



# **SPiRiT @ FIRST**

## Monthly Newsletter

### **FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH *of Essex Junction***

*Love. Serve. Grow.*

#### **JANUARY 2026: IN THIS ISSUE...**

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## **YOUR PASTOR PONDERS...**

We have just come through a great Christmas Season with a pageant that knocked our socks off thanks to Jenny Bourn, Gretchen Owens, Mindy Bickford, and a goodly number of kids who brought the old story to life; a Christmas Cantata that touched our hearts thanks to Bethany Blake and our unbelievably talented Sanctuary Choir; a Holiday Craft Fest thanks to Linda Bogardus and her crew that brought joy into some hard working hearts and raised a ton of money for the church; a Giving Tree Outreach Initiative thanks to Linda Bogardus, Jen Dooley and Jen Kelly and their crew that provided Christmas joy to over fifty kids and their families, a Healing Service that brought people some much needed tenderness and an opportunity to light a candle for those in their hearts dearly missed; a New Member's Class that brought eight new folks into our community of faith; two caroling groups thanks to Bethany Blake and Bill Bickford Jr. and their talented volunteers that visited local Assisted Living Homes singing of Christmas and bringing some love into their facilities; the Hospitality Committee, spearheaded by Sue Conti, who provided a great atmosphere full of good food and refreshments for every worship service; and three Christmas Eve services that were packed, filled with extraordinary music, special guests, a sacred baptism, and a sense of loving community that made one believe in a higher power sending a little baby into the world to change it for the better. All of you made this December a month to be remembered!!!

Now Baby Jesus is born with all the hoopla and celebrations that a new birth brings into our world. We were prepared for the birth with rooms readied, food prepared, music practiced, guests cared for, presents wrapped, and sensitive interpersonal landmines protected against erupting. Sounds a little like my family! It takes an enormous amount of energy to get through this season.

But anyone who has brought a baby into their lives knows that when you finally bring the baby home the work begins! My great niece in Colorado just had a baby girl and she is discovering this truth. Her and the father's lives

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart.*

Howard Thurman

changed dramatically over night; now instead of movies and eating out there are diapers and feedings, doctor's appointments and wellness check-ups, sleep patterns and clothes to wash, books to read and people to talk to and a vigilance in oversight that perhaps was not there before the birth. Plus the good parts of seeing new behaviors every day, listening to baby glossolalia and maybe even a word or two, and the simple joy of watching a baby discover every aspect of the world around them. And despite the changes, parents will tell you that the demands grow with the child along with the costs until your entire life is caught up in your child's life. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that who you were before the birth and how you lived changes completely.

*Continued on next page...*

Perhaps that is the entire point of the birth narratives, for when you accept Jesus into your life, it changes. The beginning point is naturally significant, but then the work begins. When you bring the baby Jesus into your life, your life changes dramatically; learning about The Way requires some reading and talking to others in the faith; following Jesus requires a different type of food in order to flourish; now instead of bars, self-absorbed activities, and purchases that feed yourself, there are food pantries and thrift stores, taking care of other's needs, and refocusing your thoughts and emotions to care for others. There are constant wellness check-ups, but as you grow into the faith there will be new behaviors every day, new ways of understanding the universe with wonder and exhilarating joy, and as you grow into the faith the costs will continue to grow until you are so totally caught up in God's world that you will be a new creation.

And seeing how age does not have much to do with this process, I look forward to experiencing this journey with you. As always, I am,

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Mark

## CHRISTMAS POINSETTIA DEDICATIONS

Jenny Bourn.....	In memory of Thomas Connelly
Ruth Casey .....	In memory of Skip Casey
Bill Coddington.....	In memory of Lynn
Brenda Dawson.....	In memory of my parents
Jen & Rick Dooley.....	In memory of Harry Dooley, and Joe & Dot Pine
Riley & Lorinda Elliott .....	In memory of our parents
Noel Family.....	In memory of Carolyn Hawkes
Janne & Howard Giles.....	In memory of David & Anne Cozzens
Hoy Family .....	In honor of Guy and Sandra Stone, and In memory of Thomas Hoy
Joanne Irwin .....	In memory of Ed & Virginia Irwin, and Ed & Dorothea Hilbert In honor of my children and grandchildren
David & Marie Johnson.....	In memory of our parents
Mike & Suzanne Lawrence .....	In memory of Ruth Sumner and Ginny & Robert
Derek Lyman.....	In memory of Phyllis Latuch & Phyllis Buchanan
Laura Marthaler.....	In memory of Lillian Morris
Judy & Kevin McCullen .....	In memory of our parents
Rev. Mark Mendes.....	In memory of George & Margaret Mendes
Sylvia Nyhagen .....	In honor of friends and family
Elizabeth O'Beirne .....	In honor of my children, Robin and Noah
Linda Lou Parker.....	In memory of Bruce
Jane Schneider.....	In memory of Russ Schneider
Gorden & Lauren Starkey .....	In memory of our parents, Gorden & Garnet Starkey, and Rick Busciglio
Cathy Stroehler .....	In memory of my mom, Muriel Lenhardt and In honor of my family
Beth Volker .....	In memory of my parents, Charlie & Linda Volker, and Joan McGrath Greve
Carl & Alison Wermer .....	In memory of our parents
Arthur & Mary Winslow .....	In memory of Noel Winslow
Tobe Zalinger.....	In memory of Gary "Jake" Tomlinson

