



SPRIT @ FIRST

Monthly Newsletter

FIRST
CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH *of Essex Junction*

Love. Serve. Grow.

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YOUR PASTOR'S PONDERINGS...

The Wednesday Night Searchers are reading *The Book of Joy*, by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The editor of the book, Douglas Abrams, interviewed these two great religious and moral leaders trying to learn how we can claim joy in the midst of a difficult and sometimes dark world. Archbishop Tutu says

"It is also good to recognize – speaking from our struggles with apartheid – how incredibly noble people are. You know human beings are basically good. You know that's where you have to start. That everything else is an aberration..... People are remarkably, remarkably, remarkably good, incredible in their generosity..... We've always got to be recognizing that despite the aberrations, the fundamental thing about humanity, humankind, about people, is that they are good, they were made good, and they really want to be good."

Naturally, Archbishop Tutu draws this from the creation story when God declared everything good. It is a foundational belief that separates from many people in today's world. Jesus reminds us of this goodness when he cares for folks the world has neglected, when he treats everyone with respect, when he desires everyone to live within God's realm of love.

They both talk about how the nightly news often focuses on the bad and they do so because the bad is an aberration. The goodness all around us is so common it is NOT news. Keeping this wider perspective is one of the ways that we maintain hope and subsequently joy in the depth of our being.

Hope and Joy, along with Peace and Love are the gifts of Advent we welcome into our lives in December. The church year starts with these foundational concepts because in the midst of waiting in darkness for the messiah to come, the people still clutched to these gifts to get them through the night. They had a firm belief that goodness would reign one day AND, in the midst of their oppression, the Israelites cherished moments when these gifts entered their lives.

Like the Israelites experienced when Jesus was born, our world still suffers from war and oppression, the accumulation of wealth and its accompanying poverty, deep division, and dysfunction, but all of those and more do not define us. We choose to believe in goodness. We choose how we respond to those circumstances in our lives. We choose whether to claim goodness. We choose whether to be hopeful, peaceful, joyous and loving.

Life is better when we do. So as we re-live Christ's light bursting into a sea of darkness this December, let us soak in its warmth and spread it around a bit. Let us cease focusing on the

negative and stop complaining about the world. Let us strive to change our attitude to reflect God's glory. Let us seek out folks who need a friend, a kind word, a warm embrace or maybe even a surprise present.

Let's strive to hover around the manger and follow Jesus in making our world a better place, one smile and thought at a time. Blessings on your journey. As always, I am

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Mark



SPECIAL SUNDAYS & SERVICES IN DECEMBER

Communion will be on December 7th at the single service at 10am.

It will be observed in the traditional way w/ the elements being passed out to the congregation.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14

Blue Sunday with a Time for Healing @ 1st Service—not streamed

Children's Christmas Pageant @ 2nd Service—streamed and in-person

New Members Joining @ Both Services

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21

After One Service at 10am

Christmas Cantata presented by Bethany Blake and the FCCEJ Sanctuary Choir

Currier Bells and the Joyful Noise Musical Groups will Perform

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24

Christmas Eve Candlelight Services

5pm ~ Kid Friendly service w/ "Special Guests" sharing the Christmas Story

9pm ~ A Service of Lessons and Carols with a Pre-Service Concert at 8:30

11pm ~ A Communion Service with the Fantabulous Finally @ First Praise Band

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28

One Service at 10am

The Blessings of the Bears & Sacred Objects

On the Sunday after Christmas, we are going to have ONE special informal service @ 10am where folks can wear their PJ's or dress casually. We will bless all the teddy bears, or stuffed animals, or baby dolls that our children [including children at heart] bring in. We will also bless any sacred objects, such as jewelry or mementoes, that have special significance in our lives. One of my favorites memories of this service is when a 90 year old doll collector in my first church gently brought in her first baby doll – a porcelain faced, first eye rolling beauty, threadbare and nearly falling apart. She brought it up to me with such reverence and love that my heart warmed and left for joy. Naturally, we will be singing quite a few Christmas Carols. And of course there will be good snacks after church. Christmas sweaters are welcome!

DEACONS

Season's greetings from the deacons. It is with great anticipation that we celebrate this holiday season with you, your family and friends. The Deacons send our heartfelt wishes that our Advent and Christmas celebrations will fill you with faith, hope and most of all love. Please join in as your church family gathers to share many old and new traditions. It will be a season of ringing bells, the magic of children's voices, sacred music, and the wonderful sharing of prayers and scripture. The deacons send you our sincere thanks for all that you and your loved ones have contributed to bringing light and hope into the life of our church. Know that we are with you as we journey towards Christmas together.

