



Congregation Information

The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor

About The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor

The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation has been an active liberal religious voice in the Ann Arbor community since our founding on May 14, 1865. Visitors to our church immediately see the outward symbols that speak to who we are: the rainbow flag of welcome to people of all gender identities flies from our entryway; Some people refer to our 90 foot tall wind turbine as our steeple; A rotating solar panel stands in the prairie grass in front of the church, collecting renewable solar energy; In back of the church there are walking trails and a colorful children's playground.

We are an intentionally inclusive and supportive religious community of over 600 activist members who worship together, reach out to our community together, laugh together and nurture our children with a UU perspective of our World. We are a creedless religion that finds inspiration in encouraging each other's individual spiritual journeys.

We have a long, rich history of social activism. At least one of our church founders, Richard Glasier, was part of Michigan's underground railroad, helping slaves escape to Canada in the 1850s. In the late 1880s women from the congregation were active in women's rights and women's suffrage. Unitarian minister's wives Eliza Sunderland and Reverend Florence Kollock Crooker spoke frequently from the Ann Arbor pulpit as well as in national settings. Eliza Sunderland was very active in the intellectual life of early Ann Arbor and in 1892 became one of the first women to receive a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Michigan. Florence Kollock Crooker was a close friend of Julia Ward Howe and often used her pulpits as a Universalist Minister to promote women's rights.

In the early 1930s, during the ministry of the Reverend Harold P. Marley, the original draft of the Humanist Manifesto was authored and read in the church by congregant Roy Wood Sellars. During the 30s the church took an assertive lead in the civil liberties movement and in the Ann Arbor Community Forum, which debated and lobbied for means to end the Depression, for public school improvements and for upgrading city services.

In the decade before World War II the city and university doors were often closed to the emerging anti-war and peace movement groups as well as to the labor groups that were organizing. Our Unitarian congregation, always staunch supporters of free speech and civil liberties, voted to provide space for these groups to meet. In 1937, the Fellowship Room of the church was designated "Unity Hall" and the

church was opened seven days a week to house educational programs about labor problems and leadership skills for labor union activists. *The Washtenaw Progressive*, a "people's front" newspaper, with a governing body drawn from the workers' unions, was published in the church offices.

During World War II the Unitarians in Ann Arbor collaborated with the Unitarian churches in Detroit to serve the large number of workers coming in to Ypsilanti to work in the bomber plant. These services not only included a "Wayside Pulpit" for worship services, but provided a nursery, playground and recreational facilities, giving social work experience to many young people eager to serve in non-military programs.

In the 1960s the congregation was very involved in anti-war activities lead by Reverend Erwin Gaede, an ardent peace activist who staunchly opposed the Viet Nam War. During that time period the congregation organized "Project Transition", a program that provided transitional help to mental patients. In the 1970s the church supported the Black Economic Development League and helped lobby for racial integration in Ann Arbor neighborhoods.

In the 1980s and 1990s minister Kenneth W Phifer and members of the congregation supported gay, lesbian, transgender rights, hosting meetings for PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). In 1988, the congregation took in and for many years supported a Sanctuary family from El Salvador. During this time period the congregation also helped start the Interfaith Hospitality Network (now Alpha House) and reached out to form global connections with a partner Unitarian Church in Transylvania and with Unitarians in the Khasi Hills of India, descendents of the Unitarians visited by our minister Jabez Sunderland in the late 1800s.