure that you're also looking out and about for those unexpected moments of "hap." I know they're out there. As Tammy so beautifully expressed it in the anthem on Sunday, "How can I keep from singing?"

Looking forward to seeing many of you next week. Take good care.

Beth



## Musical Minute:

If any of you have watched McAllister's livestreamed services all the way to the very end, you might have noticed that in December we began showing a slide with our livestreaming license number from One License. When we jumped online last spring at the beginning of the pandemic and Pastor Jim began livestreaming from his phone, we, like many other churches across the nation, were livestream novices and knew very little about our responsibilities when it came to music copyright law and live broadcasting. While McAllister has long held a license which enabled us to print lyrics in the bulletin or print song sheets to use during Vacation Bible School, we had never had to consider the licensing required for a live broadcast. During the last year, I have worked to become better educated about what McAllister needs to do to comply with copyright law as it pertains to livestreaming.

In copyright law, there is an exemption for religious institutions that allows for the use of copyrighted material during a religious service. If I legally purchase something for the organ or piano, I am allowed to use it for a worship service in my church. If McAllister purchases 15 or 20 pieces of a new anthem for the choir, we are legally entitled to use it during our worship service. This exemption does not, however, extend to the use of copyrighted material in a service which is broadcast beyond our sanctuary. Under current law (generally), the copyright for a piece of music extends to 95 years from the date of its publication. The work then enters what is known as "public domain." According to an on-line article from Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church, "Music is in the public domain if: (1) all rights to the music have expired; (2) the music has been placed in the public domain by the author and/or composer; or (3) if there was never any copyright attached to the music by author, composer, arranger performer or publisher."

All of this is to say that we need to examine more carefully what music we use in our livestream services. Many of our hymns, but not all, are in the public domain. ("Here Am

I, Lord," a new McAllister favorite, is not, as it was published in 1981.) Many works for organ were written by grand masters of previous centuries such as J.S. Bach, Johann Pachelbel, Dietrich Buxtehude, and another of my personal favorites, Domenico Zipoli. Much of this music, depending on the editions used, is in the public domain. The biggest challenge for us in our new livestreaming endeavor will be seeking appropriate permissions for works that are not in the public domain and are also not covered by our newly acquired license from One License. While our license covers works from many church music publishers, it is not entirely comprehensive. In my own music library and in the church's music library there are many pieces that are not covered by our new license. It may be possible to obtain permission to perform these works in a live broadcast, but this will take time, effort, and advance planning in order to make contact with the publisher or composer. (As an aside, if you were to peruse the contents of our music files in the choir room, you would find many pieces in the public domain as they were published in the late 19th or early 20th century. It's a wonder that Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade wasn't filmed in the ladies' robe room where the file cabinets are kept . . . I wouldn't be surprised to find the Holy Grail buried there amongst the other artifacts!)

The use of soundtracks during our services will also be impacted by our new awareness of copyright law. Due to the exemption for religious institutions, it is appropriate to use a legally purchased soundtrack during a worship service. This is no longer the case when the service is being broadcast. We can, however, contact the publisher to ask for permission to use the recording during our livestream. From what I've researched, we can expect one of the following responses: "Yes, of course. Thank you for asking," or "Absolutely not," or "Of course, but we'll need some money first!" I did have a good experience in December when I wanted to use a particular piano piece on Christmas Eve and contacted the composer. She was pleased to know that I liked the piece and asked only for a mention in the closing credits of the service, which I gratefully gave her.

So, I just wanted to let you know that we are doing our best to be our best when it comes to livestreaming. The musicians who write the music that enhance and uplift our worship deserve their due. Our livestreaming adventure is just beginning. It helps us maintain connection with our core church family and may even help to grow McAllister's ministry. We have some things to work through and we are doing so. But in the meantime, don't worry McAllister family, we are good to go with "The Palms"! First published in 1913, its

copyright was renewed in 1941, but its publisher, the Lorenz Publishing Corporation, is covered under our new livestreaming license!

It is so wonderful to see many of you back in the sanctuary and to read the comments of those of you at home. Take good care.

Beth

April 4, 2021

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

When Andy and I moved to Austria from the Czech Republic in 2001, it took some time to find a home to rent. After a number of months in an apartment on the edge of our new hometown of Graz (Austria's second largest city after Vienna) we found a small family farmstead in a settlement in the country about twenty minutes from the city. At the time, it was undergoing renovations to convert it into two apartments, but we caught it in time to keep it a single-family home. The first time we went to view the property we were struck by the beauty and peacefulness of the environs and by the long driveway to the house lined with age-old, twisted apple trees. (I was promptly stung by a yellow jacket that had been feasting on fallen apples near the driveway.) Our future landlord arrived not too long after we did. We all tried our best to communicate as he showed us around the place. Sensing our interest, he invited us to his home for coffee. It turned out that Franz and his wife, Huberta, lived less than half a mile away and would be our new neighbors should we decide to let the house. They turned out to be good neighbors and responsive landlords and Huberta became a dear friend to me. In fact, she made it her

mission to introduce me to all that our settlement, Edelsgrub (which we roughly translated to "Noble Ditch"), had to offer.

