

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 8, 2019  
Sermon Title: Keys to a Great Church Year  
Pastors: Rev. Alida Ward & Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Introduction: DAVID

The idea for this sermon is simple. We are 294 years old. Not me. The Church. That's pretty old! Older than America, older than peanut butter and most every other popular daily food. Older than the Yankees and the Red Sox combined. Older than rock 'n' roll. As things get old, or people, or institutions, they can get, well, arthritic, achy, tired, rigid, creaky. In need of repair. In need of special attention.

If you visit in hospitals and nursing homes as much as we do, you're often with people who are achy, tired, and creaky. As a result, there are posters and signs everywhere about "Fall Prevention": how to keep patients from "slipping and falling down."

Well, that's good caution for an old Church too. Or an old bank, an old restaurant, an old college. Old institutions do not want to be "slipping and falling down." Or look, sound, or act as though we are achy, tired, or creaky. We don't want everyone looking at Greenfield Hill Church and admiring how incredibly historic we are, how wonderfully New England quaint are, how our aesthetics and theology match up: simple, basic, no-frills, and then saying, "Gee, they are barely hanging on."

Thank the Lord, and all of you, we're not just hanging on. We are a strong, vibrant, and, frankly, quite an interesting and exciting Church. So that's what led to our sermon title, "Keys to a Great New Church Year." A key is something that opens something up, right? Unlocks something. We want to unlock a great Church year for everybody here.

First, Alida's going to share with you her 'three keys'.

## **ALIDA:**

Okay, so here we go — my three keys to a great new year together here at Greenfield Hill. And then a little later David's going to jump in with three more. Let me start by telling you about the lady with the sneakers. I was in line at Target on Thursday afternoon.

I needed ten pounds of chocolate and a bunch of footballs and basketballs. In other words, basic supplies for youth group -- the first SPF meeting of the year was on Thursday night. So I pile my chocolate and all those balls onto the cashier's conveyor belt, and not surprisingly there's basketballs going everywhere, and the cashier's laughing and so am I -- but the woman right in front of me is not amused. Not amused at all.

She is very elderly, she's trying to find her coupons, and she seems to be having maybe not the best day. And I decide that it's best to stop laughing, get my basketballs under control, take a step back and just be quiet. And then I remember. I remember the newspaper article that a bunch of you sent to me this summer, about this study where they discovered that talking to a stranger every day makes you a happier person. And you sent it to me because I had just preached a sermon on the importance of connecting to others in every available moment. Oh no -- I thought -- time to practice what you preach, Alida. This elderly woman in front of me had now firmly turned her back to me. "Excuse me, ma'am," I said, talking to her back. She didn't respond. And the cashier looked at me like why are you messing with her? So I tapped her on the shoulder and tried again. Excuse me! I said. And she turned. And I went with the first thing that came to mind: Your sneakers, I said. They're awesome. Where did you get them? Because honestly, they were awesome. They were clearly brand new, and they were in all the colors of the rainbow, and they were sequined. Maybe not what you'd expect. And the lady kind of looks at her feet, and she looks at me, and then she says, "Well, I got these downstairs," she said. "By that 21 place." "By Forever 21?" says the cashier, "You mean the Vans store?" Vans -- the most popular footwear out there for teenage skateboarders. The cashier is now clearly in awe of the old lady rocking her Vans, as am I. This lady has just realized that -- perhaps inadvertently -- she is wearing awesome sneakers. And we are all now, together, laughing and smiling. And I'm realizing the article was right.

You do get happier when you talk to people. Connection is pretty cool.

Which leads me to Key number one  
for how to have a great year at church.

Has nothing do with wearing Vans.

Key number one is to use this year to connect to folks in this church that you haven't had the chance to know yet.

Find someone and compliment them on their shoes, sure, that's one way.

Or turn to someone at coffee hour and say "so, hey, what brought you to this church?"

Even more fun, connect to people here

by trying out something you haven't done here before.

Come to a book conversation and see who you're sitting next to.

Wander down to the Penfield party in a couple weeks and watch the sunset with a bunch of other GHCCers.

