

*"We kindle the light within and inspire courage to nurture the web of life
and to create a just and compassionate world"*



New Beginnings

FIRST UNITARIAN CONGREGATION OF OTTAWA

ANNUAL REPORT 2025-26



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Poetry

The Power of a Circle

In a circle, we gather, hand in hand,
Bound by a power that helps us understand.
The strength that resides in communal embrace,
Where no one gets lost, no one is misplaced.

A circle is sacred, like a warm embrace,
A safe haven where we find solace and grace.
Together we are, united in this ring,
Sharing stories, laughter, tears that bring

A deeper connection, a sense of belonging,
For in community, we find ourselves growing.
No one is left out, no one is alone,
The circle expands, through love we're shown.

In unity we stand, as diverse as can be,
Celebrating differences, our collective decree.
For within the circle, we embrace our kin,
Bound by the power of love from within.

-Langston Hughes





Message from the Minister

-Rev. Lara Cowtan

The first year of a new ministry is often a time of flux as we get to know each other and adapt to new or different ways of being and doing together, sometimes smoothly and sometimes with bumps, always moving forward toward deeper understanding and shared

ministry.

Gratitude for Volunteers – dedication, integrity, enthusiasm and deep talents of leadership and vision - Caring Team, Contacts and Visitors, Office Volunteers, Worship Associates, Hospitality, Group and program leaders, fearless Board peeps, etc.

Ministerial Goals – Program Year 2025–2026

In this first year of ministry, these goals emphasize relationship-building, shared leadership, and creating the conditions for healthy congregational life. I am encouraged by how our work together has already advanced these goals. We are on a positive and promising path in this shared ministry.

1: Community Presence and Relationships

- Strengthen the congregation's visibility and relationships with campus and community partners through consistent presence, worship leadership, and engagement in shared events.
- Shared plate offering and engagement with community outreach partners
- Unitarian House monthly worship services and small group meeting

2: Shared Ministry and Volunteer Support

- Programs being continued, reviewed, refreshed, developed. Adapting to ever-changing landscape of members, volunteer engagement and the context of the day so that ministry is shared, supported, and sustainable.
- Ajashki 2.0 unveiled its new mission statement – planning for garden summer, 2026.

3: Engagement of Families and Younger Members

- Support programs and practices that increase accessibility, participation, and belonging for young families and younger members of the congregation.
- Growing numbers of new members and families, activities like the Children's Choir, and Wednesday community dinners. Increased numbers in RE classes.

Progress towards these goals is reflected through the overall increased participation, program vitality, and trends in engagement across all the areas of congregational ministry.



Affiliated Community Minister

- Affirming Affiliated Community Minister Rev. Mwibutsa (formerly Fulgence) Ndagijimana

Community Ministry is a way of bringing Unitarian Universalist ministry to the world beyond our walls in a number of ways—through chaplaincy, hospice care, or working in nonprofit organizations, for example.

Being affiliated with this congregation means Rev. Mwibutsa is connected to us. It helps to ground his ministry and to remain in good standing and in relationship with our larger Canadian and international Unitarian Universalist Associations. Through Rev. Mwibutsa’s connection with First U, we get to benefit from some of their ministry gifts and be connected with the good work they do in the community.

Rev. Mwibutsa (formerly Fulgence) Ndagijimana is a Unitarian minister ordained in Burundi in 2011 and welcomed into the Unitarian Universalist Ministerial Fellowship (UUMFC) of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in 2018. Rev. Mwibutsa Has lived in Canada for 11 years and 6 years in Ottawa.

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Rev. Mwibutsa’s ministry is mostly with refugees, community development and nurturing Unitarian communities in Burundi and in Africa through a Canadian registered charity “Flaming Chalice International”. Rev. Mwibutsa is involved with the Pan African Unitarians as chair of the leadership team and the “Unitarian Francophone Project”. For Rev. Mwibutsa, being connected to ministerial colleagues and being part of the Unitarian family in Ottawa is important.

Description of Flaming Chalice International

Flaming Chalice International (FCI) is a CRA-registered charity that supports refugees in East Africa and community development projects in Burundi. FCI is currently involved in education projects such as “the Brilliant Minds” project supporting brilliant students from families of modest means and tuition support for university students.



Rev Lara leads us in Sunday Worship



Programming



Religious Exploration

-Jodi McIntosh, Director of Religious Exploration

Between April 2025 and April 2026, the Religious Exploration (RE) team continued to grow and strengthen programming for children, youth, and families. We expanded our Sunday morning offerings for children ages 2 to 12 from two groups to three groups, with average weekly attendance reaching 20 children. We also offered the Kindergarten and Grade 1 OWL program to 12 children between the ages of 5 and 7, providing age-appropriate learning and relationship-building opportunities.

Our youth programming remained active through a monthly youth group for ages 11 to 17, with attendance ranging from 7 to 16 participants each month. In addition, we launched Bridge and Branch, a homeschool co-operative created as an outreach program to the local homeschool community. Across two sessions, nine families participated, helping us build new connections and expand our reach beyond our congregation.

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Throughout the year, we offered three multigenerational services that brought together all ages in shared worship and learning. We also created a dedicated family area in the sanctuary, known as the Family Garden, and welcomed several new families into our programs, reflecting the continued growth and vitality of our RE community.

Looking ahead, the RE team has several exciting goals. We plan to offer the Grade 10 to 12 OWL program, which will include training at least four new facilitators. We also hope to create a dedicated youth space on Sunday mornings where youth can attend the service together and participate in a discussion group afterward.

We will continue our monthly evening youth group and, if volunteer capacity allows, divide participants into two age groups, ages 11 to 13 and 14 to 17, to provide more age-appropriate activities and deeper engagement. To support our growing programs, we also intend to introduce a new volunteer model in which every parent completes a Vulnerable Sector Check and contributes volunteer time on Sunday mornings.

