

Seeds

Dec '23/Jan '24

encourage - inspire - challenge



Augustine
United Church

Faith in a fractured world

Revd Fiona
Bennett



Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.' (Hebrews 11:1, King James version)

To have faith in a chair is to be willing to risk my body weight in it.

To have faith in an organisation is to trust that it will function, in both spirit and practice, as it set out to do.

To have faith in a person is to trust that they will behave as we believe them to have said they would.

All these expressions of faith are rooted in the reality that people (as individuals and in systems) are limited and flawed... and the same can be true for furniture!

Jesus invites us to recognise that all the trust and faith we place in our lives are phases in a much wider story; faith in the God of Sara, Moses, Deborah, Elijah, Mary and Jesus. Faith in this God offers us hope, peace, courage and purpose even when our faith in people, systems and things is disappointed or fractured.

Faith in the God of Jesus is not the unquestioning acceptance of a

dogmatic system; it is trusting that God's steadfast love for all is eternal and unwavering, and that, even in the most desperate and complex messes in our lives and world, God's Spirit is already working to bring new life.

At Christmas we remember the story of a young girl, living under occupation, who found herself pregnant and trusted God for an uncertain future.

At Christmas the story begins of a manger king, a status-less messiah, a vulnerable saviour, who was worshipped by shepherds, trusted by foreign women, hunted by the authorities, executed out of fear, and yet who trusted and followed God's Spirit to birth new life out of the ashes of injustice and death. His trust was not misplaced.

This is the God of Sara, Moses, Deborah, Elijah, Mary and Jesus, who is still shaping the story of our world today, whose love for all never wavers, and who is already creating new life from the ashes of broken trust and pain. This is the God we are invited to trust in, having faith that God is already creating new life even when we cannot see it or currently feel it. Throughout the waiting of Advent and the celebration of Christmas, I hope trusting and having faith in the God of Jesus will bring us peace and hope for all.

'Now faith is the substance of things hoped for,' said the writer of Hebrews; 'the evidence of things not seen.'

This Month

WHAT IF...

...we did the right things, made the right choices?



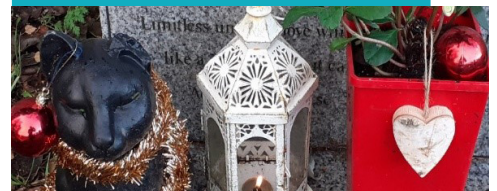
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ROOTS

Andrew Owens describes the recent anniversary celebrations



PLACES OF MEMORY

Mandy Rathjen introduces her work of grave tending



STATUS OF OUR SPECIES

The latest State of Nature report from A Rocha





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Within AUC there are Ministry Teams which are responsible for different areas of Church Life.
If you would like to know more or get involved with one of these please email the contact person.

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We are always looking for volunteers to undertake various tasks each week to keep church happening. Perhaps you could consider learning how to make coffee or welcome people. To find out more, contact:

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LOCAL COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERING

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Local and Global

News from the United Reformed Church



WE ARE TWINNED!

Six AUC toilets will be twinned with toilets in Africa, thanks to a quiz and fundraiser on 12 November. Many thanks to Moira, who had the idea and organised the quiz. Find out more about the project at toilettwinning.org/.



CALL FOR PRAYERS

Prayers have been requested for the 2025 URC Prayer Handbook. The theme for 2025 is 'Immersive Joy', and the editors are looking both for prayers that link to the Lectionary of Bible readings, and those that can be used at any time. You are invited 'to write as you would pray – no special words or format is needed'. The deadline is 24 February 2024. All the details you need are on the URC website (go to Latest News). Submissions should be sent to phb@urc.org.uk.

The Methodist Prayer Handbook editors are also looking for prayers, on the theme of 'Praise and Protest', inspired by Mary's 'Magnificat' (Luke 1:46-55). The deadline is 8 January 2024. All details at the Methodist website, and submissions to be sent to prayerhandbook@methodistchurch.org.uk.

Header globe icon by Vectors Market
via Noun Project

HOW CAN THERE BE CHRISTMAS?

The patriarchs and heads of churches in Jerusalem have asked that Christians in the region refrain from usual festivities during the Advent and Christmas seasons in honour of those who have lost homes or family members. They said that, in 'normal' times, Christian communities throughout the Holy Land take great delight in holding large-scale religious services and public festivities with bright light displays and ornate decorations. However, 'these are not normal times', they said.

