

SPiRiT @ FiRST MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

FIRST
CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH *of Essex Junction*

Love. Serve. Grow.

January 2024: In this issue...

- Your Pastor’s Ponderings Cover,
- Special Worship in January,
- Deacons, Stewardship..... 2
- Laurie’s Lens, Children’s Ministry..... 3
- Faith Formation, Youth Ministry..... 4
- Missions/Outreach 5
- Connections 6, 7

Your Pastor’s Ponderings.....



We just celebrated the joyous seasons of Advent and Christmas and it felt like we were well on our way of arriving at a healthy post-covid reality, despite an upswing of cases and a renewed concern for issues of personal and corporate health. On Christmas Eve, we almost reached 500 people in attendance at our services and saw a number of our people return to the fold as well as a goodly number of guests looking for a church to call home. The music from all of our groups was stellar, the Christmas Pageant joyful, our guest speakers excellent and the many family configurations who lit the advent candles uplifting.

And in talking to our Financial Secretary, it looks like we are going to be close to reaching the Stewardship Committee’s goal of a 10 % increase in our giving for 2024 and that is on top of having a decent sized surplus in 2023. Our financial officers, our committees who watch their spending, our people who generously give to our church and the many groups who are thrilled to be using our facility and generously give for their use of it.....together we work together, do great ministry, share our resources with the less fortunate, and continue to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to a world in dire need of the Good News.

As I reflect on 2023 and look to 2024, I am grateful for the participation, faith, devotion, generosity and hard work of so many of you. Christmas Eve is perhaps the clearest lens by which to understand the shape and future of the church and after my experience a few days ago, I would say we are going to have a great 2024!

Seems like Mary and Joseph could have said the same thing. Despite an arduous journey of pregnancy and travelling to register for taxation and finding no place to stay, they found a safe spot, had a healthy child, experienced signs from God and had wise folks steer them to safety with gifts that would support them in a strange land until they could return home safely. I can only imagine the conversations that Joseph and Mary had along the road and in their little apartment in Egypt as they reflected back on the events of Jesus’ birth. Despite the threats from Herod and their immigrant status in Egypt, I imagine they were filled with hope and looked to the future with expectation, like any good parents or in our case, church.

This morning I came in and asked our newest staff member, Elizabeth, what I should share with the congregation in my January newsletter article. She simply responded, “tell them 2024 is going to be a great year.” And I agree. With so much of the unknown in our politics, economics and national experience, let us be grateful that the First Congregational Church of Essex Junction is stable and doing well. We have tremendous members, a healthy economic situation, an expanding social justice witness, great music, fantastic children in our midst and plenty of new folks bringing new ideas and energy to an already exciting ministry. Join me in being thrilled to belong to such a dynamic and vibrant family of faith. As we venture into the unknown future, let us do so with song, passion and joy. Jesus would have no less.

New Year’s Blessings,

Rev. Mark

SPECIAL SUNDAYS IN JANUARY

One Service for Communion

January 7, 2024 at 10am

In 2024, we will continue to have only one service at 10am for Communion Sundays; [January 7th]. The Deacons voted, since the music and service was exactly the same at both services, to have just one service; it also gave a break to the Sanctuary Choir members. People have loved seeing the church full and to be able to catch up and see folks they know and love that attend the other service. This service is streamed and in-person.

Pulpit Exchange with Rev. Devon Thomas

January 21, 2024

Many of you will fondly remember Rev. Devon Thomas who was ordained in our church a number of years ago to great acclamation. He went through the ordination process at our church AND served on staff where he helped to lead the youth group, preached once a month and assisted Rev. Mendes with programs and activities. Once ordained, he responded to a call to minister to three churches including the Jeffersonville United Church where he served for five years. He has recently accepted a call to be the solo minister at Ascension Lutheran Church in South Burlington and is thrilled to be back in the area. We will invite him back to the pulpit on January 21st for both services. Come and see what five years of ministry, a beautiful new wife, and two children have done to his preaching and ministry. There's a rumor that he is even going to ask for questions!!! Rev. Mendes will be preaching at Ascension Lutheran on that day.

