

First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa

The Parkway Spire

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Deadline for next Spire submissions:
Nov 21, 2026

FirstU at Pride:

Barb Freeman, Saahil Cuccria and Danie



Caring Contacts

"We respond to your phone calls and emails when you wish to alert us to a need or concern, or when you want to celebrate a joy"

The Caring Network

September

Carmen Contreras	calesco@rogers.com	613-565-3613
Margaret DeCorte	m.003@gmail.com	613-722-1424

October

Maryan O'Hagan	maryan.ohagan@rogers.com	613-729-7752
Marianne Wood	mharhwood@gmail.com	613-725-3452

November

Barb Ryan	ryanbarb99@gmail.com	613-710-3131
Stanley Pope	stanleypope74@yahoo.ca	613-614-3750

Words from our Minister

~ Rev. Lara Cowtan



I returned to Ottawa in August after a long and nourishing summer break to find FirstU humming with activity. I was greeted by friendly, welcoming faces and a beehive of activity.

On August 19, the day after my return, we marked the momentous ceremonial groundbreaking of Odayanhaway with Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services (OAHS). Staff and volunteers had been busy for weeks preparing countless details.

The freshly renovated front doors offered a warm welcome into a sparkling-clean building, and so many hours and hands went into everything from managing parking to making and plating endless treats for the reception.

It was a truly wondrous and heartwarming celebration. I had tears in my eyes more than once, moved by the cultural ceremonies and songs and by the words of Indigenous leaders and community partners.

It was such an honour to participate in this occasion. I was so dang proud of this amazing congregation, UHO, and RPCC for the heartfelt joy and genuine hospitality shown as we welcomed visitors and new partners for Odayanhaway!

All the gardens were in their full summer glory, including the Ajashki Garden and Grow Towers. Kayoki beamed as he shared about how well the program had been doing.

On that first day back from my break, after greeting the staff and front desk volunteers, I ventured out to the lovingly tended Memorial Gardens. I sat in Brian's Reste, enfolded in the oasis of green, and thought of the long line of ministers who had enjoyed this space before me. I felt their presence and felt incredibly blessed to be serving this vibrant, loving, dedicated community—and to be living in Ottawa.

I lifted a prayer of gratitude, followed by a prayer of care for people in other parts of the world affected

by devastating storms, fires, earthquakes, wars, hunger, discrimination, and oppression. May every person know the kind of peace that sitting in this garden can bring to the heart. Such peace is precious and life-giving.

September is always a kind of new year for students, teachers, parents, cottage-goers, and congregations. It is fitting that our theme for the month is "Beginnings"—a time to reflect on where we are in our individual and collective journeys, what our next steps might be, and what we wish to renew or leave behind.

The theme of beginnings resonates in so many ways. Historic, seasonal, social, and cultural shifts often make September feel more like a new year than January 1. Over the summer, people have moved, started new jobs or schools, or adjusted to newly empty nests. Summer can feel like a liminal time, followed by a return to reality—but reality is not quite what it was in June, and neither are we. What is beginning now? What has ended? How do we honour and embrace it all? FirstU has many new "Beginnings" ahead. We will navigate them together.

As the ancient philosopher Heraclitus reminds us, *"You cannot step into the same river twice,"* because new waters are always flowing, and we are also changing. Every step is a new beginning.

The start of our new congregational year brings many beginnings: new opportunities, new people, activities and programmes, construction beginning this Fall, and the congregation's discernment about whether to call a new settled minister.

Through all of this, I am delighted, honoured, and excited to be with you as we embark on this journey together. Many blessings.

~ submitted by Rev. Lara Cowtan

News from the Board

~ Mary Ella Keblusek, Board President



It has been a very busy summer, as much went on behind the scenes related to campus development. For this edition of the Spire, I am writing with a report on the recent groundbreaking ceremony, and an update on our plans for beginning construction this Fall.

About 15 years ago, the idea of devoting more of FirstU's campus lands to affordable housing first began to form. While FirstU had created Unitarian House of Ottawa back in 1984 to provide affordable, supportive housing to seniors, many congregants felt it was time to do more to help the community. Since then, many from FirstU have spent countless hours working on this project, and forming the key partnerships that would bring us to this moment. This Fall, construction will finally begin on the two buildings that will be added to our campus to complete our 'Odayanhaway' Little Village.

In addition to the ceremony, which was conducted by elder Grandmother Irene Compton, there were speakers drawn from project partners, local dignitaries and cultural performances. A large number of community partners attended as well.