'Despite our repeated calls for a humanitarian ceasefire and a de-escalation of violence, the war continues.' The Holy Land leaders have asked their congregations to 'stand strong with those facing such afflictions by this year foregoing any unnecessarily festive activities'.



PLAN FOR NON-BINARY PEOPLE WELCOMED

The Scottish Government's Non-Binary Equality Action Plan, published on 16 November, was welcomed by seven national LGBTI organisations in Scotland, including Equality Network, LGBT Youth Scotland, and Stonewall Scotland.

A Working Group for Non-Binary Equality had proposed 38 actions that could help reduce barriers non-

binary people face to equal treatment in services, policy and the law. They include providing guidance on updating name changes in a timely way and improving the evidence that exists on non-binary people's lives. Most recommendations have been accepted.



The organisations believe this is the first time any government in the world has set out commitments specifically focused on improving the experiences of non-binary people.

HELP TIP THE PLASTIC SCALES

The Christian charity Tearfund has called for bolder cooperation between governments following a disappointing end to plastic treaty talks in Kenya. Governments, corporations and NGOs have been drafting international rules against plastic pollution, but Tearfund blamed a coalition of plastic-producing countries and petrochemical groups for significantly delaying progress.

A final round of talks will take place in South Korea in November 2024, but there will be no interim discussions before that, as originally proposed.

Tearfund campaigner the Revd Dennis Nthenge has urged citizens around the world to 'demand decisive action against plastic pollutions, tipping the scales towards a world-changing treaty'.

Life on the Bridge

News from Augustine United Church



WORSHIP AT AUC – WHAT'S COMING UP

During Advent, we welcome the Revd Paul Whittle on 3 December, in what will be his last service with us as Moderator of the URC's National Synod of Scotland.

There will be an all-age nativity and gift service on the 17th and a carol service on Christmas Eve – 24 December. On Christmas Day itself, all-age worship will begin at the earlier time of 10.30am.

Worship on Sunday 31st will help lead us towards 2024.

OUR TRIBE THIS ADVENT

Our Tribe will meet on **Thursday 7 December** at 7.30pm GMT / 9.30pm EET / 2.30pm ET / 1.30pm CT / 11.30am PT on Zoom. We will be joined by Queen Jesus.

Jo Clifford writes: 'Queen Jesus has been globetrotting since she was last with Our Tribe.

She's been all round Norway, in Melbourne, in Florida, is being read in secret in Karachi, and recently was seen in Iona Abbey (pictured) and Manchester Cathedral. Blessing people, and being blessed, wherever she goes.

It seems like a miracle that this gentle invitation to imagine Jesus returning to earth as a trans woman should still speak to so many people all over the world.

I thought we'd celebrate her 14th Christmas with a new story – about the shepherds – alongside a selection of her usual parables. And a Communion. And her Blessing...'

The Zoom room will open at 7.30pm

GMT for 15 minutes of chat; 45/60 minutes for Queen Jesus performance (audience muted); 15 minutes more social/chat. This event is live and not recorded. For the Zoom link, email ourtribe@augustine.org.uk.

We will also meet on **4 January 2024**: Epiphany – 'Every day is a new start!' Our Tribe is the LGBTQI+ ministry at Augustine United Church. It is a joint ministry with the worldwide Metropolitan Community Church.



All LGBTQI+ folks are welcome – friends, family and allies. You do not need to have been before or be a member of a church to come along. Our Tribe welcomes everyone who is seeking to follow an inclusive life journey.

If you would like to receive regular emails about Our Tribe and other Augustine United Church events please email our office manager, Rachel Fitzgerald, who will organise

for your details to be held on our secure database: centre.manager@augustine.org.uk.

We look forward to meeting you on Zoom.

*Revd Elder Maxwell Reay and the
Our Tribe Team*

ELDERS NEEDED

An election of Elders will be held at the AUC Church Meeting on Sunday, 10 December. However, as we go to print, nominations are still needed.

Four Elders will stand down, all having completed a first term. Two have agreed to allow their names to go forward to a second term. Two will step back at this time for other commitments. Throughout 2023, there have been a further two vacancies on Church Council, meaning there are a further four vacancies in all.

Nominations should be with Linda Harrison, the Church Secretary, in writing (which may be by email) by Thursday, 7 December, proposed by a full church member, seconded by a full church member, and with the prior agreement of the nominee. Contact Linda for further information.

