

**THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
OF ELLSWORTH, MAINE  
FOUNDED 1812**



**May 2021 - THE STEEPLE NEWSLETTER**

First Congregational Church, PO Box 12, 2 Church Street, Ellsworth, Maine 04605 207-667-8321 ellsworthucc.org

Boxes continue to be unpacked at our home. Books that have been nestled in boxes for up to five years are seeing daylight. As the midpoint of the Easter Season approached, I rediscovered Martin C. Helderfer's *Prayer: A Guide when Troubled*. In the past, I couldn't get past the illustration on page 19, but this year, I kept reading. Perhaps its insights interwoven with my reflections will spur some reflection, prayer and insights for you as we await the celebration of Pentecost. Pentecost, a pivotal day, is called the birthday of the church

When we change, our relationship to God changes. We and God seemingly withdraw from one another. Since we are always changing, it seems God, whom we knew or thought we knew, is always being lost. We experience a gap, a desert. When we look backward, we see how God is lost and found as we change. Gaps, like deserts, are lonely places. Deserts, like change, are places for growth. Is that why Jesus went to the desert?

It seems to me that our congregation is in a communal gap. When a gap is extended, we live in a desert that is unsettling. Yet, we don't generally experience life and gaps—spiritual deserts—in the same ways and at the same times.

For some people, the moment of suspension is an instant. Change is not troubling for them. The new intermingles with the old in a way that smooths the transitions.

If life experience is drawn as a line, a few could depict their lives as relatively continuous. They are the persons for whom change is not particularly troubling. They are molded slowly by daily life:



Others know desert experiences now and again. Most of the time they are settled. Their life experience might be drawn this way:



Still others know what it is to have one major life crisis that seems to divide their lives into halves. They speak of a before and after of one never-to-be-forgotten troubling time:



And some know the feelings of living in a near-continuous desert where tranquil moments are as rare as the moments of crisis are for others. They primarily live within the gaps:



When in crisis, when something or someone is lost, there is seldom an awareness and certainly no assurance that the moment will pass. We are suspended. That is what is so unsettling. It feels as if there is no end:



Some paths may be easier; no one way is better. Gaps, deserts, and experiences of God's absence are gifts, however unwelcome. They hint at an indication of growth and a path toward depth. The absence of God is an invitation to a discovery not only in our hearts but in our involvement as well.

Holding you in prayer. -- Pastor Cynthia

Notification regarding whether the sanctuary is open or closed to worshipers will be made in the email with the bulletin and on ellsworthucc.org. You may also call 667-8321 on Friday, 9:00-2:00. **We want to keep each other safe.**

## MAY CHURCH MEETINGS (ZOOM\*\*)

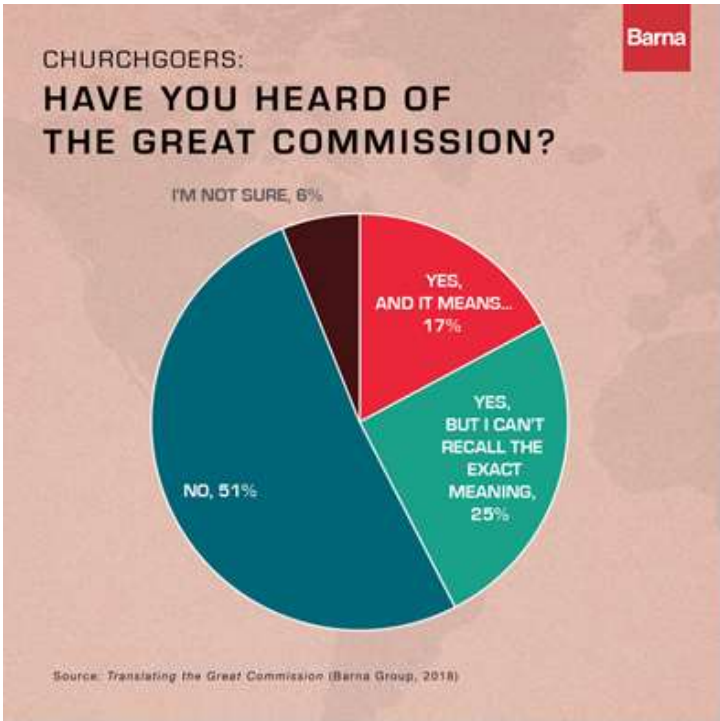
**Adult Forum** – Sundays, 8:30 a.m.  
**Kids Church** – Sundays, 11:30 a.m..  
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**Trustees** – Thursday, May 13, 7 p.m.  
**Re-Opening** – Thursday, **May 13, 7:30 p.m.**  
**Christian Ed** – Sunday, May 16, 12:30 p.m.  
**Deacons** – Sunday, **May 16, 1:30 p.m.**  
**Finance** – Friday, May 14, 10 a.m.  
**Council** – Wed., **May 19, 7:00 p.m.**  
**Missions** – Thursday, May 20, **7:00 p.m.**

PLEASE NOTE CHANGE IN DATE FOR  
 DEACONS, RE-OPENING COMMITTEE  
 AND COUNCIL.

