



SPirit @ FIRSt

Monthly Newsletter

FIRST
CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH *of Essex Junction*

Love. Serve. Grow.

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YOUR PASTOR’S PONDERINGS...

*“If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant:
if we did not sometimes taste of adversity,
prosperity would not be so welcome.”*

Meditations Divine and Moral

Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*

I have not lived in Vermont all of my life, but it seems like it has been a long, hard winter. The cold lingered and was harsh at times and of course we had the faux coming of spring followed by more snow and ice. And the darkness can be demoralizing. Having Lent in the midst of winter is typecasting to perfection.

And then there is Easter! Flowering buds appear on the trees, bulbs start popping up; the forsythia bursts on any scene and the smell of soil awakens our natural senses. The cacophony of birds forcing the sun to arise earlier and earlier is of course the best invitation to open our windows as we listen to life burst all around us. Easter is typecast as well.

One feeds the other. After winter, newness of life comes. After death, resurrection breaks in. After darkness, light reshapes reality. After hibernation comes people walking, excited to see their neighbors, re-entering the community; inactivity replaced with exercise and getting out into the world. Hope replaces apathy and spirits soar a bit more in spring, during the season of Easter.

Christ’s resurrection is all around us if we but have eyes to see. Mother Earth, the second bible, reflects resurrection just as surely as the empty tomb. People awakening from a long winter’s sleep into a land of activity speaks of the same divine truth of new life. Folks encouraged with new energy, engaging in new projects, enraptured with springtime passions point to the truth of the resurrection.

Christ’s resurrection taps into the deepest yearnings of the human heart, mind, body, and soul. New adventures awaken unseen depths of character and purpose. New light inspires us to think beyond what the darkness holds. New journeys take us to destinations unforeseen just a few dark months earlier as new truths bursts onto the scene.

Resurrection speaks of transformation and our church continues to claim this part of our faith story. Yes, Jesus came back from the dead! Yes, transformative change is embedded in the heart of life. Yes, there is hope for the future. Yes, God is calling us toward the peaceable kingdom, the Holy Mountain, the eternal realm of undiminished love.

May God be with us as individuals as we mature in the faith and our understanding of ourselves fulfilling God’s call in our lives. And may God be with our church as we corporately look to the future with excitement and hope.

Eastertide blessings be with you all.

In Christ,

Rev. Mark

SPECIAL SERVICES IN MAY

Communion in May will be observed in the traditional way on May 3rd
Bread and Juice passed out to the congregation

Living in Faith Together [L.I.F.T.]

May 3—One Service at 10am

Many of our members have been grateful to have a bag of goodie necessities to give to the homeless as they encounter them on the byways of Vermont. Hesitant to give money, but wanting to help people in need, these L.I.F.T. packages provide our members a way to lift the spirits of those who need a little kindness. On L.I.F.T. Sundays, we come downstairs, assemble the packages, seal them into two-gallon plastic bags, and place them in the shelves by the front doors of the church so when we leave church we can simply pick one of two up for our cars to distribute!

Confirmation Sunday

May 24—One Service at 10am

Our confirmands this year are insightful, articulate, and have met with Rev. Mendes each month since September. They have explored the bible, learned about Jesus, studied the church a little bit, and had lots of great conversations about faith and how they claim it in their lives. On their upcoming retreat, they will shape the service, assign parts, and then explore what each one of them believes and whether they want to be confirmed or join the church or be baptized. Finally @ First Praise Band will provide the music for their Confirmation Service and all of our confirmands will have hands laid on them as we bless them in God's name. This will be a service you will not want to miss.

The Blessing of the Animals

May 17 After Both Services

During COVID, FCCEJ got out of the habit of having a service each year where we take some time after each worship service to bless our animals in the name of their Creator. Naturally, our precious pets were not only created by God, but offered a promise through Noah's Covenant with humanity along with all the creatures of the earth. This followed God declaring all creatures good and gave humanity their first commandment to care for the earth and her creatures; long before God gave us the 10 Commandments which secured behaviors between human beings! So after each service, we will head outside and Rev. Mark and Rev. Bob will anoint and bless any and all animals brought to them. If it rains, we will move the blessings to the gym.