Our first Easter in Edelsgrub, Huberta called on the Saturday morning before Easter Sunday and informed us that she would be taking us to the local Easter blessing (the Fleischweihe, which actually translates to "Meat Blessing"), an event that would be taking place in one of the farmhouses further down the road from our home. She urged me to gather our Easter ham, eggs, sausage, horseradish root and bread in a basket and meet her at the end of her road so that we could walk together to Herr Leopold's house where the blessing was to be held. Not being Austrian, I didn't have all of the Easter necessities in our fridge, but Huberta told me to just bring what I had. So, I did. Andy and I hadn't gotten around to coloring any eggs yet, so I stuck a carton of fresh eggs in my basket, along with a package of prosciutto (ham, right?), and a jar of prepared horseradish sauce. I did have a nice piece of dark Austrian bread to tuck into the basket.

We headed down the road, deeper into Noble Ditch, where we met up with Huberta. Other neighbors joined us along the way, and we all proceeded, baskets in hand, to the Leopold family farmhouse where we could already see the priest and a large gathering of people. At some point along the way, Huberta looked into my basket, and I could see she was horrified by the contents! After a good laugh and some gentle chiding, she kindly removed the beautifully embroidered white cloth covering her Easter goodies and placed it over my store-bought items to save me from embarrassment. All of her items had been sourced from local farms and were pristine examples of what, after being blessed on Saturday, would make up Sunday's midmorning meal before the Easter feast was prepared. The blessing itself was moving—simple and humble in a way, yet also hinting at something much greater and more universal than those of us assembled. It was an exceptionally beautiful early spring day and as Andy and I stood in the company of our neighbors listening to the intonations of the priest in the garden of the centuries old farmstead, we felt a part of something both ancient and timeless. It was an experience we will never forget.

While most Austrians identify as Catholic and may observe various seasonal traditions of the church, many are not practicing Catholics. I'm sure that was the case with several in the crowd that lovely spring morning. Some were there because of their faith and some participated because the tradition held meaning. After the blessing, we all returned to our daily routines, maybe going for a hike, mowing the grass, cleaning the



garage, perhaps even going to mass later that evening. But we all knew that we'd taken part in something very special that morning—something greater than ourselves as individuals. I hope that this Easter season holds unforgettable meaning for each of you. Take good care,

Beth



April 18, 2021

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

Wasn't last Sunday's service (April the 11th) wonderful? After the buildup to in-person worship services in March, followed by the push to Palm Sunday, the solemnity of Maundy Thursday and then the celebration and exhilaration of Easter Sunday, the Sunday following Christ's resurrection can be a bit of a let-down. Not so with last Sunday as we had our very own grown-up child of McAllister in the pulpit. Linda Trumbo is always a welcome presence, whether as a guest in the congregation or as a guest speaker, but last Sunday was particularly special as her sermon was one of the culminating tasks in Linda's quest to become a lay speaker in the Presbyterian church. I think many of us have felt over the years that this is something she was meant and even destined to do. How exciting to be a part, even just as listeners, of someone we have long loved achieving a dream. I have absolutely no doubt that she will go on to touch many lives with her ministry.

Selfishly, I was tickled to have Linda there on the same Sunday that brother Nick came to sing. In addition to other congregation members, I saw Steven Craft come up to greet Linda during the pre-service music and our friend Gary Whitmer also came up for a visit with Linda and Nick. (There may have been others of you there from my high school years, too, but with my reading glasses and with all of us continuing to mask, I can't be certain!) For a minute before the service began, in my thoughts, I could have been fourteen years old again watching the "old gang" on any given Sunday morning.

I like Linda's metaphor of God as the warp (or constant) on the loom of our lives with the weft (or cross weaving) being the individuals and events that color and shape our lives. The cross weaving can be a steady, beautiful, and colorful pattern (our parents, our church family, our friends), or equally colorful but bumpy and rough (the loss of a loved one, a damaged relationship, job loss). Still, each addition to the warp builds upon the other and becomes a part of who we are, shaping our future. Those of us raised at

McAllister were blessed to be shaped by the adults around us who loved us, guided us, taught us, and gently disciplined us. They created a beautiful and even foundation upon which we could build the tapestry of our lives.

On Sunday, Linda reminded us that every person and event, positive or negative, plays a role in who we eventually become. And she challenged us to be our best selves as stewards of Christ—to be the beautiful cross weaving in the lives of all of those we meet, even those we may not be naturally inclined to aid. She gently presented us with a huge task in the form of a subtle metaphor. I think that she's going to be great in her new role.

***Congratulations, Linda!***

Beth

May 2, 2021 McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

Upon moving to the Czech Republic in 1994, one of the first gifts I received from a new Czech acquaintance was an elegant, emerald green vase. Wide at the bottom and top with a cinched "waist," it was embellished with three hand-painted white flowers with a gold rim encircling the top lip. If you collect glass of any kind, you probably frequent auctions or antique shops or antique malls and are familiar with the term "Czech glass."

