

FIRST CHURCH CHATTER

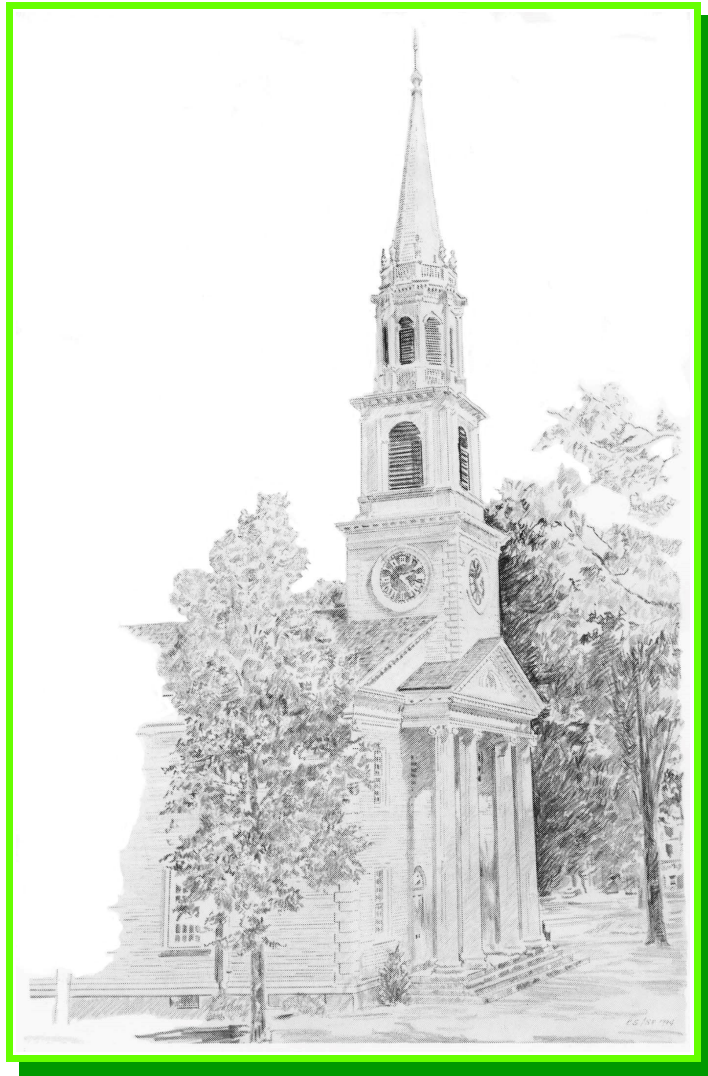
July, 2023

June Birthdays

- 1 Margy O'Connor
- 3 Mark Robertson
- 8 Bill Oberst
- 12 Larry Wright
- 18 Nina Donati
- 19 Margaret Oxtoby
- 21 John Green
- 27 Holly Edwards

July Birthdays

- 1 Laura Vankin
- 2 Deborah Brown
- 3 Jean Vankin
- 7 Penny Bucky
- 14 Gail Oberst
- 20 Nancy McIntire
- 22 Tom Costley
- 24 Teague Murphy
- 26 Ben Kobrin
- 30 Mark Longhurst



This is another edition of our church newsletter. We thank those members and friends who have contributed stories, biographies, reflections, letters, poems and encourage any who wish to contribute to our church newsletter. As you can read in this edition, we have many talented friends and church members. We would like to get to know all of you better and encourage you to send your thoughts, poems, stories to us to publish. Thanks so much.

The newsletter will be printed at the beginning of each month and be sent via email to church members and friends, be sent by mail to those who would prefer a written copy and be available in the foyer for all to pick up when the church is reopened. In the meantime, we will deliver the Chatter to those who would prefer paper copy or don't receive email.

We are always looking for stories, poems, thoughts to contribute. If you have notices about upcoming events which you would like published, please let Carrie or Jody know and we will try to include. We try to publish by the beginning but realistically often it is sent out by the 10th or so.

