



First
Congregational
Church
of Burlington, UCC

March 31, 2026

To the Members of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees:

I am the Rev. Elissa Johnk, the Senior Pastor of the First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ. In my tenure I have had innumerable interactions with State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies. What I experienced on March 11 was shocking.

I was present from roughly 10 a.m. until shortly before 4 p.m., yet I am going to limit my comments to a single moment in time – a moment that few were there to witness.

Shortly after the Vermont State Police arrived, a representative officer proceeded to “speak” with the individuals blocking the front entrance. The conversation, as observed and immediately reported to me, consisted of the officer warning the individuals that if they were to remain where they were, “there would be violence.” One can hope he intended to say the violence would be from the federal ICE agents, but I can assure you that, given the delivery, the message was ambiguous.

As the Officer was returning from his warning, to discuss with other officers, he passed by the small group where I was. In the group were: a key organizer of the gathering and response; a member of the clergy who had been instrumental throughout the day in keeping the crowd rooted in non-violence (not me!), and an Immigration Attorney who had been in conversation with those inside. If the VSP were interested in de-escalation, a conversation with this group should have been the first place to start. We were on the sidewalk, calmly awaiting his return for a conversation. When asked politely, he pushed past.

When asked again, the Officer replied with a clenched jaw, a finger in one our face, and no small amount of disdain: “*I* don’t have to go through ***you***.”

I have so many questions about the day, and I am sure wiser people would be able to answer most. Why, if the suspect was known, in name and appearance, were women and children kept captive in their home? Why were the other individuals not escorted out before the warrant appeared (hours later)? If it could be arranged for the child (far later than it should have been) to be supported in departing, why could Law Enforcement not find a way to do the same for *all* the (brown and immigrant) residents in their jurisdiction? In their *care*?

But amidst all these questions, and all the opportunities that were missed, for me that single finger stands representative of the day. Who *did* the Officer think he should “go through”? As far as I could see, the answer was “the FEDs”, or perhaps most accurately, “a front door”.

If this is the best we as Vermonters can do, I am for, very first time, ashamed.

With sadness,



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A handwritten signature in green ink that reads "Elissa C. Johnk". The signature is fluid and cursive.

The Rev. Elissa C. Johnk