

# SOULS MATTER

ANNUAL REPORT 2012-2013

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines • A Unitarian Universalist Church

# MARK'S MESSAGE

Welcome to a look back at many of the opportunities for connecting that have been shared and savored during the past year in our congregation. Meaningful connections abound!

- From our monthly Soul Matters meetings to our affirmed social justice action groups.
- From GenUU, our vibrant young adult group, to Sacred Bridges CUUPS, our burgeoning gathering of UU pagans.
- From our renewed Caring Ministry approach that promises to involve more of us in caring for one another, to our lively Singles Ministry where new friendships are being formed every month.
- From religious education classes for children and youth, including our acclaimed Our Whole Lives sexuality curriculum for elementary and middle-school students, to the many offerings for adult learning and growth, including classes on ancient peace teachings, aging, and atheism.
- From working with each other and in the greater community towards restorative justice, to imagining how our congregation could become a more intentionally anti-racist institution.
- From serving on teaching teams to working to revitalize our woods.
- From speed-meeting new friends in Face2Face gatherings to sharing food and fellowship in Hanging in the Hood circle suppers.
- From Food Fair events and all-church parties to Progressive Voices concerts and film series on food and immigration.
- From making music together in choirs of voices and bells to serving on councils and committees that direct our present and guide our future as a congregation.



*Meaningful connections are everywhere! Enjoy this review of where we've been and begin planning how you will want to be involved this coming year.*

*Meaningful connections are waiting... for you!*

*-- Rev. Mark Stringer*



# SOUL MATTERS



“I began coming to the Unitarian Church with my daughter, Abra. I had grown up in and spent most of my life in a fundamentalist Christian church but after many difficult experiences, the evolution of my understanding did not seem to ‘fit’ in any particular doctrine. Abra wanted me to join a Small Group Ministry meeting with her. I was used to having an intimate relationship with my religion and with my church...the Small Group afforded that intimacy. What impressed me most was the “generous listening” that accompanied the sharing that took place. No one advised, criticized, or offered religious ‘answers’...instead I found respect for the individual journey...a trust that the soul will find its way to wholeness.

*“To get a glimpse through the eyes of another adds to our own perspective and understanding.”*

“I found I was learning from the journeys of others. So when the Soul Matters group was offered, I was eager to join a group. I wanted not only to meet people, but to think deeply about my own spiritual journey, and learn from the spiritual journey of others. Religion is about relationships....our relationship to the deep questions of the mystery of life (whether you call that God or merely the great mystery)...our relationship to those around us (family, friends, acquaintances), our relationship to our planet, and to the future. What better way to add depth of understanding than to ponder the soul searching questions and to attempt to put them to practice in our lives. We are all different. So to get a glimpse through the eyes of another adds to our own perspective and understanding.

“Perhaps this is what I value the most: the groups are ‘safe places’.... everyone can open up about very personal subjects of the heart, mind and emotion. We can all explore the mystery that is life without fear. I have learned to love people I never would have even thought to get to know before.

“No one I have met ‘sleep walks’ though life....they all ponder the great questions that have dominated my life. I am thankful for all the different perspectives, journeys, thoughts and emotions each has shared.”

-- Martha Shen

***What does it mean to live a life of...***  
anticipation, honesty, humility, blessing, heroism, devotion, inquiry, yearning, imagination? These are the questions that guided sermons each month, and they are the basis of the deep reflections that over 140 members and friends at First Unitarian have contemplated in small groups as part of the Soul Matters program this year.



# EXPANDING OWL

# SPIRIT OF YOUTH



In the 1970's, First Unitarian began offering a sex education curriculum for 7th and 8th graders called AYS (About Your Sexuality). Now known as OWL (Our Whole Lives), this year-long program has become a successful part of the R.E. youth curriculum with attendees coming from other local faith communities as well as First Unitarian.

Yet conversations about sex and reproduction are starting at an earlier age for youth. Thus, this year, First Unitarian introduced an Elementary OWL class for youth in 4th – 6th grade. The 10-week program offered both parents and children the opportunity to get a jump start on the facts of life, and met Wednesday evenings beginning in January 2013, with 18 students enrolled. Topics ranged from puberty to health & safety to values & relationships.

*"I feel like it's never too early to learn about sex and reproduction."*  
- parent Victor Tonelli

when they get exposed to it from their peers and the media, they're working with facts and not assumptions," explained parent Victor Tonelli.

Providing a safe atmosphere for kids to talk about these topics with adults and peers made it easier to broach conversations at home, too. "We've had a couple of really good conversations where (my son) wasn't embarrassed about it," said parent Ron Schebel. "OWL helped take that embarrassment out of the equation."

