
PARISH NEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF METUCHEN, NJ



Photo by Colin Poellot of New Orleans, 1969-2025

SLOW DOWN AND UNPLUG

- THE LEGACY OF OUR WORSHIP SPACE
- CREATING ROOM FOR WORSHIP

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- VACATION BIBLE CAMP AND CHOIR MUSIC CAMP SIGN UP
- ORDER FORMS FOR BLANKETS AND TOOLS

BEHRENBURG LEGACY FOR THE CHANCEL SPACE

Fred Garry

In 1958, First Presbyterian was bursting at the seams. Like most mainline churches living in the aftermath of World War II, people flocked to worship, joined in mass, became part of a church like one would own a car, have a telephone. It was what you did.

Thomas Weber, the church historian who accounted for the life of FPC Metuchen as it celebrated our 250th anniversary, completed his history in 1967. After the 250th celebration was complete, a moment where congratulations were also extended to Dr. A. Behrenberg for completing his 25th year as the minister, there was a great sense of completion, a sense of realizing a future no one would have imagined. Describing the growth by comparison, Weber wrote this:

By the end of 1950, Dr. Berenberg had received more members in eight years than James Mason in his entire span of almost half a century.

There is much to learn and ponder concerning the explosive growth of the church from 1945-1967. How they grew; what they built; how they gathered: all intriguing. Yet, the one description I enjoy most of Weber's history was his account of the sanctuary remodel and the building of the Christian Education Wing. He wrote this:

This great decade of dramatic growth was climaxed by the largest single undertaking in the history of the church, the forward movement of 1958.

After a series of meetings and gatherings it became apparent by this time that the original siding of the old frame church needed rehabilitation if it was to survive as a building. It was proposed that the exterior of the church be resurfaced in brick, and a new bell tower and steeple added in front. The new plans were approved for submission to the congregation, with Thomas Ainslie as general chairman, Miles Oppenheim and Ralph Preston as co-chairman of the finance committee, and Saxon Palmeter and Reuben Hager as co-chairman of the building committee.

The financial goal of the project was ambitious: \$250,000. This represented a figure three-times the annual operating cost of the church. In our dollars, we would need to raise \$3,000,000 to match this. The conclusion of the campaign was successful, and their faith and dedication continue to bless our congregation and community.

In the coming year we will seek to remodel and renovate much of the work completed in the sanctuary in 1960. There will be a new chancel design; there will be a renovated organ with a new counsel; flooring, substructure and pew renovations will also be seen. There are other parts to the plan, but these are the large ones.

In the dedication of the new sanctuary in 1960, Dr. Behrenberg congratulated the congregation for their faithfulness, but he was also a bit caustic about the design and décor of the past. He called it "ugly." Having read many of his sermons, I can assure you this was part of his personality and pulpit style. He was bombastic. I offer his comment for two reasons. First, I don't believe our sanctuary is ugly; I see it as a wonderful expression of modern and ancient sensibilities; it is very Protestant; and, it is primarily a "preaching" pulpit, high and elevated. Each Sunday I am mindful of how much I am in his design. While, not my style, worthy of appreciation none the less. Second, I offer his "ugly" comment because we will seek not to reject the past, but to find our space born anew.

The last design was essentially in place for 65 years. Imagine not changing the furnishings of your home for 65 years. It is time to find the future of the church as we are faithful to our past. This is an amazing moment in the life and history of the church. Someday the next Thomas Weber will speak of the new Social Center, the Food Pantry Expansion, the renovations to the education building with a new school, and, I trust, a remodeled sanctuary. I believe the next historian will praise the faithfulness of this generation, your generosity, and mostly how you made a way for the next generations of First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen.

MEET OUR CAPITAL CAMPAIGN LEADERSHIP

For over 300 years, First Presbyterian Church has been used by God to make a meaningful impact on our community and beyond. Church leaders in generations before us have made significant investments in the life of our congregation, and have left us with our beautiful church, sanctuary, and campus. But, as our ministries grow and change, we are repeatedly challenged by a space that does not meet our needs.

Over the past several months, our church leadership has been developing a new vision to help guide us into our future. This vision includes projects that would require that we engage in a capital campaign. The Session has approved an exploration of a possible capital campaign to meet these needs, and a leadership team has met the call to serve.