Finally, we are exploring the possibility of offering a one-week summer camp in summer 2027, creating another opportunity for children and youth to build community, deepen friendships, and connect with Unitarian Universalist values.





Music Program

-Jenn Berntson, Music Director

The House Band, the choirs, and other volunteer musicians have continued to provide music for our Sunday services. In March 2025, we were thrilled to welcome Kimberly Waigwa as a guest clinician to work with all three of our choirs; they also provided music and were guest speaker at a Sunday service. We also hosted guest musicians Joe Jencks, Tony Turner, and Blue Petties performing in services/concerts. The choirs hosted “Singing Our Principles”, a concert of music uplifting our UU principles. In the fall we performed “Elbows Up!”, a concert of all Canadian music. Three Rivers also performed at a fundraising event supporting the GoGo Grannies. We also had Summer Choir and Christmas Choir, drop-in choirs that rehearsed in July/December respectively.

The choirs have provided music for several memorial services, and I have provided music for services at UHO. Mary Ella Keblusek and I did our annual Carols & Cocoa carolling event; unfortunately, a similar carolling event at UHO in December was cancelled due to health concerns. In March of 2026, I began running a pilot program for a Children’s Choir at FirstU; currently there are 14 registered children, and they have already performed at their first service. In the same month I also introduced a new digital hymnal, Sing Out Love. This is a subscription-based hymnal which will be used alongside our two existing hymnals.

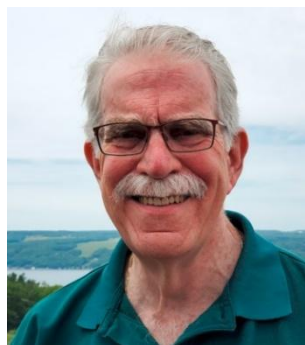
I hope to continue developing the curriculum for the Children’s Choir, as well as expanding our music library with more selections suitable for children’s voices. Another project I am hoping to carve out time for in 2026-27 is creating a memorial choir – a drop-in choir with the purpose of providing music for memorial services at FirstU. I also plan to continue familiarizing myself and our congregation with the new hymns from Sing Out Love.



FirstU Choir



Administration



Message from the President, Board of Directors

-Chuck Shields

The past year has been amazingly full. We bid farewell to Rev. Eric Meter and welcomed Rev. Lara Cowtan and have begun building a ministry with her.

Through all this there is much that has been going well for the congregation:

- There's a very exciting buzz in Worship Hall pre-service and in Fellowship Hall afterwards;
- In keeping with our reputation for generosity, last fall's annual pledge campaign reached a goal of 10% over last year's campaign;
- Services continue to be well attended with total numbers of those in the sanctuary and those on-line exceeding what we enjoyed pre-Covid;
- Our membership has been growing significantly to over 300 and our new members are contributing actively;
- Our RE program is vibrant and growing;
- Our music program continues to attract new participants and has added the Children's Choir;
- The programs organized by Adult Learning and Growth, have continued to provide the opportunity for congregants to connect in smaller groups; and,
- Our connections and sense of community have continued to strengthen through our many active groups and by:
 - The hundreds who came together to make the Fall Fair a success;
 - A successful Time and Talent Auction;
 - The Men's Breakfast Group bringing the men of the congregation together to prepare and share a meal and participating in stimulating presentations and discussions;
 - The newly launched Community Dinners which have attracted a multi-generational audience.

Our Odayanhaway Project has continued to progress with work on many details as we still aim to start construction this fall. Just prior to the start of construction, we are looking forward to joining with Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services to hold a ceremonial groundbreaking and celebration.

There has also been a lot of positive work with our long-term campus partners:

- With Unitarian House we have been having discussions about developing a long-term extension of their lease rather than their request last year to purchase their property.



This has been facilitated by regular and very positive meetings of the senior leadership groups of our two organizations. From Unitarian House this has involved Ian Arnold, president, Louise Schwartz, vice-president and John Goodwin, a member of their executive committee. Participants from FirstU have been me, Mary Ella Keblusek, our vice-president, and Terry Kimmel, our representative to the Unitarian House Board.

- We have worked with River Parkway Children's Centre to address issues related to the Odayanhaway project and for renewing their lease in early 2027.
- We are also working with Or Haneshamah, the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation that we have hosted for several years, to renew their lease.

So, the past couple of years while I've been pleased and honoured to serve as president have been a bit of a blur.

But there is a lot that we have accomplished and I have to stress the 'WE' because it has been due to the efforts of hundreds. I've been particularly heartened by the number of times that members of the congregation have said, 'Yes!', when I asked them to take on a responsibility. It is by stepping forward in these ways that we are able to move FirstU towards delivering on our mission.

There also are some particular people and groups who have helped immensely over the past two years as I've served as president. I would like to give them all a special thanks:

- The members of the board
- Rev. Lara
- The staff team, including the office volunteers
- The Odayanhaway Project Team – Lisa Sharp, Brent Nicolle, Terry Kimmel and Bill Van Iterson
- To Mary Ella Keblusek, Terry Kimmel and Bill Van Iterson a special thanks for stepping up and taking over some areas of my responsibilities that allowed me to enjoy a couple of vacations.

Although I'll be moving on from the president role, I'm looking forward to continuing to work with members of the congregation and staff to build this spiritual community that helps us with our individual spiritual journeys but also makes a valuable contribution to our Ottawa community and the national and global communities of fellow UUs!

Operations and Facility Management

-Jen Brennan, Operations Manager

Day-to-day operations of the administrative office remained steady throughout the year, with no significant challenges or disruptions. This is in part due to our competent office volunteers that greet you each workday and on Sundays, from the main office.

Rental revenue exceeded budget projections, which was particularly encouraging given the anticipated reduction in rental income during the upcoming construction period.

The custodians continue their careful oversight of cleanliness, safety and accurate set-ups.



