FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
31 W. MILWAUKEE AVE., FORT ATKINSON, WI 53538

February 2026
First Congregational UCC Broadcaster

The Lenten Journey begins with Ash Wednesday February 18th. Lent marks a time of deep symbolism and meaning. One may ask why ashes? Why a Wednesday?

We first start with Easter. Easter is to be celebrated on the first Sunday after the Paschal full moon. The Paschal full moon is the first full moon occurring on or after the spring equinox. Ash Wednesday is six weeks before Easter (that gives you the first Sunday of Lent), and then back up four more days: Ash Wednesday is the Wednesday before the first Sunday of Lent.

Ashes are used as a symbol of mortality. A symbol that the dust we once came is the dust to which we will return. Ashes on the forehead symbolize the commitment we make in the journey of Lent who look inward and dialog with our own Spiritual being to find where there are places that need healing or mending so we can fully go to God new and fresh on Easter morning. We follow the journey of Christ which began in the wilderness for 40 days and nights is he entered a time of profound reflection. It was in the wilderness that he heard the voice of God with clarity and understood his purpose and mission for all humanity.

Our prayers for this Lent continue ground us in the grittiness of the soil to find opportunities to scour where tarnished hearts may have run dark and cool. We use Ash as an agent of cleansing and healing to become fresh and new once again.

May God bless you and keep you pilgrimage of faith.

Pastor Sara

Pull Out All the Stops

With gratitude to the Whitewater Congregational UCC Church, we moved and installed their organ to our sanctuary last summer. The installations required to get all components connected to each other took a few months, but we had glorious organ music once again during the Christmas season. Now it's time to pay the bills!

The total costs for procuring, moving, and installing this organ are $40,032.37. A few members made donations during the months of installation so we started this campaign with $16,445. With donations we received in January, our total is now roughly $18,000.

We received word in late January that an anonymous donor has offered up to $10,000 in matching funds! What a generous offer! This immediately bumps us to a total over **$19,000!**

Let's support this donor's generosity with some of our own.

You can make your donation in the usual way - a check written out to First Congregational UCC with a notation of "Organ Fund" in the memo line can be left in the offertory trays or delivered to the office by you or by the USPS.

The stops on the organ are used to help it reach its fullest, richest sound. To date we have pulled out 47 of the 97 available. Help us pull out all of the stops by considering a donation to the Organ Fund!

Requested respectfully,
Organ Fund Committee Members
Charlie Knapp, Ruth Hammiller, Martha Firari

PreSchool and Childcare Closure

Fort Atkison childcare center will be closing after 57 years of operation.

Fort Atkinson Preschool and Childcare, located in the lower level of First Congregational United Church of Christ at 31 W. Milwaukee Ave., will shutter it doors when the school year ends June 5, 2026.

Center director Heidi Yngsdal informed pupils' families of the pending closure in an email Thursday.

"It is with great emotion that I write this letter to you," she stated. "As many of you have noticed, enrollments have drastically decreased over the years, and each classroom has small class sizes. This has been wonderful to allow teachers to provide one-on-one care for students, as well as really get to know each student and the families. However, these decreasing enrollments has taken a huge toll on the financial situation of the church and childcare center."

She noted that the Church Council made the closure decision "with great regret," adding, "Quality childcare provision has long been a part of First Congregational's mission, and thanks to the families, the staff and all our community partners, that mission has been realized. But it is time for this chapter for the church to conclude."

During the congregation's annual meeting Sunday, it was announced that dropping enrollment and operational deficits led the council to this difficult decision.

The childcare center is licensed to serve 75 children, but has only 33 currently enrolled, roughly half of whom are after-school attendees. Since COVID-19, the center's 4-year-old kindergarten (4K) headcount has dropped from 54 to 12. The 3-year-old program currently has only four children, with just one attending all five days of the week. Staffing could accommodate 12 pupils.

According to the state Public School Review, the School District of Fort Atkinson's overall 4K student population has declined by 41 percent during the past five school years.

Potentially exacerbating the childcare center's future enrollment drop are program expansions planned by the the Badgerland After-School Enhancement Program (BASE) and local school districts considering full-day 4K programs.

Yngsdal told the council earlier this month that she met with Lisa Hollenberger, School District of Fort Atkinson director of Pupil Services and Special Education, who said there are going to be changes to the structure of 4K in the next few years. A community survey found support for more programing in district buildings and wraparound (before- and after-school care) options, and a consultant suggested that move.

