



Tower Notes - February 2026

Celebrating 181 years of Community Based Ministry



First Congregational United Church of Christ
An Open & Affirming and Immigrant Welcoming Church
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Pastor's Message

Starting Off on a Good Note: What Is a Pastor?

Before I dig into the question at hand, I want to begin with gratitude. I am deeply thankful for the call to serve as Pastor of First Congregational Church of Janesville. From my very first day here, I have felt welcomed, encouraged, and supported. I am grateful for your openness, your stories, your honesty, and your willingness to engage in conversation about faith, church, and the future we are shaping together. It is a genuine joy and privilege to be here, and I look forward to getting to know each and every one of you—ideally before I accidentally call you by the wrong name in the grocery store (yes, this has happened before).

One of the healthiest things we can do together as pastor and congregation is to talk openly about expectations from the very beginning. Churches work best when fewer assumptions are left unspoken. So it feels right, in my first newsletter article, to share how I understand the role I've been called to live among you.

Walking together in faith

At its heart, a pastor's role is to **walk with a congregation in faith**—not to hover above it, control it, or shy away from it when things get complicated. In practical terms, that means you can expect your pastor to:

- **Be present** — in worship, meetings, homes, hospitals, times of grief, and moments of joy. (Yes, pastors still do visits—and I genuinely value them.) *Scripture:* John 1:14; Romans 12:15; James 5:14

- **Listen deeply** — trusting that the Spirit often speaks through the lived wisdom of the community, sometimes in ways none of us expected. *Scripture*: James 1:19; Proverbs 18:13; Acts 15:28
- **Teach and preach** — helping you wrestle honestly with scripture and faith in ways that are thoughtful, progressive, responsible, and grounded in real life. Faith should stretch us, not flatten us. *Scripture*: Nehemiah 8:8; Luke 24:27; 2 Timothy 2:15
- **Offer pastoral care** — not to fix people, but to accompany one another through life's sacred moments with compassion, steadiness, and respect. *Scripture*: Psalm 23:1–4; Isaiah 40:11; 2 Corinthians 1:3–4
- **Equip and encourage** — supporting the ministry that already lives within this congregation rather than trying to do everything myself. (If the pastor does everything, the ministry will not grow beyond their individual talents.) *Scripture*: Ephesians 4:11–13; 1 Corinthians 12:4–7; 1 Peter 4:10
- **Lead with humility** — holding a servant's posture toward all members and building trust that allows the whole community to flourish. *Scripture*: Mark 10:42–45; Philippians 2:5–8; 1 Peter 5:2–3

A shared relationship

Just as you may have expectations of your pastor, a healthy congregation understands itself as an active partner in ministry. Faithful church life is never a solo act. In a healthy pastor–congregation relationship:

- We remember that **the church belongs to Christ**, not to any one person. *Scripture*: Colossians 1:18; 1 Corinthians 3:5–7
- Differences are approached with curiosity rather than suspicion. *Scripture*: Romans 14:1; Proverbs 20:5
- Grace is practiced generously—especially when we disappoint one another (because from time to time it might happen). *Scripture*: Colossians 3:13; Matthew 18:21–22
- Communication is direct, honest, and kind. *Scripture*: Ephesians 4:15; Matthew 18:15
- Staff and volunteers are treated with respect and trust. *Scripture*: Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

Looking ahead

I am genuinely grateful to learn more about our congregation in the months and years to come, and I am eager to begin our ministry side by side. My hope is that, over time, we will build a relationship marked by trust, warmth, laughter, courage, and deep care for one another. The good news is this: we don't need perfection to be faithful. What makes all the difference is honesty, kindness, and a shared willingness to grow together.

And so, as we get to know one another, I'll keep asking the question (because your answers matter to me): **What do you believe the role of a pastor is?**

I look forward to hearing your thoughts and discovering together how God might shape our shared ministry to bring love and light to our church and our wider community.