May the Peace and Joy of the season be with you,

Paula Sargent

✝ ELIZABETH'S EPISTLE ✝

Faith Formation Peer Groups

- ♦ Advent is the beginning of a new liturgical year. Advent lasts for four weeks and is followed by twelve days of Christmas and the Day of Epiphany. Depending on who you ask, Advent's liturgical color is either blue or purple (with Christmas being white). Advent is a time when we prepare and wait in expectation of the birth of Jesus on Christmas. More than anything, it is a time of great wonder and mystery.

Volunteers Welcomed

- ♦ The recruiting for Faith Formation volunteers is an open invite.
If you have been attending FCCEJ for more than 6 months, you are qualified.
Reach out to Elizabeth at ChildrensMinistry@fccej.org.

December Dates to Remember:

- ♦ December 7th ~ Spiritual friends
Matthew 3:1-12
- ♦ January 4th ~ Spiritual friends
John 1:(1-9), 10-18
- ♦ January 11th ~ Peer groups
Matthew 3:13-17
- ♦ January 25th ~ Peer groups
Isaiah 9:1-4

Prayer

"God of stories, you are with us through every beginning, middle, and end. From chapter to chapter, year to year, your love goes with us, and your presence stays near. May we never stop telling stories of your life-giving love. Amen. (miniRevolutions)

Faith Formation Peer Groups

- ♦ The Heart to Heart Program through the Humane Society of Chittenden County has been selected for the 2025-2026 faith formation offering.
 - ◇ The Heart to Heart program allows you to symbolically sponsor an animal in HSCC's care while they wait for their new family. (More information found in the Narthex)
 - Please continue to use the white envelopes in the Narthex for the Faith Formation offering, or write "Faith Formation" on the memo of your check.

Peace and Light,

Elizabeth - Children's Ministry Coordinator

CHRISTMAS HUMOR

Why are Christmas trees bad at knitting?

They always drop their needles.

What's the difference between the Christmas alphabet and the ordinary alphabet?

The Christmas alphabet has Noel.

What did one snowman say to the other?

Do you smell carrots?

What do fish sing during winter?

Christmas corals.

HEARTFELT THANKS

From a Member of the FCCEJ Missions Committee:

As a volunteer at the Burlington Justice Center, I have participated in CoSA groups. We meet weekly to help a participant, who has served a period of time incarcerated for a variety of charges. I and other volunteers worked for almost a year with a woman who had spent time in jail for several DUI offences.

She had stopped drinking, had found employment and was working on getting her life back into order, when, due to domestic assaults, she left her family house and went to the women's domestic abuse shelter. She left home with what she could fit into her run-down car, some clothing, sleeping bag, her dog, and a small amount of cash.

Her ex-partner was in control of all their money, and the owner of her car. The car needed a new tire and some unknown engine and brake work.

With a generous gift from the Joyce Jacob Fund, this individual was able to buy a reliable used car to get back and forth to work, and a laptop so she could have access to available resources in the community. She is very thankful for the money and is using the car and laptop to improve her situation.

Thank you to Joyce and the Joyce Jacob Fund board members.

Dear Church Family,

Thank you so much for my beautiful yellow rose honoring my 80th birthday. I also want to thank you for the caring support as I healed from my foot fractures. The kind words, delicious food, visits, cards, emails, grocery shopping, and chauffeuring helped throughout my healing. I am so blessed to be part of this loving, caring, and supportive faith community.

Judy Allen

Thank You From the Trustees:

The Trustees would like to thank everyone who came out on Saturday, November 1 to help with our Fall Cleanup Day! We had a great time working together and getting the leaves raked, bagged and taken away!



NEARLY NEW SAMPLER

WANTED – the person who donated the embroidered sampler to this year's Nearly New sale. The Nearly New volunteers removed it from the sale as they felt it was way too nice to sell in Nearly New.

The sampler tells us that the girl who made the sampler was Martha Marion, that her birthdate was March 16, 1820, and that she was 10 years old when she made it. Doing some research in Find A Grave, I found a Martha Marion with the same birthdate and a birth location of Burlington, Massachusetts. She married Humphrey Prescott at age 18. Unfortunately, she passed away when she was 29 years old. I need to do some more research in ancestry, but I suspect this Martha is the maker of the sampler that was donated to our Nearly New sale.

The Craft Fest Committee is planning on making the sampler part of a silent auction basket for the 2026 Craft Fest. We will include with it a book on the history of embroidery and other items needed to complete a modern day sampler.

We would also like to include some history on the donated sampler which is why I'm reaching out to the person who donated it. Information such as: Was Martha your ancestor? Do you know anything about her life? Where did you get the sampler? Any information on Martha and where the sampler has been since it was made in 1830 is welcome.