New Members Class Offered

Have you found a place where you are welcomed? Do you appreciate a faith that encourages you to use your mind? Are you looking for a church that teaches values of love, kindness, inclusion and forgiveness to your children? Do you appreciate great music from multiple choral or musical groups? Do you feel the warmth and support of our staff and members? Do you want to be a part of an organization that helps to better the structures and tone of the wider Essex community?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, then we would love you to come and explore what membership in our church means. On January 28, after second service, around 11:30am, we are offering a New Members Class where you can learn about our church and her many ministries. You will learn about our history, as well as what our denomination, the United Church of Christ, stands for and how they operate. Lunch is provided. Childcare is available with advance notice. Please contact the church office at 802-878-5745 and we'll be happy to arrange it.

Deacons

It was my pleasure to serve as your deacon for the 10am and 9pm services on Christmas Eve. What a joy to see so many of you in attendance. Our Church looked so beautifully decorated for the Christmas Season. I particularly enjoyed the return of the bell choir. I was impressed with how many of you participated in the service: Reverend Mark's energy, Kinlee and Cooper Spaulding playing violin, the beautiful music, the joy of the children. It all made me so proud to be a member of this Church.

We are looking forward to 2024 and serving our FCCEJ Family.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Rusty Sargent

Stewardship

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your 2024 pledge to the First Congregational Church! You make it possible to continue to provide help and services to our community, educational opportunities to our youth and adults, maintenance of 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, Ann Gray, Emily Guziak, Alex John, Dan Petherbridge,

Beth Volker, Beth Warren, Heather Stein, Rev. Mark Mendes

As I write this article, I'm reminded that today is the last day of Advent. Christmas Eve has arrived and what a great feeling it is to celebrate the birth of Christ anew in our lives and in the world once more. Tomorrow starts the 12 days of Christmas and then comes Epiphany. Another great time of celebrating the magi who traveled so far to find the Messiah, that Jesus was no longer a baby. Come join us on January 7th to hear this story in a dramatic reading at our 10am worship service.

I light a lot of candles at our house throughout these days when darkness falls so early in the evening. The light helps remind me of all of Christ's teachings, words he said to the disciples, and stories he told. Light helps our moods, refreshes our minds and helps us celebrate the hope, peace, joy and love in the world. It also renews my soul, helps me relax and feel God's love all around. Keep the light of Jesus with you all through this Christmas season, then into Epiphany. See if you can carry it all the way to the beginning of Lent. You know it will be here before we know it.

The cycle of the church year keeps on moving. It began with Advent. Isn't it fun to think that the church celebrates a new year before our calendar does? You will receive this newsletter as 2024 begins. A new time of winter and spring for our calendars. Some things are staying the same and others are changing. Our Junior High and Senior High youth gatherings will continue, but a few more fun things are on the calendar. I hope you will keep reading along to find the calendars, also mailed out to the youth, see them all, and mark your calendars with all the events. I will continue to reach out and gather adults to work with our senior high youth on projects. So, senior high, if you want to do something specific, please let me know. I'll be gathering our Youth Ministry Team once a month and looking for more adults who would like to support and plan. Maybe this is you! Let's chat.

As we start the year 2024, I ask for your help in supporting our youth. Whether it's here at church or out in the community, take a moment and say hello. Introduce yourself and ask how they are, what they are interested in, and when their next event is. Youth ministry is something we do together as a faith family. I ask for you help in lighting the path for our youth as we serve, learn, and grow in God's light together.