*We respectfully request that a  
 summary of each meeting be  
 submitted to the Steeple by May 21.*

\*\*FCC Zoom events use the same meeting number and password. Call the church office (W-Thj-F) for Zoom instructions if you need them.



## MAY 2021 LECTIONARY READINGS

**MAY 2 – 5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
 Acts 8:26-40  
 Psalm 22:25-31  
 1 John 4:7-21  
 John 15:1-8

**MAY 9 – 6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
 Acts 10:44-48  
 Psalm 98  
 1 John 5:1-6  
 John 15:9-17

**MAY 13 – ASCENSION DAY (THURSDAY)**  
 Acts 1:1-11  
 Psalm 47 OR Psalm 93  
 Ephesians 1:15-23  
 Luke 24:44-53

**MAY 16 – 7<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
 Acts 1:15-17, 21-26  
 Psalm 1  
 1 John 5:9-13  
 John 17:6-19

**MAY 23 – PENTECOST**  
 Acts 2:1-21 OR Ezekiel 37:1-14  
 Psalm 104:24-34, 35b  
 Romans 8:22-27  
 John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15



**MAY 30 – TRINITY SUNDAY**  
 Isaiah 6:1-8  
 Psalm 29  
 Romans 8:12-17  
 John 3:1-17

### SPIRITUAL LIFE SMALL GROUP

The pastor is offering a series of discussions based on Allison Pittman's book *Saturdays with Stella: How My Dog Taught Me to Sit, Stay, and Come When God Calls*. Call or email Cynthia or church office if interested.

# We will collect donations for blankets in May, dedicating them during worship on May 9 (Mothers' Day).

## CWS BLANKETS

*Showing God's love to all: a tale of two churches*

Congregations around the world host CWS Blanket offerings to live out a mission to serve God's people near and far; and that's exactly how two congregations in Washington state became connected.

First Presbyterian Church of Everett has been hosting "Dinner at the Bell" for 18 years. This weekly event is for low-income families, veterans, homeless, people with addictions – any community members in need – all are welcome. Along with a hot meal, guests receive blankets and hygiene kits.

**"A lot of places push homeless people away, and it is nice for churches to open their arms to help people,"** said Amanda, a guest at "Dinner at the Bell."

In the same city, only five miles away, Cascade View Presbyterian Church fundraises for the blanket ministry of CWS so that organizations and churches like First Presbyterian can serve those in need.

"We have a church that believes strongly in how God calls us to love and reach out," says Pastor Luke Hyder of Cascade View Presbyterian. "We as a church want to make tangible differences for those in need."

One church gives money so the other can give blankets, and together they give hope and a tangible reminder of God's love.

**Hope is powerful, especially in times like these. Will you answer the call to serve God's people and give hope today?**

Donate today to provide CWS Blankets to warm the hearts and hands of people in need. Scan this QR code or visit [cwsblankets.org/bulletin](https://cwsblankets.org/bulletin) to make a secure donation and learn more about your gift in action.

*Scan Me!*

 **CWS** | [cwsblankets.org](https://cwsblankets.org)

## KIDS CHURCH

**Apr. 11, 2021**

Kids Church learned  
Numbers 21:5-9 (NRSV)

"The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."



# MAY 2021 EVENTS AT FIRST CONGO UCC

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Church Admin. Asst. is on medical leave this month.						
2 <b>White</b> 8:30 am Adult Forum 10 am Worship Service & Holy Communion 11:30 am Kids Church	3 <b>OFFICE CLOSED</b>	4 <b>OFFICE CLOSED</b>	5 2:30-4 pm Welcome Table take-out	6 9 am Bulletin deadline	7	8
9 <b>Mothers' Day</b> <b>White</b> 8:30 am Adult Forum 10 am Worship Service 11:30 am Kids Church <u>BLANKET SUNDAY</u>	10 <b>OFFICE CLOSED</b>	11 <b>OFFICE CLOSED</b>	12 2:30-4 pm Welcome Table take-out	13 <b>Ascension</b> 9 am Bulletin Deadline  7 pm Trustees 7:30 Re-opening Committee	14 10 am Finance	15
Pastor is on vacation May 10-16						
16 <b>White</b> 8:30 am Adult Forum 10 am Worship Service 11:30 am Kids Church 12:30 pm <b>Christian Ed</b> 1:30 pm <b>Deacons</b>	17 <b>OFFICE CLOSED</b>	18 <b>OFFICE CLOSED</b>	19  2:30-4 pm Welcome Table take-out  7 pm <b>Council</b>	20 9 am Bulletin Deadline  7:00 pm <b>Missions</b>	21 9 am Steeple deadline	22
23 <b>Pentecost</b> <b>Wear Red</b> 8:30 am Adult Forum 10 am Worship Service 11:30 am Kids Church	24 <b>OFFICE CLOSED</b>	25 <b>OFFICE CLOSED</b>	26 2:30-4 pm Welcome Table take-out	27 9 am Bulletin deadline	28	29
30 <b>Trinity Sunday</b> <b>White</b> 8:30 am Adult Forum 10 am Worship Service 11:30 am Kids Church	31 <b>OFFICE CLOSED</b>					



**Pentecost is May 23, 2021**

## New Subcommittee

Council has appointed Kathy S., Susan F., Bonnie C. and a yet-to-be named trustee to define the church's priorities for the position of ¾-time Pastor.



