



SPIRIT @ FIRST

monthly newsletter

FIRST
CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH of Essex Junction

Love. Serve. Grow.

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Advent Your Pastor's Ponderings...

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On the phone with a friend and colleague, we discussed our respective churches' Christmas Eve plans and neither of us were able to share with finitude what our plans would be. We were each waiting for updates concerning the coronavirus and if the cases continue to increase, we might have to stream the services yet again [ugh, sigh]. Or if they decrease, perhaps we can open our doors and rely on masks and self limiting caution to keep us safe. And once we open the doors, it would be hard to turn people away once the pews started filling up beyond our comfort level. Outside of last year's Christmas Eve Services, neither my friend nor I could remember such an open ended outlook this close to our largest liturgical gathering of people. Normally, the services are planned way in advance since they are fairly similar from year to year and so the choirs can be ready to present their beautiful music.

But this year remains open ended with the future as yet unknown. Whether we gather or not remains to be seen. Honestly, it is a bit maddening not to know what the future is going to hold. This predicament applies most poignantly to our Christmas celebrations but could easily be seen as the dominant paradigm in the coronavirus reality. Family life, jobs, travel, financial well-being, educational plans, vacation destinations: all of this and more is largely dependent on how COVID19 is affecting our world. Not knowing the future produces great anxiety.

Perhaps this anxiety is ironically fitting for us during this Advent and Christmas Season. Mary and Joseph's life with the new child was unknown. A child often changes one's family dynamic but having your child be the Son of God would make that exponentially more severe. Going to Jerusalem for the census without knowing where they would stay and so close to the time of delivery would cause some anxiety. Hearing that Herod was out to kill your child would have changed your living arrangements pretty quickly as you took your donkey and headed to Egypt instead of home with the surrounding love of family. Hearing the prophesies of kingdoms falling and rising due to the child in your womb would have brought pause to any thinking couple.

For once in our lives, we have the historical context to begin to approach the level of upheaval that Mary and Joseph would have felt upon hearing all the prophesies and warnings. Perhaps our own anxiety of the future around the coronavirus can help us understand the birth story a bit more clearly. Perhaps the current anxiety in our lives might challenge us to rely on the power, presence and guidance of God a bit more. Perhaps it will open up the possibility of relying on the support and kindness of strangers a bit more. Perhaps it will draw us closer to the **WORD** and the many ways it helps us mitigate the anxieties of the world. Perhaps it will cause us to claim the importance and focus more clearly on the present instead of getting waylaid in the past or pre-occupied with the future.

Perhaps there is still more light and truth to come out of this age old story that might help us weather the storms of today. May the unknown presence of God inbreaking into our world continue to nurture our spirits and teach us how to live in our world.

Christmas Blessings to you all.

Rev. Mark

REJOICE

Associate Pastor News - Rev. Josh Simon

Do you hear the bells ringing? Do you hear the carols playing? I love Christmas carols. I love all of the new and familiar Christmas music we hear on the radio. Some say the lead-up to Christmas does not start until they hear Mariah Carey's "All I want for Christmas is You."

I am looking forward to Christmas. Even when life is difficult, I know that Christmas is on the horizon. Christmas music restores my weary soul. When I need some cheer, I will even listen to a few Christmas songs, months after Christmas! When I need a little cheer, Christmas songs are there. Our songs speak the truth. Love finds a way to shine in the cloudiest of days. Christmas songs illuminate a path of hope, leading to rejoicing sounds of praise. In the cloudiness of a weary world, these songs of joy in the birth of Jesus and the gift of his teachings to humanity send my heart to praise, clearing the weariness away, even if for a moment, reviving my soul.

And for me, Christmas Eve is not Christmas Eve until I sing "Joy to the World." As a kid, I would sing "Joy to the World" as loudly as I could. It's a song that begs, demands, to be sung loudly. Every note vibrates joy. As of this writing, we do not know how many worship services we will have on Christmas Eve, whether they will be inside or out, online, in-person, and/or both. But no matter where we are, no matter how we join together to celebrate Christmas may the songs of the season vibrate joy, speak the truth of love, and revive our weary souls.