“I think we all have been aware for sometime that our sanctuary needs attention. Things must be addressed to preserve our past, make us more accessible, and empower our presence for the future. When asked if I would join the capital campaign leadership, I realized I could not say no - especially knowing Margo and Brenda would be right there by my side, as will all of you, my church family for over 30 years.”
-Maggy Cook



“In my days as Minister of Music at FPC, I realized that there were people who wanted to be part of the Music Ministry but couldn’t because of mobility issues. Our chancel isn’t very welcoming with steps up to the choir loft and then more steps down to the choir chairs. The thought of making the chancel of our beautiful sanctuary a place that welcomes participation for all is an exciting opportunity that will benefit our church and its ministries for many years to come.”
-Brenda Day.

Over 30 years ago, when my family and I became part of a very special church family, you made us feel welcome, helped us raise our children, gave us lifelong friends, and became an important part of our lives. I love our sanctuary. It always gives me a sense of comfort and peace, but as I look around, I know it needs to become more accessible while respecting our long history and legacy. When I was asked to help lead the capital campaign, I wasn’t sure I was the right person, but knowing I’d have the support of Brenda, Maggy, and you, my wonderful church family, I couldn’t imagine saying anything other than ‘yes!’”

-Margo Gunsser



OUR EDUCATION BUILDING: A NEW CHAPTER

Pete Bellisano

For over seven decades, our Education Building served as the home of our beloved Community Nursery School. During that time the CNS nurtured, taught, and loved hundreds of children. CNS programs provided them with a variety of opportunities for social, intellectual, emotional, and physical development in a safe, pleasant environment. Many adults in our community share fond memories of their CNS experience, and many of these adults have seen their children and grandchildren benefit from the CNS program.

As we express prayerful thanks for all the wonderful things accomplished in our Education Building over the decades, we now look forward to a new chapter in the form of our relationship with the Jump Immersion School, which will be occupying space in our Education Building. Key to the success of this new chapter is thoughtfully envisioning how we can most effectively use our space and resources for our ministries – especially those related to faith formation, children, youth, and families.

We have created a Faith and Family Taskforce*, charged with guiding this reimagining of how we use our facilities and resources to nurture and sustain these important ministries. As this work progresses, there will be opportunities to share ideas and information with the congregation. We ask that you join us in keeping this transition, our new partner, and the work of the taskforce in your prayers.

*Taskforce Members: Rev. Khayla Henry, Nancy Leardi, Niall Corbalis, Joanne Bedenek, Heather Casey, Bridget Sanger, Sue West, Joe Mwaniki, Drew McCulley, Pete Bellisano.



The legacy of CNS: Todd Ryder, father of recent CNS students Colin and Elizabeth, at CNS, back row, far right, 1990.

Kevin Trolaro

Beginning in July, we will have a new group leasing the Education Building previously occupied by Community Nursery School. The closing of CNS was very sad, unfortunate. This difficult decision was mainly a reflection of CNS' lack of financial viability. I would like to offer the rationale as well as the potential benefit of our new relationship.

CNS for many years was primarily self-sustaining. However, over the last three school years, they experienced an enrollment decline that was not reversing. As a result, CNS lost a significant amount of money each year. During this time, their loss in revenue was covered by reserves from years prior. At the end of 2025, those cash reserves were depleted.

Faced with those facts, the difficult decision was made to close CNS. But with sad endings often come new beginnings, and we are very excited to welcome the Jump Immersion School into that space. The signing of the new lease with Jump was the result of a competitive bid process. We signed the lease with Jump at the end of March and they are expected to open their doors in early July.

As you know, we have been blessed with our Investment and Endowment funds which are designed to help sustain us for many, many years into the future. Beginning with the pandemic, a number of factors have resulted in larger than recommended draws from our endowment.

A very important benefit to the Church provided by the new lease is how it will lower our annual draws from the I&E account. This new lease with Jump will allow us to reduce our annual I&E draw from the recent higher levels and will help sustain the endowment so to bless our congregation for many years.

Change can be hard. We have to remember, though, change can also be for the better. I am convinced this new lease is another one of God's blessings on us allowing us to continue our mission to share God's love. Let's start by sharing God's love and welcoming Jump to our campus.

STAYING SAFE WHILE OPENING OUR DOORS

Heather Koball



Baut Studio's rendering of the front of the sanctuary

We are pleased to share some exciting and important news about a major improvement to our church campus. In October 2024, our church was awarded a federal grant through the Nonprofit Security Grant Program. This program is designed to help houses of worship enhance safety and security while continuing to remain welcoming places for community, worship, and service.

After careful consideration, FPC chose to use this grant to install new security doors in our Sanctuary and Education Building. These upgrades will significantly strengthen our ability to manage building access, improve visibility, and respond quickly in the event of an emergency—while also enhancing the beauty and functionality of our shared spaces.