In his remarks, OAHS CEO, Justin Lewis stated that a 2024 Ottawa survey found that around 20% of those experiencing homelessness in Ottawa identified as Indigenous. He continued that the Odayanhaway project is an excellent example of 'Reconcili-Action' – where allies don't merely speak about the need for reconciliation, but take concrete steps to address it.

Rev. Lara and Cathy Connor, the project lead from OAHS, were [interviewed for All in A Day](#), with [additional print](#) and [video coverage](#) provided by CBC News.

If you weren't able to attend the Ceremony, you can [watch the full livestream here](#).



Representatives from the three partners that made Odayanhaway possible: Mary Ella Keblusek, FirstU, Rodney Wilts (Theia Partners) and Justin Lewis (OAHS)

August 19 OAHS Ceremonial Groundbreaking

On Wednesday, August 19, about 100 people gathered to celebrate a ceremonial groundbreaking of the Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services (OAHS) building that will provide 66 affordable and deeply affordable units on the FirstU campus.



Rev. Lara and Grandmother Irene

Construction plans this Fall

We still have a few more steps to complete before we have the final go-ahead from the city to begin

Continued on pg. 4...

News from the Board

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construction, but I can share with you, now, our anticipated time frame for how this will unfold.

Before construction on the new buildings can begin, underground utilities must be expanded for greater capacity, to serve those who will be living in the OAHS building or the Aspire 16-storey building. That work is expected to begin in September, and last approximately 2 to 3 months. Utility work will be completed in phases, beginning with the section of Cleary Ave. nearest to Richmond Road, then proceeding north and west past Unitarian House. While this work is being done, there will always be at least one lane open for traffic on Cleary.

The parking area directly east of River Parkway Children's Centre (also known as the CPR strip) will start being used to hold construction trailers and equipment around the beginning of November. About the same time, we are anticipating having a temporary construction entrance become available

to Richmond Road, running across the former Kristy's property. This will greatly reduce the amount of construction traffic that would need to use Cleary Ave to access the campus.

Excavation and construction on the area west of the two gardens where the buildings will be located will begin in mid-November (after the Nov. 14 Fall Fair). At that point, we will no longer have access to that area for parking. The Parking Task Force has been developing plans for managing our parking during construction, and will be communicating about it with the congregation this Fall, before construction begins. We anticipate that it will take about two years for the buildings to be completed.

We plan to issue regular congregational updates as development plans get finalized. Please feel free to email me at president@firstunitarianottawa.ca if you have any questions.

~ submitted by Mary Ella Keblusek , Board President

❖ In Our Thoughts ❖

Daniel Burrows, died in April 2026 (b. 1995); son of John Burrows, grandson of Isabel Burrows.

Neil Milroy, died 19 May 2026 (b.3 February 1942); his wife Janet Milroy (née Fairchild), daughter Sandra Milroy/McNab, son-in-law Shawn McNab, and grandchildren Shawn and Willow.

Sam Wilmott, died 31 July 2026; wife Bobbee Engel, family and friends.

Rev. Fred Cappuccino, died 6 August 2026 (b.28 January 1926); his wife Bonnie Cappuccino (née McClung), and their children and grandchildren.

~submitted by Alexandra Devine

RE-flections: Our Whole Lives

~ Jodi McIntosh, Director of Religious Exploration



Help Bring OWL Back to Our Youth

When I first came to FirstU about 22 years ago, one of the things that impressed me most was the incredible energy around the Our Whole Lives (OWL) program. My introduction to OWL was as an overnight monitor for the high school OWL weekends. When the opportunity came up to train as an OWL facilitator, I was excited to become part of this amazing program. I was able to share in the energy and excitement by helping facilitate, and later by being part of the core team offering the Grades 4-6 curriculum. I found it incredibly rewarding knowing that I was helping educate youth about such an important part of being human. Since then, I have been involved in offering the Junior High and Kindergarten/Grade 1 programs as well.

Unfortunately, the momentum that was driving the high school OWL program faded a few years ago, and the last time it was offered was almost ten years ago. The high school curriculum was updated in 2025, and I am excited to discover what new content and perspectives it has to offer.

This February, we hope to bring Grades 10-12 OWL back to FirstU. Those of you who have been around for a while may remember that, in previous years, our high school OWL program was offered several times a year in an intensive weekend format. We are moving away from that model and will instead be offering it once a week over a ten-week period. Same great program, new format.

OWL (Our Whole Lives) is a comprehensive, values-based sexuality education program developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. More than just a sexuality education program, OWL creates a space where youth can ask honest questions, explore identity, build communication skills, and learn how to form healthy and respectful relationships. It reflects our values of respect, inclusion, personal responsibility, and the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

To make this happen, however, we need at least three new facilitators to join the OWL team.

