



SPIRIT @ FIRST

Monthly Newsletter

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH *of Essex Junction*

Love. Serve. Grow.

YOUR PASTOR PONDERS...

For the first year I commonly employed myself during the set time of prayer for devotion with the thought of death, judgement, heaven, hell and my sins [they discouraged me] Thus I continued for some years applying my mind carefully the rest of the day, and even in the midst of my business to the presence of God whom I considered always with me, often as in me. At length I came insensibly to do the same thing during my set time in prayer which caused me great delight and consolation. This produced in me so high an esteem for God that faith alone was capable to satisfy me in that point.

Brother Lawrence: The Practice of the Presence of God

Our Wednesday Night Searchers Group is reading a 360 year old book entitled *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In this book the author, Brother Lawrence, describes his spiritual practice of simply living each moment in relationship to God, trying to bring Christ's love into every interaction, thought, conflict, business dealing, spiritual practice, life's upswings and tragedies, etc. In doing so, he challenges many of the monastic rituals and disciplines as well as defining faithful living through the hierarchical nature of the church leadership or the definition of faith embedded in correct doctrine. He also makes sacred and spiritual every facet of life and works hard to live and lean into Christ's ways of living out the faith.

This is a seemingly simplistic outlook, but when embraced is a radical personal philosophy of life. In his day, he was challenging the church which was embroiled in the divisions of the Protestant Reformation and the conflicts, wars, and deaths that followed. Today, some of his thought would be embodied with the "Spiritual but not Religious" groups or in the work of the spirit leading the church away from doctrine in favor of praxis. Thus, Pope Francis celebrating the sacrament of washing feet on Good Friday emphasized praxis over doctrine by washing a Muslim prisoner's feet. Pope Leo lifting up ethical behaviors by which we treat our immigrant population fits Brother Lawrence's model. My father in his RV business making a decent profit instead of pushing the envelope to make a killing was a part of his living out the Golden Rule. Folks in Minneapolis blowing whistles to draw attention to illegal practices from ICE employees, or a family hiding Ann Frank during the Nazi occupation, or Reinhold Nieburr composing the prayer used by AA folks, or Martin Luther King standing up for fair wages for garbage folk all lean into living the faith out. Forgiving your wife for some slight, or ignoring your neighbor's obnoxious behavior that drives you crazy, or giving someone you vehemently disagree with the benefit of the doubt in terms of where their heart lies also leans into Brother Lawrence's faithful philosophy.

Allowing the spirit to simply ooze out of you in every interaction, thought, and behavior is what he is talking about. He was a monk and so had lots of dedicated time and different pressures in monastic life but it is easy enough to apply to our lives and times.

As we start the new year with all of the challenging news and dynamics playing out in our society and world, let us all seek to embrace Christ's love a bit more in our lives. In doing so, our lives will be richer, healthier, and better able to effect change.

Engaged with this ministry with you, I am
Yours in Christ,
Rev. Mark

FEBRUARY 2026: IN THIS ISSUE...

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SPECIAL SERVICES IN FEBRUARY

Communion in February will be observed in the traditional way

Bread and Juice passed out to the congregation

<u>Annual Meeting Sunday</u>	<u>Ask the Pastor Sunday</u>	<u>Guest Preacher Meagan Audette</u>
February 1, 2026 – 1 Service @ 10am	February 8, 2026	February 15, 2026
Each year, we meet as a church to conduct the business of the church: elect officers, pass the budget, hear from our committees and staff and mainly talk about the church as we prepare for another year of ministry. We have the meeting on the first Sunday of the month since we only have one service and everyone can come and get to the meeting. The congregation will naturally include the faith, church operations or personal spiritual life. This "Ask the Pastor" Sunday allows the congregation to check in on where he sees the church and her ministry. Worship Service will naturally include communion, focus on congregational life and provide a litany of mutual support between the staff and the congregation.	For the last 17 years, Rev. Mark has observed the anniversary of his call to minister at FCCEJ [Jan 2008] by shaping a service where anyone can ask him questions about any aspect of the faith, church operations or personal spiritual life. This "Ask the Pastor" Sunday allows the congregation to check in on where he sees the church and her ministry. Worship Service will naturally include communion, focus on congregational life and provide a litany of mutual support between the staff and the congregation.	One of our new members, Meagan Audette, has worked in the Middle East and Asia for decades and has a wealth of experience to help us understand those parts of the world. She was a member of the Jerusalem Christian Church and has a unique insight into being faithful in the midst of difficult times and situations. She has agreed to share some of her insights and faith at both services on Sunday, February 15th. She is a gifted speaker and storyteller and you will not be disappointed.