Czech glass or crystal usually has some "heft" and can be simple and unadorned, but more often it is associated with rich, jewel tones and plentiful engraving, etching or cut-work, and hand-painted motifs. The vase I was given was a lovely surprise—a delicate and beautiful example of Czech craftsmanship, and a thoughtful token of a new, and as it turns out, lasting friendship. But this vase was tiny—measuring just over 3 inches tall, 1 1/2 inches wide at the bottom, 2 inches at the top, and holding only two ounces of water. Surely it was meant as a decoration—something to sit on a bookshelf or tabletop.

Then came the following spring . . . My neighbor's visiting daughters brought over the most elegant bouquet—abundant, colorful, and artfully arranged, it was composed of fragrant lily of the valley blossoms, a few wild violets plucked from the yard around the garden, and bright green blades of grass bundled with a strand of chive. It was striking in its simplicity, and it stood about five inches tall! Whatever to put it in? A water glass was too clunky, a bud vase too narrow. It all became clear . . . The little emerald green vase with the gold rim was meant for this bouquet! Over the next few weeks, I encountered people of all ages selling petite bundles of lilies of the valley outside of shops and other venues. Even in the larger cities, these aromatic bundles were a steal for only 20 or 30 cents each. My friend knew before I did that I would need this dainty vase!

Coming up our driveway the other day, I noticed the native bluets in bloom alongside the ditch where the water is running after the recent rains. The diminutive bluets will show up perfectly in my little green vase. I've even got chives in the vegetable garden to tie up a small bundle. And I'll remember my first spring in the Czech Republic and my dear friend, Eva, who helped me to feel at home there. I wish you all a beautiful spring season filled with memories of loving friends and fragrant springs past.

Take good care.

Beth



## Musical Minute:

One of the coolest things about being a church musician (And believe me, there are so many cool things . . . ) is the opportunity to enjoy Christmas music, completely guilt free, in the month of May. This is not like the slightly uncomfortable secret that you enjoy watching Christmas movies on the Hallmark Channel out of season. That's something that you share only with the closest of friends, and only after they've admitted first that they do the same . . . No—a church musician exploring Christmas music in May is "work" or "research." Let's call it "advanced planning." And I have definitely been indulging in Christmas music over the last couple of weeks, preparing what I might play on the organ and piano later this year, as well as picking out some choral pieces for when we are able to sing together again. (This may be a while yet, depending on our progress with Covid- 19 vaccination, the further spread of virus variants, advice from the CDC and the wisdom of McAllister's Session, but I want to be ready!)

I love so many of McAllister's Christmastide standbys "Joseph Came Walking to Bethlehem," "The Snow Lay on the Ground" and "Bring a Torch, Jeanette Isabella." I've also found some new pieces and some fresh arrangements of well-known carols that I think we should try. Much of my choral planning will come down to you guys, however. When we can finally hold Adult Choir Practice, how many of you will come back? Will we perhaps have a few newcomers? Will we have rehearsal at the same time as always, or is now the time to reevaluate when it is most convenient for the majority of choir members? We've got lots to think about as we begin to reopen the church facility and restart some of our activities, but one thing that I hope you'll consider over the coming months is joining us for choir practice once we resume regular rehearsals. All that is required is a love of singing, the desire to lead your fellow congregants in worship, and the commitment to attend as regularly as you possibly can. Choir can be fun, relaxing, and spiritually rejuvenating. Studies have even shown that singing can be beneficial for

both body and mind. And don't forget, whenever we get back to practice, the Christmas anthems will be waiting for you with "good tidings of great joy...!"

Take good care.

Beth

May 30, 2021

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

Silence is terribly underrated. You may find that an odd thing for me to say, as my primary role at McAllister is to make noise! As an organist, I still get a kick from sitting at the console, depressing a bunch of stops, hitting a chord and hearing the mighty roar of the full organ. The temptation to do this is particularly alluring for young and beginning organists. (It's basically the keyboard equivalent of driving too fast when you're a teenager.) My first organ professor often advised me, "Not everything has to be loud and fast!" Well—it may not be necessary, but it's a whole lot of fun! So, some of you who may have found yourselves plugging your ears when I've played a particularly loud and bracing prelude or postlude may be surprised to learn that I'm actually a pretty quiet person, content to be alone with my own thoughts a good bit of the time. (A good friend once asked me, "Do you like being an organist because you like being alone or do you like being alone because you're an organist?" I'm not sure the answer to that question, but there's no doubt, we organists do spend a lot of solitary time in empty sanctuaries!)

Over the last two weeks I've had ample time outside planting my flowerpots for the summer and working in the vegetable garden. The birdsong has been glorious with mating pairs calling to one another and hatchlings screaming to be fed, all of it punctuated by the drumming of the various woodpecker species which live around our place. The evenings are filled with the calls of peepers and the gray tree frogs that live

high in the canopy around the house. There has to be silence to appreciate nature's abundant cacophony.

