



# WE ARE FIRST UNITARIAN

**2015  
Annual  
Report**

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines • A Unitarian Universalist Church



# MARK'S MESSAGE

“Every year, we create a church.” These words from member Bill Paxson come to mind as I look back at the past year in the life of our congregation. It’s true: Each year our choices of how we will contribute to and participate in the life of our religious community serve as the building blocks for the church we are becoming. When I look back at 2014-2015, I see us creating a church that makes me proud to say, “I Am First Unitarian.” How about you?

I see us laying the foundations of a new (or is it renewed?) identity as a justice-seeking, action-oriented congregation. From our all-church, faith-in-action day to our emerging partnerships with other justice and service organizations in town; from our accreditation by the Unitarian Universalist Association as a “Green Sanctuary” to our ever-growing Our Whole Lives human sexuality curricula offerings, we are helping to build the world we dream about.

I see the lay leaders of our “Tomorrow Team” inviting us to consider whether or not our facility and grounds are adequate to support our mission. Who do we want to be by 2025 and what kind of facility will we need to support our aspirations? Our conversation is just beginning, but I’m already appreciating how we are opening ourselves to the possibilities.

And I see us engaging with each other in shared learning, spiritual deepening, and socializing. Through weekly services and classes for all ages, monthly Soul Matters meetings, and affinity groups that allow for meaningful connections and creative interchange via common interests, we are growing our sense of community as we grow our souls.

Every year we create a church. And this past year, I think we have been wonderfully creative! Enjoy this report that highlights some of what we have together become. And let’s keep creating. As another new year in the life of our congregation awaits, our community needs us. And we need our community.

With joy for all we have been and hope for all we will be,

Rev. Mark Stringer

WE ARE

# PREPARED TO SERVE

Social action has long been a cornerstone of First Unitarian Church of Des Moines. During its 150 year history, First Unitarian members and groups have taken a stand for the right of women to vote, for religious freedom, in war protests, for civil rights and marriage equality. We help feed the homeless, advocate for those afflicted with mental illness, educate others on taking care of our Earth, and work to improve education for all. We realize that in this interconnected web of existence, the responsibility to make it a better world rests on each and every one of us. Many of our good deeds are done individually or in small groups, but without the broader community knowing that our Unitarian Universalist faith is exemplified in our outreach.



When Rev. Erin Gingrich came to First Unitarian in August 2014, one of her goals was to show the larger community our values in action by engaging the congregation in an all-church work day – “Faith in Action Day.” On Sunday, April 12, 2015, over 250 individuals of all ages participated in 13 projects around Des Moines, plus 8 projects and educational sessions at First Unitarian.

“I really loved the impression we were making in the wider community when we were all there in our ‘I Am First Unitarian’ shirts,” said Heather Schebel about her time volunteering with her sons, Gabe and Clark, at the Faith & Grace Garden, which grows and harvests over 12,000 pounds of vegetables for shelters each year. “We get so disconnected from our food and how much work it is to feed a human being. I liked teaching my boys that 30 people in 2 hours of hard work mulched about 10% of the garden and dug 20 holes (and they were big holes). But our hours there were going to be a drop in the bucket of the work that needs to be done at that garden this year.”



In the beginning, we may volunteer because we think it will make a difference to others. What we soon realize is how volunteering makes a difference to oneself, too. Whether it's picking up litter on our trails, feeding the hungry, or cleaning the cages of homeless pets - helping others can make us feel useful, acts as a break from the daily grind of our lives, and connects us to others, including those facing harder times. "David and I have worked on the trails at church, so we gravitated towards the [Polk County] trail clean up. It really opened my eyes because we came across an old homeless camp and the remnants from it, such as blankets and toys. That kind of shook us," said Andrea Quinn.

An on-line sign-up combined with accessible times, and a lovely spring day to help others in the company of relatives and friends made it easy to participate. "It felt like we were actually doing something and not just talking about it. It made it easy to make the jump," said Connie Muetzel.