One of the things I love most about OWL is that facilitators do not need to be experts. What matters most is a willingness to learn, an ability to listen without judgment, and a commitment to creating a safe and welcoming space for young people. The program provides excellent training, detailed curriculum materials, and ongoing support. Facilitators work as a team, learning alongside one another and growing in the process.

Some of my most meaningful experiences at FirstU have come through OWL. There is something deeply fulfilling about helping young people gain information, confidence, and self-understanding while knowing they are supported by a caring faith community. OWL has long been one of the programs that sets Unitarian Universalist congregations apart, and I would love for a new generation of facilitators to experience that same sense of purpose and connection.

Facilitator training will take place online during several evening sessions in November, along with a Saturday training session. Registration opens September 15th and fills up quickly so if you are interested, please contact me as soon as possible to discuss the possibility of taking the training.

If you have ever wondered whether you might be called to this work, I would be happy to talk with you. Whether you are ready to commit or simply curious about what facilitation involves, please reach out. Together, we can ensure that this important and transformative program is available once again for our high school youth.

~ submitted by Jodi McIntosh, RE Director



New Year, New Themes: Journey Groups

What if you had a space where you could show up exactly as you are—messy, questioning, growing—and be met with curiosity instead of judgment?

That's what Journey Groups offer. These aren't book clubs or study sessions. They're small, intentional gatherings where participants explore the monthly congregational themes and life's big questions together.

They're sacred spaces where your story matters, vulnerability is welcomed, and growth happens in community.

Everyone is encouraged to join a Journey Group—they're the cornerstone for building community and strengthening connections within the congregation.

Whether you're a longtime congregant or brand new to FirstU, if you're hungry for meaningful conversation and genuine belonging, there's a place for you here. When you register, tell us your preferences for day, time, and meeting style—in-person, online, discussion-only, or dinner format.



We'll form as many groups as there is interest, including Wednesday evenings after community dinner or online options. Our established in-person group meets on the first and third Tuesdays at 2:00 PM at the church, starting in October. In September, we'll meet on the second and fourth Tuesdays instead.

Groups are limited to eight participants and meet for 90 minutes, except dinner sessions which run longer. Once formed, groups remain closed until next Fall to build the trust and continuity that makes real transformation possible.

Can't commit? Our weekly after-service drop-in discussion is always open.

Journey Groups are free, though donations of \$2 to \$5 per session help keep things running and are appreciated.

So why join? Because life is hard, and we weren't meant to do it alone. Because transformation happens when we stop performing and start being real with each other.

This year's monthly congregational themes are: Beginnings, Courage, Healing, Awe, Thresholds, Commitment, Balance, Emergence, Play, and Horizons.

Registration forms will be available at Sunday Services from late August through September or reach out directly to:

journeygroupAS@firstunitarianottawa.ca.

As fellow congregant Jan Davis says: "Come for a session and stay for the journey!"

New year. New themes. Same sacred promise: you belong here.

~ submitted by Amalilly Sullivan, Journey Group Coordinator

Settled Minister Discernment Task Force

Last May at the Annual General Meeting, the Board invited the congregation to help form a Settled Minister Discernment Task Force, and the congregation voted in favour. Thank you to everyone who has helped us take this important next step together.

One year ago, the Board invited Rev. Lara Cowtan to serve as our Contract Minister for three years, with the understanding that the congregation would use that time to discern whether to call Rev. Lara as our Settled Minister. After a meaningful year of experiencing her leadership, hearing her sermons, and sharing in her ministry in many settings, we are now ready to begin this conversation as a congregation.

Since the Task Force was formed, its members—Lee Rose, Erin Keene, Ally Hobson, Alex Campbell, and Lisa Boulay—have met twice to map out the discernment process.

This process is designed to give congregants several welcoming ways to share their thoughts, hopes, questions, and wishes.

The Process

- Officially launch the discernment process at the August 16th service, “A Conversation on Calling and Ministry,” with all members of the Task Force participating in the service.
- Publish an invitation to the service in the e-UU on August 2nd and 9th and send a congregation-wide email on August 4th.
- Launch a survey at the August 16th service, with paper copies available after the service and online.

- Invite congregants to connect with Task Force members after each service until the end of September to return surveys, share reflections, and ask questions.
- The Task Force will share announcements as needed during services, in the e-UU, and/or by email.
- September 15th: Hold a congregational consultation on Zoom.
- September 20th: Hold a congregational consultation after the service in the NOW Room.
- September 27th: Host a fireside chat with Rev. Lara after the service in Worship Hall. A Zoom fireside chat may also be offered, to be confirmed.