Happy birthday, Roots!

AUC member Andrew Owens is one of the leaders of Roots, a 'grace-driven' student community and a space to 'talk about things like life and faith'. He describes the recent anniversary celebration as 'a combination of people from the entire history of Roots coming together to celebrate and share with each other.'

Early in September, we were able to gather current students, alumni, donors, and other partners all under one roof for the first time to celebrate the last ten years of Roots.



We hosted in the beautifully renovated Greyfriars Charteris Centre, which made the event feel extra special. The event was centred around the same three things that we tell students they can expect each Tuesday Night with Roots: food, fun, and something meaningful. Everyone shared a meal together, complete with a birthday cake baked by one of the current Roots students.

After dinner, we played 'human bingo', which is a game we play at least once a term. Each person has a bingo card and the squares say things like, 'has played in the Roots band', 'has attended a university in Edinburgh', or 'has been to the current Roots house'.

To cross off a square, people had to walk around and ask others if they fit that category. We all had a great time getting to learn more about each other and share some of how we've been connected to Roots through the years. One couple who have supported Roots for all ten years and who live in the USA happened to have a holiday planned that overlapped with the party. They were the only people who fit the 'travelled from outside of Scotland to be here' square, so they were especially popular!

We watched a short video telling the story of Roots, which was also shared during the AUC church service on 19 November, and we ended the night by sharing how we, the team at Roots, are thankful to all the people who were in the room, and those who could not be there as well. Roots would not be what it is without the involvement of each person.

We also thanked God for God's presence through this journey and the opportunity to participate in creating a more loving world.



Afternoon tea at AUC – A special gathering was held in the church on Saturday, 21 October – a time to enjoy good company, and afternoon tea the way it should be served! Plus a few star turns – including from Molly, pictured.

What if everything went right?



K – so we borrowed the question! (From the excellent Positive News magazine and website: www.positive.news) But it's a good question. What if we imagine the world God imagines? What, if we did the right things, made the right choices, would that look like?

We received some varied and thoughtful responses. Trust, patience, hope and joy shine through.

REMOVE BORDERS

'What if the world had no borders? In most places borders are signified by signage, but in some places there are physical barriers put up to prevent movement and to prevent hope (like the American/Mexico border wall and fence). What if the freedom to be who you need to be without these borders was made possible, and acceptance of who you are and a safe place for you to be that person was at the top of the list for allowing everything to be alright? Maybe violence toward each other would cease because everyone is allowing themselves and others to be who they truly are in God's eyes.' (Karl)

BE 'UNENCUMBERED'

'As one who is encumbered (especially by things), I tend to fret about stuff and the finances attached to such stuff. This is not about the things needed, but the things of abundance and even excess. And yet, as we travelled to Europe last summer (with a fair amount of baggage), I was reminded again and again... It is alright to not have the "right tool for the job" at all times. Even when a piece of luggage took a side trip, we not only survived, but we were constantly gifted with joy. Thanks be to God for that!' (David K.)

"Right choices don't become wrong choices because they don't completely fix a problem"

EMBRACE RENEWABLES

'The International Energy Agency has confirmed that the movement towards renewables in energy and transport really is making a substantial (if not sufficient) difference to the speed at which we reach "peak oil", and is significantly slowing the global temperature rise we remain locked into. And everyone who makes a change in their own lives changes both their own attitudes and those of others. Right choices don't become wrong choices merely because they don't completely fix a problem. We need to escape from the oppression of mathematics – the idea that one more commitment is pointless and futile – and learn more from the gift of God's grace, transforming the right things in ways we need not follow but it helps us to trust.' (David C.)



Photo by Tim Mossholder on Unsplash

MOVE FORWARD – NOT BACK

‘Some of us who are older might be wondering whether “alright” for the churches might be how they were in the ‘good old days’, when churches were full, singing was hearty, and a sense of inspiration encouraged young and old alike in their faith.

‘These days, the churches are generally not full on Sundays. But at Augustine, we are blessed with a warm atmosphere, comfortable seats, and technology which enhances the sound, gives us some great images, enables us to sing without having to handle heavy hymn books, and with kitchens and toilet facilities. (Not always the

case in the past, or even today.) We are inclusive and ecumenical, which enables us to give and receive gifts of lifestyle, culture and tradition to and from our friends in the congregation. The technology means that our worship is reached by searchers – and surfers – around the world, we make new friends, and some folk may meet Christ for the first time in this way. The church has an outreach not dreamed of ten or twenty years ago.

