

FCCEJ CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF SERVICE TO GOD AND COMMUNITY

First Congo Helps Feed Our Community

In the early days of the Champlain Valley Fair, the women of the church had a food booth and provided food to those attending with their families as a fundraiser to help the church. Since then, food has played a vital role in the life of First Congo!

During the Great Depression, like many of the other churches throughout the country, First Congo held church suppers for those who needed food. Providing a warm meal and a safe harbor for those struggling to find a little nourishment and peace was an important outreach into the community. Offering food to the food insecure continues to be one of the vital roles that the congregational church plays in Essex Junction.

Feeding folks took the form of preparing “food baskets” for both Thanksgiving and Christmas for many local families. Local schools provided the names and the church would then collect food and cash donations to assemble a complete meal ~ turkey with all of the trimmings ~ for these families for both holidays. Both then and now, the church continues to give food vouchers to community members in need.

Then, in June of 1998, two of our church members ~ Mary Richer and Suzanne Reardon ~ attended a statewide denominational meeting, and specifically, a hunger workshop. That simple choice spawned the idea for a Food Pantry. With several generous cash donations and a used freezer, this wonderful ministry went from serving four to five families each month to feeding around 70 families each month, which amounts to approximately 80,000 pounds of food being distributed annually! Staffed completely by volunteers from the church, community, and civic organizations like the Essex Rotary, food and monetary donations have allowed an ever increasing distribution of food to the people who worry about food insecurity. Supported by the Vermont Food Bank and the local Hannaford’s Market, the church is able to distribute over 100 pounds of food to people who come in for help. Celebrating twenty years of dedicated service in 2018, the FCCEJ Food Pantry continues to be committed to serving the Essex community.

A fairly new initiative to provide sustenance for area residents came into being when Essex community clergy determined the need to provide opportunities for food and fellowship. Partnering with civic and business groups, *Essex Eats Out* was started. Every Friday evening from 5:30 to 7:00 p.m., various churches and civic groups provide an opportunity to dine in a safe and friendly environment where all are welcome, regardless of need.

From providing food for fair attendees to pot luck suppers, from giving vouchers to distributing thousands of pounds of food, to offering free dinners to the community, First Congregational Church has a proud history of strengthening the community with its food programs. Everyone is welcome to come and participate or volunteer for these ongoing initiatives.

By Beth Volker and Rev. Mark Mendes