

5 HOMEGROWN STORIES

We are not consumers of congregational life, but co-creators. Linda Thomson



1. Bridge to Guelph

We celebrate this opportunity to put action to our mission statement.

We seek to:

- Question freely
- Serve, inspire and challenge
- Seek and celebrate diversity
- Support each other openheartedly
- Honour the web of existence

2. UCG Youth Group

The Friday night youth group meets for fun, fellowship, and to undertake service projects in the community. How did this happen? What were the seeds that were planted in the past?

3. CELP & Headwaters

Since January 2015, UCG has been home to the Grade 10 Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) and Grade 12 Headwaters Program of Centennial Collegiate. How did this come about? What was the kernel idea and how did it sprout?

4, 5 Christine and Megan



Bridge to Guelph

Recently we hosted a Welcome Dinner for the Alkhaleds and all the people who have been involved in Bridge to Guelph. At the end of a wonderful evening Halla, a community organizer for the Muslim Society of Guelph, asked what it meant to be Unitarian. Were we Christian? I answered that we were people who believed it is more important to question than to have an answer, that we believed we could learn from all the great religions and that a Muslim speaker is booked in an upcoming service. After a few minutes he said, we need more Unitarians everywhere; then there would be no war. It was a powerful comment at the end of a powerful evening.

UCG can celebrate being given this opportunity to put action to our mission statement. Because the Canadian Unitarian Council acted to become a Sponsorship Agreement Holder, our congregation was able to facilitate the application to support the Alkhaled family's move to Canada. CUC's support and guidance through the process has been invaluable. Spirituality in action lifts our souls.

In refugee sponsorship lots of important threads of spiritual practice converge: commitment to family (it was my son and daughter-in-law who invited us to join in sponsoring a family,) Unitarianism (the SAH and cooperation with UCG,) understanding myself as a citizen of the world (begun as a CUSO volunteer over 40 years ago,) community activism (Bridge to Guelph draws together activists from a wide range of issues including Women in Crisis,) and friendship (people important to me for decades have stepped up with money and in person.) When so much of the news of the world is bleak and heart breaking, we need to savour the opportunities to strengthen faith and hope.



We are grateful for the valour and graciousness of the Alkhaled family. Guelph is richer for their presence. Many Unitarians have been involved in packing, moving, organizing, and befriending this Syrian family. We were lifted by a powerful movement that spread right across Canada to do what we could for the people of Syria. Let us be part of a similarly powerful movement to make a difference for First Nations people, whose unconscionable suffering is on our doorstep.

Linda Reith, Member of Bridge to Guelph and UCG.





Members of Bridge to Guelph welcoming the Aldhaled family at Toronto Pearson Airport.

Laura (in the back row on the right) talked about her own experience greeting the family at the airport: the mother of the family, Diana, told Laura the following day thru a translator:

"We were notified only 3 days in advance that we were going to Guelph! I was terrified. I spent 3 days in anxiety - what are we facing, we have no idea. I felt sick on the plane - my stomach was in knots, and I was scared for my children. Coming off the airplane, who we were going to meet here; *who would greet us, what are we facing, was this going to be okay?* But when I came thru the gate in the terminal (it was just after midnight) and saw the people (even a child in the group!) with the signs of welcome, and when I saw their faces, I felt calm - I did not know them, but I somehow knew it would be okay."

UCG Friday Night Youth Group

Drew Verrall

The UCG Youth Group is for youth in grades 6-10 and meets alternate Friday evenings at the UCG. Currently we have an average of 12-15 participants at our bi-weekly meetings. Approximately 50% of our membership is youth from families attending the UCG. The other 50% are friends of those members who are new to the UCG in the last year.

The group meets for fun, fellowship, and to undertake service projects in the community. Highlights from the past year include our Winter and Fall weekend retreats to Five Oaks Retreat Centre, field trips to Strom's Farm, Air U Trampoline Park, ice skating at City Hall and bowling. Favorite on-site activities include blind-fold Banana Splits and doing the Ice-bucket challenge to raise awareness for those living with ALS.

Service Projects have included volunteering at the Guelph Food Bank and participating in Hooping for Hunger: an energy filled hula-hoop-a-thon that raised \$7396.55 in support of the Hunger Project Canada and Chalmers Community Services Centre. In support our congregation, our youth have made chocolates and duct tape craft items for the annual Winter Bake & Craft Sale, and made a festive cake for our Dream Auction. Our youth have also undertaken Leadership initiatives within the congregation through their work with our little ones in the nursery and by preparing and performing our Winter Solstice Pageant. (A Spring Pageant is in the works!)

Inquiries about the youth group, talk to Drew Verrall at service or email him at coordinator@guelph-unitarians.com

What was the seed of this?

