



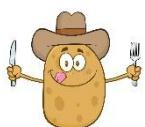
Sunday Worship: 9:30 a.m.
Faith & Fellowship for All Ages: 11:00 a.m.

Easter Music Already?

Yes, Christmas decorations are still being packed up for next year, but preparations are already underway for the Olean First Baptist Easter season cantata. This musical follows every step of Christ's Passion Week journey, so it's appropriate that it is being presented during worship on Palm Sunday, March 29th, the first day of Holy Week. The choir invites both new and seasonal singers to come out and join them as they share this stirring sermon-in-

song with the congregation and online community. All vocal parts are needed, so know that you're welcome to come to rehearsals beginning Thursday Feb. 5th at 6:30 pm in the Chapel. If you've often thought you'd like to join in, why not make sure this is the year?

You'll be glad you did!



The Board of Christian Education is hosting a **FELLOWSHIP LUNCHEON** on February 1 at Noon featuring a baked potato bar. Attendees are encouraged to bring a potato topping. Desserts are always welcome! Please sign up on the BoCE bulletin board if you plan to attend.

Pastor Jim will begin a new Pastor's Class on **February 15**. The classes will be held in the Sanctuary during the Faith and Fellowship hour. Over a 5- year period we will aim to study every single chapter of the New Testament. All are welcome to join.

AT FIRST BAPTIST

Senior Pastor James Balson Jr.	Audio Visual Specialist Casey Sage
Minister of Music Sue Neely VanBrunt	Custodian Rachel Green
Organist Jeanne Gross	

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American Baptists are joining together this February to celebrate ABCUSA Sunday

Get ready for an uplifting and mission-driven Sunday as we celebrate American Baptist Churches USA Sunday this February 2026! This event offers us a wonderful opportunity to come together in unity to honor our history while joyfully looking toward the future.

As 2 Corinthians 9:8 reminds us: "And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." This year's theme, "Grace that flows, Mission that grows," captures the spirit of God's abundant blessings and our shared calling to extend that grace through mission.

We invite your congregation to celebrate on February 15, 2026, or to choose another Sunday that best fits your church's calendar. As part of this celebration, we also encourage you to give generously in support of the vital work of American Baptist Churches USA. Together, our gifts make a meaningful impact on lives and communities as we advance the work of Christ.

Let us unite in the spirit of grace, mission, and discipleship as we celebrate ABCUSA Sunday. Your participation this February will spread the message of our shared mission and provide a meaningful opportunity for a congregational offering that strengthens our collective efforts.

NOTE: While we are in between church secretaries, Penny Sorokes will continue to set up the weekly bulletins, monthly newsletters, coordinate the monthly board minutes, and assist with the other document needs. Casey Sage and other volunteers will handle the printing and distribution of these documents. Obviously, this is not an ideal situation but we can make it work until the Trustees find a new secretary; however, it will require increased communication and cooperation. Information for bulletins, newsletters, etc. should be emailed to ofbc133@gmail. Volunteers are needed to provide phone support and greeting visitors in the office. If you are interested in helping, please see Matt Sage or Dana Boser.

Upcoming Board Meetings

Feb. 8 @ Noon: Board of Christian Missions;
Diaconate

Feb 9 @ 5:30 pm: Board of Christian Ed

Feb. 10 @ 6:30 pm: Board of Trustees



Articles will be due for the March issue of AFB on Thursday, February 12. We need and welcome the assistance of Board Chairs and others to help us stay up-to-date on events and happenings at FBC.



The FBC office will be closed on Feb. 16 in observance of Presidents' Day



**The 32nd Annual Spring Bouquet Sale:
March 3rd-8th 2025**

Online orders can be placed at
<https://HCHbouquet.givesmart.com>

by Feb 6 and can be picked up at
FBC after 1 pm on 3/1 or anytime 3/2 or 3/3.



JUST A REMINDER:

FBC men invite others to join them at Perkins Restaurant in Olean at 11:45 am On Tuesdays for a weekly men's lunch.

The FBC Women plan to meet for breakfast on the following dates:

2/5 @ 9:30 am @ Perkins

2/19 @ 9:30 am @ Friendly's

3/5 @ 9:30 am @ Perkins

All are welcome!