ASH WEDNESDAY

Wednesday, February 18th @ 7pm

After the celebration of Easter, Lent was the first season that grew up in the church. It was a time for folks interested in joining the church to learn about what it meant to follow Jesus and be a part of his movement. Many such programs lasted a year with Lent being the culminating part of the process where fasting and prayer led to a public decision and baptism on Easter morning. Ash Wednesday marked the beginning of this final period where one dedicated themselves to Jesus in his life, teaching, death and resurrection. Wholly putting your trust in Jesus meant that even in death when you turn to dust, you belong to and are a part of Christ Jesus. The service highlights our dependence on God for life and eternity. From death to resurrection, from Lent to Easter, we belong to Christ Jesus our Lord. Come and explore these themes at a long cherished and beloved service where ashes on the forehead or wrist will be offered. The service starts at 7pm in the Sanctuary.

LENTEL PRAYERS

During the 6 weeks of Lent, the staff at FCCEJ has pledged to pray for all active members and constituents in our faith community. Each week, starting February 22 and going until Easter, we will include a list of names in the Sunday worship bulletin and weekly email. These are the people that will be prayed for that week. If you have a specific prayer request, please send it to welcome@fccej.org or call the church office. If not, we will pray as the Spirit moves us. All prayer requests will remain confidential unless we hear otherwise.

We invite you to join us in praying for the folks on the list as part of your Lenten journey. By Easter morning, everyone at FCCEJ will have been lifted up in prayer.

PANCAKE SUPPER

Back when fasting and sacrifice were the primary ways in which one accessed and centered on the God, the night before Lent began, people ate all the good stuff that they were not allowed to eat during the penitential season. Sugar and chocolate, whipped cream and sweet syrups, bacon and sausage, and anything else in the house that wouldn't last for the six weeks of Lent. Well, we experience and find God in non-sacrificial ways these days through acts of kindness, concrete behaviors in which we spread Christ's love, spiritual disciplines, reading scripture, praying more, making peace with folks, and simply spending more time communing with the Divine. **HOWEVER**, we still like the idea of having a Pancake Dinner with lots of sweet toppings and plenty of bacon! Join us for a church-wide meal on Shrove Tuesday, February 17 from 6 to 7pm. Invite a friend that likes to eat!

PASTORAL SEARCH COMMITTEE

Dear Friends at FCCEJ,

A Pastoral Search Committee has been appointed by the Church Council to help the First Congregational Church of Essex Junction find our next settled pastor after Rev. Mark Mendes retires in August 2027. As participants in the United Church of Christ denomination, we, the members of FCCEJ, are responsible for selecting and calling our next pastor. The Search Committee will work with Paul Sangree, Associate Conference Minister at Vermont UCC Conference, to help guide the process.

The role of the Pastoral Search Committee is to:

- Create a Profile of our church that can be shared and used as a tool to help recruit the best candidate to call as our next settled Pastor
- Interview Candidates
- Regularly provide updates to the congregation on the search process
- Present the selected candidate to FCCEJ, upon which time the Congregation will vote to accept or not

The most important part of creating a Profile is hearing from you! The Pastoral Search Committee will host a series of Cottage Meetings to hear feedback and opinions on your hopes for our next pastor, and future of our church community. We want to hear from as many congregation members and friends as possible about which qualities and skills we are seeking, and what priorities our church should consider. We will also seek input from members of the Essex community.