Laurie's Lens

The season of Advent is upon us as I write this article. I know some of you have your decorations up already and enjoy the gift of light in these early dark evenings. Bringing the light into our lives and filling our hearts and souls with the light of Christ is so important. As we prepare for the birth of Christ coming into the world, giving thanks for family and friends, let us remember that the color purple. Purple is used for the season of Advent representing the royalty of Christ who was known as the 'King of Kings'. I encourage you to find and place purple items around your home, along with your other decorations, to help bring Christ into your thoughts and conversations throughout Advent and the Christmas season. Let the color purple be a visible sign of Jesus among you as you move about, bake, gather and prepare. So turn on your holiday lights. Light your candles and bring the Christ's light into the darkness for all to see, for you to see and feel the love of God who is with you always. Sometimes we need a visible reminder. Maybe this year more than others before.

The faith formation time will transition from hearing the stories of Moses to talking about the stories that led up to journey to Bethlehem by Mary and Joseph. We will have a different one for each Sunday of Advent, beginning on November 28th as we look at the similarities of Moses and Jesus. We look forward to having you join us.

As always, I look forward to connecting with you all and hearing your thoughts on how our programs are going, and passing along any feedback and thoughts as we continue to move forward in this ever changing world.

Blessings & Peace,

Laurie Chipman

Christian Education Director



Trustees News

Thank you to the volunteers who helped with the fall grounds clean-up at the church in October. Thank you **Carl Wermer, Phyllis & John Willey, Kaki McGeary, Dennis Conti, Barb & Frank Smith, Sue Wood and Ed Guild**. And a special thank you to **Mike Bottamini** for his ongoing care of the front lawn and garden beds.

We are also very grateful to **Rob Evans** for securing the generous donation of the beautiful conference room table and chairs for the Marvin Lounge, filing cabinets, desk chairs, office supplies, monitors and more. Rob's company decided to move to a fully-remote work environment, and they donated most of their office furniture to us.

The lead paint stabilization work at Sawyer House is now complete. Next spring, we will have volunteers do some re-painting of the non-lead surfaces outside at Sawyer House.

Trustees continue to monitor all building maintenance needs and improvements with a careful eye on the budget.
Kaki McGeary, Trustee Chair

Our Home, Our Future, Our Time - Capital Campaign News

As another year comes to a close, we have so much to celebrate! We rejoice in the many gifts to the Capital Campaign that have made Our Faith Home more welcoming, safe, and beautiful – now and for future generations. Together, we raised \$1.13 million in pledges, far exceeding our initial goal of \$822,000 and even surpassing our \$1.09 million stretch goal! We celebrate the successful completion of ALL our major projects and even most of the stretch goal improvements, including the unexpected addition of the elevator project. And, last but not least, we celebrate the ability to gather safely for worship, learning, mission and fellowship in all the renewed spaces throughout our building and grounds.

We now turn our attention to the replacement of the 2nd Floor Administrative Wing hallway floors. There are several areas of cracked and chipped tiles, so we want to address that area as soon as possible. Stay tuned for details on the timing of that project.

For a complete recap of all the projects your investments have made possible, visit our website – look under Capital Campaign/Projects (<https://www.fccej.org/v5/capital-campaign/projects/>). A friendly reminder...we continue to accept pledge payments for initial pledges and Phase 3 pledges. If you have any questions about your balance due, or if circumstances have changed, please contact Campaign Treasurer, Dan Petherbridge.

Blessings,

Kaki McGeary & Dave Johnson, Capital Campaign Co-Chairs

Communications

We anticipate working with the church leaders to support our faith community during the busy Advent season. It's a joy to assist in all ways that we can!

The committee is working to create guidelines to manage and keep a cohesive social media presence. We are planning to have this include recommendations on creating and managing authorized posters for accounts as well as a system to review posts before they go live. There will also be guidance on general social media etiquette and best practices. The committee is reviewing social media guidelines from other churches while reflecting on the needs of our faith community.