Grace and peace,

Pastor Barlow



Thank you to our January liturgists: Sarah Beers, Nathan Roehl, Neil Deupree, and Elizabeth Newby.

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



Thought for the month: 5 love languages: words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, and physical touch.

February BIRTHDAYS, Happy Day to All!

2	Gale Rundle	16	Patti York
4	Andrea McCabe	19	Dean Smith
5	Dan Laurence	22	Julie Budrow
5	Alison Madero	25	Kayla Hartung
6	Nancy Seely	26	Diane Henrichs
16	Willa Bagley	26	Jean Schollmeier
16	Desiree Halson	28	Josh Grossen



February ANNIVERSARIES, Congratulations

20 Richard & Joan Benner



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 February 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

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, February 7th at 4:00. The menu is egg bake w/ham & cheese, biscuit, fresh fruit, and cookies.

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.

CONSISTORY MEETING January 19th

Appreciations for Bonnie Stalker for organizing and paying for sack lunches for our guests of the warming center. BJ for using the words “our church” on his first Sunday as pastor. Outreach for all the things they do to make us proud. Robin and Paul who add so much to our music every Sunday.

Treasure’s Report: Treasurer Nancy Stabb reports that the church is in good shape financially. She appreciates and gives thanks for the many faithful members who. Have given so generously to keep our church a vital member of the wider community.

Facility Use Request: There was nothing new to report on the Boys and Girls Club request. The YMCA is interested in renting space again this year. The church is asking for an increase of \$75 per month for rent. The YMCA also agrees to split the cost of grass treatments from Naturescape to help keep grass healthy of the lawn that the children play on.

Request from Town Hall Coalition to be a venue for a meeting similar to the one of an earlier date: The Town Hall Coalition is looking for a venue for a public event scheduled to take place on Saturday, February 21, 2026. They are not yet officially asking First Congregational, as there is some concern that seating needs may exceed the capacity of the church. The LWV Janesville has agreed to co-sponsor the event, which is fortuitous because the League’s insurance would cover insurance needs. The Consistory unanimously passed a motion to make the church available should the official request be made.

Pastor Barlow presented his “30/60/90 Day Plan” in which he has broken down his goals and intentions for his first 90 days as our pastor, to give clarity and accountability. He intends to spend his first 30 days “listening and learning.” Pastor BJ listed some of his initial impressions. He is impressed by the high level of functioning of our ministries and committees. He sees a momentum towards growth in our church. And, he sees opportunities for growth in the future.

Outreach committee members attended Community Conversations at JPAC and the MLK Day at Blackhawk Tech. They are going to be connecting with the Janesville Community Center for February. A new Little Library will be going up across the street in front of Jeffris Flats.

The Membership committee reports plans for a Pancake Dinner to take place on February 17, from 5:30-7:30. There will be a sign-up sheet in the Fireside Room. The dinner will be open to the public and free will offerings will be appreciated.

The Nominating committee has filled almost all positions. They are pleased that some of the positions have been filled by new members. Pastoral relations had two openings which have now been filled by Bonnie Stalker and Barbara Bendlin.

The Immigration Task Force reports that members of our church and Faith Lutheran, along with Town Hall Commission have been working together to provide assistance to local Hispanic churches in town. They are assisting people in developing an Emergency Family Plan to put into play should a loved one be detained. Some within the Immigration Task Force are being trained to identify if an ICE event is happening; either to prevent rumors or to confirm ICE activity. Red cards advising people of their rights are being distributed. Greeting cards filled out by people in the community and distributed have been very much appreciated.

Next Consistory meeting on February 16, 2026. Submitted by Deb Lalor, clerk.

Learn More About 2026 Budget and Constitution Updates on Feb. 1

Church members can learn about the proposed 2026 budget at a special listening session at 9 a.m. on February 1. Copies of the budget will be available and questions and concerns are welcome.



Members can also learn about proposed updates to the church constitution at a brief presentation held after church on Feb. 1. The presentation will be followed by a question-and-answer session.