Over the next few weeks, the Committee will post the dates and times of the Cottage Meetings/Focus groups. Each group will consist of 6-8 individuals and two Committee members to discuss an established set of questions. The responses will be collected and used to inform our Profile. We encourage you to sign up and share your thoughts. We are hoping to hear from a wide variety of opinions in our congregation!

The Committee has a mailbox where you can send any questions or comments: PastoralSearch.FCCEJ@gmail.com. You are also welcome to speak directly with any committee member. You can learn more about the search process on the Vermont UCC Conference [Search and Call](#) webpage.

We look forward to traveling this journey together.

The FCCEJ Pastoral Search Committee,

Cathy Shearer, Chair

Laura Marthaler, Kaki McGeary, Bob Driver, Matt Clark, Marian Lawlor, Judy Allen, Jen Dooley,
Micah Heaney-Forbes, Betty Marthaler

DEACONS

The Searchers Group recently finished reading *The Book of Joy* which features discussions between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu at a week-long gathering to discuss their experiences and insights to cultivate a life of joy. We wrapped up the topic by watching a movie that was filmed over the course of the week. Watching these two wise leaders of very different traditions was delightful, moving, and awe inspiring. One quote from the book, and the movie, summed it up well:

“When you are kind to someone else, you end up being joyful, but why? Because we realize that we are made for goodness.” ~Archbishop Desmond Tutu

For me, there are many recent occasions in our church that have brought me joy. Watching our young people perform an amazing pageant, the candle lighting and singing Silent Night on Christmas Eve and listening to my son read The Light of the World scripture from John, talking with people after services about the service trip to the Blackfeet Reservation, and singing with my fellow choir members. How about you - where are you finding joy?

~Andrea Sharp, Deacon

† ELIZABETH'S EPISTLE †

Faith Formation

The Season of Lent is a period of 40 days, begins on Ash Wednesday, and is a period of introspection and reflection on the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus. Episcopal author and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor says that Lent is a “springtime for the soul...Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.”

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.

February Dates to Remember:

- ★ February 1st ~ Spiritual Friends ~ Micah 6:1-8
- ★ February 8th ~ Psalm 112: 1-9(10)
- ★ February 15th ~ Peer Groups ~ Matthew 17:1-9
- ★ February 22nd ~ All Family Worship ~ First Sunday of Lent

Faith Formation Offering

- ♦ The Heart to Heart Program through the Humane Society of Chittenden County is the 2025-2026 Faith Formation offering recipient.
 - ◊ A representative from the Humane Society will briefly speak to the FCCEJ congregation during worship February 15th, 2026, along with the children before peer groups that Sunday.
 - *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.*

Prayer

“God of generosity and joy, thank you for showing us how to live with kindness, courage, and care. Help us to share freely, stand firm in love, and trust that your ways of goodness will always hold us steady. Amen” (miniRevolutions)

Peace and Light,

Elizabeth - Children's Ministry Coordinator

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION/FORMATION COMMITTEE

Greetings as we begin 2026! First of all, the committee would like to thank our members who are going off the committee as of the Annual Meeting, Mary Ann Phelps and Jessica Moos. We will miss their energy and ideas, and we are ever grateful for their work on behalf of the youth of our church.

Our committee can have up to 12 members serving on it, and there will be only six people as of the Annual Meeting. If you have the time or inclination to help out, we could use you! Even if only for a year, as opposed to the regular 3-year term, there is space for your talents. If interested, please contact Derek Lyman or Terri Livak, co-chairs.

With Mary Ann leaving the committee, we are also looking for someone who would like to help out by taking on the Nursery Staffing. Mary Ann is willing to continue for a bit, but wants to ease out of the position as she takes on new committee work. If this is a role you would be willing to take on, please let us know. Mary Ann would be happy to answer questions and to help you transition into this position.

I'll leave you with a bit of a tease: please look forward to some new events taking place this coming summer in lieu of the usual Vacation Bible Camp. We are working on fleshing out some details, and hope to have more information for you after our next meeting.

For the committee, Terri Livak, co-chair

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. 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.
3. Take Pictures! We'd like to keep our website and Facebook presence fresh and up to date and we're looking for pictures from FCCEJ events, meetings, and worship services. Send them along to welcome@fccej.org or socialmedia@fccej.org. Thank you!