The website is a great way to learn about what is happening at the church; please take an opportunity to browse the website at www.fccej.org. Contact the church office via e-mail at welcome@fccej.org or by calling (802) 878-5745 if you have any questions.

Respectfully submitted by Andrea Sharp

Committee Members: Francis Gravel, Doug Olufsen, Hannah Tracy and Andrea Sharp

Stewardship Update

Dear Friends,

In this time of chaos and uncertainty, your 2022 pledge gift brings hope and encouragement. We are heartened by the generosity of the First Congregational Church of Essex Junction! You make it possible to continue to provide help and services to our community, educational opportunities to our youth and adults, maintenance for our buildings, salaries for our staff, and multiple ways for fellowship and worship.

Giving is where we find the true meaning and purpose for our lives. The ministry and mission of our church takes place because of the spiritual and financial gifts our members and friends choose to share.

The stewardship committee is very grateful for your ongoing financial support. Thank you for your generosity!

In Christ's name,

Your Stewardship Committee

Kathryn Brennan, Mark Ferrara, Emily Guziak,
Alex John, Shannon McCullen, Dan Petherbridge,

Missions Committee

Your missions committee would like to let you know of two great opportunities to spread Christmas goodwill this December through two special offerings.

The Pastor's Fund Offering on December 24th

In these economic uncertain times, there is a unique opportunity to help those in our local area who have financial needs. The Pastor's Fund is used at the discretion of our ministers to provide support for heating bills, emergencies, food etc. for both members and non-members. What a great way to show our caring to our neighbors in need!



The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross

This United Church of Christ (UCC) special offering is dedicated to retired ministers and their families. The date for this offering is December 26th, but gifts are accepted before and after this date. Please label your gift as for The Christmas Fund offering. According to the UCC website, "Gifts to the Christmas Fund bring relief and hope to those who have dedicated their lives to serving our churches. By supporting the Christmas Fund, you make a huge difference and bring great joy! The Christmas Fund provides Supplementation of Small Annuities, Supplementation of Health Premiums, Emergency Grants, and Christmas "Thank You" Gift Checks for retirees and those facing unforeseen financial hardship." For more information, please check out information about this offering on the UCC website:

<https://www.uccresources.com/products/the-christmas-fund-2021-special-mission-offering-pension-boards-ucc?variant=39493673680959>

CROP Hunger Walk Update:

\$480 dollars of the funds raised on the October 17th CROP Walk have been sent to the Vermont Food Bank. Thank you again to all who participated and all who donated to this worthy cause.

Jamaica Service Program News

The Jamaica Leadership Team and Calcutta Committee would like to announce that we've made the decision to postpone our Annual Cabin Fever Calcutta event till March 2023 due to the current uncertainty surrounding social gatherings. We are hopeful that in 2023 we'll be able to have a team preparing to go to Jamaica in the summer and a Calcutta event at that time will help support that trip.

In other Jamaica news, mark your calendars for **Sunday February 27, 2022**. Both services will be Jamaica themed. We'll be sharing music, a slideshow overview of our three service trips, and hearing from some of our Jamaica alumni about the impact this program has had on their lives. We hope to hear from our Jamaican partners as well.

We continue to be in communication with Ray Howell, the principal at White Horses School. Students at White Horses are still doing remote learning. The preschool children are scheduled to return to in person learning imminently, and Mr. Howell is hopeful that the older children will be able to gradually return beginning in January. We are brainstorming ways for their students and our youth to engage and learn about each other's cultures. Stay posted for updates!

Coat Drive Thank You

Thank you to all who donated coats to our Annual Coat Drive. We collected 137 winter coats along with many beautifully knitted items. 45 coats were distributed to Food Pantry clients, 10 coats were given to Dismas House, the remaining knitted items were given to the Thrift Store to distribute, and the remaining coats were given to Sweetwaters to distribute at their Thanksgiving Dinner and Coat Giveaway. Thanks to all for caring about our neighbors in need!