The project includes the installation of ten new doors across the building. In the Sanctuary and Chapel, we will be installing a new double door and two single side doors at the front of each space. The Education Building will receive a new double front door. There will also be new single doors under the Chapel Garden walkway and a new back door from the hallway by the Session Room. These improvements support our ongoing efforts to improve the church campus safety.

To ensure responsible stewardship of the grant funds, we undertook a formal open-bid proposal process and received three competitive bids. A dedicated Door Committee was formed to guide the project and review the submissions. The committee includes Pete Bellisano, Roland Staal, Helen Burr-Cackowski, and Niall Corbalis, with

staff support provided by Jonathan Hollenbeck and Heather Koball, who assisted in reviewing bids and supporting the process.

After much discussion and discernment, the committee selected Baut Studios of Pennsylvania. Baut came highly recommended by St. Francis in Metuchen, where they previously designed and installed new doors. The committee devoted significant time and care to developing and agreeing upon a design that would fit our buildings' architecture while meeting modern security needs. The renderings included with this article show the beautiful and functional doors that will soon welcome us all.

We are especially excited about what these doors will bring. They will allow much more natural light into the Narthex, creating a brighter and more inviting entrance. The security glass will allow us to see who is at the door while preventing breakage. In addition, the doors can be electronically programmed, enabling tighter control over access and allowing us to lock down doors quickly in the case of an emergency.

Throughout the planning process, we worked closely with our current security provider, Scotts Security System, to ensure the new doors integrate into our existing security infrastructure.

We are happy to report that the contract has been signed, Baut has completed final measurements, and we are hopeful the doors will be installed by the end of July. We are grateful to everyone who contributed their time and expertise to this project and look forward to seeing these long-awaited improvements.

Baut Studio's rendering of the front of the Chapel



NANCY LEARDI CELEBRATES 20 YEARS OF SERVICE

Dave Kozo

Nancy Leardi seems to be everywhere all at once, thoughtfully coordinating puppeteers, Sunday School teachers and youth volunteers before and during every Sunday service as Christian Ed director. But just over 20 years ago, she was a young mom who first became familiar with our church because her daughters, Lindsey and Melissa, were enrolled at Community Nursery School.

“I don’t know anything about the Presbyterian denomination,” the Lutheran-raised Nancy recalls, reflecting on her reaction to a suggestion by a CNS teacher that she check out worship services at FPC.

Nancy and her husband, Mike, were relatively new in town and were looking for a church, and they gave it a try. Nancy quickly became actively involved, attending Rev. Bob Beringer’s Friday Bible study, teaching the preschool Sunday School class and starting a mom’s group.

Ultimately, Nancy’s predecessor as Sunday school superintendent left the role, and Nancy started in February 2006.

Right away, Nancy began making a meaningful impact, launching the Puppet Ministry and Presbyterian Young Women and rebooting the community favorite Vacation Bible School. The puppets came naturally to Nancy: Her father had been a puppeteer, and in fact the camel puppet that’s still in use during puppet performances, belonged to Nancy’s dad. “My dad is with me,” Nancy says.

Nancy was born in Mount Holly, N.J., and grew up in Staten Island, where she met Mike. Nancy has a management degree from the City University of New York and previously managed a travel agency in midtown Manhattan.

That management skill is vital to Nancy’s current role. While it can look seamless from the pews, there is tons of work that goes into Christian Education programming on a weekly basis. Nancy says she spends a good amount of time over the weekend texting youth volunteers, making sure that everything is covered on Sundays, not to mention lining up Sunday School teachers,

worship readers and Children’s Time leaders. Nancy gives thanks for the faithful volunteers whose time, talent, and dedication have blessed the children and strengthened our community.

To Nancy, puppet skits and Lego Sundays are not just a way to entertain the kids and the congregation. They are vital to sowing spirituality in young people. “I feel very strongly to have children in worship as much as possible, but not to the point where children are bored,” she says. “So you want to be teaching while they’re having fun.”

The intergenerational services were also Nancy’s brainchild and are another way to get the youth more involved. Congregants clearly enjoy seeing the church’s next generation play such a vital role in leading worship, and the mark it leaves on the young people can’t be overstated.

Through innovative experiences such as Baking Through the Bible, Lego Sunday, storytelling, puppet drama, and mindfulness practices, Nancy creates an engaging, multi-sensory environment where faith comes alive. Her thoughtful, hands-on approach ensures lessons are meaningful and accessible to children with diverse sensory needs, fostering an inclusive and welcoming space. Grounded in creativity, compassion, and intentional teaching—and inspired by her family’s ties to puppetry—Nancy nurtures not only biblical understanding, but also confidence, connection, and spiritual growth, enriched by the congregation’s support of creative expression.