FirstU is facing rising costs. Everyday necessities such as paper, cleaning supplies, utilities, software subscriptions, and other operating expenses continue to increase. While our staff carefully monitor these costs and seek ways to use resources wisely, we all have a role to play in being thoughtful stewards of our shared space and supplies. We ask that you remember this when using paper towels, photocopy paper and office supplies; also, please remember to turn off lights and close windows. Together we not only save some money, but these collective actions are gentler on our planet.



FirstU Staff Christmas Party 2025

FirstU Bookshelf

-Jan Davis, Coordinator

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The Bookshelf is offered most Sundays from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in Fellowship Hall, except on holidays and when the hall is being used for church meetings or other groups. The Bookshelf provides congregants with access to new books at cover cost and can also order books for those who may not have easy access to bookstores. In addition to serving as a source for books, it provides a welcoming space for book-related conversations and community building, appealing to both new members and regular attendees who enjoy discussing a variety of genres and authors.

In 2025, two new volunteers, Lark and Brandon, joined Jan in supporting the Bookshelf's operations. The Bookshelf generated total revenue of \$863.45 during the year, with expenses of \$661.49, resulting in a net surplus of \$201.96. In the fall of 2025, a donated and second-hand book table was also introduced. While proceeds from these sales are directed to FirstU's general accounts rather than the Bookshelf itself, the initiative has expanded opportunities for sharing books and encouraging community engagement around reading.

Looking ahead, from July through August and again in December, the Bookshelf will offer a liquidation sale with books purchased prior to 2024, and now more than three years old, available at 50% off the original cover price. Exceptions will be made for classic titles and other books that continue to sell regularly at full price. Since taking over management of the Bookshelf from Margaret, it has become apparent that approximately 100 titles from 2024 and earlier remained unsold. Many of these books are now dated and can no longer reasonably be sold at cover price, particularly when comparable titles are commonly available in thrift stores for less than \$5.



The liquidation initiative is intended to refresh the inventory, recover a portion of the funds tied up in older stock, and create space for newer and more relevant titles. Revenue generated through these discounted sales will be reinvested in purchasing new books that better reflect current interests and demand within the congregation. As of May 2026, the Bookshelf account holds a balance of \$2,520.11, providing a solid foundation for maintaining and renewing the collection while continuing to support this valued congregational resource.

FirstU Library

-Jan Davis, Coordinator

During 2025, the library catalogue was successfully transferred from a paper-based system to an online Excel catalogue. Work has continued to update both the paper and online catalogues, archive materials on an ongoing basis, receive and catalogue donated books, and maintain accurate records of library resources. Regular volunteer support has been provided each Friday from 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. to assist with library maintenance. Ongoing efforts have also included sending reminders for overdue books and ensuring that the library remains clean, organized, and welcoming following weekend activities and use by outside groups.

Looking ahead to Fall 2026, there is a desire to further animate the library and expand its role within the congregation. Plans include publishing a Spire article, tentatively titled *All About Books*, highlighting the library and bookshelf resources available to members. Another initiative under consideration is a monthly *Sharing Books* discussion group, to be held on the last Friday of each month from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. This gathering would provide opportunities for participants to discuss books they are reading, feature notable titles from the library collection, and potentially host authors from within the congregation.

There is also interest in broadening the library's offerings beyond books. Future possibilities include creating a lending collection of board games and, potentially, musical instruments, helping to foster greater community engagement and shared resources. A deposit system may be explored for these items if needed.

Committees of the Board

Campus Planning Committee (CPC)

-Terry Kimmel, Chair

CPC has been in a communication mode over the past year, reporting to its members on activities related to the affordable housing project, Odayanaway. This project has mainly involved FirstU executive and Board and specific FirstU members of CPC. During the year the Chair participated in drafting the various agreements between FirstU, Theia Partners, and Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services. We have briefed our campus partners on progress with the project. The Chair has also been involved in drafting a lease extension for River Parkway Children's Centre and a short-term lease of our parking area for a company to stage the construction of a building on Richmond Road.



I expect '26/'27 will be more of the same as the Odayanaway project begins the construction phase. Significant communications will be required so that all campus partners understand construction plans and schedules. This period will mean interruptions on the campus and challenges with parking. A lease extension with Unitarian House is likely to progress during this period with involvement from FirstU members of CPC.

Finance Committee

-Guy Belleperche, Chair

During the past year, the Committee developed and refined the next iteration of the annual budget, monitored congregational finances throughout the year, examined the annual audit before recommending its acceptance by the congregation. We continued refinement of the Long-Term Financial Model (LTFM), review and maintenance of the suite of financial policies, and provided financial input to Campus Development activities as required.

Governance Committee

Guy Bellperche, Chair

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During much of the reporting period, the committee did not meet, and no work was accomplished. A new chair, John Emond, was appointed in April 2026, and he has re-energized the committee and is currently working with the committee to review and revise the workplan for the 2026-27 church year. Work has also begun to update the General Operating By-law to incorporate changes suggested by the Membership Task Force in their 2024 report to the Board. Of note, Bill Van Iterson, a long-time committee member, has stepped back to focus on other FirstU activities.

Beyond work on the By-law and development of an accompanying Membership Policy, the committee will focus on priorities identified in the workplan as approved by the Board of Directors. The committee will also actively seek new members.

Nominating Committee

-Mike Fletcher, Chair

The Nominating Committee is currently composed of Mike Fletcher (chair), Eva Berringer, Katherine Gunn, Mike Llyod, Lisa Sharp.

Current Board of Directors

The Board of Directors should be composed of eight elected directors, plus the past president serving one year as ex-officio director. Currently, one board position is unfilled, and the nominating committee is actively looking for a candidate who could fill the role of secretary. The past president role is currently vacant but will be filled by Chuck Shields. Board directors must be active Members of the Congregation and typically serve up to two 3-year terms.

Nomination to Elect Directors to the Board

The Nominating Committee nominates the following candidates for the Board of Directors:



- Jane Lindsay to the first year of a first 3-year term.
- Maury Prevost to the first year a first 3-year term
- Carman Contreras to the first year of a second 3-year term.
- Guy Belleperche to the first year of a second 3-year term.