In Today's Chatter:

[God Does Not Exist](#) – Dick Markham

[Heard At Church Council](#) – Margy O'Connor

[Rev. James Lunden's last sermon with us](#)

[Photos](#) – Cake, Deanna Shorb and July 4th

GOD DOES NOT EXIST

God does not exist, at least not in the same way that all forms exist. All existing forms are transitory. They come and go, some lasting moments, others lasting hundred, thousands, millions of years, or longer. In comparison, God is eternal, timeless, not a single entity, not a supposed Supreme Being, not an “It” or “Thing” as is the way of all other forms in our world. God as awesome mystery manifests, gives to rise to, everything within existence hence is beyond, yet imminent within all forms as the spiritual dimension of their beings.

We can never KNOW God the way that we can know all existing forms. God is not subject to being known the way we can “know” everything else, cannot be defined or analyzed. God is forever mysterious, and yet we can be intuitively AWARE of God, just not via our senses and intellect as is the case with all existential forms.

Dick Markham

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Heard by Margy O’Connor at Church Council 6/13/23

🎬 Yes, there was no Church Council meeting in May but ministry teams were meeting, and there were lots of things to discuss at the June meeting. And progress to report!

🎬 For instance, the *Steeple louvers* are finally protected from large amounts of rain and snow entering. Cheers for the successful installation of internal metal mesh, and quick drainage of any wet that does get inside.

🎬 Treasurer Lynne DeLay reported on a review of *our financial records* for the first time in three years. A Smith Watson Accountant found nothing inaccurate or unusual, but did suggest a distinction be made between income (new money coming in) and fund transfers (moving money from “one pocket to another”). Our Bookkeeper Sherraine Diaz was also present; Lynne D. will oversee these changes, plus use of some clearer payroll codes.

🎬 The Emergency Operations sub-committee, led by Kyle Tong and our Moderator Betsy Burris, has met twice more with Stewardship regarding *safety and security* for all building users. One is for a second AED (Automatic External Defibrillator) to be placed in the foyer on the Chapin Drive side just outside the Sanctuary. The church will sponsor trainings in CPR and the use of the AEDs.

🎬 A second *security improvement* is changing to an electronic key card system for three external doors in daily use. Stewardship has contracted with Lee Audio and Security to begin installing the devices the week of June 20, although the system won’t be activated for use till late September. A computer system (yet to be installed) will be programmed to open the two Chapin Dr. side doors for all scheduled meetings and events including Sunday worship, and during the week from 10 am to 2 pm while the Office is open. Church Officers, Ministry Teams and tenants will be the ones using the key cards if they need to enter at other hours. Elayne, the Office Administrator will be responsible for system operations. Interior door keys won’t change. More info to come!

🏠 A third improvement will install two *crash bars* on the center *Main Street door* to the Sanctuary, to allow quick exit even if the doors are locked. A representative from New England Door Closures took a look and said the current double opening door does not need to be replaced, though some restorative carpentry is required. The historic appearance will be preserved.

🏠 *Tenant News*: Three of our small office tenants have renewed their expiring leases for the next 12 months. However, there are some problems with increased activity, including the over-abundance of student donated (or abandoned?) tag sale items arriving in an almost overwhelming flood reunion weekend, topped off by a contra dance. Plus church users are not all adhering to SafeServe hygienic protocols when using our supposedly certified commercial kitchen facilities. Trash left over the weekend, crumbs on the counters, and unwashed mugs left in the sink cancels out the expected level of safety for food preparation. If we want to rent out a Commercial Kitchen Facility, we can't be careless.

🏠 What to do about *Coffee Hour* when there is no one person or group who will take this on? Lots of discussion here! People love to mingle and snack after church, but it's a burden on someone to be expected to do it all every week (including the cleanup). Maybe we can mingle without the coffee and snacks? Enjoy Second Hour with just a paper cup of water? Hmmmm...

🏠 The Building Task Force will make a presentation to Church Council July 18th about community involvement in the *future of The Meetinghouse*. I hear there's much positive news.

🏠 *Rev. Deanna Shorb* is moving here any day now! We welcome her with joy, and look forward to marching with her as a church in the Fourth of July Parade. Her first Sunday with us is July 2nd, so Y'all Come! There will be party food!