‘Returning to the “good old days” would certainly not be “alright” for the Church. I believe that “God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year”. God’s timings are not ours, and we need lots of patience!’ (Anne)



Photo by Joanna Kosinska on Unsplash

Christmas giving at Augustine

Look out for more details about Christmas collections and giving this year. Signing up to the Friday email is a good way of keeping in the loop – contact Rachel at centre.manager@augustine.org.uk if you want to be added to the list.

Here are the main points:

Sunday 17 December is AUC’s Gift Day and Nativity.

We are invited to bring goods to the service, which will be delivered to the Food Project, who supply several foodbanks across Edinburgh. (A list of the goods required will be circulated.)

For the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, we are invited to **make cash donations toward a gift card**, which the chaplains can use to buy needed items for patients. Either bring cash on the 17th or make an online donation to AUC and mark it REH.

The **Junior Church** has prepared a **card** for those who wish to sign and donate to Christian Aid in lieu of sending cards to those in the congregation.

In addition, we’re **continuing to support Roots** in their excellent work with students here in Edinburgh (see ‘Happy Birthday Roots!’ p.5); and, as in previous years, a substantial donation will be made from church funds to the **Grassmarket Community Project**, to support the work of providing meals for those in need.

SUPPORT AUC WITH ONLINE SHOPPING

If you do some of your Christmas shopping online this year (over 50% of us will), why not sign up to easyfundraising.org.uk? AUC is registered with the organisation, which means that many of the places we shop at will donate a small amount to our church. It all adds up!



Places of memory held with care

Mandy Rathjen has been offering her skills and care for others as a 'gravetender', and in graveyards she learns, too, about nature and parts of the ecosystem that thrive there. In this article, she introduces her work of grave tending, which she undertakes through her business, Yew Tree Grave Care.

Grave Tending is a very important service, although many people are unaware that it exists. There are a growing number of people working as grave tenders.

There are many reasons why it might not be possible to visit and maintain a grave. Distance, time, health, and energy can be factors for many people. It may just be the wish for a peaceful visit to the grave of family or friends, without having to think about maintenance tasks.

More and more people are interested in genealogy and might have discovered an overgrown family grave which they want to respectfully restore. Gravetending is not about

creating artificially bright memorials which could jar with a beautiful old burial ground. The aim is to care for each memorial sensitively while reflecting the wishes of the family.



Association of
**GRAVE
TENDERS**

Tending a grave can mean taking fresh flowers for a special anniversary or it can include regularly cleaning the memorial, picking up debris, weeding, plant maintenance, and even replacing weathered lettering. These simple acts can offer peace of

mind and reassurance that the grave of someone special is not neglected. The emotional support for someone who has been bereaved is central to grave tending, but value is also given to caring for the environment. Grave tenders will also work in line with the guidance and rules for each graveyard or cemetery. For example, some churchyards are home to beautiful, rare lichens and trustees work hard to protect their natural heritage.

Most grave tenders will make careful decisions about using environmentally friendly cleaning processes, avoiding weedkiller and single use plastics, reducing carbon use, and encouraging nature with thoughtful planting.





The Association of Grave Tenders was started up by a small group of us with a commitment to good ethical practice and mutual support across the UK. We were inspired to start gravetending after hearing our current Chair, Jo Hogger, talking on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* about how she redirected her career as a result of Covid, training as a florist and then becoming a grave tender.

Being a grave tender is a real privilege. The work is not to be rushed, but rather to be thoughtfully offered in tune with the calm contemplative atmosphere of a graveyard. A salve in this busy complicated world.

Below is the short story of one grave I tend. Names have been changed, but my neighbour has given permission for pictures. She said her husband would have liked being 'famous'.

WHITE SUITS AND JAZZ CATS

My neighbour Nancy's husband, Jim, died seven years ago. Far too young, and after only ten short but happy married years together. Whenever Jim and Nancy stepped out, they were the

most stylish couple in the street, with white suits and high heels and straw hats.

"The work is not to be rushed, but rather to be thoughtfully offered in tune with the calm contemplative atmosphere of a graveyard"

Nancy moved away after Jim died and, even though she is building a new life, she misses Jim every day. When she heard I was setting up a grave tending service, Nancy asked me to tidy up his grave and take some birthday flowers. This became Christmas and Easter as well.