Nominations of Officers of the Congregation

The Officers of the Congregation (President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer) are nominated and elected by the congregation on an annual basis. Officers may hold the same office typically for up to two years in a row. The President and Vice-President must be Board members.

The Nominating Committee nominates the following Officers of the Congregation:

- President: Mary Ella Keblusek for her first one-year term
- Vice President: Maury Prevost for his first one-year term
- Treasurer: Guy Belleperche for a second one-year term
- Secretary: Carl Sonnen as a non-director secretary

Chuck Shields will leave the president role this year to become past president and Amy Bérubé left the board and her position as the board member on the nominating committee. We thank Amy and Chuck for their service during a very busy and successful period at First U.

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UU Connections Committee

-Guy Belleperche, Chair

Our key activities in from April 2025 to June 2026 were ensuring FirstU participation in the 2025 and 2026 CUC AGMs through the recommendation of delegates and alternates to the Board of Directors, working with the minister to organize a Sunday service in support of the CUC's Sharing our Faith Fund, and highlighting CUC seminars of interest to FirstU members through notices in the eUU.

In the 2026-27 church year, the Team will continue to focus on participation in the CUC AGM, seminars and workshops, and organizing a service in support of the Sharing our Faith fund.



New member Recognition Ceremony



Teams

Adult Learning Team

-Eva Berringer, Team Leader

The Adult Learning Group organized and led workshops and sessions that deepened understanding of Unitarian Universalism and explored how to more fully live into its principles. Highlights included the Mapmaking program, offered in spring 2026, and ongoing theme-based Journey Groups. The group also supported educational sessions on a range of topics, including Marine Mammals of Nunatsiavut: Sounds and Insight about Labrador (October 2025), Colourblind: A Particularly Polite Breed of Racism, and Empathic Compassionate Communication (winter 2026). Work is also underway with the Embracing Diversity Team to offer Upstander training.

The group continued to support a wide variety of ongoing programs that foster spirituality, learning, personal growth, and community connection. These included Mindfulness Meditation, the Spirituality and Philosophy Group, Reading for Growth Groups, the Women's Personal Growth Group, Tai Chi, the Virtual Discussion Circle, Women's Spiritual Circle, and the Women's Pagan Circle. A new study group, The Mess We're In, was established in 2025 to explore books addressing contemporary social and environmental challenges. Other groups focused on connection and shared interests, including the Men's Breakfast, Poetry Sharing Group, Thursday Discussion Group, Knitters' Group, Mah Jongg, Bridge, and a new Euchre and Games Group introduced in 2025.

Looking ahead, the Adult Learning Group will focus on recruiting new team members, which will be essential to sustaining and ideally expanding its programming. Planned activities include the delivery of multi-session courses such as Journey Groups, Mapmaking, and other programs that deepen participants' understanding of UU spirituality and its application in daily life. The group also intends to initiate or support additional programs that promote personal growth, respond to congregational learning interests, and encourage ongoing spirituality and learning groups in both in-person and online formats. Collaboration with other teams and action groups will continue, including partnering with the Embracing Diversity Team on follow-up Upstander training and other educational initiatives.

Caring Network Executive

-Carmen Contreras, Coordinator

During 2025, the Caring Network fulfilled its mandate by responding to congregants' questions, concerns and requests for caring cards.

Caring Contacts gave full attention and endeavoured to respond to **a variety of concerns** related to congregants' well-being, throughout the year. A total of **70 caring cards** were sent, including condolences, get well, birthday greetings, new baby, thinking of you, and



congratulations. **44 holiday greeting** cards were sent to those unable to attend church services in person. These cards featured artwork by Laurie Foster-MacLeod as well as a carefully crafted seasonal greeting.

The Caring Network Exec met 5 times (January, March, May, September, November). It hosted fellowship coffee hour in February (Heart Month) as is its tradition.

The Caring Network continues to link with the Caring Visitors, who follow up with congregants after a card has been sent or a concern expressed, as needed.

We will continue to respond to congregants' needs, grief, concerns and joys, endeavouring to connect them with appropriate help.

We are engaged in a review of Terms of Reference, including a better description of how we collaborate with the Caring Visitors Team.

We plan to engage in volunteer recruitment, as we have lost a few Caring Contacts through 2025. We hope to continue to hold special celebrations, such as we do in February each year. We would like to plan a celebration, with the Worship Team, for Volunteer Week 2027.

Embracing Diversity Team

-Nina Strang, Coordinator

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Over the past year, Nina Strang became Chair of the Embracing Diversity Team. The team organized the Annual Pride Service, *Care and Love Will Set Us Free*, featuring Blue Petties, and coordinated FirstU's participation in the Capital Pride Parade in collaboration with UUFO.

We also established a FirstU presence at the Capital Pride Community Fair for the first time. More than 15 volunteers staffed the table, helping to strengthen engagement within FirstU and build connections with the wider community. Conversations at the Fair led to increased attendance at some FirstU services and events. In addition, we hosted several UUPride social events, including board game gatherings and a T-shirt-making event.

The group transitioned from a Board committee to a team reporting to the Minister. Members of Embracing Diversity also supported and participated in the Transgender Day of Visibility Service and the Authentic Selves Workshop.

Looking ahead, the team will continue to organize and provide the annual Pride Service each August and will review and update its Terms of Reference. We will also organize and lead FirstU's participation in the Ottawa Capital Pride Parade and Street Festival, while planning additional events during Pride and other days of significance as capacity permits.

The team remains committed to fostering a welcoming environment at FirstU for marginalized communities, including through the use of the Welcoming Guide as a resource and workshop tool. We will continue collaborating with other FirstU groups, committees, and external organizations to present events and workshops, such as Upstander Intervention training, and will host UUPride social events for 2SLGBTQ+ Unitarian Universalists and the broader 2SLGBTQ+ community. We will also explore the feasibility of establishing a 2SLGBTQ+ family resource group at FirstU.