Music Appreciation Sunday

May 31—One Service at 10am

We have GREAT Music at First Church! It warms our hearts and draws us into tenderness. Music hardens our resolve and demands that we stand up and march toward freedom and justice. It invites us to return to our childhood memories and brings our deceased loved ones back to our minds eye with indescribable emotion. Music draws us into the mysterious presence of the Living God and helps us discern where that inscrutable Presence is leading us as we enter an unknown future. Sometimes, music draws us into the presence of the Divine like a cat purring on our laps at the end of a long day. Bethany with our Sanctuary Choir, Rick with Finally @ First, Bill with Men At First, the Currier Bell Choir, Heavenly Harmony, and the Joyful Noise Children's Choir will all perform and make our sanctuary rock with the supernal music of our God. Come and be inspired. Come and meet the Holy Spirit. Come and sing your hearts out as we celebrate the gift of Music in our midst.

CELEBRATION OF LIFE SERVICES IN MAY

Jean Tucker's Celebration of Life will be on May 30th at 1pm at FCCEJ
with a reception to follow.

Bill Bickford Sr's Celebration of Life will be on June 13th at 1pm at FCCEJ
with reception to follow.

PASTORAL SEARCH COMMITTEE

The Dear FCCEJ Family,

The Pastoral Search Committee continues to meet faithfully as we seek the person that will lead our congregation into the next phase of our church life. We are deeply grateful for your continued patience, trust, and the many words of encouragement and assistance that we have received.

Current Progress

We are currently in the Construction of the Church Profile Phase. Since our last update, we have:

- Facilitated twelve cottage meetings soliciting feedback about our church and about what we are looking for in our next Pastor. These meetings generated many insightful themes into our present reality and future outlook.
- Conducted a survey to solicit feedback from those unable to attend a cottage meeting.
- Solicited feedback from community members regarding FCCEJ's place and participation in the greater community of Chittenden County and Vermont.
- As a committee, spread out pieces of the church profile to fill out based on the feedback received from the meetings and surveys.

Looking Ahead

Over the next month, we expect to finalize our Church Profile and publish it with the UCC so we can accept candidates. We are extremely encouraged by our progress and remain committed to a thorough discernment process rather than a rushed one.

Call to Prayer

Prayer remains the most vital action our congregation can take. Please join us in praying for:

- **Wisdom & Unity:** For the committee to have clarity and discernment through each step of the process.
- **The Future Pastor:** For God to prepare the heart of our next leader and their family for this transition.
- **Our Church:** That we remain unified and focused on our mission and each other during this period of transition.

If you have any questions about the process, please do not hesitate to reach out to any of the committee members.

Jen Dooley, Secretary

FCCEJ Pastoral Search Committee, Cathy Shearer, Chair; Bob Driver, Chaplain; Jen Dooley, Secretary; Judy Allen, Micah Heaney-Forbes, Marion Lawlor, Betty Marthaler, Laura Marthaler, Kaki McGeary, Amy McIntyre

DEACONS

Greetings from the Deacons Committee!

As I write this in late April, my sincere wish is that all the April rains we've had will bring all the May flowers to our gardens, towns, highways and byways. May will also bring the end of our program year and Faith Formation classes. The last two Sundays in May we will have single services at 10am before switching to our 9am Summer Schedule in June.

Sunday May 24th is Confirmation Sunday, when this year's confirmands will be running the service under Rev. Mark's proud and watchful eyes.

Sunday, May 31 is Music Appreciation Sunday. All our musical groups are scheduled to sing!

As always, if you have any questions or concerns about our worship services, please contact myself or anyone else on the Deacons Committee!

Respectfully submitted,

Maureen McKenzie

✠ ELIZABETH'S EPISTLE ✠

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed! Eastertide is a period of 50 days, beginning on Easter Sunday and ending at Pentecost, when we celebrate the birth of the Church. During Eastertide, we celebrate the Risen Christ and imagine how we might live as Easter people.

Volunteers Welcomed

- ★ Volunteers are essential to the heart of Children's Ministry!
- ★ As the 2025-2026 faith formation year comes to a close in the next month. Please consider volunteering next year, and sharing your faith with the children of FCCEJ.

If you have been attending FCCEJ for more than 6 months, you are qualified.

Reach out to Elizabeth at ChildrensMinistry@fccej.org.

May Dates to Remember:

- ★ May 3rd - Spiritual Friends - 5th graders move up celebration after service ~ Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
- ★ May 10th - Peer Groups - Mother's Day ~ 1 Peter 3:13-22
- ★ May 17th - Peer Groups - Blessing of the Animals ~ Acts 1:6-14
A representative from the Humane Society has been invited to briefly talk to the FCCEJ congregation
- ★ May 24th - All Family Worship - 10 am
- ★ May 31st - All Family Worship - 10 am ~ Music Appreciation Sunday

Faith Formation Offering

- ◆ The Heart to Heart Program through the Humane Society of Chittenden County is the 2025-2026 Faith Formation offering recipient.
 - *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 overflowing love, you invite us to live with open hearts and open tables. May we share what we have, ask for help when we need it, and care for our neighbors—building a community where no one is left out. Amen.