YOUNG FAMILY FREE NIGHT OUT

Too busy with kids and responsibilities to cook a good meal? Want a night to be waited on without any responsibilities? Want to sit and talk to some like minded parents while your kids get rid of some energy running around and playing games safely in the gym?

Well have we got a deal for YOU!

We are embarking on a monthly event for any family with an elementary aged child or younger to come and enjoy a free meal where all you have to do is show up and eat. The meal will be provided by capable hands and be something your kids will eat. The Gym will be available and supervised for the kids to run around, play games and get rid of some of their excess energy! You will not be expected to set up or put the tables and chairs away. Simply come and eat and enjoy the company of other families. No reservation needed. And invite your friends as well! Next dinner is Friday, February 6—taco casserole, salad, fruit, and dessert.

NEW MEMBER'S CLASS OFFERED

Do you like the values of love, justice, inclusion and diversity that we lift up as Christ's teachings here at FCCEJ? Do you enjoy the warmth of community that we cherish here? Do you like the ways we feed and clothe people in need? Do you like the many groups and organizations that we partner with in order to create a more perfect union in Vermont, our nation and world? Do you love the music that comes from so many different and talented groups in our church? Or do you just love to come and sit in the sanctuary and soak up God's presence? If so, then maybe its about time you join this great church. Both God and all of us need you to help us spread Jesus' love around liberally to people who need it and to a world in desperate need of some tenderness and light.

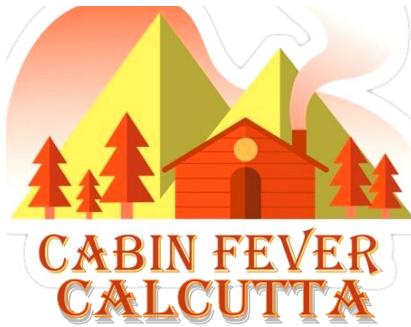
You are invited to attend our New Member's Class on Sunday, March 29 after the second service around 11:30am in the Marvin Lounge. Come and learn more about the UCC and FCCEJ in a relaxed setting with Rev. Mark and one of our Deacons. If you need childcare, please contact the church office. Lunch will be provided for all. The class will last about an hour and a half.

Dear Friends at First Congregational,

Thank you so much for your extremely generous donations of warm clothes and toys for children at Hiawatha. Your kindness and willingness to share will make a meaningful difference for our families, and it means a lot to our school community. Your generosity sends a powerful message of care and support. We are grateful for you!

Sincerely,

Terri Geffert and Kristina Natal—Hiawatha Teachers of Multilingual Learners



Do you have your ticket yet for our 9th Cabin Fever Calcutta to be held on March 14, 2026 at the Catamount Country Club? The evening promises lots of fun and fellowship just when we all are ready to get out and about. Your \$150 ticket includes a buffet dinner for two plus one Calcutta ball number.

We have secured many interesting prizes, assuring that a prize is awarded every 3rd or 4th ball drawn. Prizes include hotel and restaurant packages, gift certificates to local eateries, and a wine grab. The grand prize is \$1000.

Tickets for the Calcutta can be purchased at the Service Trip table in Fellowship Hall.

Contact Sharon Dettenrieder at Sharon.dettenrieder@gmail.com for additional information.

Proceeds from this event support our Intergenerational Service Trips. Members of the 2026 team who are going to the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana will be at the table in Fellowship Hall. The trip will be led by Lisa Clark and Betsy Weischedel.



REQUEST FOR CUPCAKES

The Missions Committee would love to have some of the fabulous and talented bakers in our church assist with making cupcakes for the Calcutta dessert table. We are looking for a dozen of any flavor of cupcakes. If you make any gluten free cupcakes, please mark the container. The cupcakes need to be dropped off at the church kitchen between 9 am and noon on Saturday, March 14th. For further information, please contact the church office. Thank you.



“CRITTER CORNER”



By Beth Volker

In my November “Critter Corner” I talked about providing outdoor cat houses/shelters to help feral and stray cats find a place to stay warm. In weather like we’ve been experiencing lately, this message bears repeating.