Hospitality Team

-Tarrel Armstrong, Coordinator

Hospitality Hour has been busy as usual over the past year. We still have a group of long-time volunteers and others have joined.

Besides setting up hot and cold beverages and snacks of many sweet items, we have assisted at BBQ and picnic events, new members cake events, food events before choir concerts and setting up the table for the Mia's to serve their delicious food.

We prepare a tray each week now with coffee and snacks to go to the Lounge for a conversation group after the service.

Though not exactly in the timeframe mentioned above (hopefully before) – a team of volunteers along with the Men's Breakfast Group will do a thorough review and reduction of equipment etc. in the cupboards/shelves in the kitchen and some in the old 'apartment room' (don't know what to call it at present).

We will continue to recruit more volunteers and to make working in the kitchen a rewarding activity.

Meditation Gardens

- Susan Mellor and Margaret Linton, Chairs

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Once the garden reshaping parameters were set in April 2025, we identified vulnerable plants and assessed relocation options. Several species, including a memorial ornamental tree, were transplanted. Three arborists provided estimates to relocate a pendulous spruce memorial. Plans are also underway to move two memorial benches—a heavy granite bench and a wrought-iron bench that will require securing; funding is yet to be determined.



Three contractor estimates were obtained for replacing a structurally unsound wooden footbridge in the south garden. With the Property Committee covering half the cost, the new bridge was completed by summer's end.

Two letters were prepared for the FirstU President to notify individuals associated with endangered memorials (A. Beale and K. Elliott), with at least six additional letters to follow pending research.

In addition to routine garden maintenance, pathway gravel was replenished, the wooden garden shed was repainted, and our growing collection of red dresses was displayed for May 5 MMIWG Day.

While the Team is not normally active during the winter months, during a possible construction start-up we hope to establish a more direct communication link with the construction project manager to ensure vulnerable trees, plants and other assets are appropriately protected. How construction will impact gardening activities in 2027 is unknown, but we will attempt to develop contingency plans to mitigate.



Property Team

-Jen Brennan, Operations Manager

The Property Team at First U held a fire drill in the autumn of 2025 which is an annual requirement by the Fire Department. The congregation aced it!

Huge thanks to Team member Patti Wunsch for painting the exterior masonry.

After much research by Bill Van Iterson, it was determined that there was enough power in the current source to the church, so we will not be adding more when the new transformers are brought in for the new buildings.

Much work was done (research and obtaining quotes) to facilitate a number of projects that are now being done in 2026, such as fixing and refinishing the main doors and dealing with drainage issues under the main stairs. These and other projects will be completed in 2026/27.

Right Relations Team

-Lisa Boulay and Marilen Gerber, Co-Chairs

The Right Relations Team is currently made up of four members: Marilen Gerber and Lisa Boulay (Co-Chairs) and Lena Jones and Jennifer Shaw-Reid. We have not met as a Team since 2024, as there were no referrals to us. Since the arrival of the new minister, Rev. Lara Cowtan, we plan to meet with her this year to discuss or revise our role.

Our Team plans to discuss with the minister what role we should have in the current congregational structure.

Welcome and Membership Team

-Carol Card, W&M Team Member

-Greeters (under the responsibility of Andrew Drake): A team of three to four volunteers, including an elevator operator, was in place before and during each service to welcome people, hand out the order of service, count attendance, and collect and count the collection.

-Welcome Table (Mary Jackson): The WT was staffed every Sunday by a W&M team member to provide information and name tags to visitors, help repeat attendees start to engage with the congregation, and give membership application forms to those who are ready to take that step.

-Outreach (Brent Nicolle): Outreach engaged with visitors and responded to enquiries sent to welcome@first... Two well-attended sessions of "Introducing Ourselves" were organized for newcomers.

-New member applications (Carol Card): Over the past year, 34 new members were accompanied through the membership process to Board approval. Welcome ceremonies were organized and conducted in two Sunday services.

In the next program year, we plan to continue with the same activities.



Worship Associate Team

-Lisa Boulay, Chair

The role of the Worship Associate Team is to assist and support the Minister and/or guest speakers during Sunday services. During the summer of 2025 and at other times when the Lead Minister was away, the team took the lead in coordinating and facilitating services. This included working closely with guest speakers to develop services, communicating with the Music Director regarding music selections, and ensuring that service descriptions and speaker biographies were provided to publications staff so that services could be promoted within and beyond the congregation.

Over the past year, the team made several improvements to its organization and communication practices. A Google Drive folder was created to house the Worship Associate spreadsheet, meeting minutes, and other important documents. The team also adopted Google Groups to facilitate communication and piloted a new process for coordinating schedules. Worship Associates continue to meet every two months to discuss worship planning and team business.

The team celebrated the contributions of long-time Worship Associates Mary Jackson and Susan McKenzie upon their retirement and welcomed two new Worship Associates, Alexis McKenzie and Paul Julien. In addition, brief Worship Associate reflections were introduced as part of Sunday services, providing another opportunity for personal insight and congregational connection.

Looking ahead, the Worship Associate Team will continue to support the Minister and guest speakers during Sunday services and will continue planning worship around monthly themes. The team intends to expand the inclusion of Worship Associate reflections in services and implement a backup system to ensure coverage when a Worship Associate is unexpectedly unable to attend. Worship Associates will also take a larger role in leading services when Rev. Lara is away.

A Worship Associate retreat is planned for May 2026, and the team will review and revise the Terms of Reference for the Worship Associate position. The team will continue to meet bi-monthly, or as needed, and will begin planning for the Summer Services program in 2027.