So what’s next? As she looks to the future, Nancy holds a deep sense of peace and trust that God is already preparing the way. “We are blessed with so many gifted and faithful people,” she shares, “and I believe God is already calling the next person to continue this work.”



MISSION FEST

Russ Dickow

On June 7, 2026 we will be holding the first FPC Mission Fest. This will give everyone an opportunity to learn about some of the various organizations the church's Mission Commission supports locally, statewide, and globally. Representatives of these organizations will be there to speak about their programs and answer questions. Also, you will have an opportunity to find out some of the activities happening in the Food Pantry and Social Justice.

Some of the organizations planned to participate are

Seeing Eye is headquartered in Morristown, New Jersey, and is the nation's oldest guide dog school. Its mission is to promote independence and dignity for people who are blind or visually impaired through expertly trained guide dogs.

Share My Meals serves Metuchen and surrounding Middlesex County communities by rescuing surplus meals from schools and food providers. Its goal is to reduce food waste while addressing local hunger through volunteer-powered meal delivery.

Elijah's Promise is based in New Brunswick, NJ and serves neighbors experiencing food insecurity. The organization fights hunger and poverty through community meals, culinary job training, and supportive social services.

OutFront is a Metuchen-based nonprofit supporting LGBTQIA+ youth, families, and allies. Its work focuses on education, youth engagement, and advocacy to foster an inclusive and affirming community.

DIRE is located in Highland Park, NJ and serves immigrants across Central New Jersey. The organization supports individuals and families facing immigration and detention crises through legal services, advocacy, and accompaniment.

Hackensack Meridian Health is headquartered in Edison and is New Jersey's largest nonprofit health system. Its mission is to improve health and expand access to high-quality, integrated medical care for communities statewide.

It Takes A Borough is a Metuchen-based organization dedicated to helping residents facing hardship or unexpected crises. The group provides compassionate, direct support through financial assistance and community donations.

Lift Up the Vulnerable is a faith-based nonprofit connected to communities in New Jersey, with programs focused internationally. Its mission is to prevent human trafficking and empower vulnerable women and children through education, protection, and economic opportunity.

Although this event will take place the same day as the Church picnic, we encourage all to come into the Social Center between 12 and 2 PM to meet these dynamic organizations that do so much good for so many people.

A NEW MISSION NEWSLETTER

Heather Koball

We're excited to share that FPC will launch a new newsletter, *Mission Possible*, dedicated exclusively to the mission work of our church. Director of Mission, Sarah Teti, and Associate Pastor, Rev Khayla Henry, will oversee the new newsletter. While the Parish News shares what's happening within our congregation, this new publication is designed for the entire community—not just church members—and will highlight ways people can engage in meaningful service together.

Our mission ministries continue to grow and thrive, including our expanding food pantry, deepening Malawi partnerships, community garden, community dinners, sock drive, Advent Angels, and more. These efforts regularly draw volunteers and supporters from many faith traditions—and from those with no faith affiliation at all—who are united by a shared desire to serve.

This new newsletter will focus on how the community can get involved, offering opportunities to volunteer, give, and learn more about the impact of this work. Keep an eye out for the inaugural issue coming soon!

VACATION BIBLE CAMP: BUG ZONE

Nancy Leardi

Get ready for an unforgettable week at Bug Zone Vacation Bible Camp, June 29–July 3 at First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen! Celebrating our 21st year, we’re excited to share God’s love with children from our church, neighborhood, and beyond.

This year’s theme Bug Zone, “Transformed by Our Big God,” follows the journey of Bugzy the caterpillar as he becomes a butterfly—teaching kids about growth, change, and faith. Invite your friends and neighbors and come be part of something special. Volunteers are warmly welcomed—we’d love your help!

Sign up today at [this link](https://fpcweb.org/vacation-bible-camp/) (https://fpcweb.org/vacation-bible-camp/) or with the QR code.

Catch the bug this summer!

First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen
2026 Vacation Bible Camp



JUNE 29 to July 3, 2026

9:00 to 11:45 am

For children K to 6th Grade (by Fall 2026)

Discover and respond to God’s wonderful love with love, trust, and courageous obedience.

BUGZONE

Sign up



Register now by scanning the QR code.

270 Woodbridge Avenue, Metuchen, NJ 08840

www.fpcweb.org | (732) 491-2364 | nleardi@fpcweb.org

Right: Flyer for the year’s Vacation Bible School Camp. Use the QR code to sign up
Below: Photo of Vacation Bible School volunteers, June 2025



MUSIC MINISTRY INTRODUCES A NEW CAMP!