I reported in November that I was attempting to trap two cats. Thankfully, I was successful. The black, 10-month-old kitten now has a wonderful forever home in Connecticut. The other is an approximately nine-year-old male who has lived 90% of his life 100% outdoors, getting his food from “feeding stations” that neighbors have been kind enough to supply. He is currently living with me, and as soon as I have him vet-checked, he has a good home waiting. I am so thankful that I was able to capture both of them before the frigid cold and snow of the January 24th-25th weekend!

In addition, I have several insulated feral cat houses outside around my house. This way, if there are any cats or kittens in need in my neighborhood, they will have shelter from the cold. I don’t know of any currently, but that could change in the coming months. Another advantage of providing these shelters is that sometimes they will be used by opossums. These poor creatures have a very tough time maintaining their body temperature, so you will often see them with parts of their ears and/or tails lost from frostbite. Some will recognize these shelters as a safe place to be, so they will crawl inside to warm up.

If you are interested in providing feral cat shelters, they are easy to make. There are numerous online sites if you just Google, “How to make feral cat houses.” They can also be purchased online, but many come with mattresses that can be plugged in like a heating pad. I am way too fire phobic to use these, so instead, I use self-warming mattresses in them. These can be purchased from Chewy.com for about \$12 each. I put these on top of some straw, and change them frequently, especially if the house is being used because the mattresses get wet from snowy paws. They’re washable but should be air dried. They radiate the cat’s/occupant’s own body heat back onto their bodies.

Sample heated houses found on Amazon (I own a Wagstro):

If you suspect you have a stray or feral cat in your neighborhood, please don’t hesitate to contact me for advice and help. Try to get a picture of the animal if possible. Thanks, in advance, for your kindness!



YOU'RE INVITED

Chittenden County CJC Community Forums

SESSIONS:

FEB 6 @ 10-11:30AM

South Burlington Police
Department Community
Room

FEB 9 @ 5:30-7PM

Essex Police Department
Community Room

REGISTER NOW

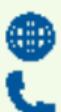


Vermont is reshaping how pre-charge diversion will work statewide starting in 2026. In Chittenden County, the municipalities of Williston, Essex, South Burlington, and Burlington are collaborating to co-create a centralized administration hub.

This forum will offer:

- An overview of what's changing
- Context about the transition timeline and local impacts
- Space to ask questions, share perspectives, and help shape what comes next

**Community members
connected to any of the 4
Chittenden County CJC
are welcome to attend**



linktr.ee/burlingtoncjc



802-865-7155



COMMUNITY CONCERTS AT FIRST

Back in the spring of 2022, when a small group of us envisioned a community concert series at FCCEJ, we had no idea we would survive.

Thanks to the FCCEJ family and the community at large, not only have we survived, we have thrived! **We are about to embark on our 5th year with an absolutely fantastic and eclectic line up** - in line with our mission statement: *"To celebrate a wide variety of amazing musical talents from Vermont, New England and beyond. An opportunity for the Essex Community to gather and enjoy great music while supporting local and global mission outreach".* CCAF works closely with the Missions Committee. Our beneficiary for 2026 is Age-Well of Vermont.

Here is the lineup for 2026:

- ♦ Sunday, March 22: Tom Cleary—Piano virtuoso accompanied by vocalist extraordinaire Amber deLaurentis (more information below)
- ♦ Sunday, April 26: Ray Vega—Jazz legend with his multi talented Afro-pop group
- ♦ Sunday, September 27: Hair Peace—Americana, Indie, Rock. *They were amazing last year, so we asked them back*
- ♦ Sunday, November 1: Skylark—An innovative, contemporary string ensemble based in northern Vermont, influenced by Nordic, Celtic, and American musical traditions.

All concerts are at 3pm in our beautiful, acoustically elegant sanctuary. \$20/pp, under 12 free.

Tickets: <https://sevendaystickets.com/?q=first+congregational+> (you can also get tickets at the door, or by calling the church office - 802-878-5745).

