

Tower Notes - January 2026

Celebrating 180 years of Community Based Ministry



*First Congregational United Church of Christ
An Open & Affirming and Immigrant Welcoming Church*

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#Love&JusticeChurch

Rev. Dr. Bob Gross



President's Message

What wonders lie ahead?

At year-end, it's natural to pause to savor the wonders of the past 12 months.

- On a personal level, the most wondrous event for me was watching a neighbor who lives near the family hunting shack in Hawkins pause on our walk to feed chickadees from her hand. The chickadees trusted her so much that they didn't care that a noisy stranger – me – was standing beside her on that rural gravel road. They didn't even care that my yellow Labrador Retriever – a bird dog – was standing beside me. When she opened her hand to offer peanuts, they let go of their suspicions and doubts and fluttered down.
- In our church, another wondrous event occurred at our fall ceremony to officially welcome new members. When Pastor Bob said membership was open to anyone who wanted to join, a new member hopped up from her pew and came to the front to commit to the church. In a lifetime attending churches filled with the “frozen chosen,” I have never seen a member spontaneously show such joy at joining. She let go of any doubts and just jumped in.

When a New Year begins, it's time to trust that more wonders lie ahead. This month, First Congregational UCC Janesville welcomes Pastor Benjamin J. Barlow. Pastor BJ and his wife, Megan, are letting go of the comforts they knew in California to jump into a new future with us.

As members of First Congregational UCC, we can help them experience the wonders that surely lie ahead. Like Pastor BJ and Megan, we'll have to let go of some old things and embrace some new things to make that happen. Can we let go of both the joys and the jolts of the past to fully welcome new leadership? Can we continue to open our church building to the world around us to find new possibilities for serving the community? Can we remain committed

to welcoming all people into our church, wherever they are on life's journey? Can we step up and jump right in?

It's up to all of us to help dream of the possibilities that lie ahead for First Congregational UCC. Even when changing times create new challenges, wonders are all around. In the coming year, let's look for them together as we welcome Pastor BJ.

Blessings,

Darla

Darla Dernovsek, President, First Congregational UCC



Welcome Pastor BJ and Megan to First Congregational Church UCC Janesville. We're glad you're here.

Thank you to our December liturgists: Sarah Beers, Nathan Roehl, Neil Deupree, Linda Salter, and Debi Cox.

If you would like to be a liturgist, sign up in the Fireside Room on the clipboard.

We would love to have you host Fellowship/Coffee Hour. Please sign up on the clipboard in the Fireside Room.

SEEKERS BOOK CLUB NEWS

Seekers book discussion group meets on Thursdays from 4:00-5:30 pm in the Atrium of the church. They are reading "Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion: by Gregory Boyle.

You are invited to attend the discussion even if you haven't read the book.

For further information, contact Barbara Bendlin at Barbara.bendlin@gmail.com





Our Parish Care members provide a confidential PRAYER CHAIN. You are invited to send your prayer requests to them any Sunday by using a yellow slip found in the pews or by calling the church office.

Thought for the month: In a society that has you counting money, pounds, calories, and steps, be a rebel and count your blessings instead.

January BIRTHDAYS, Happy Day to All!

3 Jennifer Grossen	13 MaryJo Manus	25 Joan Gruenwald
3 Janet Hay	14 Jim Holtz	25 Wyatt Hyzer
4 Sarah Beers	16 Lili Fraunfelder	25 William Streeter
5 Niki Halson	17 Roger Willeford	26 Nancy Stabb
6 Becky Kingsbury	19 Anne Laurence	27 Kelsey Stalker
10 Kathy Craney	22 Joy Myers	27 Madeline Condon
12 Tani Abendroth	23 Becky Behling	28 Denise Caldwell
		29 Gary Teubert



January ANNIVERSARIES, Congratulations

1 Becky Behling & John Brown



If your name ever gets missed from the birthday or anniversary list, please let Becky know.