Beyond the valuable information, students bonded as a result of the experience, giving them connections with both peers and church leaders that will benefit them for years to come. "It's good to have the opportunity for the younger kids to have a meaningful time together weekly," said parent Eileen Jackson.

"I feel like it's never too early to learn about sex and reproduction and I want my kids to have that knowledge, so

The high school youth group at First Unitarian provides a place to be oneself, learn to be accepting of others, and explore one's own potential among other teens.

"Being a part of a Unitarian youth group is great because there are so many different types of people but they all somehow seem to fit together in one group like a big happy family," praised youth group member Ellie Paxson.

*"We are given a time to reflect on our lives and what we want to do in the future."*  
-- Olin Carty

As membership continues to grow at First Unitarian, so do the numbers in the high school youth group. To help manage the various activities of this group, Sara Karbeling joined the staff as a part-time Youth Coordinator.

Along with Sara, volunteer adult youth advisors help guide the youth in planning weekly meetings and the various events during the year. More importantly, they act as mentors to the youth in their path to adulthood. "Although the adults are often just thought of as supervisors, we see them as essential members of the group," said youth group member Olin Carty. "The adults in the group give me someone to talk to about specific issues that I may not want to address in the group. The mentors also help the youth become more comfortable speaking with adults, increasing creative interchange within our church community."

Sixty youth from our church and regional congregations attended Def-Con 5, an annual district-wide conference held at First Unitarian in early December. The conference was a fun opportunity to hone planning and leadership skills – from meal-planning and preparation to youth-led workshops on politics, theater, music and crafts. "At each Con, our youth group, along with youth groups from other states not only explore our different interests, but we are given a time to reflect on our lives and what we want to do in the future," said Carty.

Church-wide events led by the high school youth included:

- Halloween haunted house
- Holiday cookie dough sales
- Weekend service in March
- Easter egg hunt



# GROWING GROUPS

## Sacred Bridges

The Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans (CUUPs) is an organization that enables networking, outreach, education and dialogue about earth- and nature-centered spirituality. The Sacred Bridges CUUPs chapter formed at First Unitarian this year, joining about 70 other CUUPs chapters nationwide.

Besides organizational meetings, Sacred Bridges CUUPs offers full moon rituals, a Beltane Ritual (May pole ceremony), and solstice celebrations. "I've enjoyed the diversity of the Full Moon Rituals. A different person plans each one, so each ritual has been unique and different and I really enjoy that," explained Janelle Bailey. You don't need to be a member of Sacred Bridges to attend. "Sacred Bridges provides an opportunity to learn about spirituality as a whole versus a religion. I appreciate the principles that UUs believe and I feel it

compliments what people on a Pagan/Wiccan path believe," commented Bailey.

Sacred Bridges provides a gateway for Pagan-identified individuals and families to form connections with each other. "Many who practice

earth-centered spirituality do so in a solitary manner, and that has usually included me. Sacred Bridges CUUPs has given me a place and community in which to interactively celebrate holidays such as solstices and harvests," confides Sarah Weitzel. Sacred Bridges also invites non-UUs to explore Unitarian Universalism by reaching out to other Pagan groups. About 75% of participants in Sacred Bridges events are not currently members of First Unitarian.

To provide a fitting outdoor location for their events (such as the May pole event below), members of Sacred Bridges CUUPs worked tirelessly to create a Ritual Circle in the church woods, just east of the creek.

*Sacred Bridges CUUPs has given me a place and community in which to interactively celebrate holidays such as solstices and harvests." - Sarah Weitzel*



## Gen UU

Gen UU, also known as the Young Adult Group (ages 20s/30s) has evolved to be an active, energized and welcoming group at First Unitarian. Thanks to dedicated leadership, members of the group come together for several monthly activities, including:

- **Finding Your Path** - a monthly small group ministry, to take time to catch up and have meaningful conversations on race, material wealth, humor, God, marriage, and other topics important in the lives of young adults.
- **Social Action** - monthly service projects to give back to our community, including a Habitat for Humanity workday, stocking shelves at the Food Bank, replanting seedlings for Des Moines' Parks & Recreation, assisting in cleaning up Brown's Woods, and many more.
- **Social Outings** - anything from picnics at the sculpture garden, a night of contra dancing, attending an improv show, or just a laid-back game night, social nights provide an opportunity to unwind and have fun each month.

Members keep in touch on Facebook, where impromptu get-togethers are sometimes planned, including a recurring group trivia night. These regular events help form connections and lasting friendships for many young adults at First Unitarian.