As a neighbour and friend, I was happy to do this and, in return, Nancy was always willing for me to take photos. She thought Jim would have loved the idea of being on my website.

Jim was a marine engineer and loved the sea, the stars, Liverpool, and the Beatles. He was a big jazz fan and always had a cat named after different jazz musicians. The black cat statue in the photo (p.8) was Satch, who in real life also had a torn ear.

It has been such a joy to think about how to make sure the grave tending reflects Nancy's 'magnificent husband', as his inscription reads. He has to have red flowers for Liverpool, hearts from Nancy, as well as some mussel shells for the sea and lanterns for the stars at night. The plant, a 'Christmas Carol' Hellebore, reminds me of him and Nancy singing in the garden over a bottle of wine. Even Satch had a jaunty piratical Christmas bauble last year.

You can find out more about Mandy's work via the Association of Grave Tenders website:

www.associationofgravetenders.org/directory-of-members/yew-tree-grave-care.

Speaking up for nature

A Rocha UK, an umbrella organisation for church communities concerned about our world, joined with over 60 nature organisations and government agencies to present the clearest picture yet of the status of our species across land and sea.

The latest *State of Nature* report shows that the UK is now one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth, with one in six species approaching extinction.

The report also provides clear evidence of climate change becoming a major driver of damage, alongside damaging farming practices such as the over-use of pesticides.

The report was published at the end of September. Andy Atkins, CEO of A Rocha UK, writes:

‘Several findings stand out. Approaching one in six UK wildlife species are now at risk of extinction, compared with one in ten at the time of the last report, in 2019. Forty three per cent of UK birds are in decline, red squirrel numbers have plummeted by 37% in the last 20 years, and only a fifth of farmland is farmed in a nature-friendly way. Just 7% of woodlands in the UK are considered to be in an ecologically good state. Climate change is now a major driver of damage to nature, alongside farming practices such as overuse of pesticides, habitat destruction and fragmentation, and pollution of our rivers and seas.

‘There is some good news. Certain species are bucking the downward trends as a result of concerted efforts to protect them and bring about their recovery. The large blue butterfly, Camberwell beauty, red kite, peregrine and European bittern are just a few of the species enjoying an ongoing recovery. Also, we now have more forested land in the UK than at any other time in the last 1,000 years, although not all of it is the right forest for nature.

‘The report lays bare the contradictions in the UK’s relationship with nature. The UK has a long tradition of nature conservation. The RSPB for example, was founded in the late 19th century; our first National Park, the Peak District, over 70 years ago. Yet we are one of the most

“The report lays bare the contradictions in the UK’s relationship with nature”

nature-poor countries in Europe. The UK government recently signed up to an international goal to halt and begin to reverse nature loss by 2030, but its current policies will not achieve this and in some cases, are making things worse.’

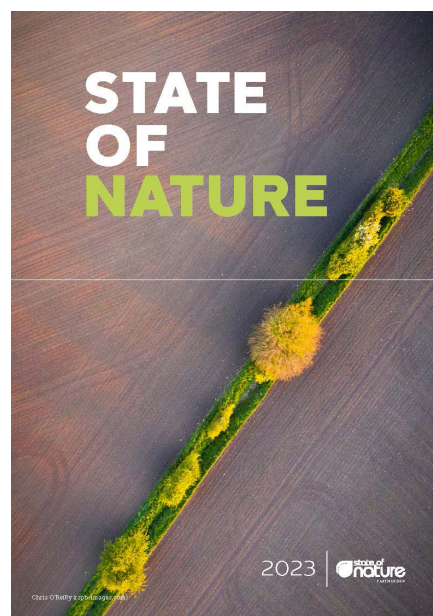
The *State of Nature* report sets out the actions necessary to meet biodiversity and climate targets, including implementing nature-friendly farming at a much wider scale, expanding

protected areas for nature, and restoring and creating carbon-rich habitats to unlock co-benefits for nature and climate. However, only our governments have the powerful legislative and structural levers to roll these solutions out at scale.

So, A Rocha UK is encouraging supporters (and even those who are not

supporters!) to email their MP, asking them to back policies to restore nature in the UK.

You can read the full *State of Nature* report at www.stateofnature.org.uk.



Turning people into trees

This thought from Ram Dass, an 'American spiritual seeker', was doing the rounds recently.