Sunday Worship - Two Services - 8:30am* and 10:15am

*First service streamed via youtube.com/c/fccej

We are pleased to offer in-person worship with COVID precautions in place. This includes masking and social distancing regardless of vaccination status.

Communion is served in the Sanctuary on the 1st Sunday of each month. The elements will be sealed and passed out to the congregation.

DECEMBER'S PREACHING SCHEDULE

- ~ December 5th: Rev. Mark Mendes ~
- ~ December 12th: Rev. Josh Simon ~
- ~ December 19th: Christmas Pageant with our Children and Youth ~
- ~ December 26th: Rev. Ron Faux ~

NEW MEMBERS SUNDAY - Dec. 12, 2021

Be sure to come and celebrate three new members joining our church on December 12, 2021! All three of our new members bring a wealth of church experience with them and will add some great energy and ideas to our community. And it is a joy to say and an evangelical truth to proclaim that all of them will be joining because they were first invited by someone already attending our church. Over 70% of new members of any church are there because someone personally invited them to come.....and Christmas and Easter are the best seasons to do the inviting since that is when folks are interested [*hint, hint*]. Anyway, be sure to come and welcome the following new members into our community:

Jackie Lee Hadler, Marty Hopkins, Betty Busciglio

PAGEANT SUNDAY - Dec. 19, 2021

My Advent and Christmas Season is not quite fulfilled until I see the yearly rendition of the Christmas Story by our children and youth. On December 19th at both services, Christian Education Director Laurie Chipman will direct our children in their own interpretation of the birth of Jesus. There will be costumes and improvised lines, cute little sheep and goats making their way around the sanctuary, ancient words of narrative and new twists of understanding, carols sung and angles fluttering about. Come for the pageantry, processions and power of this age old tradition and bring a friend....
Pastor Mark

Christmas Eve Services

The Deacons and staff are committed to having all three of our worship services this Christmas Eve: 5pm Family Friendly Service; 9pm Lessons and Carols; and 11pm for a quieter service with communion. However, we are not completely clear on how each service will be presented since we are concerned that a jammed packed congregation in the midst of rising COVID19 cases is not the wisest of choices. The Deacons and Staff will be meeting on December 5th to finalize the plans and shortly thereafter, we will share our decisions for the Christmas Eve Services with the congregation and the wider community. Stay tuned.

DECEMBER BIRTHDAYS

ARNOLD, Becky	12/03	HOLLAND, Deb	12/14	DEWEY, David	12/21
LARRABEE, Judy	12/04	LOUNSBURY, Bill	12/14	EHLER-VOCK, Donna	12/22
OLUFSEN, Douglas	12/04	GRENON, Frank	12/15	LIVINGSTONE, Linda	12/23
GUILD, Anita	12/05	HOFFMAN, Brian	12/15	BOOMHOWER, Linda	12/24
IRWIN, Joanne	12/06	SCHMALZ, Zachary	12/15	STEIN, Terry	12/25
DILELLO, Hayley	12/07	SHEARER, Munroe	12/16	GILLIAM, Ben	12/27
HELMSTUTLER, Tom	12/07	WATT, Chelsea	12/16	PARISER, Olivia	12/28
KINAMAN, Russ	12/08	BESSETT-MAUGER, Wyatt	12/18	WATT, Deb	12/28
TAATJES, Andrea	12/09	BIRMINGHAM, Elizabeth	12/18	DEWEY, Christine	12/29
PLOOF, Cohen	12/10	DOWELL, Wendy	12/18	PALMER, Elijah	12/29
PORATTI, Alex	12/10	TRACY, Hannah	12/18	SHRESTHA, Manu	12/30
WINSLOW, Mary	12/10	JOHN, Monica	12/19	TALLMAN, Kurt	12/30
FIRKEY, Pete	12/11	FRANK, Rebecca	12/20	GOEDKEN, Carley	12/31
RICHARDS, Wayne	12/11	FRANK, Sheldon	12/20	PORATTI, Samantha	12/31
FRANK, Tom	12/12	HENNESSEY, Steve	12/20		
FIELD, Kathryn	12/13	PARKER, Linda Lou	12/20		