On Wednesday afternoons at 3:30, Dave Torrey continues to lead "Pause for Power," a Midweek Prayer and Worship opportunity. Attendees gather for a special time of sharing the cares and joys of their hearts, followed by prayer, hymn sing and Bible study. With all the things going on in the country and our world, this might be a good time to invite others who might be looking for a midweek worship/study opportunity to join in as well!



We would like to thank the 2025 Nominating Committee members and all who stepped up to fill open positions on FBC Boards and Committees for 2026 and terms beyond. A few open spots still remain and it's not too late to offer to serve. This is one way to make a difference at your church and in your community, sharing in the work of First Baptist and the family of God. See any board chairperson, or

Moderator Casey Sage if you would like more information about how to include your time and talents as part of your church giving.

FAMILY OF GOD



We extend our **LOVE AND SYMPATHY** to Sue Neely VanBrunt, Jeanette and Matt Butler and family on the passing of Ed VanBrunt on December 23, 2025; to the family and friends of past members Carol Mahoney and Joan Hargis; and to Bonnie Kettle on the passing of her husband, Larry, on January 18.



of beloved members of our church family who went home to be with their Lord in 2025

Victoria Dennis (date unknown)
Marilyn Piepho 7/11/25
Edward VanBrunt 12/23/2025



Dedicate a Service

If you would like to be a part of this important ministry at Olean First Baptist by dedicating a service in memory or honor of someone, a sign-up sheet is posted on the window for 2026 dates. This is such a nice way to honor or remember someone on a special occasion.



Jeanne Gross has been playing the organ and piano for us this past month. If you have not yet personally met her, please take a moment to stop by and introduce yourself. She is eager to get to know everyone as she joins in the ministry and mission of our church! Welcome Jeanne!

Thanks to the extremely talented performers and generous attendees of the New Year's Eve Concert, \$700 was given to benefit the Olean Area Food Pantry as they restock their shelves for the new year. What a blessing was received by those who heard the music and testimonies...and what a blessing will be received by those in need of your kindness. Grateful! Sue & the Music Committee

FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS



1	Megan Sorokes Sneed
3	Miesha Brown
9	Darlene Selph
12	Dana Boser
	Nan Norton
16	Katrina DeGroff
24	Brian Sanders
27	Terri McDowell
28	Elizabeth Spiller

FEBRUARY ANNIVERSARIES



24 Nick & Brandi Porcello



Thank you to the congregation and Hospitality Committee for the special fellowship time held in our honor on December 28. We certainly appreciate your love and thoughtfulness and covet your prayers as we start this new chapter in our lives. We will miss all of you and look forward to seeing you when we visit in the summer months.

Jim and Penny Sorokes

I would like to thank those who have generously shared their words of sympathy and love in the passing of my husband, Ed. Your cards, hugs, Memorial Fund gifts, prayers, food, memories and offers to help have meant so very much. As Bill Gaither wrote: "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God."

In Christ's strong love, Sue Neely VanBrunt





Operation Christmas Child collections at FBC sends off 8,047 shoeboxes

Two trailers loaded for NC after regional effort
A final count of 8,047 shoeboxes were packed locally for this year's Operation Christmas Child, a project of Samaritan's Purse, filling two truck trailers sent to Boone, North Carolina, the ministry's headquarters. Site Coordinator Sharon Anthony said the latest total count for this year's overall project is \$12 million (and counting), an increase of \$1 million over last year.

Several regional volunteers placed at least 15 shoeboxes each into larger boxes which were then loaded up at FBC's regional collection site.

Other churches in the region packed and collected boxes, including some in Allegany,

Salamanca and more, all contributing toward the effort.

Volunteers at First Baptist spent the week of Nov. 17 through Nov. 24 receiving shoeboxes from other collectors, counting, ensuring correct tagging and doing the paperwork before loading up two tractor trailers.

This year, Samaritan's Purse also awarded Olean First Baptist with a service award for coordination efforts that have continued throughout the past five years.

"We are grateful for all the local participation and volunteers who take part in any way to help us coordinate shoebox collections for Operation Christmas Child," said Sharon Anthony.

Volunteers of all ages and abilities are welcomed to take part in the process. Several FBC



children also packed shoeboxes.

Julie Kerls, who has participated in the process for several years, shared how volunteers sometimes view videos or hear stories from those present as shoeboxes are delivered. Recipients may be in foreign countries or areas in need, such as communities suffering natural disasters.