Please contact me at grayann8@aol.com (put sampler in subject line) or at 802-878-4088, or talk to me some Sunday morning in church.

Ann Gray, Craft Fest Committee and FCCEJ historian



“CRITTER CORNER”



By Beth Volker

Please Feed the Birds & Squirrels This Winter!!

It's that time of year...if you have not already put your bird feeders out, now is the time! I know there is a lot of frustration around keeping the squirrels out of the bird feeders, but I believe I have finally figured it out, so I will share my findings with you now.

The first premise for me is that the squirrels need to eat too. The winter is as hard on them as it is on the birds. Squirrels breed in January and February so the first litters are born from mid-March to early April, when the temperatures here in the northeast can still be bitterly cold. Most of our squirrels live in dreys....those seemingly messy bunches of leaves that you see high up in the trees. I've often wondered how warm it can actually be in those, so I looked it up and found it can be 60 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than the outside temperature. That's warmer than I would have thought!

If you're determined to keep your feeder squirrel-free, I found a bird feeder that, thus far, both this year and last, has kept the squirrels at bay. It's made by Audubon and I found the best price on Chewy.com. It's called Audubon Vista Winter Squirrel Resistant Wild Bird Feeder and the price is \$46.03. At that price your shipping will be free. I put out three of these feeders. One contains black oil sunflower seed, another Flyers Choice and the third is Cardinal's Choice. I buy them at Agway in Williston.

Of course I don't forget the squirrels. Every day, I put out four 9" x 13" brownie pans filled with black oil sunflower seed. I also spoil them some days by adding mixed nuts...the kind you can find in the grocery stores during the holiday season. They contain walnuts, almonds, pecans, Brazil nuts and others, all still in their shells. I put these pans on the ground under the bird feeders. By the way, despite popular belief, peanuts in the shell are not good for squirrels.

I hope this information is helpful and that you will join me in caring for the birds and squirrels from now through the end of April. Thank you and Happy Holidays!!

CRAFT FEST UPDATE

We are pleased to let everyone know this year's Craft Fest event was a huge success. The following are the net profit for each area:

Cafe - \$1,030.46

Sweet Shoppe - \$1,265.00

Accessories - \$ 527.25

Crafters - \$ 495.00

Nearly New \$1,772.91

Silent Auction \$3,514.00

This is a total of \$8,604.25 for the day!

A big thank you to those who baked, made items for the luncheon, donated items for the nearly new sale, donated accessories, and contributed to the silent auction. Also, thank you to everyone you came and bought items. A special thank you to the many elves who helped with setup and cleanup. Everyone contributed to a successful event.

The biggest thank you goes to the Craft Fest Committee members:

Mary Gratton, Gail Cromie, Janne Giles, Alyssa Lasher, Ruth Casey, Susan Turner, Cathy LaPierre, Linda Bogardus, Ann Gray
Merry Christmas!!

EARLY BIRD CALCUTTA TICKETS

Early Bird tickets are now available for our 8th Cabin Fever Calcutta to be held on Saturday, March 14, 2026 at the Catamount Country Club. Each \$150 ticket includes a buffet dinner for two plus one Calcutta ball number. Those purchasing tickets prior to January 14th are entered into a drawing, to be held at the Calcutta, for a \$100 cash prize.

Letters to those who joined us last year will be mailed in early December with information about how to purchase a ticket. There will also be a table in Fellowship Hall where tickets can be purchased. For more information, contact Sharon Dettenrieder at Sharon.dettenrieder@gmail.com.

The evening promises lots of merriment with our MC Jamie Polli in his sequined jacket. What color will it be this year? Plan to join us for this evening of fellowship in early March when we are all ready to be out and about.

Proceeds from this event support our Intergenerational Service Trips. Watch for information in the spring about our 2026 domestic trip to the Blackfeet Reservation.

HEAVENLY CENTS THRIFT SHOP NEWS

The Shop is currently all decked out for the Holidays! Our sales have been wonderful and we continue to see new customers. We would like to thank the many generous community members who make donations, so we may continue to meet our Mission of serving others, both with sale items and financial donations to local organizations.

At our November Advisory Committee Meeting we voted to give the following local organizations \$1,000 each: Age Well, Building Bright Futures, Champlain Community Services, Essex Community Justice Center, Essex Rescue, HANDS VT, Hunger Free VT, Janet S. Munt Family Room, Jenna's Promise, Katie Currier Scholarship Fund at VSAC, National Alliance of Mental Health VT, Outright VT, Pathways Vermont, Steps to End Domestic Violence, VT Children's Trust Fund and VT Community Foundation.