We no longer collect for Grocery Bag Sundays each month, but ECHO is always in need of food and non-perishables, which you can drop off during their business hours, or at church. Thank you to everyone who contributed.

*Life is an echo...
what you send out,
you get back!*

ECHO January Needs:

Breakfast bars	Diapers (sz 4-6)	Toothbrushes	Spaghettios
Shampoo	Peanut butter & jelly	Feminine products	Tuna Helper
Paper bags	Spaghetti & sauce	Deodorant	Toilet paper
Hamburger Helper	Diced tomatoes	Canned Tuna	Laundry soap

CONSISTORY MEETING December 15th

Appreciations for the excellent Christmas pageant performed by the Sunday school. For everyone who participated in making the craft and bake sale, especially Diana Huckstep for organizing it. For Pastor Bob for all he has done and continues to do as we transition. For Linda Salter for organizing the "Comfort and Joy" celebration. For our church secretary, Becky, for all she does including all the extra tasks she is performing during our time of transition.

The treasurer presented a summary of Income and Expenses for the month of November and for Year to Date. Prior to the craft and bake sale we had raised \$5154 through Fund Raising activities not including the money for the new pastor's move. We have raised over \$10,000 to help with the moving expenses. This will not cover all those expenses but we have money in the Leadership Giving Endowment spendable account to cover the remainder. We have sufficient funds in the checking account to cover expected expenses for the rest of the year. The Stewardship campaign was successful. We have 57 pledges many from new members which is reassuring. There are some members who for various reasons do not pledge but are nevertheless generous in their giving. I think we are better off heading into 2026 than we were a year ago thanks to all the new pledges. I appreciate the members who set up regular payments toward their pledged commitment. That is really what sustains us.

The Boys and Girls Club requested use of the Spiritual Center space for a meeting. The Consistory passed a motion to offer the space at a 50% discount in exchange for advertising the space to potential renters for future events. Our church will welcome two new members in December. A private funeral will be held at the church for Dr. Katsumi Neeno. Our church has accepted an invitation to receive a traveling exhibit depicting the history of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ. The exhibit will be displayed for viewing at the reception following Pastor Barlow's installation.

The Outreach Committee is investing in a new Little Library. This box will be made of a composite material which will withstand weather conditions better than wood. It will have two shelves. One for books and one for personal items. Building improvements are in progress at Jeffris Flats. Sara Beers attended the YMCA Rock County Racial Justice Conference. Sara Beers and Patti York toured the Next Steps Family Resilience Center.

The Finance Committee reports the warming center for unhoused individuals, holds 18 cots and is supervised by Rock County Human Services employees in the lower level of our church. It has been activated 7 nights and is very much appreciated. A necessary additional lock was purchased for \$354. Upgrades and repairs to the lighting at the Southside entrance will be made. Church volunteers have been packing up lunches for those in need of the shelter. These lunches are distributed to them as they leave in the morning.

The Membership Committee reports that despite bitter cold weather the craft and bake sale was a success. It was decided to extend the sale into the following weekend to give shoppers an extra opportunity in gentler weather conditions. A sign will be up to welcome people to the Christmas Eve services. Fellowship Hours will be held in the last two weekends of December.

The Nominating Committee reports that the committees are "filling up nicely." There are still a few openings. And, they add they are looking to fill two positions on the Personnel Committee.

The Immigrant Task Committee reports they are focusing on training people to help with completing paperwork and getting needed notarizations. And, they are looking for volunteers for this. The Town Hall Coalition is also planning to have a public presentation that will focus on what it is like to be an immigrant here. Next Consistory meeting on January 19, 2026.

Submitted by Deb Lalor, clerk

from Nominating...

Do you like to be involved in church affairs? Are you someone who enjoys working in small groups? Would you like to be part of the church's internal fabric?

If you said 'Yes,' please consider being on our church Leadership Team.

The Nominating Committee is currently seeking to fill remaining open positions in our ministries and committees.

