

The Story of the Unitarian Congregation Of Guelph



“We build on foundations that we did not lay
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
We drink from wells we did not dig.
We profit from persons we did not know.
We are ever bound in community.”

- *Peter Raible*




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Our Beginning: 1960

In response to an ad placed by the American Unitarian Association 20 people gathered to discuss the possibility of forming a “community of seekers.” They wanted their children to be part of an environment in which they could experience the wonder of life and ask meaningful questions.

From that early beginning, the Guelph Unitarian Fellowship flourished, then waned and in 1979 almost faded away. However, a “saving remnant” of five people were determined that religious liberalism should continue in Guelph and began a revitalization process. Gradually the membership began to increase again. Young families joined and some long-time Unitarians from other places added their strengths.


We continue to be lay led, with our services and children’s programming reflecting our values, principles and talents of the diverse membership of our congregation.

We started with a budget of \$400 and were completely volunteer led. We met in borrowed space. Now our budget has grown, we have part-time paid staff and own our meeting house. 

Our Meeting Places

After a brief period of meeting in private homes, the Rotary Crippled Children’s Centre was rented in 1961 for Sunday School and adult meetings. Already the group had a vision of owning a place of its own and had established a building fund. A library of 150 books – mainly for the Sunday School – had been set up. However, we met in many rented spaces before that dream was to be realized.

By 1986 we had purchased the Bristol Street property. An investment in the future had been made, one which re-affirmed the faith in the flaming chalice, signifying the search for truth, love and justice. Our services and a successful RE program were held at Bristol Street until 1992.


As growth continued and we discovered that we would not get permission to expand on this property we chose to move to Harris Street. Sharing the space with the Y Daycare and numerous other community agencies helped make our meeting house affordable. Over the years we have renovated the space to make it more fitting to our spiritual community. 

Our Sunday Services

In the beginning, bi-weekly services for adults were held in the evening. The focus was on intellectual inquiry and rational humanism. We invited a range of speakers including Rabbi Klein, Ursula Franklin, Mavor Moore, and a number of academics and Unitarian ministers.

There were no prayers, hymns, or meditations until the early 1980’s. In 1981, two of our members attended the Eastern Great Lakes Leadership School and came back full of ideas for worship services. The services developed flow and consistency growing out of ritual and a deepening spirituality. We held our first Flower Communion and later the Water Ingathering Service, both beloved traditions linked to Unitarian Congregations world-wide.

In 1987, we invited the first of a series of part-time ministers who functioned to strengthen the lay leadership which is the backbone of UCG.

Service Leading workshops reinforce our ability to offer services that meet the spiritual needs of our diverse and growing community. This commitment to training allows each of us to bring our individual gifts to the spiritual experience of our congregation. Our services include meditation, music, stories, and a wide range of stimulating speakers and topics which are listed on our website. 

Children and Youth Programs


In the beginning, there was a class of 12 children and by 1968 it had grown to 54 children and 10 teachers. This foundation ensured our commitment to children's spiritual development. There were many excursions, ie: Ste. Marie among the Hurons and the planetarium. These trips were possible because the adult services were in the evening so parents were available to join the children on these outings. As the children matured they formed a Liberal Religious Youth Group which continued for several years. A joint Sunday School arrangement was made with the local Quaker group successfully for two years.

From the early 80's there has been consistent spiritual programming for children often utilizing Unitarian curricula. Since 2004 part-time staff have provided a stimulating and welcoming experience. The success of that initiative led to the decision to hire a part-time Spiritual Development Coordinator in 2006.

The OWL (Our Whole Lives) program, which outlines the understanding of the spiritual, emotional and social aspects of sexuality is offered to several different age levels, in conjunction with other congregations.




Chaplaincy

Unitarians have a long history of providing rites of passage to the broader community, most often through the services of a Lay Chaplain. These provincially licensed lay members are specially trained to provide these services. By 1971 our congregation appointed the first lay chaplain. Unitarian Rites of Passage such as weddings, child dedications and memorials are designed to reflect the personal beliefs of the participants and our commitment to inclusivity. About 90% of the ceremonies we do are for those who have no affiliation to our church or religion, but seek us out because they want a liberal religious ceremony. The Chaplaincy program has confirmed our sense of purpose and service. 

Social Action/Justice /Responsibility

Unitarians are concerned about social justice and are encouraged to act as responsible citizens in society. We want a fair world based on our principles and democracy, one free of bias with equal opportunity for all. We have hosted speakers, held workshops and sometimes taken more tangible steps by knitting sweaters and collecting clothes to send to developing countries.

The issues that interest us reflect what happens in society. For example in 1965 it was biological warfare and the question of religion in the schools. In 1982 the emphasis was on Nuclear Disarmament, reproductive choice and teenage pregnancy. The 1990s brought continuing support for USC and Childhaven.


We have endeavored to encompass local, national and international causes in our work. Currently, we support the breakfast club at Tytler school and gather food for the Drop In Center as well as raising money for the Aids projects. We are especially heartened to support the social justice initiatives of our youth. 

Our Dream Weavers

Stuart and Sherry Dixon have been part of our congregation from the beginning. In the early years Stu developed a children's curriculum for religious education and he has shared his creative puppetry with both adults and children. He has served as chaplain, president and speaker. Sherry founded the local Unitarian Service Committee chapter, organized the breakfast club at Tytler School, and plays a valued role in welcoming new-comers. They were two of five people involved in the plan for renewal when the congregation had dwindled to five in 1979 and were recognized as "Unsung Heroes" by the UUA in 1997.

Louise Colley's position as one of the founding members enabled her to write the history of the congregation. Like Sherry, Louise's welcome to newcomer's was legendary. She brought a fresh flower for the alter every Sunday and met everyone at the door with a smiling face. Her delightful personality infused the congregation with warmth and joy. She was a stalwart worker for peace and social justice.

Betty Bean Kennedy had a vision full of young people, vibrant community, and big projects. She had a talent for implementing constructive change, for example, the Welcoming Congregation Initiative. She was involved in every aspect of the congregation from washing windows, teaching children, being Board President, to leading services, and developing small group ministry. We took great delight in gathering the testimonials for her nomination for the CUC Unsung Hero award.

Elinor Knight came in 1981 and brought to our congregation a knowledge and understanding of the broader UUA and CUC networks. She was the President of the CUC for 3 terms. Elinor has filled roles as chaplain, president, administrative assistant, and coordinator of religious education. Elinor's connection to the wider Unitarian reality invigorates our local experience. 

This pamphlet was developed to complement the visual historical timeline that was completed in the spring of 2007. June Gilbertson, Aspen Heisey, Linda Reith, and Joan Rentoul.