Try a bible study.

Whatever it is, talk to strangers right here,  
connect right here,

and help us to create the community that every church was meant to be.

The community that every one of us longs for, needs, and comes here to find.

Key #1 - Connect in new ways this year.

Which actually leads right into Key #2.

Which is — give your kids the chance to do the same.

Give them the chance to connect, too.

We do some pretty great stuff here with kids and teens.

In Church School, they get to connect not just with other kids,  
but with awesome adults who cherish them.

They get to connect with a God who, it turns out, loves them a lot,  
and they get to find out that the whole point of being here in church  
is to be a connected something called the Body of Christ —  
a community of love and hope and faith and service.

And then, in youth groups,

they find out how much their thoughts matter,

how much each person matters,

and that web of connection and community grows stronger and stronger.

Lord knows we all need that,

but our kids, our teens, need it even more.

My friends in the counseling world talk about the levels of anxiety

they're seeing among kids now - like nothing they've ever witnessed before. More than ever, our kids need to be in communities of care, where they are strengthened by love and accepted just as they are. So Key #2 to a great church year for all of us — bring us your kids, bring us your teens, and keep them coming.

And the third key to a great year together — well, I just said that we're a community of love and hope — and service. We call it mission - that is, our mission to bring God's love to a hurting world. And we do pretty amazing mission here.

Yes, we take hundreds of people to fix homes in Appalachia. And yes, we help an extraordinary number of people in India. But we do an incredible amount right around here, and give an incredible amount right around here. So key #3 — become part of what we're doing for others.

Become part of that mission.

And that can mean a lot of things.

You could volunteer to tutor at Mercy Learning Center, which we support.

You could help out at Bridgeport Rescue Mission, also one of ours.

You could help stock the shelves at Operation Hope's food pantry.

But if you can't do that, I've got other ideas.

Go on the websites of the places we support and just read up — learn why they exist and what they're dealing with --

what it means, for instance, to be the Connecticut Institute for Refugees right now.

And then pray. Pray for the people that Operation Hope serves;

pray for the women whom Mercy Learning tutors.

Key #3 — make yourself a part of our mission, in whatever way you can.

So those are my three keys:

Number one - Connect to create community

Number 2, make sure the kids are part of that,

and number 3, be a part of what we're doing to love this world.

And in a few minutes, we'll find out what David's got in mind for you!

## David's Keys to a Great New Church Year:

### David:

I get the boring 'Keys', but they are really not. In old-fashioned terms, my three keys to a great new Church year would be: read your Bible, pray regularly, evangelize your neighbors. But that sounds scary, off-putting. So let's rebrand them a bit. One, get to know the book, the Bible. Two, talk to God. Three, don't be embarrassed to be "Church folk."

The Bible is the foundational document of our Church. There has been a big push in the last decade or so to get every American to read the United States Constitution, and that's a good thing. It is what America stands for. It expresses our fondest hopes and greatest ideals. Same with the Bible. The best of what we believe and hope is in those pages. The evolution of human thinking about God; the history of God's relationship with us; the essence, the heart of Jesus's teachings, the truest goals of this little old Church are in those pages.

Some years ago, I took a high school youth group to Harvard and arranged for two Harvard juniors from a campus Christian group to talk to them. I was hoping they would help my Church kids to take school more seriously, to study harder, to aim higher. We sat on the grass on Harvard's quad, and I started off by asking the Harvard students, "What should my young people be doing to be ready for college?" I thought they'd say study hard, take an SAT prep course, build your résumé with after-school activities. Nope. They both said, "Study your Bible." Know your Bible: "because once you get here, it'll be too late." They went on to explain that when you move on in life, away from home, off to college and career and adulthood, you're in a world where the Bible is often twisted, mocked, misquoted, misrepresented. And if you don't know it, you're at their mercy. It's something that you grew up with as precious, something that's meant to help you, gets taken away, lost, ruined. Whatever age you're at, that can still happen. The Bible is constantly being misused. So one key to a great new Church year is to get to know the Bible.