After the Faith in Action Day, UUs continue to help make English learning books for refugees at EMBARC, volunteer at the Faith & Grace Garden on Monday evenings, and a Days for Girls work group started meeting once a month at church to sew more sanitary supplies to send to girls around the world.



# WE ARE MUSICAL



This year, First Unitarian continued to grow our music ministry for all ages. The Channing Chimes, a hand chime choir for kids, was introduced in October by Karen Kraemer, director of the adult chime choir, Bell Avenue Ringers. The group of 1st-5th graders practiced Wednesday evenings for a half hour. They debuted at the December music service, and also performed at 2 other Sunday services, plus the all-church talent show in May.

Karen received many compliments from the congregation, but the biggest compliment are from the kids who enjoyed participating in it. "I liked all of it: the music, being with my friends, playing songs in front of the church. I like everything," praised Gavin Houchins-McCollum.

Another addition to the music program in 2014-15 was "Strings Attached," a group for those who play stringed instruments, whether it be guitar, bass, fiddle, viola or banjo. "I felt it was a good opportunity to have another musical outlet to help build community," says Moira Leu, Music Director. Performances were given at the December music service and the May Talent Show.

Music has a special ability to bring comfort to others during hard times, creating a natural connection between the UU choir and the church's caring ministry work. Choir members visit ailing members to help lift their spirits with song. Individuals may choose favorites from our hymnals, but special requests can be made as well. The choir sang for Phil Jorgensen, Ruthanne Harstad, and a special video recording was sent to Priscilla Witke in Vermont.



# WE ARE ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS



At the 2011 Annual Meeting, the congregation approved the commencement of working towards the UUA's Green Sanctuary designation. The next three and a half years were filled with hard work by the Energy and Justice for All group and others to complete the requirements of this designation. The Green Sanctuary designation is not only for our building and grounds, it is also for the people within its walls and the actions we take to be environmental stewards in all we do. The following are just a few of the more than 15 projects completed for this accreditation, which First Unitarian received in 2015:



- Trail building and a labyrinth in the church woods
- Enviroscoouts, a 9-month long, weekly program for children to explore ways of living gently on our earth
- Donations to the DMACC Green Energy Scholarship Fund to support low income students studying for a career in wind energy



- Redesigned our biocell outfall
- Started a congregational curbside recycling program
- Rain barrels were placed to save on city water use
- Replaced 13 fluorescent bulbs with LED bulbs through funds from a REACH grant
- Installed a bike rack at the south doors of the church



The Tomorrow Team was formed to determine how to engage YOU, the congregation, in discussions about the future of the church, with a particular emphasis on the facility we need, and the church we envision – the church our ends statements say we want to be.

“Dreaming” sessions held in January clearly showed YOU want MORE. To embrace MORE people at First Unitarian. MORE programming. MORE community involvement. MORE social justice activities. MORE educational and social activities. MORE and larger indoor spaces. MORE effective use of outdoor spaces. MORE parking.

- Fifty percent of you responded that our current facility does not meet our needs today.
- Eighty-five percent of you do not think our facility will be adequate to meet our needs in 5-10 years.
- Eighty-five percent of you also responded the congregation should begin pursuing plans for a capital improvement project, considering that it will take 4-6 years for that project.
- “Dreaming” sessions also showed that you want to stay here at 1800 Bell if MORE can happen here.



During the next year, the Tomorrow Team will assess the current site in light of your dreams. Watch for MORE in the coming months.

A word cloud of the responses attendees to the January dreaming sessions gave when asked to envision our Programming in 2024.

# WE ARE THE FUTURE

We continue to grow as we find new and meaningful ways to put our **FAITH INTO ACTION!**

## This year we held our first Faith in Action Day on April 12<sup>th</sup>!

- We cancelled services to work on service projects together.
- 250 people mobilized to work on 21 service projects!
- We formed new partnerships and they continue to grow, with volunteers continuing to work with EMBARC, Faith & Grace Garden, and Days for Girls.