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WILLIAMSTOWN 20a: Come Away with Me

Today is Pride Sunday in the US, the 66th anniversary of the founding of the United Church of Christ, and it is my final Sunday serving as your interim bridge pastor. It's been a deep blessing for me on a variety of levels and I want to express my gratitude to you all for the way you have welcomed and engaged with me over these past 150 days.

🏠 We've laughed and wept, worshiped and studied, sung and kept silence, danced and mourn-ed, pondered and prayed, cared for one another with compassion, and gone a bit deeper into the grace of God revealed in Jesus the Christ. This could have been simply a season of place holding till your new settled pastor arrives. And while it's been that, too, it's also been a mystical pilgrimage into the sacramental surprises of learning to walk in the dark.

🏠 At the close of worship on week three someone said to me: *I've never really LIKED Jesus much before but the way you talk about him makes me WAAY more receptive*. What a precious gift to give to your pastor. I'm so thankful – and want to build on that insight by including a new rendering of today's reading from St. Matthew's gospel. We know it as: ***come unto me all ye who are tired and heavy laden and I will give you rest***. The brilliant pastoral theologian, the Rev. Dr. Eugene Peterson of blessed memory, re-framed it in what has become my all-time favorite Biblical poem. He writes:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it—as you learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Two competing but not contradictory notions kept coming to me while preparing for this day: The first was a life-changing memory and the second, as you might imagine, was a song.

■ The memory involves what a former pastor told me upon hearing this translation for the first time. The late Pastor Rada founded a tiny evangelical congregation in Tucson, AZ to the queer community during the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. As an out lesbian pastor in the late 70's, she faced countless challenges from discrimination and hatred to misplaced fear and psychological projections from her often profoundly broken flock. The stories she told me of caring for her flock during that dreadful time still cuts me to the core: how funeral homes often refused to bury LGBTQ+ corpses or else required they be smuggled inside through the backdoor alleyway after dark; how struggling HIV/AIDS women and men passed from this life into life eternal convinced they had been condemned to a never-ending hell by a God who despised and hated them; and how too many in that community took their own lives in acts of unimaginable self-hatred.

■ After hearing this text rephrased, Rada said to me as she and her wife were leaving worship: “I am SO burned out on religion, Pastor. I'm exhausted, heart-sick, grieving and aching to know something of Christ's UN-forced rhythms of grace. So many in my community would still be alive if there were other churches proclaiming this truth.” Then she embraced me as we stood in the greeting line – and we wept together.

Those tears, hers **and** mine, opened her emotional flood gates and my commitment to craft a genuinely safe faith community grounded in the unconditional and unforced rhythms of God's grace. This text – and how others responded to it – taught me that HOW we read and interpret the Holy Word is often a matter of life and death. The words we share in worship have consequences. So, too the way we incarnate those words individually and in community. That's where the song comes in: as I tried to articulate last week when some of our band was here sometimes the most important gift we can share in worship is the groove. How a song makes us **feel** regardless of its origins. We do that tacitly with the instrumental organ preludes and postludes that start and close worship so I'm just expanding on that truth. Like St. Wendell Berry put it: ***There are no unsacred places / there are only sacred places / and desecrated places.*** I fundamentally agree.

■ So, as I sat with this Biblical text, no matter how hard I tried to ignore it, I kept hearing Norah Jones singing: “*Come Away with Me.*” When I mentioned this to Di at breakfast she said, “Well, I could sing that – I love it – and I'm going to be with you on your final Sunday.” To which I could only reply: thank you.

■ So, take a listen to this sweet song of the soul as yet another way of meditating on the invitation of Jesus to rest into the unforced rhythms of grace...

***Come away with me in the night – Come away with me – and I will write you a song
Come away with me on a bus – Come away where they can't tempt us with their lies
I want to walk with you on a cloudy day – In fields where the yellow grass grows knee-high***

*So won't you try to come. Come away with me and we'll be free - On a mountaintop – come away with me – And I'll never stop loving you – I want to wake up with the rain falling on a tin roof While I'm safe there in your arms so all I ask is for you is to come away with me in the night
Come away with me*

Do you feel what the text is trying to tell us here? Of course, it's a love song – not a hymn – but as the late George Harrison insisted: ALL of our love songs hold multiple layers of meaning and if we trust that creation is infused with God's grace, then even a jazz ballad can become a prayer. ***There are no unsacred places / there are only sacred places / and desecrated places.*** Indeed!