- For years we watched our youth drift away as they became teenagers. We dreamed of having a youth group so they could be involved in a whole new way. June Gilbertson was key to bringing this dream into reality by designating and funding our first "youth leader" ... Rebekah Jamieson.

How did it grow?

- The UCG Board making ongoing decisions to invest in paid staff focused on youth.
- Talented and inspiring staff have watered and nurtured this seed: Melina Bondy, Mel Horvath-Lucid, Stacey Molengraaf, Jane McRea, Parents are vital to the ongoing success of this group.



Aidan Robinson



CELP and Headwaters

Katie Gad

Have you noticed the smell of wood smoke and canvas in the air as you enter UCG? Have you seen teenagers coming and going all week? Since January 2015, UCG has been home to the Grade 10 Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) and Grade 12 Headwaters Program of Centennial Collegiate. These offsite programs offer students a chance to earn four regular high school credits in an experiential community-based setting.

Last January (2015) was a mad scramble as the programs had recently learned that they had to move from Camp Edgewood in Eden Mills. The UCG board and particularly Nancy, Harold, Naomi, Helen and others worked hard to make sure that the downstairs kitchen and basement space were suitable for classes. CELP teacher Joel Barr commissioned sheds to be built at Centennial's wood shop for the parking lot, bike racks to be delivered, and other minor renovations to be made to allow for on-site storage.

UCG enthusiastically welcomed the students and the first class started at UCG in February 2015. They often commented on the warm welcome they received from the congregation and responded by affectionately dubbing the congregation "UniCon" (fun, except for making it sound like a multinational corporation!). The first class enjoyed the new site by forging relationships with the Two Rivers Community Garden, exploring the neighbourhood and the river and creating a new raised bed garden with Headwaters teachers Paul Gifford and Janet Dalziel.

This school year has seen one class in the fall and both a Grade 10 CELP class and a grade 12 Headwaters class using the space this winter with teachers Joel Barr, Janet Dalziel and Katie Gad. If you had come here during the week in February as students were preparing for their winter trips in Algonquin Park, you might have seen the Sunshine room awash in leather and sinew as students stitched mukluks or the basement deep in wannigans*, pot sets, axes and saws as students packed for their journey. The sheds in the parking lot have been used to store snowshoes and wannigans and have been the starting point of forays along the river to learn snowshoeing and sled hauling. Nearby Owens Corning has been generous enough to allow CELP to have a shipping container on site to store larger gear like tents, stoves, lifejackets and paddles. This spring, both programs plan to bike around the city using UCG as a starting point. CELP will also be running a Grade 5 "EcoStars" program from the site and Headwaters will be piloting a Grade 3 "Rubber Boots" Program run from the nearby Two Rivers garden and by the river. CELP and Headwaters look forward to continuing the relationship with UCG: thanks for the warm welcome!

**A wannigan is a traditional piece of gear that is used to pack fragile equipment or used as a grub box on canoe trips. It is nothing more than a wooden box, and can be any size or shape that is needed. You may wonder why on earth you would want to carry a wooden box on a canoe trip: because it's so functional.*

If you have questions about CELP and Headwaters, visit www.celp.info or talk to Katie Gad at service or email her at katiegad@hotmail.com



What was the seed of CELP being housed at the UCG and how did it become reality?

Katie, a high school teacher, tells the story of back before she knew anything about Unitarians, she observed students whom she admired that treated each other with a deep respect, were self-aware and had a strong sense of social justice, and all of them turned out to be Unitarians. She and her husband Dave found their way to the UCG, were married by the UU Celebrant, and now have 2 kids of their own. When the CELP Program she works with was looking for a new home, UCG became one of the

strongest options. The congregation fits many of the program's needs: close to the river, enough space for two classes and in-town for ease of transportation. The win for the UCG is 2-fold: we get the satisfaction of being home to this leading-edge environmental program which aligns so well with our principles, and, it provides steady dependable revenue for the UCG.

Journey to Finding the UCG

Christine Robinson

The Search What drew me to UCG was a desire to be surrounded by like-minded people amongst whom our children could grow in supportive community. I looked up the UCG at a time when we were new to the Guelph area and I was feeling a need to simplify, I was missing a sense of meaningful contribution and had a strong desire to deepen my everyday spirituality in an enriching community of free thinkers - a place where our boys would feel welcome, supported to question freely and able to find grounding spiritual education and a community to help them grow into the most authentic version of themselves possible.

The Find Our first service was when James Gordon joined us to talk about the costs of our commercial society and did that ever resonate. His wisdom, challenge and activism were an inspiration. The intimacy of the space, the fact that it was lay-led, laid back and intensely warm and welcoming made me feel immediately at home to the point of being moved to tears, something that has happened to me repeatedly over the last year or so; whenever I am overwhelmed by gratitude for this lovely constellation of people, or by how much a thought-provoking service topic has touched me and been just what I needed.