District Superintendent Rob Abbott explained Monday that early childhood is a topic being discussed by school districts statewide in light of declining birth rates.

Cont. on next page.

A recent study by Forward Analytics shows the number of children in Wisconsin dropped more than 9 percent from 2000-2024. In 2023, there were 59,719 births in Wisconsin, the lowest number since 1941. Compounding the issue is the fact that since 2017, the state has the fifth-lowest rate of people moving into Wisconsin.

"We have no plans in place right now, but we do have to look at early childhood (programs), including 4K," Abbott said. "We have to adjust to small enrollment and we are exploring options related to 4K and early-childhood programming."

In addition, it is possible that BASE — which recently moved into its new 60,000-square-foot Janesville Avenue facility — will start offering 4-year-old wrapa-round care when its classrooms receive state license approval. That also would impact Fort Atkinson Preschool and Childcare as it is one of the few 4Ks that offer before-and -after school care.

BASE Executive Director Alicia Norris said Monday that while the nonprofit is seeking a license that covers children ages 2-6, its plans are targeting school-age youngsters ages 4-6.

"We are prioritizing ages 5 and 6, kindergartners and first-graders, and will wait to see how things progress," she said. "We would not be a 4K (teaching) site, but we would provide 4K wraparound."

Yngsdal noted that Fort Atkinson Preschool and Childcare cannot boost its income by offering infant care, as state licensing requires that babies be housed on a main floor and the childcare center is located in the church's lower level.

At the same time, losses in childcare are funded by the church's endowment. Church Treasurer Kim Lutes reported that the childcare center experienced a $53,661 deficit in 2025 and was anticipated to be $75,238 in the red for 2026. The significant drop in 4K pupils resulted in a reduction of approximately $30,000 from the School District of Fort Atkinson.

In 2025, she said, grants funded $20,144 of payroll costs and other grants added $14,865 to the bottom line. However, state grants were down about 36 percent from 2024 and it was anticipated that they would cease entirely in 2026.

"The church council has been monitoring enrollments and the financial aspects of the childcare for several years now and, regrettably, the continuance of the childcare at First Congregational Church UCC is no longer feasible," the pastor, the Rev. Dr. Sara Rabe, said. "We appreciate all of the staff who have provided high-quality childcare and early childhood development education throughout many years.

"Many young ones began their education at Fort Atkinson Preschool and Childcare and it is has been a special place," she added. "For that, we are grateful."

Fort Atkinson Preschool and Childcare is a nondenominational, nonprofit self-supporting center founded in 1969.

Council Highlights – January 2026

Fort Atkinson Preschool and Childcare: After discussions over the past few months with Heidi Yngsdal, Director and vote by council members, the center will close on June 5, 2026. The number of students has declined over the past few years. Current number is 33, with a maximum of 75. Unfortunately, the financial deficit was $53K in 2025 and projected to be $75K in 2026. This decision announcement has been made to Heidi, her staff, families, and church members. Please contact Moderator, Linda Glendon with any questions.

Organ Fund Update: A task force was created to encourage church membership and friends to donate toward the $40,032.00 cost for the moving and installation of our new organ. Martha Firari announced the "Let's Pull Out All the Stops" campaign recently. She will make announcements during worship keeping us updated on the total donations received. If you are interested in contributing, please use the envelopes in the church pews and note that your donation is for the Organ Fund. Thank you!

Church Ministry 2026: Several positions have been filled for Outreach, Church Relations, Worship and Nurture. David Stedman is nominated as vice-moderator 2026-2027. Vote for all new members will be completed at our Annual Meeting.

Pastor Sara Surgery: Pastor Sara's surgery on her wrist/arm will be 2/12/26. She will be out for her recovery for a few weeks. Pastor Luke Booker will lead our Ash Wednesday service, Chris Reed and Justin Frey will lead on 2/15 and 2/22. The church office will be open during regular hours. Good Luck Pastor Sara!

Parking: When parking for Sunday worship, please keep the front parking spots open for people with mobility issues. We understand that parking is at a premium! Parking is available in front/side of the Hoard's building and at Badger Bank. Thank you for your consideration!

Next meeting is February 17, 2026.
Complete Council Minutes are available in the church office.