I certainly value the convenience of the now ubiquitous cellphone and the sense of security it provides, but I am particularly grateful to have been raised without one. There are days when I spend a good bit of time with my phone in my hand, but thankfully, there are more days when it stays in my purse or on the bench in the front hallway for the whole day. I may glance at it, but I don't pick it up. It's too easy to intentionally look something up online (useful) and then waste an hour scrolling through internet headlines (not useful!). Scrolling may be a quiet activity, but it doesn't translate to silence, or time to think.

I returned to McAllister in 2017 for various reasons, but a contributing factor and one of the most poignant was hearing our Holtkamp played at Susan Parker Potter's funeral in 2013. The sounds of the beautiful flute stops on our organ are as familiar to me as my own voice, and I found them speaking to me as we communally grieved the loss of our dear Susan. There wasn't absolute silence in the music, but there was quietude and serenity, and space to contemplate loss, joy, and purpose. The tiniest germ of a seed was planted . . . . (Could this have been one of those Pentecost moments that Pastor Jim spoke about in his sermon on Sunday?)

I'm going outside now to water my young tomato plants and listen to the birds sing. I hope that you're able to carve out some time this week for whatever brings you joy, calm, and time to think.  
Take good care.

Beth

June 13, 2021

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

While the weather has turned hot and humid this year a little too early for my taste, I have to admit that thanks to the early spring rains, this has been an exceedingly exuberant spring in the Allegheny Highlands. When Dawn Wilson and I met at McAllister last Saturday afternoon to run through her solos for the following day we both commented on how lovely the drive down Potts Creek into town had been. Anyone who makes this

drive regularly knows how beautiful the redbud is in early spring along a particularly rocky stretch of the winding two-lane road. On the drive in last Saturday, there were brilliant yellow wildflowers atop the seemingly barren ridge. Although I'm not sure what the flower is, I remember it well from the first year I returned home following mom's cancer diagnosis. Due to the more accessible layout of our house in the "country" the decision was made to move mom from her wonderful old home on Lexington Avenue to our place. It was a jarring and sudden decision for her after the devastating blow of her diagnosis. Once we got settled and our life started to take on some structure, we found ourselves driving into town at least once or twice a week. Route 18 never failed to surprise with its ever-changing seasonal finery. It brought joy and a sense of constancy to our new and disconcerting reality.

Mom will be gone for 10 years on June 27, but I think she'd be pleased to know how often we think of her, especially with the beauty and variety of the passing seasons. We have a bounty of perennial riches dug from her garden—forsythia, peonies, hostas, Black-eyed Susans, clematis and others, and every year I find contentment and solace in cutting flowers from the very plants that I know she planted, tended, and nurtured.

When Dawn came to rehearse last Saturday we discussed the text to Sunday's anthem, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." How perfect the words are for times such as these, and frankly for any other times. How perfectly fitting they were for such a beautiful early summer day. It's always been a favorite congregational hymn of mine, but in listening to



Dawn sing it as a solo, I found that the words took on a more personal nature. The second verse reads,

"Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest, sun, moon, and stars in their courses above, join with all nature in manifold witness to Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love."

The faith-affirming chorus follows:

"Great is Thy faithfulness!

Great is Thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see.  
All I have needed Thy hand has provided.  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me."

Now that's a resounding hymn of faith if I've ever heard one. (And I appreciated the "Amen!" that followed Dawn's rendition!) I look forward to accompanying all of you when we can safely sing together again. Won't that be a joyous day?!

Take good care.

Beth

July 2021    McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

Our lavender in the garden has bloomed so beautifully over the last month. I love how it sneaks up on us each year, the stem tips so gradually taking on pale shades of blue and purple that we don't even notice the plants beginning to color until the sun hits just right. Then, a couple of weeks later it blooms in earnest, the brilliantly hued spikes

almost vibrating against the green grass and the pale blue sky. I've always loved the scent of lavender, but I became enamored with the plant itself while on a trip to France almost 25 years ago.

We were already living overseas in 1997 when I had the amazing opportunity to join a group tour of the pipe organs of France. I joined my fellow travelers in Paris where we embarked upon a week of visiting and playing many of the most famous instruments in the city. At each cathedral and church, we were met by the host organist and given a thorough introduction to the instrument and its history, as well as an overview of the many famed players and composers whose hands had touched the keys (including, at the Cathedral of St. Sulpice, the much revered and beloved Charles-Marie Widor of "Widor's Toccata" fame).

The days were long lasting from early in the morning until midnight by the time we had dinner, and they were packed with so much information it was almost overwhelming, but it was a dream for any pipe organ player or organ devotee. And while the history and overview of the instruments were fascinating, there wasn't a single one of us who couldn't wait to hit the bench and make some noise! I had visited Paris before and had heard many of these marvelous instruments in concert, but I had never been granted entry to the organ loft to see the actual organ case, console, stop tablets, and pedalboard. (Many organ lofts in Europe are actually inaccessible from inside the worship space and are entered from outside the church, sometimes even from a different street at the larger cathedrals.) Playing at the Cathedral of Notre Dame will always remain a particularly special memory, as will playing the five manual instrument at St. Sulpice.