Love and Light,

Elizabeth - Children's Ministry Coordinator

CHRISTIAN FORMATION COMMITTEE

Three Summer Evenings—Join Us!

As summer comes closer, we are getting excited about our VBC alternative - **Three Summer Evenings**. We will follow the story of Moses through fun, fellowship, and faith learning.

- ◆ **June 17**— Enjoy a campfire evening, complete with s'mores, camp songs, and stories.
- ◆ **July 22**—Look forward to camp-style games (and perhaps a water balloon or two).
- ◆ **August 19**—We'll have a street dance (or a sock hop if the weather doesn't cooperate).

These evenings are for the entire church community, with a variety of activities at each to suit all age groups. We will provide enough food to call it dinner, perhaps asking for some donations of dessert or salads. Arrival is planned between 5:30 - 6pm, and we'll finish between 7:30 and 8.

Speaking of summer, we will host our annual Ice Cream Sunday on June 7 when we wrap up Faith Formation for the summer and recognize our wonderful volunteers.

In other news, we are working to update our Safe Conduct Guidelines, and we're continuing to look for a Faith Formation Leader for our older youth. If you know of someone (or you are that someone) who might be interested, please contact the church office.

MISSIONS

Sincere Thanks

Thank you to everyone that attended the Age Well Seminar last month. We are especially thankful for the time Erica Marks; Director of Volunteer Services gave to our program.

Thank You From our Troops

A big thank you to everyone who signed and gave Easter cards for Bobbie Evans and Tatyana Szymanski. Here's a note from Tatyana: *He (Bobby) found me! We opened the cards together OMG there were so many. He brought half to his section to hang up and some snacks to share with the pilots. The kids' drawings are so nice. They did a really good job! This put a big smile on my face. Love all of you. Sometime this summer both of them will thank you all in person.*

Save the Date

On Friday, June 5th the Missions Committee is hosting a pizza party at the Josh Pallotta House for lunch. We are inviting all veterans and current service members from the church to join us for lunch at Josh's house. It will be a great opportunity to see all the services provided by the house and meet other military members in the area. We will be carpooling from the church at 11:30 to the house. Please feel free to join us.

The Missions committee will also be hosting another luncheon in the fall to celebrate the return of all our service men and women who are serving overseas. Any further questions, please feel free to contact the church office.



COTS Walk 2026

Founded in 1988, the COTS Walk is one of their oldest and most important peer-to-peer fundraisers. Every year walkers of all ages come together from all over the region to participate. The Walk begins and ends in Battery Park with music from Jenni & the Jazz Junketeers, as well as Ben & Jerry's ice cream, and fun activities.

This family-friendly event guides Walkers along a 3.6-mile route through downtown Burlington visiting some of the shelters and facilities that COTS operates. At this event, COTS seeks to illustrate the path a person experiencing homelessness might take when utilizing COTS services to educate our community about homelessness in our region. Bring your friends, family, coworkers, dogs, and strollers...All are welcome!

This year the COTS Walk theme is *Every Story Deserves a Home*. Every person who walks through the doors of COTS's shelters, housing, and service locations has a unique life story. COTS believes that every story matters, and every person has the power to change the ending. At this year's COTS Walk, we hope you will join us in honoring every story and recognizing that homelessness is a chapter in too many stories in our community.

When: First Sunday in May; Sunday May 3rd, 2026.

Where: Battery Park

Registration: begins at 1pm - <https://cotsonline.org/cots-walk>

Walk time: begins at 2pm

Who Walks?

- Walkers of all ages, from businesses, schools, social groups and religious organizations, and neighborhoods come together from all over the region to participate in the annual COTS Walk.

Why Walk?

- Raise public awareness about homelessness in our community and to raise money.
- Support COTS shelters and services for Vermonters who are homeless or are at risk of losing their homes.