## READINESS IS THE KEY TO CONGREGATIONAL CHANGE

These are difficult days for the church, but also days of real opportunity. The trends are alarming. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 50% of Americans were church members in 2019, which is down from 70% in 1999.<sup>1</sup> Of the generations alive today, the younger the group, the less likely it is that a person is involved with a church. For most of us, being involved in church life has meant dealing with a declining number of active members, decreasing involvement by those who do attend, a shrinking or perhaps disappearing Sunday School, disappearing youth ministries, infighting within denominations, and struggling to navigate the pitfalls of downsizing our church staff and programming.

Church leaders seeking to change the congregation have been involved in efforts to identify our core values, define our mission, clarify our vision, lay out a strategic plan, and/or create a discipleship system. We hoped that having these necessary ingredients in place would lead us back to the glory of the growth years of our church. But often, all that good intention and hard work has not produced the fruit of our dreams.

### Why Do Revitalization Efforts Fail?

Many things can contribute to the ineffectiveness of our revitalization efforts. Some of these include:

- Unresolved conflict in the church can make forward progress impossible.
- Rushing the improvement efforts and involving too few people can minimize the sense of ownership and scuttle the development process.
- Creating a vague vision that does not delineate specific goals can make planning ineffective.
- Identifying a mission that does not resonate with the real values of the congregation yields a lukewarm response.

- Focusing spiritual growth programming only on the young leads to fading commitment in the adult leadership.

### Readiness Must Be First

But there is a logically prior requirement if we are to make progress. We must be ready to change. “Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” (Matt 9:17)<sup>2</sup> It is most often our inability to let go of the past that has blocked our efforts. Churches must continually change if they are to keep pace with an ever-evolving cultural setting.



“SO FAR, FIVE OF OUR PREVIOUS PASTORS AGREE WITH YOU ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF LETTING GO OF THE PAST.”

But people, generally speaking, do not like change, and institutions are more resistant to change than individuals. Institutions are designed to preserve themselves. But when the desired outcomes change, the system needs to change too; form follows function. We must organize in whatever way best fits what we are trying to accomplish.

This is obvious, but it is not easy. In church systems, as in our individual lives, a kind of inertia sets in over time. We fall into patterns of behavior that become automatic and comfortable. Edwin H. Friedman refers to this condition as “homeostasis” and defines it as “the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its existence.”<sup>3</sup> The homeostasis is familiar and seems safe, but change feels risky. When change is needed, our comfort is disrupted. It forces us to let go of habits that are ingrained in us. It means the hard work of learning how to be in this changing world in a different way.

We often make the mistake of imposing change on churches that are not yet ready for it. The result is twofold: the change is never successfully implemented, and many people become disgruntled in the process. Being ready for change is necessary to realizing the vision to which God calls us. Raymond Schulte, Executive Director of The Center for Parish Development, describes change readiness this way: “Readiness is that moment when congregation leaders become willing to expose themselves to learning something new. It is willingness to take a risk, to confess that a gap exists between the way things are and what they believe is God’s vision for the church; it is receptivity to the movement of the Spirit.”

We are ready to accept the sacrifices we must make to change when we see that the current situation is not viable. We need to really feel the urgency of our plight. We need to be shaken awake to the fact that our current reality requires something of us.

### **Pandemic as Wakeup Call**

These days of trial in the pandemic may be just the wakeup call we need. The requirements of these days have forced us to be the church in new and different ways as it seeks to address challenges such as grief, a need for financial support, a heightened need for community, and a hunger for healing and reconciliation.

And with congregations already loosed from the grip of past ways of being, we are in a good position to address those needs. The pandemic has caused us to communicate remotely and this has been a blessing. We are more flexible in our worship. We are more efficient in the use of our meeting time. The most reticent media users have been moved to participate and have experienced the convenience of a variety of communication venues. It is easier for us now to share our faith and our care and concern with people we might not have otherwise reached.

This is the time; this is the moment now, to do the hard work of discernment, planning, and implementing that will reach our hurting nation with the love and care of the gospel of Christ. We are more ready for change than we were a year ago. The felt needs of our citizenry are clearly in our view. Now is the ideal time to reach out as our churches and our world find the way to a new homeostasis.

So get to work. Make clear the values of the faith, define a mission of reaching out with love and acceptance for all, clarify a vision of a grace-filled community, create a plan in line with your mission and vision and launch out in faith. Perhaps you were created for a time such as this!

**THE REVEREND LAUREN W. SWANSON** is a United Methodist pastor and former Director of Congregational Development for the North Central New York Conference.

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1. Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>, April 18, 2019.

2. The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

3. Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 23.