After seven exciting and informative days in Paris (And yes, I took a little time to do some shopping, too!), we flew to the south of France where we landed in Marseille on the coast of the Mediterranean. Picturesque, bustling Marseille served as our home base for several days of pipe organ exploration in Provence. Our touring in the south took on a much different pace than our days in Paris. Like departing New York City for more southern destinations, the hours seemed less hurried, and the sun cast a different glow. We lingered over longer lunches and dinners taking time to visit a church or two each morning and afternoon. One of the most unique experiences was a communal

meal served by nuns next to the Basilica of Notre-Dame de la Garde in Marseille, high on a hill above the sea. We sat at long tables with bench seating and had the most heavenly "Soupe au Pistou." Made with fresh local vegetables (green beans, shelled white beans, zucchini, onions, potatoes, tomatoes . . . ), it was the essence of summer in a bowl. It was served with an icy-cold dry rosé wine, baguettes baked earlier in the day, and bowls of fresh basil pesto for dolloping on the soup. It was a meal I remember to this moment -- fragrant, filling and restorative.

It was in a small town outside of Marseille that I saw one of the most beautiful sights of my life—a whole field of lavender in bloom. There had to have been thousands of plants. The scent was exquisite and the deeply colored rows stretched right to the horizon. It was, I believe, the last day of the tour before we would all go our separate ways, either home or on to further exploration in Europe, but of all the sights we had seen, this one, to me at least, has proven to be the most indelible and the most magical.

Seeing our own lavender in bloom over the last weeks prompted me to dig through my files and photographs to unearth some details of that trip so many years ago. It was an entertaining exercise in time travel. I remember a few of the faces (including someone who somewhat resembles me!), many of the pipe organs, and some of the magnificent historical sights. Unbelievably, I have no actual, tangible picture of that breathtaking lavender field—nothing that I can look at in an album or hold in my hand—just the one in my mind. And perhaps that's for the best . . . Here's to beautiful summer memories that remain ever so. No matter where you make them or with whom, I hope that all of you are able to create some of your own this year.

Take good care,

Beth



## Musical Minute:

I am a self-confessed news hound. As much as I love to listen to music, if I'm driving or tidying up in the kitchen, I will most often have the radio or the television tuned to the news. And no, I'm not going to tell you which 24-hour news broadcast I usually watch. You'll judge...And don't say that you won't. We all do these days! (How often have you heard or said the following, "The only reason she (or he) thinks/says/does/those things is because he sits around every night watching XXX news"? I know I've said it myself.) While the twenty-four hour news cycle can be convenient for learning about all that is going on in the world at any time of day or night, it can also be overwhelming. Whatever makes one sad or mad at 8 a.m. only serves to make one even more sad or mad at noon and downright depressed and furious by eight o'clock in the evening, I found myself in this predicament while preparing a bite of lunch a couple of weeks ago and decided to turn on some music instead.

Rather than listening to the radio, I decided to listen to something from our music library that I hadn't heard in a while. The change in my mood was lightning-fast and absolute! I was stunned to find myself suddenly singing aloud and dancing while making turkey sandwiches and slicing pickles. My instant mood changer came in the form of crooner Nat King Cole singing a World War II era piece titled, "If You Can't Smile and Say Yes." In it, an ardent suitor attempts to persuade a young lady to consent to go out on a date. I couldn't resist perking up at the chorus:

"Baby, let bygones be bygones,

'Cause men are scarce as nylons.

And if you can 't smile and say yes,  
please don't cry and say no."

Nat King Cole's voice is as smooth as butter and his piano technique is effortless and sparkling. In poking around online later, I learned that this song was #29 on the R&B Charts in 1945! How remarkable that Nat and his trio could transform my mood in July

of 2021. Music has that magical power to improve our outlook, make our day, and even transport us back in time. Maybe Nat King Cole doesn't do it for you, but I'll bet there's a singer or group or even a particular style of music that makes you want to sway. Who knows? Maybe it's Lady Gaga, Lady A, "Lady Day" Billie Holiday, Lyle Lovett, Kenny Chesney, Kenny Rogers, Frank Sinatra, Michael Jackson, or anything Broadway, Classical, Country, Motown, or Bluegrass, or anything fifties (or eighties!), or all things Rolling Stones or The Beatles (or The Monkees?!)...Your options are endless.

So, if you find yourself in the doldrums this week, or even if you don't, turn off your television and make some time for a little music of your choice. You'll be dancing before you know it!

Beth

September 2021

McAllister Messenger

## Musical Minute:

While the choir loft may be empty and it will be a bit longer before the adult choir can rehearse together again, that doesn't mean that there hasn't been some "lofty" thinking and planning going on. In anticipation of choir starting up again this fall, I spent several summer days perusing choral music catalogs and websites and I chose some beautiful new pieces for us to learn and sing. Several of these anthems have arrived in the last few weeks and I've enjoyed playing through them so that I can share them with our choir members, and, in turn, the choir can share them with you.