"In one case, youngsters were viewed who kept lifting their hands over their shoulders," said Julie Kerls. "What turned out to be happening was their classroom only had one pencil to use, so they pass it over their shoulder to the next student. This is a reminder that it can be the smallest things—like pencils—that can make a difference when you are packing a shoebox."

Kerls, Anthony—and Franklin Graham, head of Samaritan's Purse, founded through Billy Graham ministries—all note that spreading the gospel message of Jesus Christ is at the center of Operation

Christmas Child. The boxes are prayed over many times before reaching final destinations. The message may reach beyond the child recipients, to families and communities as well.

"We're spreading Christ's love in a shoebox," said Anthony.

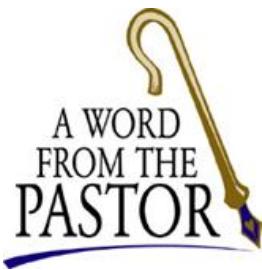


ANNUAL COMMUNITY EASTER DINNER

Olean First Baptist Church will be hosting our Annual Easter Dinner on Sunday, April 5, 2026. Easter Sunday will be served as a take-out/delivery only event offering ham or turkey meals to the Olean area communities. We will also need many volunteers to help with set-up, serving, cooking, delivery, and clean-up. Please help us get the word out to people that are in need of this dinner. If you would like to place an order, volunteer or donate, please call the church office at 372-5151.

WAHH: HYGIENE DRIVE

We Are His Hands annual hygiene drive is from February 15 to March 31. The need is great. In 2025 we distributed 496 hygiene bags. The barrel is in the lobby and a list of items needed can be found on the Missions table.



Looking over the next three months, we see a lot of different things happening! Later on in February, on the 15th, we will be starting a new Sunday school class, open to everyone. I'll be teaching this class and we will pursue the

ambitious goal of covering every single chapter in the New Testament over the next 5 years. Romans 10:17 says "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." In this class we will be "consuming" copious quantities of God's Word and watching as our Faith grows!

In the next few months we will be celebrating various holidays, some great, serious and important, like Palm Sunday and Resurrection Sunday. Others, of lesser import, like Presidents Day (Who remembers when we actually celebrated both Washington's and Lincoln's Birthdays?!). And some, fun and lighter, as sweethearts take extra time on Valentine's Day to express their love for one another. Perhaps you also have some family Birthdays coming up as well.

And then, there's the weather? Between February and April we can reasonably expect everything from -10 to 55 or 60 degrees! Snow, hail, wind, blizzard, rain, sunshine, and mud!

There are Providences, too, which we are presently completely ignorant of. Who knows what awaits us in the next few months? Sickesses, Financial Crises, Government Scandals, Peace Talks, Wars, Death, Declines, Relocations, Emergencies, Family Cares.... We simply don't know what God has planned in His perfect Calendar. Though we DO know that He "works all things according to the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1:11), and that in His plan, "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called.." (Romans 8:28).

Considering so many different events, challenges, joys, and sorrows, I can't help but be reminded of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Go ahead and look it up...

There are so many varied circumstances that we face. Each one calls for a unique and proper response, and those responses... weeping, morning, laughing, dancing, speaking, being silent, etc.... all have their proper place. The part of Biblical, God-

given wisdom is to know which response is proper for which events that we face every day. Through all of it... we can be assured of Jesus presence, The Spirit's leading, and God's love. Let us then face our future, both known and unknown, with faith in God's goodness and determination that we will use every day to glorify and honor our Lord!

Pastor Jim

"REASON FOR LIFE"

*I don't know how to say it
But sometimes it seems to me,
That maybe we are stationed
Where God wanted us to be.*

*And the little place I'm filling
Is the reason for my birth,
And just to do the work I do
He sent me down to earth.*

*Now, if God had wanted otherwise,
I reckon He'd have made
Me just a little different
Of a worse or better grade.*

*But since God knows and understands
All things on land and sea,
I fancy that He placed me here
Just where He wanted me.*

*But sometimes I get to thinking
As my labors I review,
That I would like a higher place
With greater tasks to do.*

*But I've come to this conclusion
When envying is stilled,
That the post to which God called me
Is the post He wanted filled.*

*So I plod along and struggle
With the hope when the day is thru,
That I'm really necessary
To the things God wants to do.*

*And there isn't any service
I can do that I should scorn,
For it might be just the reason
God allowed me to be born!*

(For those of us who have been around FBC long enough to remember him, Gene Rote **loved** to recite special poems like this. A sweet reminder ☺)

Reflecting on our Advent Season—FBC Style!