Please reach out to one of us with your questions.

We'd love to hear where you would enjoy being of service.

Nominating Committee Team

Patti York, chair - 608-751-4836

Jean Schollmeier - 608-295-4237

Nathan Roehl – 608-755-1122



February 8

Free Community Dinner



Community Meal is an outreach that our church has participated in for over 15 years. We serve a healthy, balanced meal to those in our community who need or desire a freshly prepared meal. It is served the first Saturday of each month. We began serving it as an indoor sit-down meal but has transformed into a to-go style meal. We currently serve over 100 meals each month.

The next Community Meal will be on Saturday, January 3rd at 4:00. The menu is spaghetti bake, green beans, garlic bread, fruit, and brownies.

Guests can drive up or walk up to the back parking lot door and meals will be delivered to them.

Want to volunteer for Community Meal? You can donate desserts, food prep and assist serving meals on the day of the meal. Desserts can be dropped off during office hours or a pick-up can be arranged. Volunteer by contacting Nancy Stabb, Jeanine Fry or Bonnie Stalker, directly, email bonniebrewer17@hotmail.com, or sign up in the Fireside Room on the clipboard.



Thank you to our amazing church family. This was our first open to the public event that was a great success. Even with the cold weather we had at times a steady flow of visitors. This would not of happened without all of your help. Membership Ministry



2025-2026 Music Scholars

Top row left to right: Bryson Oliver, Maxwell Chitek, Wil Brossard, Brandon Valdivia Orosco,
Bottom row left to right: Abigail Dalton, Annabell Colby, Megan Stormes, Tyler Cleveland



Pastor Bob Gross' last Sunday, December 28. Pictured is President Darla Dernovsek giving him going-away gifts and Rev. Rachel Bauman conducting Liturgy of Release:



Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! For such a wonderful time of "farewell." Your kind words and gifts prove once again what phenomenal people and community of faith you are. I will never forget the love extended to my family and me. Blessings upon blessings on your journey, Pastor Bob

SUNDAY SCHOOL AND YOUTH NEWS

JANUARY SUNDAY SCHOOL

December 28 Sunday School will stay in the sanctuary for the special service for Pastor Bob's last day. There will be a Children's Moment.

January 4 Epiphany! Sunday School will wrap up our Glitter and Jesus series with a special book read by a guest reader and one last special craft. And we will choose a 2026 Star Word. 

Youth Group News

January 16-17-18 Winter Soulstice at Daycholah

February 8

March 8

April 12

May 10

Sunday Morning Youth Group

Join us as we work on what you would like from a Youth Group.

(During the 10:00 service at the same time as Sunday School.)

FIRESIDE BANNER UPDATE

The banner is almost ready for us to paint!

I will be contacting those who would like to help in January. Please sign up in the Fireside Room or contact Debi. We are going to be using high quality acrylic markers. No special skills required.



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FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC
OPEN & AFFIRMING
IMMIGRANT WELCOMING 

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JANEVILLEUCC.ORG



First Congregational Church
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This page was attached to the Tower Notes that that were mailed.

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Office Hours: Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday mornings 9:00 - 1:00 or by appointment.

Ministers

Pastor

Christian Ed. Director

Music Director

Pianist/Organist

AV Technician

Secretary

Bookkeeper

Nursery Coordinator

Custodian

All Members of First Congregational UCC

Rev. Benjamin 'BJ' Barlow

Debi Cox

Robyn Doege-Brennan

Paul Finger

Kaydence Troia

Becky Kingsbury

Denise Caldwell

Gwen Charlet

Matthew Charlet

Church Leadership & Volunteers

President

Treasurer

Finance Chair

Gardeners

Lawn Mowers:

Darla Dernovsek

Nancy Stabb

Mike Rundle

Barbara Bendlin, Jeanine Fry, Tani Abendroth, Nancy Stabb,

Mike & Bryan Rundle, Doug Newton, Martin Huckstep, Tim Green