None of these pieces are particularly difficult, but the harmonies are fresh sounding, the melodies lovely (some even familiar), and the texts meaningful. I hope that you will love them as much as I do. And no need for concern—we'll keep McAllister's favorites in the mix. These anthems have been a part of our church's music ministry for years, even decades, and they hold a special place in my heart, too.

Several choir members expressed disappointment that we weren't able to restart rehearsals in September, but fear not, we WILL sing again at McAllister. The Session simply



wants to assure that we will be safe when we do so. (This is also my primary concern.) Other choir members have confessed anxiety over how long it has been since they've sung. No worries! Singing is like riding a bike, only easier! We'll be back in "fighting" form before we know it.

So, if you are a former or present choir member, I hope that you will rejoin the group when we are able to begin rehearsals. Invite a music-loving friend to come along! If you've never sung in a choir before but think you would like to dabble your toe in the proverbial musical waters, please consider giving us a try! Prior experience in a choir is not necessary, just a love of music and the desire to lead the congregation in song. All voices are welcome and valued, from the tiniest Tenor to the boldest Bass and everything in between. Every individual voice contributes to the whole and aids in the worship of God. If you'd like to discuss choir membership with me, simply call the church and leave a message and I'll happily be in touch with you.

In preparing for the coming fall season, I've been researching prayers for choirs—something perfect to recite before each rehearsal and worship service. Below is one of my favorites. Titled "The Choristers' Prayer" it is thought to have been written in the 1930s. I've found several variations of it online, but I believe the following says it perfectly:

"Bless, O Lord, us Thy servants who minister in Thy temple.  
Grant that what we sing with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts we may show forth in our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen."

I look forward to seeing you in the choir loft.

**Beth**

October 2021

McAllister Messenger

## Musical Minute:

McAllister's got talent! Our congregation has been blessed over the decades with scores of committed musicians who have generously and tirelessly shared their musical gifts in leading worship. I don't think that any of us who know the longstanding tradition of music at McAllister could have ever imagined a time when the choir loft fell silent. Thanks to the unwavering commitment of our vocalists, our sanctuary wasn't silent for long, in spite of Covid's best efforts. My sincere and most heartfelt thanks goes to each of you, both McAllister members and those outside of our church, who have returned my calls and texts as I have relentlessly pursued you in search of soloists during the last months!



And while we're on the topic of music, I'd like to introduce you to one of my very favorite words: hudba! It rhymes a bit with tuba but with an H on the front and a D in the middle (hood-ba). In Czech it means "music." I think it's one of the most charming, magical words of any language. How can such a word not make you smile? It sounds like something Dr. Seuss would have dreamed up. (Just imagine all of the "Whos" in "Whoville" in a rousing chorus of "holiday hudba" in "How the Grinch Stole Christmas"!) Although we've not lived in the Czech Republic for years, Andy can tell you that hudba is still very much a part of my vocabulary. It's usually one of the first words out of my mouth when we return home from elsewhere as I turn on the sound system and say, "We need some hudba." Our church needs some hudba, too. In this late, but still active, phase of the pandemic we have some planning to do about how to safely gather the adult choir in the sanctuary for Sunday morning services, but we are about to make McAllister's halls once again ring with some heavenly hudba!

I thought it would be nice to jumpstart McAllister's adult choir program so that we have a few pieces in store for when we can safely begin contributing to worship. Here is the plan for October 2021:

**Saturday, October 9, 2021:**

The WOMEN of the adult choir (and other interested female individuals) will meet in the Fellowship Hall from 10:30 AM until 12 PM. There is a nice piano in the Fellowship Hall, good lighting, and we can maintain safe social distancing. We'll work on some Choral Calls to Worship, some new and some classic anthems, as well as some Benediction Responses. If you feel comfortable doing so, please bring a lunch from home or from your favorite eatery so that we might enjoy a socially distanced lunch after our rehearsal.

**Saturday, October 16, 2021:**

GENTLEMEN SINGERS – Please gather in the Fellowship Hall at 10:30 AM so that we can work on some music for later this year. We'll go until about noon unless you'd like to sing even longer!

I don't know about you, but this hudba hiatus has seemed interminably long and I can hardly wait to hear you sing together again! As I mentioned in a previous newsletter, I have some wonderful new anthems picked out as well as some seasoned McAllister favorites. If you've never sung in our choir, or any other choir for that matter, please join us for one of our Saturday sessions and see how you like it. There is no pressure to join. (Although we do have a rather large butterfly net hidden in the corner for wavering singers!) We would love to have you, even if it's just for a day.

See you in October for some Hudba in the Hall!

## Beth

- \* *I respectfully ask that all attendees be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. If you have not yet had the opportunity to receive your vaccine, please begin the process. We can't wait to have you join us in song!*



## Musical Minute:

While we Presbyterians know "All Saints' Day" as a special day in the liturgical calendar, and while we may even sing the hymn, "For All the Saints Who from Their Labors Rest" on the Sunday nearest the start of November, I've never been in a Protestant church where it receives much more than a mention. During our years in the Czech Republic and Austria however, I discovered that while not a national holiday, the day is marked and celebrated in these countries where Catholicism has historically played a significant role.