Helper Schedule				
Date	**Greeters**	**Ushers**	**Lay Reader**	**Tech Support**
Feb. 1	Terry Teipner	Linda & Jeff Glendon	Zach Finch	Kurt Wesemann
Feb. 8	Christine and Brooklyn Mckinney	Brenda & Chris Reed	Eunice Ann Slaney	Kevin Becker
Feb. 15	Sharyl Beranek	Judy Brown and Pat Jung	Bridget Trewyn	Bob Buell
Feb. 18	Mary Beyerly	Bob & Sue Buell	Sharon Wisch	Kurt Wesemann
Feb. 22	Bob & Sue Buell	Heidi & Michael Siefkes	Jo Ann Rose	Kurt Wesemann

The Food Pantry items needed:

Hamburger Helper

Canned Chili

Pineapple

Boxed Potatoes

Cheerios

Feb. 1st Communion Team

Susan & Jeff Woods,

and David & Lynn Klug Stedman

Pastor Out of the Office

Pastor Sara will be having surgery on her wrist Feb. 12th and will be out of the office until March 1st. Chris Reed and Justin Frey will be leading worship on Feb. 15 & 22nd, while Pastor Luke Buchor will be leading the Ash Wen worship on Feb. 18th at 6pm. Joe Slaney is available to triage pastoral needs as they arise with Rev. Luke Buchor being available for emergencies.

Chase away the Winter Blewz

Until February 22, 2026- Books, Magazine & Puzzle Exchange Bring in books, puzzles or magazines (with your name on- if you want returned) to share and exchange. There will be a table in the narthex to pick, choose and bring back for exchange.

Savoring Spirit Retreat

Take the time.

Slow your life. Find healing, calm and peace in the chaos.

Join us for a retreat at Moon Beach Camp to learn and experience ways to embrace a Savoring Spiritual Life connected to the essence of the Spirit in nature.

May 28-30, 2026

Cost $215 includes 2 nights, 5 meals

Date: Thursday noon May 28– Saturday morning May 30, 2026

We'll nestle into the comfortable accommodations where most guest rooms have 1-2 single beds. All bedrooms have bathrooms directly accessible– some with a private bath and some sharing a bath between two bedrooms.

For more information about the camp: https://ucci.org/moon-beach/

Sample Schedule TBD

Thursday May 28
Noon – Arrival and Picnic Lunch
1:30 pm - Wander and listening (all abilities)
5:30 p.m.—Dinner
Sunset and Vespers
Conversation, afterhours

Friday May 28
8:30 am. – Breakfast
9:30 am Morning Devotions
10:00am– Savory Senses
12:30 p.m. – Lunch
1:30 pm - Contemplation or Field Trip
5:30 p.m.—Dinner
Sunset and Vespers,
Conversation, Afterhours, Bonfire

Saturday May 29
Breakfast– Devotion and return home
*Other activities offered may include:
Pontoon ride, Book discussion, Meditation, Games, Hiking, Relaxation and Release

Registration is due by May 1st. revsarafortucc@gmail.com for details. We don't want cost to keep anyone from coming to the retreat. If it will be a financial hardship, please speak to Pastor Sara. revsatucc@gmail.com

Moon Beach Camp

1487 Moon Beach Rd, St Germain, WI 54558

SAVE THE DATES

Feb. 12 -- Lend-A-Hand 1PM Meeting

Feb. 18 -- Ash Wednesday Worship 6 PM Service

Feb. 19 -- 10 AM Church Relationship Ministry - All welcome to attend

Feb. 20 -- Nurture Ministry Fish Fry Outing 6 PM - Sign Up in Narthex

Feb. 22 -- 1st Stunday in Lent

Feb. 26 -- Creation Care Meeting 11 AM

Nurture Fireside Fish Fry Outing

On Friday, Feb 20 the Nurture Committee hopes that you take a night off of all kitchen duties at home and treat yourself to dinner at the Fireside with us!

Their fish dinner is notoriously delicious, yet other meal options are also available. Look for the sign-up sheet in the narthex and add your name to ensure spaces for everyone at the table!

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Noon Thursday May 28 to mid morning Saturday May 30th

$215 includes 2 nights and 5 meals Moon Beach Camp UCCI- St. Germain, WI

If you would like to have an event or announcement added to the list

Please let Henry know by the 25th of each month at officefortucc@gmail.com

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC

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Moderator: Linda Glendon jlglendon@tds.net

Rev.Dr. Sara Rabe: revsarafortucc@gmail.com

Church's Website: www.fortfcc.org

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United Church of Christ