

FCCEJ CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF SERVICE TO GOD AND COMMUNITY

First Congo's Doors are Open to the Community

From our founding as a place where the early Sunday School movement took hold to today where we open our doors to every organization that needs a place to call home; First Congregational Church built its church in the middle of town because they believed in being civically active and making Essex a better place.

After World War II, the Essex Community experienced a population boom and a shortage of public school classrooms. The church stepped in and provided classroom space within its building for local public schools.

In 1914, newly installed bowling alleys provided a place where the community could gather to have some fun and fellowship in the winter months. Men and women (wearing black bloomers & stockings) both bowled despite the objections from church elders who considered it to be a bit risqué.

Serving as the center of community life, the Parish House was used for minstrel shows and meetings of the Knights of King Arthur, a secret society for boys, a forerunner of the Boy Scouts of America. Our oldest member Bob Vincent remembers the first meeting of the first Boy Scout Troup in town which was called together by his father, a former Minister at First Congo, and which met in the church.

Today, we welcome community groups into our facilities for meetings and events. Below is a list of some of the organizations that have used our building:

Age Well (CVAA), Alcoholics Anonymous (first in town), American Red Cross, Burlington Amateur Radio Club, Boy & Girl Scouts of America, Business Networking International, Essex Art League, Essex Bridge Club, Essex Community Players, Essex Eats Out, Blue Spruce Grange, Group Victory, Heart & Soul of Essex, Joe's Big Band, Karate, Essex Senior Center, La Leche League, Life Line Screening, Northern Bronze Handbells, Overeaters Anonymous, Scrapbooking, St. Andrews Pipe Band, Tai Chi, Women Infants & Children (WIC), Hathaway's Taekwondo (started in the church basement) and Yoga.

In 1995, three dynamic women of the church established the Heavenly Cents Thrift Shop to provide affordable clothing to our community. Never taking a salary, the volunteers give all their proceeds [over \$300,000] to special projects in the church or causes in the community. With renewed energy and volunteers, many of which come from the community, the shop is getting a facelift and will re-open in late April. Around the same time, two other dynamos of the church established the Heavenly Food Pantry, which distributes 80,000 pounds of food every year to help folks in the community who struggle with food insecurity. Both initiatives rely on community support and volunteers and both programs remain strong.

Each Sunday morning the minister opens with the words, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome in this place!" For 150 years, First Congo has opened her doors to everyone and will continue to do so.

By Beth Volker