Children That first Sunday, as my children played downstairs while the enriching talk came to a close, I waited with baited breath to see if my often-hard-to-please boys would be begging to leave or if they'd managed to be ok during their first visit...when I asked them how it had gone, my youngest and then six year old Liam, gushed about his new friend and the games they'd played and my ten year old Aidan said with a mix of wonder and great seriousness "Mommy, I love it here - the kids are just like me!" So that was it....we now come regularly and every week is unique but equally enriching.

Unicamp We also visited Unicamp this summer and were nourished by the rustic natural setting, the great food and campfire sing-a-longs. We attended a Mindful Parenting retreat that included the children...Aidan escaped partway through to join the adult artist's retreat and we not only felt totally secure to let him go, he was welcomed with such warmth and appreciation that he never wanted to leave. The whole experience there was magical...I couldn't get over how much I felt like we'd found our tribe.

I asked my boys again as I wrote this what means the most to them about coming to "Uni" (the "Un-Church" we sometimes joke). Liam still says it's his friends. For Aidan, it's the opportunities he gets to discuss things with people of all ages who he says have lots of interesting things to share and are also genuinely interested in what he has to say. He drew us a picture of one of my favourite scenes...him sitting at a table in the sunshine room after service in deep dialogue with his friends in their 50s or 80s. To me, that's the essence of a thriving community. For myself, I am just beginning to understand how much I will learn about contribution and activism. Thank you to all our new UCG friends for challenging our thinking and for welcoming our family with such open arms. This is a marvelous place we get to enjoy, thanks to those of you who have worked tirelessly over the years to nurture it. We are so glad you are here!

Growing Up Unitarian

Megan Gilbertson, 24

I have been a part of a Unitarian congregation all my life; I've always known that I was a part of a larger community. My first Unitarian home was the congregation of Olinda (near Windsor) and is still a community that I have, even though I moved away 12 years ago. They had a lasting effect on me growing up. I was taught that I wasn't alone, that I was part of an inter-connected web - a community. Even now, I can call and be invited in like family.

Moving to Guelph, my family joined this Unitarian Congregation. Walking in through those doors was the same as it had been in Windsor: smiling faces, listening ears, helping hands - a community that cared for each other. But Unitarians don't just care for each other, they care for the world. Whether it be environmental or social justice issues, Unitarians understand that our community isn't just inside these four walls of our building, but outside it as well. For everyone, whether they come from the streets, live in dirt houses, live in mansions, are lawyers, are politicians, farmers, teachers, single fathers, activists, gays, transgender, etc. it doesn't matter: Unitarians recognize and accept that individual's inherent worth and dignity, without expecting something in return.

I didn't entirely get this at first, and why should I, when the majority of our society is saying something completely different. Although, when 14-year-old me heard about the organization *World Accord* and the construction expeditions that they offered in Honduras, I knew I was going - I wanted to help this impoverished part of the world. What a huge surprise it was for me when I got there and realized that these were some of the happiest, smiley-est, most community-focused, generous, and caring individuals that I'd ever met in my life. We didn't speak the same language, I'd never met them before, they knew nothing of me, and yet I was being invited into homes and fed bananas by smiling individuals whom I'd imagined to be impoverished??!!!

I came back from that trip with the realization that I'd just experienced some of the richest, most generous people on earth, and I was grateful for that experience. So I went back again, and again, and again.... and yet again; every year, for nine out of the past ten years. I am now one of the leaders for those same construction projects. My focus, when volunteers come on a construction expedition, is to connect them with the communities we're serving, to get people connecting beyond differences; to help move them beyond the mindset of 'they are other,' and instead to experience worth, dignity, and individual personalities. To connect them to the world of happiness, light, and community I have found there. That is the reason I go back every year, because I know, just like the UCG, there will be smiling faces, listening ears, helping hands, and a community that cares for each other.

This knowledge and the desire for interconnectedness seeps into every aspect of my life. I am at the moment pursuing the career path of becoming a plumbing apprentice, hopefully here in

Pledge Drive April 2016

Guelph. I want to learn about sustainable plumbing methods such as grey water systems, solar water heating, how to provide clean drinking water to those that don't have it, and how to teach plumbing to aid their communities. Working in Canada as a plumber will also mean a better income, which means that I'll have more to give toward the projects that I believe in. Just as the UCG congregation helped me to fundraise the money for my volunteer expeditions, I would in turn like to have money to give back to them, as they are a community and set of values that I believe in and want to support.

Thank you UCG for believing in me, and for being my community to come home to!