In the lovely city of Svitavy, CZ, where Andrew and I lived for more than six years, there was a beautiful gothic church with an adjacent walled cemetery with graves pre-dating the 1700s. A good friend, a new young Czech friend, knowing my love of old churches, took me about a week before All Saints' Day to see the preparation and tidying of the graves in anticipation of the holy day. We entered the cemetery through elaborate wrought iron gates. The graves were marked with weighty, ornate markers and stones and the names of long-since departed Czechs, Slovaks, and Germans who had once called the area home. There was a hubbub of activity in the cemetery the day we visited as families, some local, some from away, cleaned around the graves of loved ones and placed evergreen wreaths and other hardy arrangements that could withstand the bitter temperatures and wintry elements of the coming months.

My friend took me back to the venerable cemetery on the evening of November 1 to experience the full magic of All Saints' Day. We walked through the cold, damp city, our breath hanging in the air as we talked. Even with a down coat, woolen hat, and boots, and the exertion of walking, my feet were numb from the cold. We were still several blocks from the cemetery when he pointed out the warm golden glow emanating above the cemetery walls. It looked as though there was a bonfire inside, but there was no smoke. As we got closer, we could see a stream of people entering and exiting. The mood was convivial yet hushed. It was probably no later than 6 PM, but the sky was already an inky black. Such a beautiful sight greeted us as we entered the cemetery walls. There were thousands of tea lights, pillar candles, and oil lamps burning. There

were so many open flames that upon walking through the gates, we could actually feel the temperature rise.

It was an astonishing and moving experience, and I made sure to visit the cemetery as often as possible during our years in Svitavy. All Saints' Day actually stretched on for several days, as the candles and lamps burned until they were spent. There were years that I went more than once, soaking up the magical, serene atmosphere in the still, cold night. Andy and I visited several times together and when he was traveling there were times that I went alone. One time, I remember a light coating of snow on the ground reflected the flickering lights all the more, brightening the cemetery and further exaggerating the line between the warm light and dark shadow. The quietude, solemnity and yes, joy, of the whole experience never failed to impress me.

Not long after we returned to the United States, Andy built me a little chapel with an open alcove for a candle. It resembles the small roadside kapličky (little chapels) that I admired in the Czech Republic and Austria and is a replica of one that Andy built for his parents when he was in high school. He mounted it on a post outside of our den window where we can see it from the house. I always burn a candle in it at Christmas, New Year's Eve, and to mark our parents' birthdays, the anniversaries of their passing, and the dates on which we lost our beloved dogs. This year I think I'll light a candle to mark All Saints' Day, celebrating the connectedness of all of us, past and present, who have found our home in the church universal.

Hope that your November is full of new joys and cherished memories.

Beth

## Musical Minute:

Sunday, November 14, 2021, marked the first time the Adult Choir sang from the choir loft in 623 days. The members were all excited to be participating in the service again and we were all so touched and humbled by the spontaneous and exuberant applause from the congregation. A few of us (I'm not saying which) even got a little teary-eyed! Thank you so much for your appreciation of our dedicated vocalists. The choir began rehearsing in mid-October and all of the singers have been working diligently to learn new repertoire and refresh some old favorites. When I talked with big brother Nick last week before the choir sang its first new anthem from the loft, I shared with him my concerns that the circumstances (physically distanced and masked) were less than ideal for a stellar performance. Nick quickly put things in perspective by reminding me that last year at this time, no choirs were singing together at all. The very fact that McAllister's choir has been rehearsing together for more than a month and that they were preparing to sing an anthem as a group was indeed, "ideal." (And, may I say, the choir did a lovely job with the anthem last Sunday. Thanks guys!)



Tammy Scruggs-Duncan worked tirelessly to assemble a children's ensemble to sing last week's Choral Call to Worship. Thanks to Covid-19 concerns, the exact make-up of the group was in a state of flux almost until the last minute. On Saturday morning, with all of the other singers sidelined, both Mason and Maddox Hale bravely agreed to go it alone. And they did an absolutely beautiful job. In the end, even though it was not what anyone had initially envisioned, it was "ideal."

We really are in a better place than we were a year and a half ago, and even 8 months ago. Due to the long-reaching effects of the pandemic, the upcoming holidays may still contain some unexpected bumps, but at least most of us will be able to celebrate with family, even if in smaller groups than those to which we are accustomed. No matter what shape your holidays take this year, I hope that you will find a way to make them "ideal."