We also donated \$3,000 to Essex Junction Recreation & Parks Scholarship Fund, \$1,500 to Heavenly Food Pantry for Milk Project and \$500 to FCCEJ Giving Tree. We appreciate the continued support our community at large provides and always welcome donations of gently used items in good resalable quality when the shop is open. We are currently looking for jewelry.

The Shop hours are Tuesday, 10-1, Thursday 3-6 and Saturday 10-1. We will be open on the first Sunday of December for church goers to bring their donations as well as shop. We will be closed Tuesday, December 23, 2025 through Saturday, January 3, 2026, reopening Tuesday, January 6, 2026. Please spread the "good word" of the Shop's mission with your friends and if you are interested in volunteering, contact Sandy Tallman, 802-879- 0665.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

We are an active church with events, groups using our facilities, and myriad ways that we help people in our community and beyond. With such a dynamic community, there are many opportunities to help nurture and grow our ministry and live into Christ's way. OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS lifts up specific needs of our church and ways our members and friends can help. If you feel called to help in one of these asks, please call Jen or Mark at the church office at 802-878-5745. And thanks in advance!

We are looking for someone to.....

1. Snow Angels. Snow Angels assist with keeping our walkways and steps clear and salted during our snowy season. When we expect significant snow fall, we send an email to the group to see who is available for that particular instance. If you're able and willing, we'd love to add you to the team.
2. Coordinate the Easter Breakfast. Plenty of people like to pitch in and help with this project that FCCEJ has been doing for decades. It involves securing and organizing the volunteers to plan, cook, and then clean up after the Easter Breakfast.
3. Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper. This relatively recent addition to the church's schedule is when we gather to enjoy a pancake meal for dinner the night before Lent begins (Tuesday, February 17th, 2026). We need someone to coordinate this event.
4. A Meal Ministry Team. We are hoping to restart the Essex Eats Out Program where we offered a free meal to anyone who walked in on the first Friday of each month. It was a highly successful program. In this uncertain time where people are struggling with food insecurity and loss of benefits, the need is definitely there.
5. Audio/Visual Support. We're looking for a few more people to assist with streaming our worship services. It is not difficult or time intensive. Streaming our services is crucial to reaching out and providing a connection to folks who no longer drive AND to people checking us out before they come in person. We also receive requests to stream memorial services, so that family and friends who are not able to attend in person may still celebrate the life of their loved one.

WHY I JOINED THE LEGACY CIRCLE

by Ann Gray

In starting to write this article for the newsletter on why I joined the Legacy Circle, I realized I had included FCCEJ in my will prior to receiving information on the program. And with that realization, I decided that the article should partly be on why I give. Now I have to apologize to those of you who listened to my testimonial during the stewardship campaign of why I give as this article will be repeating part of what I said that day.

To me, giving is two-fold – monetary giving and giving of time to support your family. My immediate traditional family consisted of my grandmother, my mother and father and myself. A family can be the traditional family of parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, or it can be a school family, a work family, a community family, or a church family. Growing up on a farm in rural Vermont in the 1950's, I was exposed to both types of giving at an early age. My grandmother and parents all gave of their time by volunteering in community organizations (AKA families). My traditional family also donated money to these organizations as well as other charities. One of my earliest memories of monetary giving was giving to the March of Dimes. In the 1950's, the March of Dimes was focused on combatting polio and we had cards with places to hold dimes. I had my own card to fill. Memory fails as to how many total dimes the card held but it was probably only 10 or 20, but for a young girl in the 1950's, this was a lot of money and it was a happy day when I had earned and saved enough dimes to fill a card.

My grandmother was a long-time volunteer for the Ladies Home Mission. My parents gave money to help support their mission of providing food and other items to those in need. The Ladies Home Mission was the food pantry of the 1950's in my town. My 4-H Club (that I joined at the age of 10) did food drives during the holidays and gave the food collected to the Ladies Home Mission.

Fast forward several decades and I was now living in Essex Junction and attending FCCEJ. When I finally made the decision to join FCCEJ, I knew I would be giving to my new church family – giving was part of who I am – and when it came time to write a will, there was never any doubt in my mind, that FCCEJ would not be on my list of charities that would be bequeathed money in it.

To answer the question why did I join the legacy circle? I joined because giving has always been part of my life and I hope that the money in my will continues to give to the missions of my church family long after I'm gone.

First Congregational Church of Essex Junction



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ELECTRONIC SERVICE REQUESTED

SUNDAY MORNING WORSHIP:

~First Sunday of Each Month ~ One Service at 10am~

with Holy Communion and Sanctuary Choir ~ Spiritual Friends for PreK-5th

~Other Sundays Throughout the Month~

8:30am - In-person & streamed via YouTube

Music: Bethany Blake directs our Sanctuary Choir and provides accompaniment

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

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