Blessed to be in ministry on this faith journey with you,

Laurie Chipman, Christian Education Director

Children's Ministry Coordinator-Elizabeth Miller



We are thrilled to welcome Elizabeth Miller to the FCCEJ staff as our Children's Ministry Coordinator! Here is her brief background:

"I was born and raised in Glens Falls, NY, where my parents still reside. I attended Nazareth University, in Rochester, NY, where I received my accounting degree. Over the past 23 years, life has moved me to California (after graduating college) for 3 years, back to upstate New York for 6 years, where my oldest child Robin, 16, was born. Then down to North Carolina for 10 years, where my youngest child Noah, 11, was born. And at the end of 2020, here to Vermont! I am fortunate to enjoy the beauty and slower pace of the Green Mountain State with my family and friends.

My full-time job is the Accounts and Resource Manager for an apple orchard in NY. I have worked there for over 15 years, and it's been a pleasure to work with a third-generation farmer to keep his vision alive for generations to come.

I am glad to have become a part of the First Church Community in 2021 to create meaningful connections and spend time volunteering and now working as part of the FCCEJ staff as the Children's Ministry Coordinator. I look forward to new adventures in life as I enjoy spending time with my family and friends, yoga, reading, traveling, and laughing!"

Faith Formation News

****Watch for Faith@Home emails in your inbox****

Faith Formation Sunday Morning Calendar

January 7 ~ Communion / Spiritual Friends (PreK—2nd) - **One Service at 10am**

January 14, 21, 28 10 ~ Peer Groups during 2nd Service (PreK—8th)

J.A.M. (Jesus And Me)

January 14 ~ All 3rd through 5th graders are invited to stay from 11:30-12:30

A fun time with a light snack, filling the Faith Formation Offering barometer, and more!

Faith Formation Offering

2023-2024—Ice Cream Aunties Mission of Aloha (Lahaina Fire Relief)

Current total \$450.75

Remember to use the small white bible story envelopes on the Narthex shelf so that your offering goes to help those in Lahaina. Loose money in the offering plate goes to our general church budget.

Each month Jennifer Kelly will join us in the Program Room for updates and ways we can support the children of Lahaina in Maui, Hawaii.

Youth Ministry

Youth time reaffirms the church as being a safe space to build self-confidence, discover identity, and carry it throughout life. A valuable tool. It is foundationally about loving God and our neighbor, being in community with each other, and living out the love that was given so freely to us!

‘Our Youth’ Bulletin Board

Have you seen the pictures of youth doing what they love? It’s right outside Laurie & Elizabeth’s office. Stop by and check it out. Don’t see a recent event? Send a picture to Laurie and she’ll add it to the board. Send her a text or email with upcoming events. She’d love to come show support and share the info on our Facebook group so others in our wider church community can too!

Youth Calendar:

January 7 ~ JH Youth (6th — 8th) - Epiphany Party, 11:30-1:30

January 14 ~ SH Youth (9th-12th) - Frank & Barb Smith are guests, 1-3pm

January 21 ~ JH Youth (6th — 8th) - 11:30-1:30

February 4 ~ Annual Meeting Childcare (JH & SH) - Games/Movie/Toys/Projects, 11am to 12:30pm(ish)

Save the Dates:

May 5 ~ COTS Walk ~ JHY & SHY

July 28-31 ~ New England Regional Youth Event @ Silver Lake Camp & Retreat Center, in Sharon, CT for all youth ages 13-18. Youth are invited to join together and attend this awesome experience! RYE will be a place to grow your spirit and connect with other youth from all over New England. This beautiful outdoor ministry site features swimming, boating, and a challenge course for team building. More details coming soon.

Nursery Staff (Senior High Youth & College Students)

Reminder to staff to sign up on the calendar for slots (first come first serve). Calendar dates now go out through January. On the 1st Sundays of the month you will arrive 15 minutes earlier for our 10am service. Others who would like to join the staff, please contact Laurie for an interview and orientation. You earn \$20 per worship service.



Vacation Bible Camp

Mark your calendars now!

August 5th – 9th, 2024

Mornings 9am-12noon

OR

All-Day 9am to 4pm (\$100 per camper ~ scholarships available)

Online Registration is now LIVE! Mark your calendars and sign up TODAY!