Beth

Mid December 2021 thru January 2022 McAllister Messenger

## Musical Minute:

Every culture that celebrates the birth of Christ has its Christmas food traditions. The British have their "figgy" pudding, the French their *Buche de Noel*, or Yule Log, and the Italians their *Panettone* sweet bread. We discovered while in the Czech Republic that every Czech household becomes a veritable cookie factory in the weeks preceding Christmas. Mothers, daughters, sisters, and cousins, and depending on the family, fathers, and sons, too, all get together to ease the process of shaping and baking hundreds of cookies destined for the Christmas feast and the following days of revelry. There are sugar-coated vanilla crescent cookies, cream-stuffed nut cookies in the shape of a walnut, small, spicy tender-crumbed bear paws, marzipan hedgehogs, pressed Linzer torte cookies filled with jam with the upper cookie cut out, so the jelly shines like a stained-glass window, and a myriad of other sweet variations.

The first Christmas season that we lived in the Czech Republic, we hosted an open house to thank the many people who had assisted us personally in getting settled into our new home and life as well as those who were aiding in getting Westvaco's greenfield printing facility built. The house was chock full and the mood was merry as, in broken English and Czech, we all got to know one another a bit better. As the night went on, we realized that something was happening in the city square not too far away. One by one our guests came to us and explained that they needed to run to the city center but would be back within the hour. We weren't sure what was up, but finally someone explained that the Christmas carp had arrived! Our visitors were all heading into town to pick their live carp out of a barrel and then take it home where it would live in the family bathtub until December 24. We learned that the traditional Czech Christmas feast consists of fried carp and potato salad preceded and followed by dozens of the aforementioned cookies. It didn't take long for one of our new friends to decide that since the Americans were living in the Czech Republic, the Americans needed to experience an authentic Czech Christmas dinner! He disappeared briefly and soon returned with a heavy-duty plastic shopping bag, the contents of which were noticeably alive. Yes—it was our very own Christmas carp! We named him Ralph and hastily took him to the ground floor bathroom to put him in the tub. He was a handsome, heavy fish, but was none too happy for having been out of the water for some minutes. As you

know, carp are bottom dwellers and are known for having a distinct flavor directly related to their habitat. They are also meaty and tender, and the time spent in the fresh water of the bath is meant to minimize some of that earthy (i.e., muddy) flavor.

At the time of Ralph's arrival, the Westvaco offices were still located on the ground floor of our private residence while we awaited completion of the new factory. This meant that our Christmas carp inhabited the company restroom. Any visitor to the facilities during the days preceding Christmas was greeted by an emphatic "swish" and the occasional splash of a seemingly indignant fish that had been unwittingly transported from its familiar environment. Keeping Ralph as a pet long term was not an option, so there was nothing for me to do but pour over my cookbooks looking for recipes for large freshwater fish. Our Czech friends all suggested that after the fish met his demise, its flavor would be further cleansed and enhanced by a long soak in a milk bath the day of cooking. I listened to every tidbit of advice on carp preparation I was given and also decided to make a huge casserole of scalloped potatoes as insurance in case the fish was a disappointment (or a disaster)! We "prepared" Ralph a couple of days before Christmas so that we might enjoy some of our own Christmas food traditions on the actual day. While my baked fish preparation was not authentically Czech, it was memorably tasty, and the scalloped potatoes were truly a side dish rather than the main course.

Over the years we were honored to be included in the family Christmas festivities of several of our Czech friends where we tasted carp as it was meant to be cooked—deep fried, crispy and served piping hot. Carp won't be on our menu this Christmas Eve, but we do have a wonderful hand-carved wooden carp (the very image of Ralph) that Andy gave me as a Christmas gift during our years in the Czech Republic. It presides over our living room year-round, a reminder of the most beautiful expressions of the Christmas season—generosity, kindness, friendship, hospitality, community, tradition, family, and love. While I'm pretty certain that it won't be a carp, I hope that you are surrounded this Christmastide by whatever evokes these sentiments for you. Merry Christmas and Veselé Vánoce!



Beth

## Dear members and friends of McAllister Memorial Presbyterian Church

In 2020 we were stunned to learn what a never-before-heard-of virus could take away from us. In 2021 we adapted and slowly began to wrestle back bits of the ground we had lost. If nothing else, the Coronavirus pandemic has shown the resilience of humanity in the face of extraordinary challenge and during these last two years, the family of God at McAllister has continued to minister to one another and to those outside of our number in various ways.

A good friend recently shared with me a photograph of her newborn granddaughter—barely eight days old at the time of the photo. We stared at the sleeping beauty and marveled at her perfection. It was impossible not to wonder what the future will hold for this lovely child born in late December 2021. She literally has her whole life ahead of her.

The same can be said of us, even though we may be a little more “seasoned” than baby Grace. While the end of the year is often a time for reflection and remembrance, a time for summing up what we’ve gained and what we’ve lost, each new year begins with promise and opportunity. Although technically just another day on the calendar, the beginning of the year is a chance to be figuratively reborn. I am optimistic that in the coming year we can continue regaining even more of that ground that we lost over the last two years.

In the spirit of reflection, I offer you this compilation of Musical Minutes from the year 2021 sent to church members and friends of the church in the McAllister Messenger newsletter. In the spirit of rebirth, I wish all of you health and a reinvigorated perspective on life. I look forward to seeing what the McAllister church family will accomplish in the new year.

### Beth

Elizabeth Leitch Dreszer  
Organist and Choir Director