*"We hooked up with the GenUU group pretty soon after we started coming to services. We have made some of the best friends of our lives so far in GenUU. They've become such a huge part of our lives in Des Moines. The GenUU group are some of the most thoughtful, welcoming, and inspiring people we've ever met. I can't speak highly enough of them, and they've been such a blessing in our lives from day one."*

*-- Tori Gibbs & Don Godfree*

# CARING COMMUNITIES

# MAKING CONNECTIONS

First Unitarian Church is a community with whom we want to share our joys, our sorrows, and our concerns. As our UU community continues to grow, we want to insure this circle of support grows, too. This year, a team of church members re-envisioned a new approach to Caring Ministry where all members in the church are connected to one of several “caring communities” – neighborhoods of support – to help form a broad-based, yet personal and focused means, to reach out to those in need. To oversee this new approach, part-time Caring Ministry Coordinator Terry Lillie was hired.

*“It’s incredibly humbling to have so many people say ‘What can I do?’ or offer to cook for us, visit us at the hospital, play Bananagrams with us, read to us, mow our grass, or help with with mundane chores,” expressed Pat Headley and Ruthanne Harstead.*

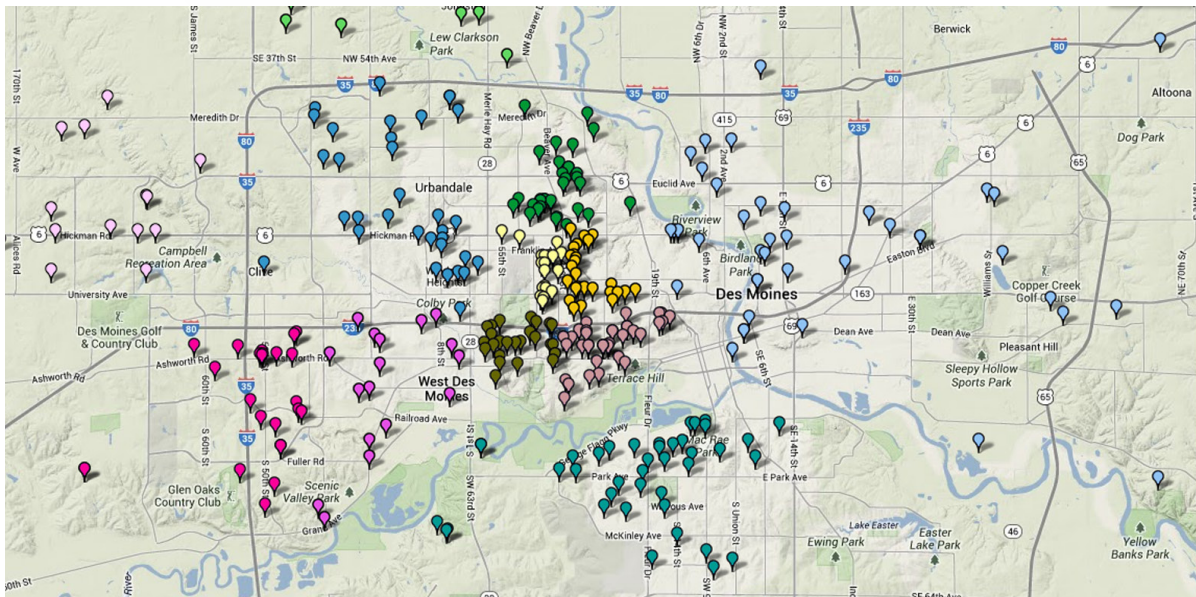
Whether it’s regular meals for new parents, cards for the sick, or a personal visit to listen and bring comfort, Caring Ministry is the heart of a loving community.

Community cannot exist without relationships. As a growing congregation, we seek multiple ways to support our connections to one another and to create new opportunities to nourish our community. Added this year to our abundant offerings of social and educational opportunities were:

- **Face2Face** – a time dedicated to having an in-depth conversation with someone new to you. At these gatherings, individuals are paired up for 30 minutes to have intentional opportunities for creative interchange.
- **Single Suppers** – an opportunity for singles of all ages to join together in fellowship for dinner once a month, following Saturday service. Not about matchmaking, but about being with friends, new and old. The relationships made through Single Suppers have led to lasting friendships as well as a service project - providing meals for the adult OWL training in March 2013.
- **Hanging in the Hood** – groups of eight people assemble to share a meal four times during the year. These groups encompass all ages and backgrounds.
- **Friendly Faces** - a new initiative this year to extend our welcome beyond the greeter table and make coffee hour less intimidating to newcomers.



Participants of Face2Face tell each other their stories and make new connections on a deeper level than may occur through more casual interactions.

