

## 2022 Annual Report from Lead Minister, the Rev. Elissa Johnk

Friends,

In my household we have a tradition that on every birthday, after the person being celebrated receives their cake, they are required to go through their year and name the high points that occurred in each month. It's a bit of an Annual Report, so to speak, to cement in our memories the most important parts of the year. There are years when it can be challenging – when a year is full of grief and loss, for example. 2022 was not one of those years. At least not in the life of First Church.

No, this past year has been a remarkable one. In January, we began planning for two major transitions – Hannah's parental leave, and how we might welcome Amy the next month. The Visioning Team was finishing up the first round of its process, conducting cottage meetings on peoples' experiences of, and dreams for, the church and Stewardship concluded an extremely successful campaign. Building and Grounds installed a plaque commemorating Lois and Holly's Civil Union in July of 2000, and hosted a successful in-house day of service in conjunction with Outreach. On the flip side, the acceleration of Covid transmission meant we also went back to an earlier stage of precautions, cancelling all in-person meetings.

February marked the beginning of Amy's already spectacular time with us, and the conclusion of a remarkable time of being led by this congregation's deep bench of lay musicians. And in March, the choir resumed rehearsals after a two year hiatus! Lent brought a sermon series based around the books the Vision Team chose to help prepare us for the next stage of the vision process. The widespread involvement – well over forty regular participants – meant that these themes of active faith, history, and charity effortlessly dominated our congregational life through May. Indeed, March and April were full of conversations about the Visioning process – what brought us here? Where might we go? What does discernment mean, and how do we do it? By mid-May, we had received almost forty proposals for different ways the church could move into the future, had a meeting to narrow it down, and launched our different working groups to study how we might go about actualizing them.

Through all of this, choir started singing in worship, we hosted a joint Easter service with College Street, came together to fill in for Hannah on her leave, and lined up the Rev. Joan O'Gorman for my own impending leave – which arrived earlier than expected. And while my three months were mostly spent trying to figure out how to survive with two small children (how do people do this??), the church remained active during the summer – with concerts, a yard sale, Peace Camp, Dragonboat races, a Wondrous Walk, Bible and Beer gathering, a potluck dinner and boat rides!

I returned in September to a church alive with the Spirit, and ready to go. Although it was sad to say goodbye to Hannah, it was with great pleasure that we sent her to a location with an ordained position near her family. Later that month, we launched into our fall series on a "Good Enough" faith. For the first time since March 2020, we fully lifted our Covid masking and gathering restrictions, as children's vaccinations were rolled out, and transmission remained low. Fellowship time was back!

In late September and October, our collaboration with College Street was finalized, as Jason Vanderlaan was officially listed as our joint "Youth Leader." Indeed, October brought us two joint services with College Street, including our second "Service-Service" in partnership with local organizations. The Youth Program had its first "Trunk or Treat" and Connections hosted a Moth Storytelling event. Momentously, it also brought the closing for the sale of the parsonage to the Ronald McDonald House!



The funds, as we voted last year, were parked in an account, to be left alone until we completed our Visioning process. Even with that historic October, November and December kept up the pace. November brought a Ministry Fair, and Connections' before-worship breakfasts, to great success. Our New Member class was superbly well attended, and led us well into the month of December, which was packed, with 8 worship services, including the pageant, the Christmas Oratorio, and a joining service. Sunday School attendance reached its post-pandemic high, with 15 kids in attendance, and growing!

Perhaps most exciting from my perspective, however, was the strength from which all of these church "highs" occurred. We are certainly dealing with a congregational landscape changed indelibly by the pandemic. Volunteerism continues to be lower, as folks continue to stay home and carefully prioritize their social interactions. Yet our in-person attendance rose steadily in the spring and fall, and for the year, we averaged more than 80 people in physical attendance, and almost 100 viewers online! In this achievement, I would be remiss not to thank Lou Rochford for pioneering our digital hospitality and crafting such excellent worship slides.

In that vein, as you will see in the following report, each and every team functioned from a place of strength this year. Outreach facilitated a myriad of wonderful partnerships and events, Connections was more active and creative than ever, Worship crafted moving and faithful spaces for every season, Stewardship was enormously successful, Trustees took on serious discussions about maintenance and faithful stewardship, our Ushers worked double-time, and Visioning Working Groups were well-attended and creative. Our staff has functioned *exceptionally* through two parental leaves, and two major transitions – Amy and Hannah. I hope we, as a congregation, know how fortunate we are to have each and every member of our staff. I am not naming individuals here, because I would inevitably leave many of you out – this year was a congregation-wide effort!

Yet, I have gone into such detail this year to highlight how extraordinary this year has been. Like 2020, this year has been a historic one in the life of First Church. In my ministry, I have never experienced anything like it. In the book of Habakkuk, the prophet is instructed to "write the vision plain", so "even a runner could see it." It is a scripture that has always intimidated me. How are we to so clearly know what God is intending for us? After this year, however, I am beginning to understand it better. The act of writing is an act of discernment, and discernment energizes us in a special way – as we begin to understand that God is, indeed, at work amongst us. Trusting that a vision will emerge (and it is!) is an act of faith that opens us to the movement of the Spirit among us. From my perspective, that openness, and the movement of the Spirit, are clear in a whole new way. And I cannot wait to see what 2023 will bring.

Yours in faith and excitement,

*Elisa*



**From the Ronald McDonald House:** Thank you to First Congregational Church of Burlington for their partnership over the last 38 years in renting the house (\$1 per year!) to us in supporting our mission. A BIG thank you for the sale of the house to us, making it our forever home for families!