Men's Breakfast Group prepares the feast for Congregational BBQ



Fundraising

Fall Fair

-Catherine Pope, Director

The Fall Fair runs a large bazaar in November, which is a major fundraiser for the congregation. A large number of volunteers, many from outside First U, transform nearly all areas of our church building into a giant marketplace. The purpose is to raise funds for the operations of the church, build community within and beyond the congregation, disperse unsold donations to charitable organizations, and put our environmental principles into practice in dealing with waste and recyclables.

This year the Fall Fair was held on November 15th, 2025.

There were 330 volunteer positions and over 40 new volunteers. That number included friends, new members and young members.

The event was very successful, with Net Sales of \$45,502 and Net Revenue of \$40,470.

18 The construction of the LRT on Richmond Rd, the closure of the Parkway and threat of freezing rain may have impacted the numbers of people that usually come to the Fall Fair.

During set-up week there were four medical incidents with older volunteers. Fortunately, we had medical volunteers available. Our Safety & Security team identified challenges and gaps that need to be resolved by the church.

A Fall Fair Task Force has been created to look at Leadership Succession and the impact of new construction on the property.

The Director, Communication Coordinator and Volunteer Coordinator positions need to be filled for next year. There are several other leadership roles to be filled. A number of convenors have indicated that they will stay in 2026 to “train” volunteers to fill their roles for the following year. It appears to be easier to get co-convenors rather than successors; shared responsibility helps.



Social Responsibility

Social Justice Action Network (SJAN)

-Justine De Jaegher, Treasurer

The Social Justice Action Network (SJAN) continued to bring together its member action groups throughout the year, supporting collaboration, communication, and coordinated planning. The network remained actively engaged in budgeting and activity planning while providing opportunities for member groups to share updates, identify common priorities, and strengthen connections across their areas of work. Detailed information about the accomplishments and activities of each group can be found in their individual reports.

SJAN currently includes the Justice and Equality Action Group (JEAG), the Environmental Action Group (EAG), the Mental Health Support and Action Group (MHSAG), and the Unitarian GoGos. A representative from the Embracing Diversity Committee also frequently participates in SJAN meetings, helping to foster communication and cooperation between the committee and the network's action groups.

Throughout the year, SJAN continued its role in convening action groups and supporting donations to partner charitable organizations. The network also maintained regular oversight of its financial resources through quarterly reviews with the congregation's Finance Manager and developed budget plans aligned with the congregation's fiscal year.

Looking ahead, SJAN plans to organize a social justice forum for FirstU, providing an opportunity for education, discussion, and engagement on issues of social justice. The network will continue to support its member groups, strengthen partnerships with charitable organizations, and ensure responsible financial planning in support of its mission and objectives.

Pride 2025



Pride Info Table 2025



Environmental Action Group

-Mike Fletcher, Chair

The Environmental Action Group (EAG) remained actively engaged in environmental advocacy throughout the year, supporting three major campaigns: Opposing both the Provincial Bill 5 and the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline, and supporting the continuation of the tanker ban on British Columbia's North Coast, and opposing. The group also encouraged environmental awareness and action within the congregation, with several members participating in the Draw the Line climate strike.

The group welcomed several new members, strengthening its capacity to carry out environmental initiatives and advocacy efforts. Additionally, a motion was passed directing staff to review the possibility of moving the congregation's banking services to a climate-friendly financial institution, reflecting the group's commitment to aligning the congregation's financial practices with its environmental values.

Looking ahead, the EAG will continue its work to promote the decarbonization of church-owned properties, including the church campus, Unitarian House, and River Parkway. The group will also explore ways to enhance resilience within both the congregation and the broader community, including investigating the potential role of resilience hubs.

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The group plans to support at least four environmental campaigns in the coming year while continuing to educate, engage, and mobilize congregants around environmental and climate issues. Through advocacy, community involvement, and practical action, the group aims to advance environmental sustainability both within the congregation and beyond.

Justice and Equality Action Group

-Lisa Sharp, Chair

The Food Cupboard continued to provide support to members of the community, including young adults, seniors, and families experiencing food insecurity. During the year, two successful fundraising events featuring performances by the Beacon Band were held, with donations directed to the Food Cupboard. A Thanksgiving food drive also helped replenish supplies and increase community awareness of the program. To expand storage capacity and improve operations, an upright freezer and a refrigerator were purchased with assistance from the Men's Breakfast Group. The program is supported by four dedicated volunteers who purchase groceries monthly, helping to ensure that food remains available to those who need it.

The Community Ministry and Partnerships Team continued to strengthen relationships with community organizations, including Bethany Hope Centre, Ten Oaks, and Ancoura. These partnerships support shared goals of community care, inclusion, and mutual support. Looking ahead, the team plans to develop a strategic plan for the Food Cupboard to guide its growth over the next two years and ensure its long-term sustainability. The team will also continue working with community partners to organize events, activities, and initiatives that benefit both the congregation and the wider community.



Refugee Support Action Group

-Eva Berringer, Group Leader

The Refugee Support Team remained active throughout 2025 and into 2026, providing sponsorship and settlement assistance to refugees seeking safety and stability in Canada. In January 2025, the team welcomed two refugees from Burundi and provided them with initial settlement support. Both individuals adjusted quickly to life in Canada and, within six months, had secured employment and become self-supporting, although their jobs were located outside the province. The congregation's formal sponsorship commitment concluded in January 2026. In June 2025, the team submitted a sponsorship application for a young man from Afghanistan who is currently residing in Tajikistan. He faces the risk of deportation to Afghanistan, where he could be subject to persecution by the Taliban. The team continues to monitor the progress of this application and advocate for a positive outcome.

The refugee sponsorship process also presented challenges during the year. In July 2025, the Syrian family the congregation had been sponsoring informed the team that they were withdrawing their application after Jordan, where they had been living, ended support for refugees. As a result, the family returned to an uncertain future in Syria.

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More recently, the team received notification that a young woman from Ethiopia is expected to arrive in Canada soon. Also, two sponsorship applications for young men from Burundi remain under review by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The team continues to monitor these applications and prepare to provide settlement support as refugees arrive.