Members will vote on the budget and constitution as separate items at the annual meeting following worship at 11 a.m. on Feb. 8.

Please click on this video from President Darla Dernovsek to learn about the changes to the constitution:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=n7LsViDTa9g>

Rock County Human Services is using our Fellowship Hall as an overnight warming shelter when the temperature is at or below 0. Hours are 7:00 pm – 7:00 am. They provide the cots, blankets, and pillows. Bonnie Stalker, Jeannine Fry, Patti York, and Jean Schollmeier are providing BP&J sandwiches when guests leave in the morning. Here is the attendance so far:

First Congregational United Church of Christ: December 2025 Overnight Warming Site Data

- First early Dec. activation: 12/3/25 - 12/4/25
- Total activation nights in December 2025: 11
(12/3, 12/4, 12/7, 12/10, 12/11, 12/12, 12/13, 12/14, 12/18, 12/29, 12/31)

Activation Date	Number of Overnight Guests
12/3/25 – 12/4/25	4
12/4/25 – 12/5/25	2
12/7/25 – 12/8/25	3
12/10/25 – 12/11/25	15
12/11/25 – 12/12/25	15
12/12/25 – 12/13/25	16
12/13/25 – 12/14/25	15
12/14/25 – 12/15/25	13
12/18/25 – 12/19/25	12
12/29/25 – 12/30/25	10
12/31/25 – 1/01/26	10
Total Guests at First Congregational United Church of Christ:	115

Thank you for your community partner support in helping those experiencing homelessness to have a safe & warm space.



First Congregational has the following available:

- + Bidwell Scholarship – Eligibility for this scholarship is limited to two years and you must be under age 27
- + Saenger, Frick, McBlair, Lee Fund*
- + General Scholarship Fund*

*Awards from these 2 funds will be limited to a total of five (5) years.

Application forms are on the counter in the Fireside Room, and also on our website janesvilleucc.org under 'Uniquely Us'.

Happy February!

On Tuesday, February 17th, we will be having a FREE pancake dinner open to the public. It will be from 5:30 – 7:30 pm. We will have a free will offering.

Our planning meeting for this event is Tuesday, February 3rd at 12:30 pm at church. We will need a lot of volunteers for this event. Please contact Rita Feirn, Tabitha Ebert, or Diana Huckstep with any questions. Thank you, Membership Ministry



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.

SUNDAY SCHOOL AND YOUTH NEWS



Sunday



Starting in February, we are doing a once-a-month Youth Group Meeting. We are going to get to know each other and talk about what we want to do to Be the Church. Let any young people that you know that we will be getting started by meeting on these dates.

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

Two groups have worked on painting the banner and it is coming along beautifully.

Want to be in the next group?

Talk to Debi or sign up in the Fireside

Some of the things we are learning in Sunday School in February:

What is the Liturgical Calendar?

What is Lent? Why do we care?

What are Jesus and the disciples up to?

Why does the church have different colors at different times of the year?

What is Transfiguration Sunday all about?

Why does the church use so many big



Debi Cox

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FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC

OPEN & AFFIRMING

IMMIGRANT WELCOMING

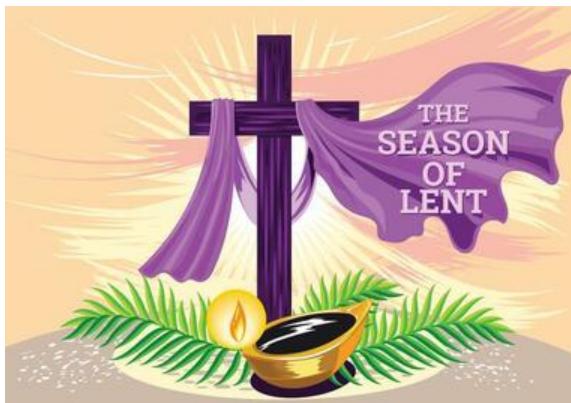


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JANESVILLEUCC.ORG



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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