Stepping back periodically from the onslaught of issues, needs, demands, commitments, fears, busyness, tasks, trauma, and anxieties is essential for those allies of the holy who yearn to birth both solace and celebration in this savage culture. Activists and intellectuals are often put off by the call to contemplation thinking it's a naval gazing distraction for people of privilege; while contemplatives believe that hard-core activists don't know how to consciously take either a breath or a break. But remember that old CERTS breath mint commercial: STOP you're BOTH right!/? Like Fr. Richard Rohr, I believe that contemplatives and activists need one another. The demands of com-passion and justice necessitate the linking of arms and fates as comrades if our quest for lasting social transformation and healing is to bear fruit. Back in 1932, T.S. Eliot sensed the importance of quiet discernment as part of any activist engagement in culture care. He put it like this in *The Rock*:

The endless cycle of idea and action, endless invention, endless experiment, brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness; knowledge of speech, but not of silence; knowledge of words, and ignorance of THE Word. All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance, all our ignorance brings us nearer to death, but nearness to death is no nearer to GOD. Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The gospel's call to come away for time of rest and reflection before returning to the fray allows our flesh to be restored, our minds to be renewed, and our spirits to be reconnected with the source of life. Sabbath – in any of its forms – is a spiritual practice that helps us trust that God is truly in control whether we can feel it or not. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ally of Dr. King, used to say that the reason God gave us the Sabbath is that if we can commit to deep rest for 24 hours, leaving Creation in the hands of the Creator for one full day, then maybe we can extend this trust beyond the Sabbath so that its blessing fill every day. Rest, you see, is soul food yet most of us don't believe it.

When I was in Union Seminary in NYC in the late 70's, I was deeply engaged in Central American solidarity work. I'd studied at Seminario Biblico in San Jose, Costa Rica, I'd read many of the early liberation theologians. And vehemently opposed the Reagan regime's policies against Nicaragua. Early in my second year, as I was frantically organizing two busloads of students to go to DC to protest the regime's support of the contras, my homiletics professor, the great Black preacher James Forbes, called me to his office. I had NO idea why this gifts orator wanted to speak with me, but I wasn't going to miss the chance.

So, after a few pleasantries, Dr. Forbes said: *Lumsden, are you in hurry to get yourself killed?* I was stunned! So, he added:

Look, I'm no stranger to social activism, ok? You know my story. What you may not know, however, is that ALL truly revolutionary activists regularly take time out for quiet rest and reflection: Gandhi did when he returned to India from South Africa, MLK did on a regular basis. So, too Cesar Chavez, Mary Lou Hammer and countless others. So why, can you please tell me in the name of God, are you wasting your quiet time in seminary with reactive and frantic acts of opposition when you only have a short time here?

I was dumbstruck and didn't know what to say – so Jim brought our meeting to a close saying: ***Do not waste this quiet time, brother. You have the rest of your life to get yourself killed, ok?*** I left thinking that Dr. Forbes was totally wrong. I was young, bright, cocky, and full of energy so why in the world would I slow down? Some three years later, though, when I was totally exhausted, those words of wisdom came back to haunt and realized Dr. Forbes was right. About that same time, my first spiritual director gave me a beautiful copy of a prayer Reinhold Niebuhr had once scrawled quickly on the back of an envelope before a vacation bible school just down the road in Lee. Later it was published in 1951 as the Serenity Prayer and reads like this in its original form:

O God and Heavenly Father, grant to us the serenity of mind to accept that which cannot be changed, courage to change that which can be changed, and wisdom to know the one from the other through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

The wisdom to know the one from the other is how prayer is balanced with politics and contemplation dances with action. Some of the wisdom-keepers in ancient Israel learned this both/and practice while living in captivity to Babylon 500 years before Jesus. Pete Seeger popularized their insights in his adaptation of Ecclesiastes 3 called “Turn, Turn, Turn.”