Many have heard me talk about (or write about) how my husband and I and his family would often visit Olean First Baptist Church with our daughter, Michele, in the mid-to-late 1970s. We almost always came home for Christmas from our residence in Michigan. No matter how hard it was snowing, we made it most years, though there were a couple we had to spend the night in Erie or North East before finishing the trek.

In addition to other traditional family gathering events, there were two big items on the agenda: driving around to look at Christmas lights and attending a Candlelight Christmas Eve service at this church of my youth. Back then, the cantatas mostly were performed that evening. These outings form fond memories for me, especially seeing the face of my little one take on a reflective glow from the candles, which she insisted on holding herself (long before we went to a safer battery light for little ones).

Since my return a decade ago to this congregation, I have never been disappointed in all the festivities that take place here during the Advent season. FBC can be a busy place, and it is because of so many willing hands, hearts and volunteers as well as our excellent music department that we can keep these traditions alive, and even invite the community to share in them.

How special is it to devote a little time each Sunday in Advent to invite specific congregation members to light the candles—and sing the familiar, “We Light a Candle for Jesus” together? (Very special).

As a church, we have come to expect that joyful Sunday when so many don ancient-style costumes, especially our littlest ones who become sheep, angels and other manger-attending livestock and adults become kings, a golden star, and shepherds attending the Holy family. The music and the atmosphere tell the familiar (to us) story in a way different from how we typically hear it in a sermon, and the church fills with family and community members who want to hear it again too!

I always look for the excitement on the faces of the smallest ones. I remember when Paige Hannahs was the smallest angel performer in the pageant and if I’m remembering correctly, when Huntson was first born, he joined the pageant with mom Ashley and dad, Matthew. Long-time member, Dorothy Lemmer Sage (my late cousin), Gaylord, and my Aunt Virginia and Uncle Joe (Paige’s great-great-grandparents) were surely smiling down from heaven, joining my delight!

Different new babies have served as these littlest angels at different times, and this year, it was fun to see the joyful expression on the face of one little lamb: Waylon Singer, Rachel and Alan’s little boy. I have a few photos to commemorate the moment, as I still do from when it was Paige’s and Huntson’s turn. (I am older, with a sometimes-failing memory, so perhaps my memory of Huntson was when he was dedicated, but I know he’s been in pageants since.)

Here at FBC, we’ve come to expect there’ll be a Birthday Party for Jesus, something not all churches do, and what a lesson for our kids and others, especially with it being an occasion for the gifts to benefit local charities. It was fun this year to see kids put all their intention into making gingerbread houses out of graham crackers and goodie kits our Board of Christian Education put together for them. Even some visitors were very proud of their creations!

Our Cantata’s have always been something to remember, and Sue Neely VanBrunt puts in so much work with her accompanists, musicians and singers. The “Mary Did You Know” theme this year was fantastic, with sing-along carols weaved in.

And then, Christmas Eve. It has changed somewhat since the days we brought Michele, but I, for one, truly enjoyed the fact that a decision was made to hold this service a little earlier in the evening. It brings benefits to several. Families are more likely to come at the earlier time. Those with out-of-town guests can bring them along and then continue with other Christmas Eve plans and family gatherings. And it’s good for some of us who are less and less likely to drive to a night event largely because we do not trust eyesight that is getting increasingly difficult to see in the dark and headlight glare.

I regret that I was unable to make it to the New Year’s Eve rescheduled concert, but I have heard rave reviews! What talents we have among us and in our community.

We will soon be gearing up for Lent and Easter activities, and reviewing the Advent season just reminds me how privileged we are to have a church where we are free to worship with our church family. We may be a smaller congregation than in the past, but for sure, we still have caring, industrious and ready-to-volunteer folks at FBC who keep things going year-round, as well as a capable new shepherd in Pastor Jim, who wants to take us forward in faith and fellowship. My wish is that we can continue to rally together to ensure the future of our church and for all to have a healthy, Happy 2026!

~Deb Wuethrich