“CRITTER CORNER”



By Beth Volker

Important Springtime Reminders

Spring has sprung and with it comes a few important reminders:

- ❖ As of this writing (4/26) it's time to put out your hummingbird feeders. The early arrivals will be here this week and with few, if any, flowers to supply them with food, your feeder will be a life saver. PLEASE remember....do NOT use store bought nectar of any color. All that is needed is plain white sugar and water. One part sugar to four parts water. To make life easier for myself, I put eight (8) cups of cold water and two (2) cups of sugar in a large pot and bring it to a boil. Once cooled, I fill my two feeders and refrigerate the rest in a pitcher until it's time to change the water in 48 hours. It is VERY important to stick to this every other day schedule, especially when the temperatures climb into the 80s and 90s when the mixture can ferment. This is very dangerous for the hummers.
- ❖ Spring also brings with it the first orphaned and/or injured birds and mammals. For me, this means lots of phone calls to transport critters from the finders to the rehabbers.

Several things to keep in mind if you find a critter in need. If it's a baby bird, either not feathered or covered with pin feathers, it IS in need of assistance. Gently pick it up and put it in a box with some soft fleece, if you have any, and keep it warm on a heating pad set on low with a towel between the box and the heating pad. Call our volunteer dispatcher, Ellen Jarecki (802.578.7168), and she will find someone to transport it for you, unless of course, you're willing to do the transport yourself ~ LOVE it when someone is willing to help out in this way.

If Ellen is unreachable, and it's a bird, call or text Sophia Parker at (413) 923-4922. Oftentimes she responds to a text more readily than a phone call. If it's a bunny or a squirrel, text or call Shona at (802) 238-5291. If it's a reptile or amphibian call or text JoAnn at (802) 999-5360. If it's a rabies vector, meaning a possible rabies carrier, such as skunks, raccoons, foxes and coyotes, call or text Medora or Bryeanne. Medora's # is (802) 355-1590 and Bryeanne's # is (802) 535-9602. If you must handle a rabies vector, do so with gloved hands or by picking up the animal with a towel or a blanket.

- ❖ In regard to bunnies, BEFORE mowing your lawns for the first time this season, hopefully not until late May or early June, please walk your property to make sure there are NO bunny nests! Momma bunny just creates a shallow impression in your lawn, lines it with her fur and soft grass and has her babies there, only visiting the nest at dawn and dusk to nurse them. How they survive is beyond me...between predators and lawnmowers the odds are stacked against them, so please be careful.



- ❖ One final, VERY IMPORTANT reminder, if you see adult skunks and/or raccoons, foxes or coyotes out during the day, THEY ARE NOT RABID!! They are hungry moms who know that it's safer to leave their babies alone during the day, while they briefly search for food for themselves and for their babies as they grow.

Thanks for helping wildlife and Happy Spring!

STEWARDSHIP

Our Annual Per Capita Dues are May's Special Offering

Did you know that our church, the First Congregational Church of Essex Junction, is part of a larger organization in Vermont? We belong to the Champlain Association, one of eight associations within the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ. The Vermont Conference's mission is to equip churches for Christ's mission and ministry now and in the future.

Every year, our church contributes to this wider church. This is called a per capita donation (or dues). We give as part of our connection to the Champlain Association and the Vermont Conference United Church of Christ. Per capita dues cover such things as clergy gatherings and educational support, pastoral search and call assistance, faith formation resources, outdoor ministry camp for youth, training, and resources for staff and much more.

Per Capita Dues are assessed on a per member basis according to the membership numbers reported by churches to the Conference as of December 31st of the previous year. This year, 2026, our per capita dues are \$16.38 per individual member. We will be asking for this donation on May 4th. Please give during the month of May and, if possible, double your offering to cover the dues for members who may be unable to give at this time. Of course, any donation later in the year is also welcome. The giving tab at www.fccej.org makes it easy to share your monetary gift with the church.

The Stewardship Committee appreciates your generosity towards this special offering. If you have any questions, please contact any member of the committee.

Anna Izzo, Alex John, Rev. Mark Mendes, Heather Stein, and Beth Volker (Chair)

PLANNED GIVING

Estate Planning and Wills Clinic In May

The Planned Giving Committee is offering an Estate Planning Seminar and Wills Clinic for all church members and friends on May 21. from 6:30 to 8:00pm in the Main Hall (top floor) at the Holy Family Parish House at 28 Lincoln Street, Essex Junction. The event is FREE.

The Seminar will cover all aspects of estate planning and information about the benefits of having a will. Also covered will be trusts, elder law, Medicaid planning, special needs planning and probate. Holly LeMieux, a local attorney specializing in these matters, will lead the workshop. She is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts and the New England College of Law.

To attend, please contact Jen in the FCCEJ church office at 802-878-5745 before May 15.