## **† ELIZABETH'S EPISTLE †**

### **Faith Formation Peer Groups**

- ♦ Christmas celebrates Jesus' birth. The Christmas season—Christmastide—begins on Christmas Day and ends on Epiphany, January 6, 2026, the twelve days of Christmas!
- ♦ The Season after Epiphany began with the three wise ones following the star and ends with the bright lights of Jesus' Transfiguration on the mountain. Epiphany means “showing forth,” and it is during this season when we are called to look for how God makes Godself known throughout the world.

### **Volunteers Welcomed**

- ♦ Volunteers are essential to the heart of children's ministry!
- ♦ 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](mailto:ChildrensMinistry@fccej.org).

### **January Dates to Remember:**

- ♦ January 4th ~ Spiritual friends  
John 1:1-9, 10-18
- ♦ January 11th ~ Peer groups  
Matthew 3:13-17
- ♦ January 18th ~ All Family Worship
- ♦ January 25th ~ Peer groups  
Isaiah 9:1-4

### **Prayer**

*“God of hope and freedom, you are with us in shadows and sunbeams. Your radiant light illuminates a path of hope, and your holy darkness gives birth to joyful life. Wherever we find ourselves, remind us we are not alone. 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

### **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 2025:

<https://www.signupgenius.com/go/20F0545A8AB2FAAF58-53196874-altar#/>



## **PLANNED GIVING IS WORKING**

### **1ST LEGACY CIRCLE EVENT PLANNED**

The Planned Giving program, which was revitalized in 2023, is working. Last year at this time, there were five church members who included FCCEJ in their wills and/or estate plans. Now there are thirteen. By leaving a gift to the church, members are included in The Legacy Circle. The Planned Giving program at FCCEJ is alive and well!

The first ever Legacy Circle recognition event is February 6, from 6 to 7:30pm, at the home of Kaki & Matt McGahey. Light refreshments will be served. All Legacy Circle members are invited to attend, as well as anyone interested in learning more about Planned Giving. The details about FCCEJ Planned Giving are included on the church website under the Giving tab.

To RSVP for the February event, please email Dave Johnson at [mdjkiln@gmail.com](mailto:mdjkiln@gmail.com) or text to (802) 399-6278.

Your Planned Giving Committee:

*Dave Johnson, Chair, Matt McGahey, Darryl Koch, Dan Petherbridge, Kathryn Brennan, Terry Stein, Mark Mendes*

## **STEWARSHIP**

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your 2026 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.

The practice of giving regularly and intentionally helps us grow in faith and mature spiritually. It requires us to put our own needs and wants into proper perspective, to set aside our own interests for the sake of God and others. Pledging helps us embrace the spiritual discipline of regular, faithful giving. 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, Heather Stein, Rev. Mark Mendes*



The 2025 Giving Tree Program was a resounding success! We had 54 children in the initial sign-up, for a total of 162 tags. This year, we provided a second distribution day for families that missed the sign-up deadline. That additional day, we served approximately 20 families, most with at least two children in their household. This puts the total number of children given assistance at over 200—so awesome! As a reminder, the tags provided each child with two articles of clothing and a book, toy, game, or gift card. Along with the gifts, there were winter coats, donated by Essex Rotary, hats and gloves and Hannaford Gift Cards, provided mostly through donations from our amazing FCCEJ community, and bags of Christmas candy. The second distribution day was a little less formalized, but everyone received a box with at least two gifts, a bag of candy, and a gift card, and many also accepted a winter coat.