So you see, the sunny-stories that we are featuring this year in our pledge drive, had a long journey from seed to fruit. Each one began with a seed of an idea and our UCG community helped to make it a reality. May we be inspired to renew our commitment to making a pledge for the coming year:

- by giving your money, time, and energy to our Unitarian Congregation, you can have the satisfaction of nurturing a long-standing spiritual community (since 1961).
- by combining our monetary generosity we can sustain these programs and alliances, and feel proud of what we can do together.
- we have *local* and *global* reach - several of the stories are local to Guelph, and the Bridge to Guelph / UCG partnership has impact globally, as well as Megan's story.

What is wonderful about giving to the UCG is that we are a very lean organization – your dollars go directly to paying our staff, guest speakers on a Sunday morning, mortgage payments, and repairs/upkeep to our bricks-and-mortar building – Helen Prinold, our Building/Environment care-taker extraordinaire, has done an amazing job of solving the wet-basement-issue, which has eluded us for years, and has overseen the professional masonry repair of a crumbling brickwork. In fact, Helen has mapped out a 5-10 year plan to anticipate where we might need to put our next capital investments. Meeting these needs requires a bigger budget than we currently have.

We are privileged to be part of this dynamic organization. Your generous support has impact with our local and global reach.

One UU's journey with giving / pledging...

Prue is a member of the First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa

When I joined the congregation 10 years ago, I was un-churched. I had no idea what I was expected to give. What I did notice was that people would avoid talking about money and the pledge campaign altogether, if they possibly could.

So I pledged \$20 per month, much as I would to any charity I supported.

The next year the Pledge Committee said 'focus on us as a community, not as a charity. So assess what it is that you get from being a member here, and then decide what your contribution might be.'

This was a revelation to me. I saw beauty, ideas, music, and wonderful people that I felt so lucky to have found.

So I increased my pledge substantially - to \$60 per month.

Then later I 'got it' about the fact that we own this congregation, and have ownership responsibilities, so I added a little each year thereafter.

Then 3 years ago, four of us, Bob Armstrong, David Hudson, Jan Glyde, and myself got together to form a Stewardship committee. We committed to serving for a minimum of three years because we wanted to bring conversations about money out of the closet, and into the forum. And we knew that would take time.

Almost the first big question that we got was 'What is a fair share?'

We winced! We did not know. We went away and calculated that a fair share was about \$80 per month, or \$1000 a year.

I found I was not contributing my fair share. So I increased my pledge to \$100 a month, or \$1200 a year. At this point I thought I was done. Truly.

NOT. The next year the Rev Janet Newman spoke of her personal *tithing*.

So the second big question we were asked was **“What is tithing, and what is this congregation’s view on tithing?”**

We winced! We were a faith community - What should our view of tithing be? And of *giving back* more generally?

So we did some research. Tithing is the contribution of 10% of one’s income to one’s church. It has been a standard for centuries, and is very widespread in both Christian churches and other faith communities.

And we found when we explored that a number of Unitarian congregations are moving towards developing guidance about tithing.

This UU guidance is in essence ‘to tithe is a personal financial objective for giving back to society - 5% of that to the congregation, and 5% to the causes one holds most dear. It is recognized that it may take time to get to this objective, but it is a clear objective towards which one may choose to move’.

In the USA this is called A LIBERAL TITHE. Here, we call it a *Unitarian* tithe.

My personal dilemma was that I was nowhere near tithing myself. I would need to increase my pledge by more than 300%, and soon. This was rough.

I found I couldn’t avoid a the question ‘Do I take myself and my faith community less seriously than Evangelicals and fundamental Christians routinely do?’.

I equivocated. I avoided. I lied to myself. A lot. But, ultimately, I tithed. Mostly to the congregation, but also to the causes I care most deeply about.

And this time I thought I was truly done with awkward financial questions. Specially as John Marsh is so whole-hearted in helping us to haul our finances out into the light of day.

But NO, not quite.

We have a granddaughter who is earning her first babysitting money. Her other grandmother and I had no difficulty advising her save some of what she earned. She agreed. (though the ratio has been subject to debate, as you might imagine!)

But we realized that we did not know what to say about giving back.

So the third big question is: **‘What should we be telling our children and grand-children about giving back?’**

People often learn as much from what is NOT said or done as they do from the formal announcements. Our children and grandchildren are moving through great programs here. But, if they are not asked, routinely, to contribute to them financially, will they not come to see them as entitlements?

For myself, I thought, 3 years ago, that spiritual development and money were quite separate things. I have found that they are inseparable.

I have also discovered that pledging is not an event, it is a journey. And tithing may be a destination of choice. I think I am not alone in these discoveries.

My core personal question is always ‘ What do I get from this congregation?’

Everything!

But most powerfully, A grounded community of people I respect and admire, who are full of delightful surprises as I learn more about them, and for whom I feel a growing and expanding affection. I cannot imagine my life without this intellectual and emotional richness.

Again, I say

I slept and dreamed that life was joy,

I woke and found that life was duty,

I acted, and behold, duty was joy.

Prue Craib, First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa, 2010 Used with permission