Missions Committee

With Gratitude

Your 2023 Missions Committee would like to express our heartfelt thanks to all our volunteers, committee and staff members and community members who have made this an incredible year. Your dedication to supporting us through bake sales, dinners, performances, lectures, a silent auction, and preparation for an amazing trip to Montana - the list is long and impressive. We truly value each and every contribution that you have made this year. In addition, thanks to our Missions Committee members who have spent endless time connecting with our community, bringing back the firsthand knowledge of what is needed, and organizing what it takes to make this a better world. Congratulations on a job well done! We are looking forward to a fantastic 2024!

Racial Justice Event

Mark your Calendars!! Sunday, February 4th @ 3pm in the Sanctuary

The Racial Justice Subcommittee of Missions will be hosting Rev. Mark Hughes, Co-founder and Executive Director of Justice for All Vermont.

Their mission is to dismantle systemic racism, eliminate poverty and ensure racial equity and relationship-building. They envision a nation where a restorative dialogue enables us to become empowered and moves us beyond a legacy of racism and oppression, causing a change in the hearts and minds of current and future generations AND a nation where our judicial system and peace officers are accountable to our citizenry and committed to protecting and serving with cross cultural understanding and trust.

This event is free and open to the community.



We are again at the end of another year and we have just completed the remarkable opportunity called the Giving Tree. Our congregation gave holiday gifts to 57 children from the City and Town of Essex and Westford. Those gifts included clothing, coats from Essex Rotary and the Thrift Shop, fruit, vegetables and sweets from the Heavenly Food Pantry, candy from our Youth, stuffed animals, toys, books and hats and mittens.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the folks who helped to make the Giving Tree a success. They include Sharon Dettenreider and the Essex Rotary, Valerie and Belinda Gabert and the Heavenly Food Pantry, the volunteers at the Thrift Shop, Laurie Chipman and the church's youth, Mary-Ellen Grove, Ginny Coe and Susan Pratt who provided handmade hats, mittens and scarves, Jenny Bourne and Suzanne Reardon for the stuffed animals and Anita Guild,

Linda Bogardus, Jane Schneider, LindaLou Parker, Teresa Gabert and Francis Raymond for their labor of love. And a special thank you to Jen Kelly, our administrative assistant, who was so very helpful in coordinating the logistics that we encountered on a daily basis. Last, we want to offer a heartfelt thank you to the members of this congregation for choosing, purchasing, wrapping and delivering gifts to the church.

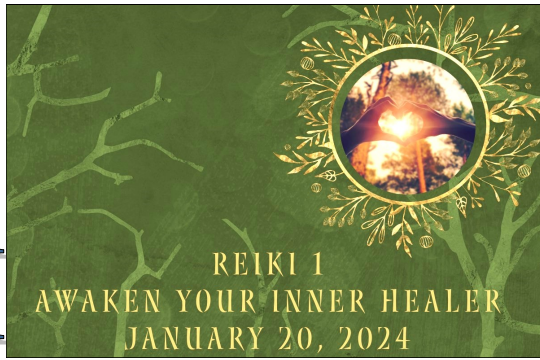
It is important to share with each of you how very much the Giving Tree is appreciated by its recipients. When families pick up their gifts, they tell us how much our generosity means to them and that they are so grateful to be able to provide their children with a Merry Christmas. Many have tears in their eyes as they offer their thanks.

With grateful hearts,

Elaine Raymond and Anita Guild

Montana Service Trip

Tickets are available now for the Cabin Fever Calcutta happening on March 9th. Names of those who purchase tickets on or before 1/15/24 will be entered into a drawing for a \$100 cash prize. Don't miss out on this opportunity to support the Montana Service Trip.



Reiki I Awaken you Inner Healer

Here are the basics of what you will learn in the class.