Thank you for your continued enthusiasm and support - spread the word to friends and family!



Community Concerts at First Presents: Jazz Pianist Tom Cleary & Jazz Vocalist Amber deLaurentis Sunday, March 22nd at 3pm

Tom Cleary studied jazz improvisation with Yusef Lateef and Archie Shepp, and classical piano performance with Sylvia Parker and Elizabeth Metcalfe. He has had extended collaborations playing piano and keyboards with artists including Mike Gordon, James Harvey, Ray Vega, Patricia Julien, and Jamie Masefield. His collaboration with his wife, vocalist and composer Amber deLaurentis, in the jazz quartet Birdcode can be heard on the 2019 *album You Are Here*. He has played on jazz recordings including *Cerulean* by harmonicist John LaRouche, *Burmese Panther* by guitarist/composer Paul Asbell, and recent releases including *Now And Then* by saxophonist and flutist Marty Fogel and the debut album by Saturn People's Sound Collective. His work as an arranger, lyricist and co-writer can be heard on deLaurentis' solo albums *Hey Sadie*, *Innocent Road*, and the recent *Space Invader*. He has accompanied artists including Lester Bowie, Fontella Bass, Clark Terry, Ernie Watts, Chris Vidala, Pete Yellin, Max Weinberg, Judi Silvano, Joe Lovano, Joan Rivers and Steve Earle. As a composer, his work has been commissioned and recorded by groups including Social Band, Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble and the Saint Michael's College Fine Arts Department, where he composed and compiled the score for *Mill Girls*, a play with music that was most recently performed this past year. He teaches in the jazz studies program of the UVM Music Department, the Flynn Arts jazz program and his home studio; please visit his music blog, *Birdfeed*, at blog.uvm.edu/tgcleary. For an example of his solo piano playing, check out his recent recording of the Billy Eckstine standard *I Want To Talk About You* from an upcoming release.

Amber deLaurentis oversees the vocal jazz program at University of Vermont, where she teaches voice and co-directs the UVM Jazz Vocal Ensemble with husband Tom Cleary. Amber also maintains a private studio of voice and piano students. She performs regularly as a member of jazz quartet Birdcode, (which released its first recording, *You Are Here*) with Tom Cleary in 2019. As a songwriter, Amber just released her third full-length record *Space Invader*, preceded by her second release, *Innocent Road*, in 2019. She has performed with jazz artists including pianist Marcus Roberts and Judi Silvano. Amber has previously performed with Ben Folds, opened for Patti Larkin, Dan Hicks and his Hot Licks, NRBQ, Tom Paxton, Marshall Crenshaw, Five for Fighting, Alana Davis, and Entrain. In 2002, Amber's band won best of 1,200 in the northeast finals of Discmakers' Independent Music World Series.

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 February 6, please contact Dave Johnson at mdjkiln@gmail.com or 802-399-6278. Your Planned Giving Committee:

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

STEWARDSHIP

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*

IMPORTANT FCCEJ REMINDERS

FCCEJ Calendar

- All meetings must be scheduled through the church office
- Send an email to 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 or drop off hard copies to the church office.
 4. Reimbursement checks will be mailed unless otherwise requested.

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 *The Stolen Queen*, by Fiona Davis for the February discussion.

A dual-timeline historical mystery that explores themes of female power, prejudice, motherhood, and the rightful ownership of antiquities, intertwining the glamor of NYC with the sands of Egypt.

We will meet in the Marvin Lounge on Monday, February 16 at 11:30am.

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

BRIDGE FOR FUN

If you are an old pro or just beginning to play, we have a Bridge Club that comes together to have some fun on the first and third Friday or every month from 1:30 to 4pm. We get a couple of tables, enjoy some good natured table talk, have snacks and coffee, and if you win the day, you get one of Rev. Mark's homemade jams! The group is pretty evenly split between church members and non-church members so bring a friend.

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. The group meets the 2nd Thursday of each month. Next meeting is Thursday, February 12 at 10am in Marvin Lounge.