Jordan Klotz

Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic that shook our world, our individual lives, and indeed, our church, the children and youth choirs at FPC have welcomed a season of incredible growth. As young singers from within the congregation and from the broader community have joined Carol Choir, Junior Choir, and Westminster Choir, not only have the choirs grown in size, but our participants have grown together in friendship, as well. Truly, it is a beautiful thing to witness.

This growth is not by accident. Our church has a legacy of musical excellence and has maintained a reputation in our community for teaching music and faith in a loving and safe environment.



Our Minister of Music Emeritus, Brenda Day, spent decades building and tending a Music Ministry that defied the current sweeping too many other congregations. At a time when churches were disbanding children and youth choir and handbell programs, FPC remained strong. It is because of this legacy that, after the difficulties of the pandemic, we are again defying the trends and experiencing growth.



As we continue to teach our young musicians about God's love, why making beautiful music together is essential to our faith, and how worship can lift our spirits, we are considering new and creative ways to share our Music Ministry with the community outside our church. In fact, not only is sharing this with others an important part of living our mission, but it is important to remember that a strong Music Ministry helps grow a church.



August 10-14, 2026

In that spirit, FPC is very excited to launch its first ever Choir & Music Camp!

Young Voices Track (Grades 1-3)

Daily, 9:00-1:00

Snack provided.

After care available, 1:00-3:00 PM

Choir & Bells Track (Grades 4-10)

Monday-Thursday, 9:00-3:00

Friday, 9:00-1:00

Lunch and snack provided.

The week will conclude with a special musical performance by the campers!

**SCAN TO
REGISTER
& LEARN
MORE!**





May 10th MOTHER'S DAY

Please return completed forms by April 26th

Celebrate Mother's Day by honoring a loved one with a gift to the Church World Service (CWS) Blanket Fund. Your heartfelt gift provides warmth, comfort, and hope to those facing hardship—helping to blanket the world with love.

Blankets now cost \$10 each. Please give as you are able.

Return the completed form with your contribution in the offering plate or to the Church Office **by April 26.**

Checks may be made payable to First Presbyterian Church with "CWS Blankets" in the memo line.

An acknowledgment card will be mailed to those honored, and donors and honorees will be listed in the Mother's Day worship bulletin.

NAME _____ PHONE NUMBER _____

AMOUNT OF CONTRIBUTION (\$10.00/ Blanket) _____ PLEDGE ENVELOPE NO.: _____

INFORMATION FOR BULLETIN INSERT & ACKNOWLEDGMENT (Please print.)

GIVEN BY: _____

GIVEN IN HONOR OF: _____

HONOREE'S ADDRESS: _____

GIVEN IN MEMORY OF: _____

RETURN FORMS TO THE CHURCH OFFICE BY: April 26th, Monday



Transforming communities around the globe through just and sustainable responses to hunger, poverty, displacement and disaster



This Father's Day, share Christ's love by giving through CWS Tools—building strong homes and hope-filled futures for families facing hardship. Honor your father with a gift that helps communities weather life's storms.

Tools are \$10 each. Please give as you are able.

Return your form and gift to the Church Office by **June 8**. Make checks payable to First Presbyterian Church (memo: CWS Tools). An acknowledgment card will be sent, and honorees will be listed in the Father's Day bulletin.

NAME _____ PHONE NUMBER _____

AMOUNT OF CONTRIBUTION (\$10.00/ Tools) _____ PLEDGE ENVELOPE NO.: _____

INFORMATION FOR BULLETIN INSERT & ACKNOWLEDGMENT (Please print.)

GIVEN BY : _____

GIVEN IN HONOR OF: _____

HONOREE'S ADDRESS: _____

GIVEN IN MEMORY OF: _____

RETURN FORMS TO THE CHURCH OFFICE BY: June 8th, Monday



BUILDING A BRIGHTER FUTURE

SPRING 2026 PARISH NEWS

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Visit the church website, send an email to fpc@fpcweb.org or use your cell phone to go directly to the link using this QR code.

We promise not to spam you!



First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen is a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Parish News Submission

Items for the upcoming newsletter may be emailed to hkoball@fpcweb.org

Church Office

270 Woodbridge Avenue, Metuchen, NJ 08840
Office Hours: Monday - Friday 8:30 am to 4:30 pm
Telephone: (732) 491-2300
Email: fpc@fpcweb.org

Sunday Worship Service 9:30 am
Online Sunday Morning Worship 9:30 am
Livestreamed on FPC Metuchen Facebook