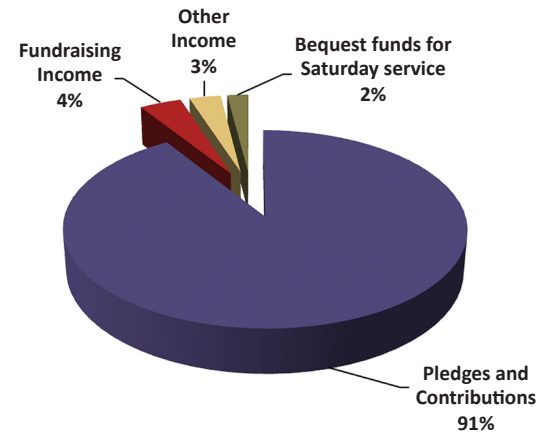


To better serve the caring ministry needs of our growing community, everyone is now part of a color-coded “caring community”, as illustrated on the map above.

# FINANCIALS

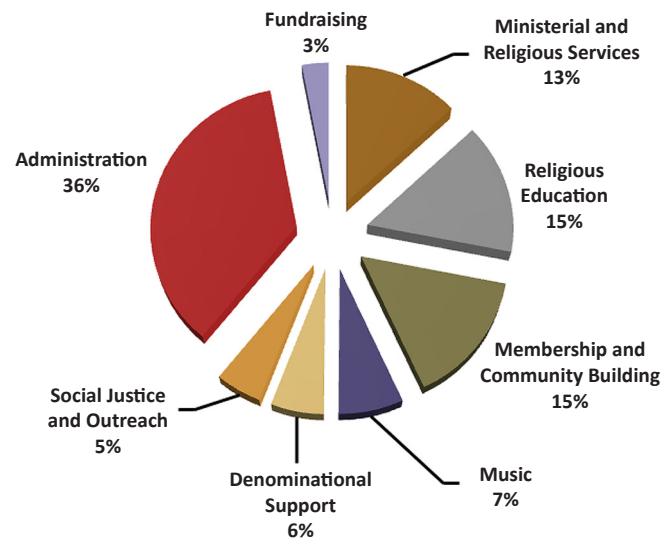
# THE FUTURE

## 2012-13 Financial Support



Pledges & Contributions	\$575,000
Fundraising	\$26,000
Other Income	\$21,000
<b>Total Received</b>	<b>\$622,000</b>
Bequest funds used to support addition of Saturday service	\$10,000
<b>Total Support</b>	<b>\$632,000</b>

## 2012-13 Money Spent



Ministerial & Religious Services	\$81,000
Religious Education	\$92,000
Membership & Community Building	\$97,000
Music	\$43,000
Denominational Support	\$36,000
Social Justice & Outreach	\$37,000
<b>Total Programming</b>	<b>\$386,000</b>
Administration	\$226,000
Fundraising	\$20,000
<b>Total Spent</b>	<b>\$632,000</b>

As we look forward to 2013-2014, we have *much* to share as a congregation and there's room for all of us to contribute. We will:

- Seek to hire an associate minister with a primary focus on organizing and supporting our work in the community for justice.
- Review results of recent studies about the needs of our building and grounds, and consider how our current facility supports our ministries.
- Support the ministerial internship of Linda Barnes, who begins two years of study, practice, and ministry with us in September.
- Journey with another Coming of Age class on their year of discovery and meaning.
- Grow our Saturday 5pm service and our Soul Matters program to include more people.
- Continue to nurture meaningful connections, pursue justice and inspire service in ways we may not even yet imagine.

**I can't wait to see what we will together become. How about you?**

**See you in church!**

*Mark*



# PEOPLE



## First Unitarian Church of Des Moines

*A Unitarian Universalist  
Congregation*

1800 Bell Ave.  
Des Moines, IA 50315  
(515) 244-8603  
www.ucdsm.org

## Staff

**Rev. Mark Stringer** • *Minister*

**Deb Dessert, CPA** • *Director of Finance and Administration*

**Tracy Beck** • *Director of Religious Education for Children & Youth*

**Lori Emison Clair** • *Director of Congregational Life*

**Moira Leu** • *Director of Music*

**Abby Chungath** • *Communications Coordinator*

**Sara Karbeling** • *Youth Coordinator*

**Terry Lillie** • *Caring Ministry Coordinator*

**Jane White** • *Office Assistant*

**Natalie Clark** • *R.E. Assistant*

**Connie Price** • *Bookkeeper*

**Sydney Williams** • *Membership Assistant*

## Board of Trustees

**Denny Schrock** • *President (Aug 2012 - Jan 2013)*

**Amy Luebbert** • *Vice President (Aug 2012 - Jan 2013), President (Jan - June 2013)*

**Deidre Fudge** • *Vice President (Jan - June 2013)*

**Linda Lemons** • *Secretary*

**Bob Belosky**

**Rob Heater**

**Michael Ream**

**Ann Rezarch**

**Darcie Vandegrift**

**Louise Alcorn** (*March - June 2013*)