Sincere thanks to all who contributed to this vital ministry in our community:

- ◆ Everyone who selected a tag—many of you generously took several!
- ◆ All the volunteers who helped assemble boxes, set up the tree, assisted with tag distribution, collected and sorted gifts, put bags of candy together, organized the coats, set up tables, and helped out on the distribution days.
- ◆ Raymond's Hallmark for donating a majority of the boxes we used to organize and give out the items.
- ◆ Jen Dooley and Linda Bogardus, who were instrumental in the planning, organizing, and implementation—they totally ROCK!
- ◆ Rev. Mark who bought the Hannaford's gift cards AND correctly attached the receipts!
- ◆ And a huge shout out to Elaine and Francis Raymond, who, with servant hearts of gold, keep this important ministry going for years. It's a testament to their dedication that it took a village to replicate their efforts!

Blessings,  
Jen Kelly



## **“CRITTER CORNER”**



By Beth Volker

### **Can You Spare 5 Seconds to Save a Life?**



I'm pretty sure that many of us grew up being told to cut apart the plastic six-pack holders before putting them in the trash, so that no animal or bird would get its head or body stuck in them and be unable to eat or fly or simply function. If you don't already do so, I would ask that you start. It's so easy and literally does take only five



to ten seconds. Depending on just how the critter is entangled, it can mean a slow and painful death, that you can easily prevent.



These six-pack holders are not the only human- made contraptions that pose a danger to wildlife. Cartons of cream, and sometimes milk, have a little “tab” that you need to pull out in order for the liquid to pour out. “But they’re so tiny,” you say, “How can they possibly hurt anything?” Think mice and other small rodents who can easily slip their heads into them causing strangulation or preventing them from being able to eat. The cream I use has one of these, and I don’t just cut the loop once, I cut it twice just to be sure.

Two more human creations that pose a threat to wildlife are the handles on paper shopping bags, and much worse, the ear straps on the face masks that people discard anywhere they please...parking lots, sidewalks, lawns, etc. PLEASE cut or rip off both of these before properly disposing of the bags and masks. Cats are notorious for getting their heads stuck in the bag handles.



Critters who frequent our landfills can get their heads stuck inside the glass or plastic containers that we toss in the trash. If it’s a plastic container, like those that mayonnaise often comes in, it can be washed out and then cut in half before disposal. Sadly, the same can’t be done with glass containers, and breaking the glass before discarding might injure those working in our landfills. So, we do the best we can and hope for the best.

Thank you very much for doing what you can to help wildlife, and please pass this information on to your family members, neighbors and friends.

### **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. Coordinate 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.
2. Coordinate 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).
3. Lead 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.
4. Provide 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.

**SERMON TALKBACK**

Join us every week on Tuesday mornings to discuss Sunday's message and the various elements of the service from the previous week. The group discusses a wide variety of subjects, eats scones from a masterful pastry chef, enjoys fresh coffee, tea, or water, and simply enjoys being in community together. Everyone is welcome. Tuesdays at 8:30-10am in Marvin Lounge.

**COFFEE CLATTER @ MARTONE'S—EVERY FRIDAY MORNING FROM 8-9AM**

Each week, there is a group of five to ten people that come together to enjoy coffee, a breakfast goodie, enjoyable company, and conversations about whatever people want to talk about, including politics and religion! We meet at Martone's from 8-9am and everyone pays their own way. Everyone is welcome to come and tell us what you really think! Everyone is welcome to not only come but to bring a friend.

**LUNCHTIME BOOK GROUP**

The book group is reading *We Contain Multitudes*, by Sara Henstra for the January discussion.

*An exhilarating and emotional novel about the growing relationship between two teenage boys, told through the letters they write to one another.*

We will meet in the Marvin Lounge on Monday, January 19 at 11:30am.

Newcomers are always welcome. Bring your lunch if you'd like, and join us!

**BRIDGE FOR FUN**

On the 1st and 3rd Friday of each month, anyone interested in playing bridge is welcome to come to the Marvin Lounge and have some fun. All skill levels are welcome as we enjoy snacks, conversation and cards. Come and share cool conventions or skillful tricks or come and learn how to play a little better. We regularly table talk and the winner takes home one of Rev. Mark's homemade jams. In January, we will be playing on January 2nd and 16th from 1:30pm until 4pm. That allows us to play three rounds quite nicely. And non-church players are always welcome.

**GRIEF SUPPORT GROUP**

This is open to anyone experiencing the loss of a loved one. This is an open group. You, along with any friends, family members, and neighbors are invited to join us. All are welcome!