The refugee sponsorship effort continues to benefit from strong interfaith collaboration. The Board of Or Haneshamah recently reaffirmed its commitment to the joint sponsorship initiative, and the team now includes three members from Or Haneshamah.

Looking ahead, the team will continue supporting refugees through the sponsorship and settlement process while monitoring applications currently in progress. It also intends to submit at least one additional sponsorship application, likely through the federal Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) program, and remains committed to providing compassionate support to refugees seeking a new beginning in Canada.

International Human Rights

The International Human Rights initiative remained focused on promoting awareness of Palestinian human rights issues throughout 2025. Activities included organizing film nights, guest speakers, and educational events that encouraged learning, dialogue, and community engagement. This work was carried out in partnership with organizations including Independent Jewish Voices, the Palestinian Youth Movement, and First United Congregation of Ottawa, strengthening opportunities for collaboration and advocacy.



Unitarian GoGos

-Sheila Green, Chair

We meet once a month and have a number of ongoing projects to raise funds and awareness for the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF). Most of our activities take place in Spring, Summer and Fall. Our annual Plant Sale is traditionally held outside at 30 Cleary on the Mother's Day weekend. We sell plants from our gardens and the gardens of friends and neighbours. We also have a gently used jewellery table and a Baked Goods table. Congregation members and neighbours often help out and donate plants and baking, and many purchase plants each year. In the past few years, we've not priced the plants but instead ask for a donation. Our leftover plants are donated to Ajashki who in turn take care of the pots at the side of the church for us as part of a Friendly Agreement. Due to the ongoing crisis in the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS caused by withdrawal of funds for USAID in sub-Saharan Africa by the United States, we have increased our Bake Sales to 3 or 4 per year and have had great support from the Congregation.

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Our fall fundraiser is our Biagio's dinner which we have been doing for a number of years. The past few years we have made it a small event in which we did not require a separate area and therefore didn't need a minimum number of 40 participants which made less money but is definitely less stressful and is always a very enjoyable evening. We will do this the same way this coming year. Our final activity of the year is our annual December Bake Sale in Fellowship Hall. We sell baking and also local honey and maple syrup. Once again, we did not price our products but accept donations which are always very generous. We have also participated in regional activities with other Grandmother Groups on occasion.

Our future goals are to continue supporting African Grandmothers and children through the SLF and gain some new members, whether they be grandmothers or Grand others, we welcome all ages and genders to our group with open arms. We also hope to keep our Friendly Agreement with Ajashki and are open to other collaborative activities with Ajashki and other groups in the Congregation.



Spring in the Meditation Gardens



Adult Programs – Spiritual and Growth Groups

Journey Groups

-Amalilly Sullivan, Convenor

Starting in October 2025 we've met twice monthly in-person and since December 2025 there's been a second group meeting twice monthly on-line. Both meeting types will continue until the end of May 2026.

In-person attendance has ranged from 4 to 8 participants and on-line from 2 to 4 participants.

Our only expense has been colour printing of the monthly one-page flyer. No donations have been collected to date (I feel so uncomfortable asking).

Assuming we continue to use the 2026-27 Meaning Making Project monthly themes, the groups will resume in September 2026 (perhaps October) through to the end of May 2027.

Should the theme packages not be available I have numerous ideas on how to continue the small group ministry.

The exact number, type and frequency of the Journey Group(s) will depend on interest and participation.

I anticipate continuing to co-ordinate and occasionally facilitate.

Spirituality and Philosophy

-Paula Theetge, Convenor

We have been meeting twice a month by Zoom, and we are reading *Lighting the Seventh Fire: The Spiritual Ways, Healing, and Science of the Native American*; by F. David Peat.

We are five people in the group, one of which is in B.C.

We will continue with this book until we finish it and then we will choose another book to read/study.



Women's Inclusive Pagan Circle

-Laurie Foster-MacLeod, Convenor

Since the last annual report (not sure if I submitted one last year...) we have continued to meet every 6 weeks to celebrate the Sabbats and cross-quarter days, except for Lammas in August, when we are on summer break. We met seven times in 2025. We take turns leading a ritual that all can participate in. These involve honouring the directions and elements, the Goddess and Gods, and workings that can include meditations, reflection, singing, and other creative activities. After the ritual has ended, we share refreshments and socialize.

Our group welcomes trans women, cis women, and nonbinary folks to celebrate the seasons together.

We ask for a suggested donation of \$5 to cover our costs, and to give money to First Unitarian.

Details about the meetings in 2025:

- **February 3:** *Imbolc/ Candlemas* – Co-facilitated by Laurie Foster-MacLeod and Allison Armstrong. 8 women attended
- **March 20:** *Litha/ Spring Equinox* – Facilitated by Laurie Foster-MacLeod. 5 women attended.
- **April 29:** *Beltane/ May Day* – Facilitated by Shasta Crombie and Nancy Maddams. 5 women attended
- **June 23:** *Summer Solstice* – Facilitated by Laurie Foster-MacLeod and Allison Armstrong. Attendance not recorded.
- **September 24:** *Mabon / Autumn Equinox* – Facilitated by Allison Armstrong and Helen. 12 women attended
- **October 29:** *Samhain/ Hallows* – Facilitated by Laurie Foster-MacLeod. 16 women attended.
- **December 22:** *Yule/ Winter Solstice* – Facilitated by Allison Armstrong. 14 women attended.

2026:

- **February 2:** *Imbolc/ Candlemas* – Facilitated by Laurie Foster-MacLeod. 15 women attended
- **March 25:** *Spring Equinox* – Facilitated by Nikki Chris. 10 women attended.
- **April 29:** *Beltane/ May Day* -- To be facilitated by Laurie Foster-MacLeod
- **June 24:** *Summer Solstice / Midsummer* – To be facilitated by Allison Armstrong

We aim to continue on as we have, hoping that more members of our group will take on facilitating rituals. Our group has now been meeting since January 2024, and we are becoming more cohesive, even though it's a drop-in – not a closed – group.