1. History and Principles of Reiki
2. Understanding Energy
3. Attunement
4. Hand Positions
5. Self-Treatment
6. Treatment of Others
7. Grounding and Protection
8. Practice Sessions
9. Integration and Lifestyle



Reiki II - Awaken your Healing Connection

1. Reiki Symbols
2. Symbol Activation
3. Distance Healing
4. Emotional Healing
5. Enhanced Energy Flow
6. Professional Practice
7. Intuitive Healing
8. Clearing and Protection Techniques
9. Practical Applications
10. Practice Sessions

Grief Support Group

This group meets the 2nd Thursday of each month from 10 to 11:30am in Marvin Lounge and is open to anyone experiencing the loss of a loved one. It is a place to share and connect with others. The facilitators hope to provide a safe, supportive environment in which participants learn from each other, discover ways to cope with grief, and offer the assurance that we are not alone. Grief is a normal, natural, and necessary experience!

The sessions are facilitated by Sharon Dettenrieder, MSN, RN and Mary McHugh, MAPS. Both Sharon and Mary have years of experience in leading Grief Support groups as well as personal experience with loss. First session is Thursday, January 11.

Please contact the church office for more information: 802-878-5745 or welcome@fccej.org.



FCCEJ Family Camp Dates

Friday, August 9 - Sunday, August 11, 2024

Butterfly Bay State Park

13 sites are already booked!

If you would like to contribute to the cost, you can mark your check "FCCJ Outdoor Ministries".

Arrive Friday afternoon/evening (time that works for you) and set up your site. Join the group for an evening campfire in our common area around our large red canopy. We'll move a couple of close by picnic tables so we can have a couple of meals together (lunch & supper of BYO to the table and a dish or item to share if you wish). Saturday will be a day of fun and activities, on your own and/or with others. Last year some took a bike ride, others with the pool. We played corn hole, cards and got a little crafty. Glow sticks were a favorite of many. It's a very relaxed weekend with no set schedule. There will be great koinonia (fellowship) with others here from your First Church family. Reach out to Laurie to sign up.

SERMON TALKBACK

For fifteen years, there has been a group of people who meet every Tuesday morning to discuss the worship service, the sermon content, and anything else that might come up. We support each other and laugh and cry as we explore the faith and how it applies to our lives. There are plenty of differing opinions in outlook and theology, but we are united in our love of FCCEJ and each other. If you are looking for a group to join, we meet every Tuesday morning from 8:30am-10am in the Marvin Lounge. All are welcome.

COFFEE CLATTER

Every Friday morning at 8am, join Reverent Mark at Martone's Market & Café for an hour of lively conversation and friendly banter. Grab a cup of coffee and/or a tasty treat and spend some time in community.

BRIDGE GROUP in JANUARY

If you like to play bridge, you are welcome to come and have a little fun. We have snacks and laughs, and, unlike many other bridge venues, we are simply there to learn and enjoy the time together: no crazy competitiveness! We play three rounds and the high score wins a home made jam by Rev. Mark. We meet on the first and third Fridays of the month at 1:30pm in Marvin Lounge. Everyone is welcome so bring a friend!

Altar Flowers

Flowers on the altar are a wonderful way to remember loved ones or celebrate a special day. We include a note in the bulletin about who donated the flowers and who/what they are honoring.

Scan the QR code or use this link to sign up for 2024:

<https://www.signupgenius.com/go/20F0545A8AB2FAAF58-46881013-fccej>



Yoga @ First

Come practice a compassionate, inquisitive sequence to integrate the mind, body, and soul. In each session, we will focus, breathe, build heat, strengthen, and relax. Join us Tuesday evenings, from 5-6:15 in the Sanctuary. Wear comfortable, non restrictive clothing. Bring a mat or borrow one. Donations (to FCCEJ) welcome, but not required.

Fall Prevention - Tai Chi

Join your faith family for Tai Chi class on Tuesday mornings at 10:15 in the Fellowship Hall. This is a beginner class of slow, controlled motions that aid in strength and balance. There is no charge for the class but donations to FCCEJ are appreciated. Contact Betty Adams for more information: adamsvt123@gmail.com. Sponsored by Age Well.