We are once again collection gifts for children in Essex Junction, Essex Town and Westford. You have the option of picking up a tag from the Giving Tree in the Narthex or going online and signing up via Sign Up Genius. Each tag identifies a gift for a child and for each child there are three tags. Two of the tags ask for gifts of clothing and the third tag asks for a book, game, toy or gift card for the child. Please consider taking a tag or two to bring a smile and some Christmas cheer to a local youngster. If you do take a tag(s), be sure to sign your name on the sheet by the tree identifying the tag number(s) that you have taken. Wrapped or bagged gifts, with the tags securely attached, need to be returned to the church no later than **Friday, December 10**. We will be distributing the gifts on

December 17. Families that we help have expressed how much they appreciate the gifts we give their children and the joy that abounds on Christmas Day. Please remember to label your gifts. To use the online option, visit our website at www.fccej.org/Serving Others/Get Involved - click the Sign Up Genius link on the right of the page.

If you choose a gift(s) using Sign-up Genius, **please mark your wrapped or bagged gift with the tag number & letter so we will know who the gift belongs to**. You are welcome to be as creative as you like when marking the gift. Thank you for your support of this important connection to our community!

Heavenly Cents Thrift Shop Holiday News

Gratefulness: As we enter the holiday season, our church community is grateful for the volunteers who support our mission, (many who are not church members) those who donate inventory to keep the shop in operation serving others, and to our many new and returning customers. **THANK YOU!**

Giving Back to the Community: Heavenly Cents is pleased to have given financial donations to the following organizations during the past year: Meals on Wheels, Steps to End Domestic Violence, JUMP, Katie Currier Scholarship at VSAC, SPECTRUM, The Community Justice Center, COTS, CHIPS (Essex Teen Center), The Essex-Westford Child Nutrition Center, Essex Cemetery Association, and the Senior Center. We continue to collaborate with the Missions Committee and the Food Pantry for the annual Coat Drive and future projects.

Volunteers: If you are interested in spending a few hours contributing towards the mission of helping others in our community, contact Sue Wood or Elaine Raymond. The "crew" will be happy to welcome you to the shop and show you the ropes of operations!

Donations: The Thrift Shop is currently open on Tuesdays and Saturdays, 10am-1pm and Wednesdays, 4-7 pm. Due to the lack of storage space, we prefer donations be winter items only. They need to be in saleable condition to be accepted by our sorter. We accept men's, women's, and children's clothing, bed and table linens, artwork, smaller household items, and jewelry. We no longer accept books. For questions or to donate, please contact Sue Wood at 878-3068 or email her at woodsusanjane@gmail.com.

Local Church Member Book Sales

You may not know, but FCCEJ has a number of authors among our ranks! On December 19th after each service, some of our authors will have their books available for sale to our members. No one is obligated to buy anything, but we thought it would be an excellent opportunity to see our local talent and pick up some great Christmas presents. Be sure to come and support them!

Friday Coffee Clatter: Everyone is invited to meet at Martone's in downtown Essex Junction on Friday mornings from 8 to 9. Get some coffee and baked goods with Rev. Mark and other faith friends and talk about absolutely anything! The mask policy is determined by Martone's. We laugh often while discussing aspects of life and significant current events. It's a great way to start your day!

Monthly Bridge Group: Calling all bridge players: Hear Ye, Hear Ye, our 3rd Friday of the month Bridge gathering will be December 17th from 1:30 to 4pm. All are welcome whether you are a master point bridge genius or a relatively new player trying to figure. If you would like to bring some Christmas Cookies or goodies of some kind, feel free to liven up the day and be sure to wear some **RED!!!**

Sermon Talk Back: Join us Tuesdays from 8:30-10am to talk about the Sunday scripture and message. This time provides opportunities to delve deeper into scripture and hear the perspectives of others in our faith community. Sermon Talkback meets in the Marvin Lounge and via Zoom: <http://zoom.us/j/740803865>

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