Wednesday Mindfulness Meditation Group

-Colleen Glass and Maryan O'Hagan, Facilitators

A weekly Mailchimp reminder provides the Zoom link and agenda to FirstU friends interested in meditation. It includes a weekly check-in prompt, a poem, and links to useful meditation resources. "What have we accomplished?" We shared the question "What have we accomplished?" with the core group of thirteen meditators; here is a resume of their replies: "The WEMM group has been a wonderful place to practice mindfulness and meditation. The co-leaders are thoughtful and sharing and have created a caring sangha (community) that I want to return to each week.... (WEMM) gives me an anchor for personal meditation practice and the benefit of sharing the wisdom of a group of knowledgeable spiritual friends... I have benefitted immensely by learning a few basics about Buddhism ...I am very grateful (and appreciative of dedicated and knowledgeable leadership), and it is a joy to learn ...the group makes me feel more grounded and connected, as I learn from the wisdom of our community each week."

The WEMM group aligns with Unitarian Universalist principles and grew out of an Adult Learning Workshop on Buddhism offered in 2012. Its objective is to develop skills in cultivating peace within that benefits both the individual as well as in the larger communities the members are involved in. WEMM is grateful to the church for this opportunity and hopes to continue under the umbrella of FirstU.

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Women's Personal Growth Group

-Evelyn Algar, Convenor

The Women's Personal Growth Group had interesting and diverse topics at our monthly meetings in the last year (2025-26)

Some of the topics were: Recognizing and giving credit to people in our lives for whom we are grateful; celebrations – birthdays; family and friends gatherings; Christmas; Blame (with a poem written by the presenter); and Poetry and Play. We are a small, but keen group.



Adult Programs – Fellowship Groups

Knitting Group

-Coral Sato, Convenor

The Knitters, during our weekly meetings at the church for the entire year (and individually knitting/crocheting at home), prepared goods for sale in our booth at Fall Fair.

In December, we sold mittens for Mitten Tree Sunday decoration and then also donated more mittens, hats, scarves, baby blankets, etc. to community organizations. Through revenue from Fall Fair, Mitten Tree and occasional other sales we contributed approximately \$3,500.00 to the church.

During the year we have donated knitted/crocheted items (mitts, scarves, kitchen cloths, etc.) to the nearby Parkdale Food Bank (via Sharen Bowen) and to other local community organisations on behalf of First U.

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Katherine Gunn has sent some of our donated mitts, etc. in various packages to Northern Communities.

Through Katherine Gunn, on behalf of First U, we have also given some of our yarn to other Community and Hospital knitting groups.

We offer a welcoming atmosphere for knitters/crocheters, beginners and experienced alike, that continues to attract new members from diverse communities.

We plan to continue knitting/crocheting articles for Fall Fair and Mitten Tree and also making donations of finished items and yarn to other Community groups as outreach from First U. New knitters/crocheters are always welcome to join us on Wednesday afternoons to learn new skills or remember forgotten ones. In our meetings we share information, knitting/crocheting techniques, and lots of empathy, support and fellowship.

Monthly Games Group

-Andrew Drake and Mary Ella Keblusek, Co-Convenors

The FirstU Games Group is a monthly in-person drop-in group that has been in operation since October 2025. We meet on the first and third Wednesday evenings of the month, from 6:30-8:30pm. Players arrive between 6:30 and 7:00pm. For Euchre – our original and principal offering - we make up fours as players arrive. People are also invited to play chess or backgammon, as they wish. We gather in Room 3 downstairs and generally play until 8:30ish. Everyone from novices to experts is welcome. There is even a "teaching table" for newer Euchre players.



Reading for Growth - Daytime

-Susan Mellor, Convenor

The group maintains a level of membership of around 8 participants, meeting monthly on Zoom (one of our members joins us from a Unitarian congregation in New Hampshire). We meet on the last Friday of the month between September and May.

We have established a communal system for choosing our non-fiction reading list, which provides an eclectic mix of subjects. However, we need to restrict our choices to books available in adequate quantities for borrowing from Public Libraries.

We liaise with First U. publications to announce the details of our meetings.

We will finalize our choice of 8 books for the period commencing September 2026 during our final meeting in May of 2026.

We will likely continue functioning in the established manner, although there could be adaptations such as extending our meetings into the summer months.

Thursday Discussion Group

-Andrew Drake, Convenor

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The FirstU Discussion Group is a monthly online drop-in group that has been in operation since the Covid-19 pandemic got rolling (April 2020). We meet every other Thursday afternoon, from 1:30-2:30pm. Discussion dates and topics are selected for the season (Sept-June) ahead of time and are shared with our mailing list prior to the start of the season. Membership is drop-in (we usually attract 6-7 people), and we let the conversation flow organically. During the pandemic, some people found the Discussion Group to be a good time to get together with each other while there were few other opportunities. Even now, we have people in London, Ontario who connect with friends in Ottawa at the discussion group.

Trivia Quiz Night

-Andrew Drake and Mary Ella Keblusek, Co-Convenors

The FirstU Trivia Quiz is a monthly online drop-in group that has been in operation since the Covid-19 pandemic got rolling (April 2020). We meet on the third Monday evening of the month, from 7:00-8:30pm. The trivia questions are taken from a variety of sources and topics and are divided into 7 rounds of 10 questions each – plus one bonus question per round.

Players score themselves, and are facilitated to play in teams, should they choose to do so, by the use of zoom breakout rooms. During the pandemic, some families found the Trivia Quiz to be a good way to get together with each other. Even now, we have players in Philadelphia and Calgary who connect with family and friends in Ottawa at the trivia night.



***Missing:
Ajashki Program, Time and Talent Auction, Treasurer's Report, Communications Team***

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Our New Adult and Children Little Libraries!

Thank you to Andrew Drake for proofreading this Report!