JANUARY BIRTHDAYS

DAHAL, Kul	01/01	GUILD, Ed	01/15
FRISBIE, Paulette	01/01	HALL, Wayne	01/15
HARPLE, Glenn	01/01	HELMSTUTLER, Elaine	01/15
RUSHFORD, Nicholas	01/01	BOOMHOWER, George	01/17
MCINTYRE, Amy	01/02	ADLER, Jacquelyn	01/20
OWENS, Teddy	01/03	COBURN, Mary	01/20
LAFLAM, Chris	01/04	DEAN, Ed	01/21
WINSLOW, Arthur	01/04	BEACH, George	01/24
WISLOSKI, Jessica	01/08	SHEARER, Cathy	01/25
NOWELL, Jeff	01/10	VANSTEENSBURG, Allison	01/25
SINKEWICZ, Sara	01/10	GILLIAM, Ingrid	01/26
BARTLETT, Lincoln	01/15	MCCULLEN, Kevin	01/29

First Congregational Church of Essex Junction
1 Church Street
Essex Junction, VT 05452
Phone: 802-878-5745
Email: welcome@fccej.org

ELECTRONIC SERVICE REQUESTED

Sunday Morning Worship:

~First Sunday of Each Month~

One Service at 10am

with Holy Communion and Sanctuary Choir

~Other Sundays Throughout the Month~

8:30 - In-person and streamed via youtube.com/c/fccej

Music: Bethany Blake directs our Sanctuary Choir and provides accompaniment

10:15 - In-person—Faith Formation for PreK - 8th

Music: Finally @ First Praise Band

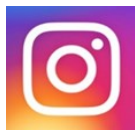
Visit us online:



FCCEJ.ORG



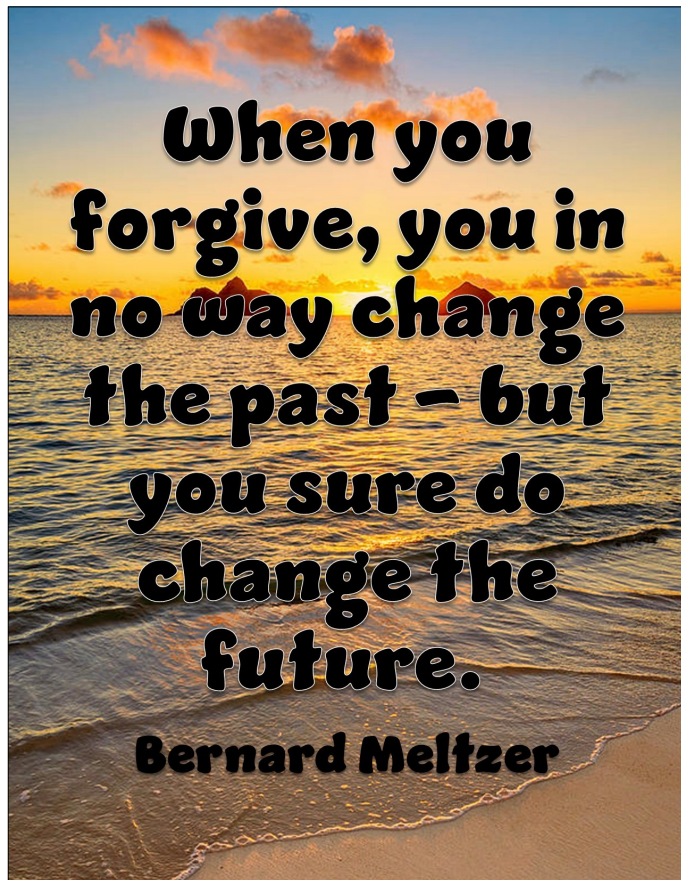
FCCEJ



FCCEJ_802



FIRSTCONGREGATIONALEJ



**When you
forgive, you in
no way change
the past - but
you sure do
change the
future.**

Bernard Meltzer