To everything there is a season: turn, turn, turn and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance...

Right now, I suspect someone is wondering: why on earth is he going on and on about rest and reflection? He's DONE and our new settled pastor will be here soon so let's get to the party and move on. Well, I have a two-part answer: First, I've come to love and respect you so deeply that I want to plant a seed in your conscience and encourage you to seek balance as you face ALL the work that's coming down the road in the months and years ahead. There are building issues to confront, fund raising concerns, the challenge of membership, as well as articulating the mission for this faith community in a way that resonates with reality. Mother Earth is literally on fire. Political and spiritual polarization is at an all-time high. And fewer and fewer people care about the church.

The most recent survey of Massachusetts residents by the Pew Research Center shows that 34% of us are nominally Roman Catholic, 10% belong to our religious tradition, and a whopping 32% of our neighbors consider themselves spiritual but NOT religious – and are mostly unaffiliated. The Rev. Dr. William Barber, founder of the Poor Peoples Movement, adds an oft ignored context writing:

Though slavery officially ended after the Civil War, the Christianity that blessed white supremacy did not go away. It doubled down on the Lost Cause, endorsed racial terrorism during the Redemption era, blessed the leaders of Jim Crow, and continues to endorse racist policies as traditional values under the guise of a "religious right." As a Christian minister, I understand why,

for my entire ministry, the number of people who choose not to affiliate with any religious tradition has doubled each decade: an increasingly diverse America is tired of the old slaveholder religion.

We KNOW at some profound level that part of our work for the next decade has to do with shaping a non-exclusive, non-judgmental way of following Jesus in a multi-cultural context where we can partner with others in pursuit of racial justice. Be a humble participant in a community movement to bring reparations and repentance to our genocidal origins. Tenderly explore revolutionary cooperation with our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers as we pursue true equality. This is a massive, shifting agenda, beloved, and without balance and faithful discernment could easily lead us into cynicism or despair. So, PLEASE take stock: if Jesus realized back in the first century CE that he and his allies needed quiet time periodically to regroup, to listen carefully for the still small voice of the Lord, and build a measure of consensus: how much more so is deep rest needed in our 24/7 world saturated with the sounds and sights of calamity?

Back when I was finishing my undergraduate studies in political science at SFSU, my pastor's spouse worked with Mayor George Moscone. One night we were over at Bill's house talking about the upcoming birth of our second daughter when we got a phone call that Moscone and Harvey Milk had been murdered. There would be NO dinner that night as hundreds of grief stricken souls gathered at city hall to mourn the loss of these two champions of inclusivity. You may recall that there was NO violence that night. There was NO hatred. There was just a deep and disciplined public grief as we all sang: We are and gentle, angry people and we are fighting, fighting for our lives. Dear friends, THAT type of focused and public grief does NOT happen automatically. It comes from practice and disciplined patience – and the wider LGBTQ+ community taught us all about what it means to challenge the status quo of violence and hatred with love and sobriety. That's the first reason I'm going out with this message: pastorally and personally I pray for your well-being. You are wise, kind, talented, resourceful, and filled with possibilities: add times of intentional discernment into the mix and blessings will abound.

The second reason is more complex but no less important: we who have come from privilege and power – and I include myself in this – are still learning what it means to partner and follow rather than lead. We are accustomed to being in charge – we've worked hard to get things done – and expect to be successful. Our churches were founded in this ethos coming of age in what Martin Luther, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Barbara Brown Taylor, Cynthia Bourgeault, and Douglas John Hall have all called a theology of triumphalism – a theologia gloria – that “fraternizes with empire and power,” celebrates control more than trust, and ignores the theologia crucis – the theology of the cross – that was incarnated in Jesus at Golgotha. Please, PLEASE know this NOT a scolding but a confession that our buildings alone document. They're enormous – costly – beautiful but predicated on principles of power and grandeur not humility and solidarity – and for countless churches in our tradition have now largely become unmanageable and unsustainable. I'm not weighing-in on what you will eventually choose as you have wise and committed leaders already working on this.