The sessions are facilitated by Sharon Dettenrieder, MSN, RN and Mary McHugh, MAPS. Both have personal experience with loss along with professional education and experience in leading grief support groups. Wherever you are along this road of grief, may you experience God's healing presence and love. It Grief Support Group meets the 2nd Thursday of each month. Next meeting is Thursday, January 8 at 10am in Marvin Lounge.

*Dear FCCEJ Friends,*

*Thank you so much for the lovely poinsettia that was delivered to my home. We have such a caring faith community and I feel so loved!*

*Sincerely,*

*Connie Marshall*

**JANUARY BIRTHDAYS**

ADLER, Jacquelyn

HALL, Wayne

OWENS, Teddy

BARTLETT, Lincoln

HARPLE, Glenn

SHEARER, Cathy

BEACH, George

KALIX-CRISAFI, Matt

SHIELDS, Kimberly

BOOMHOWER, George

MATT, Ellie

VANSTEENSBURG, Allison

COBURN, Mary

MCCULLEN, Kevin

WINSLOW, Arthur

FRISBIE, Paulette

MCINTYRE, Amy

WISLOSKI, Jessica

GUILD, Ed

NOWELL, Jeff

## **COMMUNITY CONCERTS @ FIRST**



CC@F presents Tracy Grammer on Sunday, January 11 at 3pm in the FCCEJ Sanctuary. Called "*a musician and singer of dazzling versatility*" (No Depression), Tracy Grammer is among contemporary folk music's most beloved artists. Renowned for her pure voice, deft guitar and violin work, and incantatory storytelling, Grammer has recorded and performed with Joan Baez and Mary Chapin Carpenter, headlined several of the nation's top folk festivals, and enjoyed 12 consecutive years as one of folk radio's 50 top-played artists, both solo and with the late Dave Carter. Join us to enjoy this incredible show!

*"One of the finest singers and musicians anywhere in folkdom."* - Boston Globe  
*"A brilliant artist"* - Joan Baez

\$20 suggested donation, children 12 and under are free.

A portion of the concert proceeds will support Red Cross Disaster Relief. Tickets are available online via the link or by phone through the FCCEJ office. [www.sevendaystickets.com/e/tracy-grammer](http://www.sevendaystickets.com/e/tracy-grammer)

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## **EARLY BIRD CALCUTTA TICKETS**

Early Bird tickets are now available for our 9th 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 18th are entered into a drawing, to be held at the Calcutta, for a \$100 cash prize.

Letters to those who joined us last year were mailed with information about how to purchase a ticket. Starting in January, there will be a table in Fellowship Hall where tickets can be purchased. For more information, contact Sharon Dettenrieder at [Sharon.dettenrieder@gmail.com](mailto:Sharon.dettenrieder@gmail.com).

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

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## **IMPORTANT FCCEJ REMINDERS**

### **FCCEJ Calendar**

- All meetings must be scheduled through the church office
- Send an email to [welcome@fccej.org](mailto:welcome@fccej.org) with the following information:
  1. Committee Name
  2. Preferred day & time
  3. Preferred room
  4. Is audio/visual (Zoom, video, screen access) needed
  5. Committee chairs should check the calendar weekly to confirm the schedule

### **Reimbursements**

- If you purchase something for FCCEJ, this is the process to receive reimbursement.
  1. Complete a Reimbursement Request Form—hard copies are in the church office, soft copies can be emailed to you. You must include:
    - a. Your name
    - b. Your committee
    - c. The account code
    - d. Receipt/invoice
  2. All Reimbursement Request Forms must be signed by the committee chair or another committee member if the chair is needing reimbursement.
  3. Send the completed, signed form, along with backup documents to [welcome@fccej.org](mailto:welcome@fccej.org) or drop off hard copies to the church office.
  4. Reimbursement checks will be mailed unless otherwise requested.

## First Congregational Church of Essex Junction



1 Church Street  
Essex Junction, VT 05452  
Phone: 802-878-5745  
Email: [welcome@fccej.org](mailto:welcome@fccej.org)

## ELECTRONIC SERVICE REQUESTED

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### 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

### VISIT US ONLINE:



[FCCEJ.ORG](http://FCCEJ.ORG)



[FIRSTCONGREGATIONALEJ](http://FIRSTCONGREGATIONALEJ)



[FCCEJ\\_802](http://FCCEJ_802)



**YouTube**

[youtube.com/c/FCCEJ](http://youtube.com/c/FCCEJ)