BIBLE STUDY: ESTHER

Join us in exploring the book of Esther. We will be using a study guide by Max Lucado - *"You Were Made for this Moment."* To order the study guide (\$11), please let Mary McHugh know or call the Church Office. The guide will be helpful, but you can join the study without it. Next sessions: February 13, March 13 and 27.

BASKETS NEEDED

The Craft Fest Committee is beginning their work on silent auction for 2026. We need of baskets of any shape, size and color. Also, looking for any containers such as metal or cloth that can be used for items. They can be dropped off at the church office at your earliest convenience. Thank you!

FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS

AHOKAS, Cheryl
BEEBE, Sharon
BENTON, Mark
BOURN, Molly
CASEY, Ruth
DAVIS, Robert
DETTENRIEDER, Sharon
DEWEY, Mae
FINNIE, Kathy

GABERT, Valerie
GARRAPY, Betty
GOEDKEN, Ethan
GRAY, Peter
KELLY, Jen
KINNEY, John
KOCH, Braeden
LONGWELL, Cindy
MARSHALL, Connie

MCGEARY, Matt
PARKER, Nancy
PAUL, George
RAUT, Joy
RODDY\GARVEY, Ronan
RUSSELL, Clint
SARGENT, Rusty



Bluebird Montessori of Vermont

NEW MONTESSORI SCHOOL OPENING

Elizabeth Suggs, the owner and founder of Bluebird Montessori of Vermont, is opening her new school this August inside FCCJ!

Bluebird Montessori is a small school serving children ages 3-6 years old with a class size between 12-14 children. Their mission is to provide a safe and nurturing environment that meets each child's needs so that they can reach their full potential.

Everyone from the church and the wider community who is interested in Montessori education is invited to attend an upcoming information session to learn more out the Montessori Method and about what life would be like for your child, grandchild, or loved one. We have two coming up in February!

- Tuesday, February 24th from 6:30 – 8:30pm
- Saturday, February 28th from 10:30am – 12pm

REGISTER NOW



Elizabeth's History:

I worked at a Montessori school in Austin, Texas for over 20 years and when I first stepped into a Montessori environment to observe, I knew I was witnessing something extraordinary. Children were peacefully working both independently and together in small groups. Children were kind, courteous, calm, happy and focused on their activities. They helped one another and interacted with grace and respect. The materials honored the child's need for self-discovery and autonomy. Children were reading as early as 4 years old and were doing complex mathematical problems at 5 and 6. Since this experience, I have gone on to be a certified Montessori teacher through AMI (Association of Montessori Internationale), received a Master of Education and received my certification to work with children who are dyslexic or have other reading related issues. I hope you to meet you at an upcoming information session.

Please reach out to bluebirdmontessorivt@gmail.com or 512-968-5346 if you have any questions!

www.bluebirdmontessorivt.com



MEN AT FIRST

The members of Men At First have been living the dream of life in showbiz this year. We have been busy with our Live Tour 2025, both in-house and on the road. We had Tour performances at FCCEJ, Congregational Church of South Hero, Congregational Church of Jeffersonville, Williston Place Independent Living, EastView Assisted Living Of Middlebury, and Residence At Shelburne Bay. Everywhere we go, we make it clear we are from the mighty First Congregational Church of Essex Junction, UCC!

We enjoyed warm welcomes, and have fond memories of all these events:

- June 1 - Music Appreciation Sunday at FCCEJ
- June 28 - Service honoring Bruce Blackman at FCCEJ
- June 29 - Worship service at South Hero Cong Church
- Aug 10 - Worship service at FCCEJ
- Aug 24 - Worship service at Jeffersonville Cong Church
- Oct 12 - A Cappella Sunday at FCCEJ worship service
- Oct 19 - A Cappella Sunday at FCCEJ (back to back Sundays)
- Nov 14 - Show at Williston Place
- Nov 21 - Show at EastView Middlebury
- Dec 12 - Show at Shelburne Bay
- Dec 24 - 9pm service, and at the pre-concert



COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

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 ~ 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



FIRSTCONGREGATIONALEJ



FCCEJ_802



YouTube

youtube.com/c/FCCEJ