AD-HOC COMMITTEE FORMED TO STUDY PROPERTY BASED INCOME

The Church Council has formed an ad-hoc committee under the Trustees Committee, and authorized expenditures up to \$2500, to begin preliminary studies to explore property redevelopment that could generate long-term sustainable income. The ideas revolve around the potential redevelopment of the Parsonage and Sawyer House to increase the number of rental units available while still supporting the needs of Heavenly Cents Thrift Shop.

At this point, there have been a few exploratory meetings with the City of Essex Junction, and we have engaged the services of Scott + Partners, Inc. for an initial feasibility study.

If you have any questions, or would like to discuss further, please see John Burnett (chair of the ad-hoc committee) or Rob Gibson (chair of Trustees Committee).

FREE DINNER FOR YOUNG FAMILIES

On the first Friday of each month, we host a free dinner for families of elementary-age children. No agenda, no program—come and eat and visit with other families. The kids are welcome to burn off some energy in the gym, too! All are welcome—bring a friend!

Next dinner is Friday, June 5 from 5:30 to 6:30 in the Fellowship Hall. If the weather cooperates, we're thinking of a summer cookout—burgers, etc...

COMMUNITY CONCERTS AT FIRST 2026 SEASON LINEUP:

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 FCCEJ Sanctuary ~ \$20/pp, under 12 free

Tickets:

<https://sevendaystickets.com/?q=first+congregational+>

(Also available at the door, or through the church office - 802-878-5745)

COFFEE HOUSE CABARET

Calling all musicians, poets, dancers, magicians, comedians, etc! Our Coffeehouse Cabaret has been rescheduled to Sept. 2026 at Holy Family Parish Hall (specific date TBD, but likely 9/20 at 2 pm). Please be thinking about performing something in this comfortable environment (with free coffee, tea, and pastries). You may even win a gift card to a local bakery or coffee place. An online signup form is coming soon! Must be family friendly content, performers ages 12+, and approximately 5 minutes in length.

Contact stephfield87@gmail.com with any questions. Thank you!

BLUEBIRD MONTESSORI OF VERMONT

Bluebird Montessori of Vermont is enrolling students for the 2026-2027 school year. We are a small nurturing school for 3-6 year olds. A Montessori environment supports the child's social, emotional and academic development. Children are able to focus and learn at their own pace in an environment which fosters independence and a lifelong love of learning. Bluebird Montessori of Vermont is led by Elizabeth Suggs, a trained Montessori guide with 20 years of experience. She also holds a Master of Education. The school will be located in one of the rooms in the West Wing of FCCEJ.

Do you know any teachers looking for part-time work? Bluebird Montessori is looking for a Vermont Certified Teacher who wants to work from 1-3:30 M-F.

Please reach out if you are interested in learning more about the school or teaching position:

www.bluebirdmontessorivt.com

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, May 14 at 10am in Marvin Lounge.

LUNCHTIME BOOK GROUP

The book group is reading *The Light Pirate*, by Lily Brooks-Dalton for the May discussion.

Set in the near future, this hopeful story of survival and resilience follows Wanda—a luminous child born out of a devastating hurricane—as she navigates a rapidly changing world.

We will meet in the Marvin Lounge on Monday, May 18 at 11:30am.

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

First Congregational Church of Essex Junction



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Email: welcome@fccej.org

Shoshana's Brisket

1 4-5 lb brisket	1 pkg. onion soup mix
1 onion, sliced	1 t garlic powder
3 garlic cloves, chopped	1 T smoked paprika
3 celery stalks, chopped	1/4 cup parsley, chopped
1 1/2 cups crushed tomatoes	Salt
1/2 cup water	Pepper
2 T maple syrup	Olive oil

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees
2. Sauté onion & celery in olive oil until softened, add garlic and cook for another few minutes
3. Combine tomatoes with the water, spices, and most of the onion soup mix
4. Place brisket in a roasting pan & sprinkle with additional paprika, garlic powder, and remaining onion soup mix. Pour tomato mixture over meat.
5. Seal with aluminum foil and make a few slits on top to vent.
6. Bake for 1 hour at 400, then lower oven temp to 325 and cook for another 3 hours.
7. Cool and chill overnight. Slice while cold, strain the sauce and pour over sliced brisket. Reheat to serve.

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

Music: Finally @ First Praise Band ~ Streamed on the 3rd Sunday of each month

VISIT US

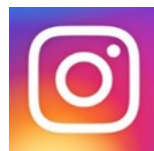


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