It speaks eloquently of trees and nature (see p. 10), but also of an approach to human relationships that fits well with the kinds of values we speak of AUC. It expresses in another way the vision that Karl shares eloquently in 'What if everything went right?' (pp.6-7).

'When you go out into the woods and look at trees, you see all these different trees. And some of them are bent, and

some of them are straight, and some of them are evergreens, and some of them are whatever. And you look at the tree and allow it. You see why it is the way it is. You sort of understand that it didn't get enough light, and so it turned that way. And you don't get all emotional about it. You just allow it. You appreciate the tree. The minute you get near humans, you lose all that. And you're constantly saying "You're too this," or "I'm too this." That judging mind comes in. And so I practice turning people into trees. Which means appreciating them just the way they are.'

If God should go on strike

Molly came across an old newspaper cutting recently (*The Scotsman*, perhaps?), which included the following poem.

It had been published in the paper before, and the editor wrote: 'I've never known anything like it. Half my

mail last week was from readers all sharing the same sentiment. They want me to reprint this poem. When you read it, you'll understand why.'

Following a year and more of strikes across Britain, do we have sympathy with the poet, or not? Do we understand what they're wanting to say about God? Do we react with a bit of, 'Well, yes... but...?'

*How good it is that God above has never gone on strike,
because He was not treated fair in things he didn't like.*

*If only once He'd given up and said,
'That's it, I'm through!
I've had enough of those on earth,
so this is what I'll do.
I'll give my orders to the sun – "cut off the heat supply".
And to the moon – "give no more light",
and run the oceans dry.
Then just to make things really tough and put the pressure on,
turn off the vital oxygen till every breath is gone."*

*You know he would be justified,
if fairness was the game,
for no one has been more abused or met with more disdain than God.
And yet he carries on, supplying you and me
with all the favours of His grace, and everything for free.
Men say they want a better deal, and so on strike they go.
But what a deal we've given God, to whom all things we owe.
We don't care who we hurt to gain the things we like.
But what a mess we'd all be in,
if God should go on strike.*

(Attributed on different occasions to Mary Evelyn Williams or Walt Huntley)

What's On?

Most of our gatherings and resources are currently online. You can find out details on our website www.augustine.org.uk.

STAYING IN TOUCH

If you wish to receive weekly updates of AUC events please register to receive the Friday email by contacting our Centre Manager (centre.manager@augustine.org.uk).

Find us on 

Check our posts on the AUC Facebook page.



Giving made easier with AUC's new QR code

Dec 2023 / Jan 2024

Every Sunday at 11am Blended Sunday worship and after-service Zoom social. **More details p.4.**

Contextual Bible Study is currently running online each Wednesday at 7.30pm and Thursday at 12 noon.

Note: There will be no NHS Mental Health Drop-In in December or January

December

Mon 4	7:30pm – 9pm	AUC Book Group (The Church Cracked Open)
Tues 5	7:30pm – 9pm	AUC Church Council
Thurs 7	7:30pm – 9pm	Our Tribe LGBTQI+ Gathering
Sun 10	12:00pm	TLC Youth (\$1 upwards)
	12:30pm	Church Meeting inbuilding (incl. election of elders)
Sun 17	11:00am	Nativity and Gift Service
	12:00pm	AUC Christmas Lunch
Mon 18	7:30pm – 9pm	AUC Book Group (The Church Cracked Open)
Sun 24	11:00am	Carol Service
	1:00pm – 2pm	Service of the Longest Night
Mon 25	10:30am	Christmas Day Celebration Service

January

Mon 1	7:30pm – 9pm	AUC Book Group (The Church Cracked Open)
Tues 2	7:30pm – 9pm	AUC Church Council
Thurs 4	7:30pm – 9pm	Our Tribe LGBTQI+ Gathering
Sat 6	Epiphany	
Tues 9	7:30pm – 9pm	Church Meeting online
Mon 15	7:30pm – 9pm	AUC Book Group (The Church Cracked Open)
Sun 21	12.00pm	AUC Burns Lunch
	1:00pm – 2pm	Service of the Longest Night
Sun 28	1.30pm	Coffee Social: Come OUT with Our Tribe (LGBTQI+)

Seeds deadline

The next issue of **Seeds** will be a double issue for February and March, and will include information about Easter. **Seeds** is usually published on the Sunday prior to the beginning of each month. The copy deadline for the October/November edition is **Wednesday 17 January**.