No, I'm simply commenting on one of the manifestations of our former theological foundation that still holds consequences, ok? You see, this theology of glory and power was born of a dominance that once worked – at least for folks like you and me – but is now being thoroughly rejected by people all over our community who are spiritual but NOT religious because that old-time religion has burned us out. Douglas John Hall of McGill Seminary in Montreal is spot on when he tells us that for congregations and denominations like our own:

The only antidote to religious triumphalism is the readiness of communities of faith to permit doubt and self-criticism to play a vital role in the life of faith. Because we have ignored the rigors of critical thought, we too often naïvely embrace big technology as our savior; because we have celebrated numbers, we naïvely court power; because we reject nuance and know next to nothing of the dialectical and dialogical character of truth, we naïvely cozy up to the tyranny of religious ideology (or even sentimentalism.)

What's happening in many of our churches right now is just what happened to people like me in seminary. I come from a background of relative privilege shaped by a triumphal theology of glory and power. I was raised among the movers and shakers of suburban, white Connecticut and Massachusetts where CEOs, college professors, medical professionals, and Wall Street lawyers called the shots. You can't get MORE white, entitled and bourgeois than First Congregational Church of Darien. So, I came to expect that I would be listened to when sharing an opinion in class. But my expectation to be considered clashed with the experience and vision of radical feminists, people of color, LGBTQ+ folk, and non-Christians colleagues who had long been silenced and dismissed by my spiritual forebears. So, when I started speaking from my privilege, they called me out. Challenged my limited vision and experience and kicked my theological butt in ways that took me down a peg or three. It hurt my feelings. Confused my understanding of how the world worked. And broke my heart open to new ways of being, listening, and learning.

One important revelation had to do with trust: in a broken and polarized culture, trust must be earned by showing up as a participant NOT a leader. My mentor in urban ministry, Ray Swartzback used to say: documenting your right to be heard is not portable; you must consistently show up before you can be trusted. New alliances and partnerships are vital for the Christian church of the 21st century. Church historian, Diana Butler Bass, recently wrote that a fascinating new trend, still small but real, is starting to take place across the US. One-time young evangelicals are leaving the fundamentalism of their past to dip their toes in the water of churches like our own:

What is happening now reminds me a bit of a similar (and often overlooked) movement in the 19-90s... when, Catholics who were discouraged by their church's views on women's ordination and divorce — and angry about the sexual abuse scandals — found their way into progressive main-line churches.... Many of those who have left Christianity will — most likely — never return to any sort of church. This won't be a trend where folks will knock down your doors. So, don't expect a tsunami to overwhelm your congregation — but there will likely be a kind of spring of newcomers curious about who you are and how you practice faith. If you are part of a progressive congregation or spiritual community and are open to such newcomers: You're going to have to prove your-selves trustworthy, open, and accepting. You'll need to earn their respect. Not only will some of the newcomers be hurt and apprehensive, but there are decades of animosity between evangelical and mainline Protestants. Ex-evangelicals were schooled in that (as were mainliners!). So, expect misunderstanding.

- Like you and me these ex-evangelicals are sick of Christian nationalism. They are horrified by the anti-science ideology of their former tradition and the violence it advocates against those deemed unworthy heretics.
- You are a people grounded in love: You possess intellect, humor, and commitment and I believe YOU have a place in what the church of the 21st century will become. And if I've ever had a doubt: your weekly peace of Jesus dance documents a commitment to joy, humility, and the unforced rhythms of grace.

So, keep letting go of that old theological paradigm of control as this new program year unfolds with your new settled pastor. Practice trusting that small is holy and partnership is the new normal. Do what you can to build times of rest into day to listen, slow down, feast with one another, laugh and weep in solidarity, trust that beyond our intellect and the obvious, God continues to embrace us in-to the unforced rhythms of grace. Because as Allan Watts taught us: *“the task of a liberated person is NOT to scold the world or preach to it, but to delight it back to its senses.”*

May it be so. Amen. Rev. James Lumsden

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A Welcoming Cake . . .



. . . For Deanna Shorb



FCC Williamstown in the July 4th Parade