## We decided to give **100%** of our offering to social justice outreach.

- 50% of the collection will support church groups who work in the community. The other 50% will support outside organizations that you nominate.
- Partnerships now include service projects!

## Next year, we will learn about restorative justice as an alternative to incarceration.

- Iowa has one of the nation's highest rates of the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans. We are working on multiple projects to eliminate this.
- We will continue to train mediators to support middle school students through conflict as an alternative to police intervention.
- Through AMOS and the Des Moines Police Department, we are building a new mediation program to divert youth from the juvenile justice system.

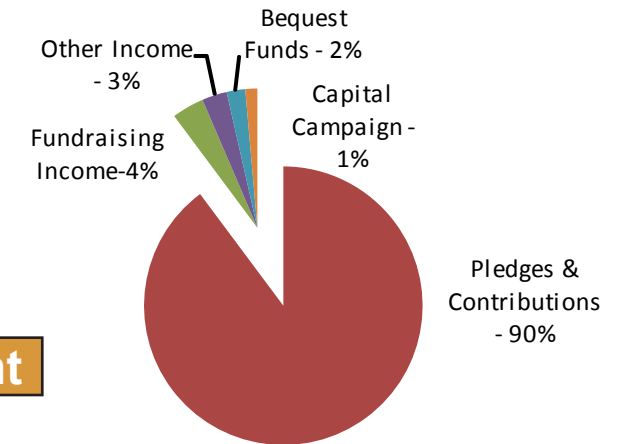


What else is to come at First Unitarian? Whatever we dream of doing. Let's keep dreaming!  
Rev. Erin Gingrich

# FINANCIALS AT FIRST UNITARIAN

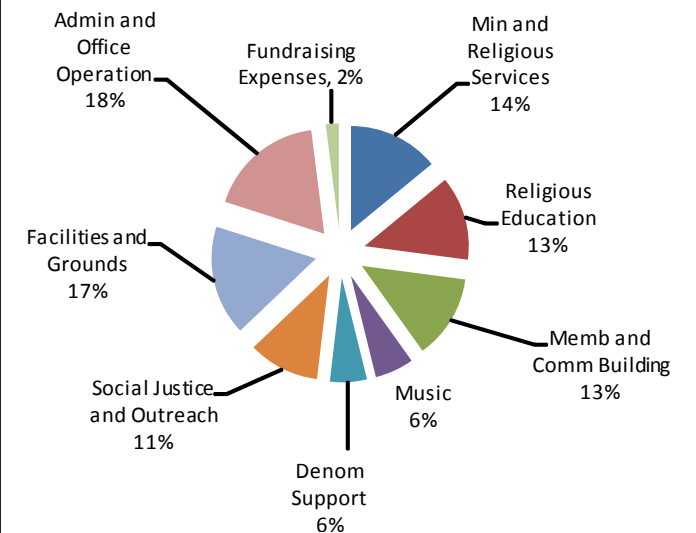
## 2014-15 Financial Support

Pledges & Contributions	\$684,000
Fundraising	\$28,000
Other Income	\$22,000
Bequest Funds	\$17,000
Capital Campaign Funds	\$11,000
<b>Total Support</b>	<b>\$762,000</b>



## 2014-15 Money Spent

Ministerial & Religious Services	\$106,000
Religious Education	\$96,000
Membership & Community Building	\$101,000
Music	\$44,000
Denominational Support	\$42,000
Social Justice & Outreach	\$87,000
<b>Total Programming</b>	<b>\$476,000</b>
Facilities & Grounds	\$133,000
Admin & Office Operations	\$137,000
<b>Total Administration</b>	<b>\$270,110</b>
<b>Fundraising Expenses</b>	<b>\$16,000</b>
<b>Total Spent</b>	<b>\$762,000</b>



**First Unitarian Church of Des Moines**

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Des Moines, IA 50315

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