We have two Bible studies each week—great fun, and always interesting, amazingly timely. We also send out an email Bible study version, usually a one-page summary. And it's online, on our website. Open the inside cover of your bulletin, and you'll see what I wrote:

### Why Bible Study?

It's called "The Good Book" for a reason

It's called "The Good News" for reason

It's called the Holy Bible for reason

It's been around for thousands of years for a reason

Jesus quoted it for a reason  
The Devil quoted it for a reason  
Pop culture and classic literature quote it for a reason  
So, get to know it!

My second key: talk to God. We preach often about “prayer”; it’s vital around here, and we keep it real simple. Prayer is conversation with God. Do it the way you talk with a best friend. Often. About anything. Nothing’s off the table.

As the old saying goes, K I S S: “Keep It Simple, Stupid,” and we do “keep it simple” in our Church.

First, it is easy. Just do it.

Second, call Alida or me. If you have a prayer need, a prayer concern, holler! We’ll pray it for you. We’ll even write a prayer for you if you want.

Third, we have a “prayer team.” A dozen people who take any request in strict confidence and lift it up to God regularly.

Fourth, we have our prayer candle stand, something we started three years ago, and people love it. Come in any time you want. Light a candle. In lighting the candle, express your prayer thought to God.

Last, even our prayer vigils, like the one we’re having on September 11, are designed to be easy and direct. You come into Church. We’ll have a sheet of paper on a table. There’s a prayer right there for you. Or, a list of ideas you can use for your own prayer; or, a few hymns that you can read that actually are prayers; or, a couple of Scriptures to guide you. As you wish.

So, what have we heard today as “Keys to a Great Church Year”?

*Get to know one another*

*Get your kids involved*

*See our mission work first-hand*

*Get to know “the Good Book”*

*Talk to God*

And now the scary one, which I’ve labeled, *Don’t be embarrassed to be “Church folk”*

“Evangelism” is scary, even if evangelism started in America, in New England, led by Congregationalists, for Pete’s sake, including our beloved Timothy Dwight and his famous uncle, Jonathan Edwards.

We were born to evangelism. But for many of us, we’ve seen so much bad religion pushed by truly obnoxious people in really ugly ways that we New Englanders have turned away from it. We turn away from most everything that is forced upon us, whether it’s vegetables as a kid or homework as a teenager or unpleasant medical procedures as an adult. But as we mature, we realize vegetables and homework and medical procedures are good for us. So is being proud of our Church life, being open

about it. It's a good thing. You don't have to be loud, obnoxious, pushy, aggressive, judgmental, or ugly about it. But you're here. In a good Church.

We are "Church." Let it be as easy a part of your persona as other parts of your life. When your kid goes off to college, you wear the college sweatshirt proudly; you put the college sticker on your car window. When you have a fun vacation or eat at a good restaurant, you post pictures of yourself. We talk up our golf game, our kids' sports, our favorite elected officials, our latest favorite book or movie. We are proud groupies and fans and followers and supporters. But we hide our "Church life" away, afraid that others will be offended. Hey, if you're not offensive, no one will be offended. To be proud of who you are, what you do, where you go, even why you are what you are—most people in your world would love to know what makes you tick. And if you care enough to come here, we probably are part of what makes you tick. Don't be embarrassed about it.

There: Keys to a Great New Church Year. We are not 294 years old. We are 294 years young. Thanks to the Good Lord and thanks to you.

Let's sing our final hymn to celebrates our Church School kids, as they come into the Church to join us, "Jesus Loves Me," No. 113 in your hymnal.

*Jesus loves me! This I know,  
for the Bible tells me so.  
Little ones to him belong;  
they are weak, but he is strong.*

*Refrain:  
Yes! Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
The Bible tells me so.*

*Jesus loves me! This I know,  
as he loved so long ago,  
taking children on the knee,  
saying, "Let them come to me." (Refrain)*

*Jesus loves me! still today,  
walking with me on the way,  
wanting as a friend to give  
light and love to all who live. (Refrain)*