After gathering input, the Task Force will carefully review what we have heard and make a recommendation to the Board about whether to call Rev. Lara as our long-term settled minister.

A congregational vote will be held at a special congregational meeting after the service on October 18th.

Together, we will listen with care to our community’s wisdom, hopes, questions, and commitments as we discern whether to call Rev. Lara as our long-term settled minister. We hope to hear from you!

For those of you who were unable to attend the launch of the Settled Minister Discernment Process on August 16 (in-person or online), here is a link to the service:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/DXkEMxiB6PQ?si=m8a-1yYTc-HnBHbD>

~ submitted by Lisa Boulay on behalf of the Discernment Task Force



A Green Sanctuary Congregation

In 2023, FirstU became a Green Sanctuary Congregation. Earning Green Sanctuary status came through a program set up by the Unitarian Universalist Association to encourage UU congregations to live out our seventh principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Our congregation became involved in 2019 as part of the Environmental Action Group (EAG) being chosen as the congregational focus. There were three required goals:

1. Mitigation, to reduce the causes of climate change,
2. Adaptation and Resilience, and
3. Climate Justice, to work collaboratively with a group most impacted by climate change.

To address mitigation, the use of Bullfrog Power was introduced to offset emissions and a heat pump was installed in Fellowship Hall. An agreement was achieved to move beyond just divesting funds from fossil fuels to actively supporting green companies. To encourage personal mitigation, there were monthly educational *Earth Speaks* presentations and a *Spring Free from Plastics* campaign. Information was provided on how to reduce your carbon footprint in your house and through your food choices.

To encourage adaptation and resilience, environmental learning was provided through articles in the Parkway Spire and on the Climate Action Page of FirstU’s website. There was a *Hope to Action* workshop to help fend off climate despair and chalice groups on Robin Wall-Kimmerer’s book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. A beautiful concert, “The Earth is Tired” with Aella Choir was the grand finale—a poignant warning about climate despair and a tribute to hope.

Ajashki, the Indigenous-led food security project, began as a climate justice partnership with EAG and is now its own self-sustaining program. Other climate justice projects included letter writing campaigns, petition signings and rallies. As well, the EAG worked to ensure that the new Odayanhaway

development would be as environmentally sustainable as possible.

The agreement to being a Green Sanctuary Congregation is an ongoing commitment. It requires us to make a yearly report as to how we have continued to meet our obligations and to a new fourth level of commitment:

CONGREGATIONAL TRANSFORMATION, which asks us to demonstrate how we collaboratively work with others including:

- The Property Team: toward a 50% reduction of the church’s emissions by 2030 and net zero by 2050
- Our campus partners: to evaluate means to lower emissions
- Our congregation and community: to build resiliency during longterm power failures and as a cooling station
- The Justice and Equality Action Group: to support the food cupboard
- Ajashki: to support its goals
- The Campus Planning Committee: regarding the Odayanhaway development project, and
- Our community: to continue our advocacy and educational work.

We do this with your help. As we focus on the goals for what we wish to achieve, there will be opportunities for individuals to offer their skills in a focused project for a specific period of time.

Come join us! We need your help to keep our commitments alive!

~submitted by Susan Spence, Environmental Action Group



Get Ready for Fall Fair 2026!

~ *Amalilly Sullivan, Fall Fair Director*

Mark your calendars: Saturday, November 14th! FirstU's Fall Fair is back, and it's Ottawa's biggest church bazaar and our congregation's largest fundraiser.

Our spaces will transform into a treasure trove of deals, finds and pre-Christmas shopping magic.

What's New This Year?

Our silent auction will focus exclusively on fine art, Inuit and First Nations works, etc. Other high-value items will go to public auction houses for broader exposure and greater earning potential. Items not selected for auction will be sold at fixed prices alongside other wares in the Worship Hall "Emporium".

How You Can Help Make It Amazing: Donate Your Surplus

Bring gently used housewares, outdoor gear, electronics, books, music, movies, toys, clothing, linens, and more from Monday, November 9th through Thursday, November 12th. Watch for earlier drop-off opportunities from the last half of October—stay tuned for specific details!

Jewellery (even broken pieces!) can be dropped off at the office anytime.

Making preserves or baking from your Fall harvest? Plan to set some aside for the Fair!

Before you donate, ask yourself: Would I buy this? Is it in good condition? Can one person carry it? Check our website <https://www.firstunitarianottawa.ca/about-4-10#ff-donate> for full donation criteria.

Spread the Word

Tell your friends and neighbours! Download posters, flyers, and shareable Facebook posts from our Promotions page:

<https://www.firstunitarianottawa.ca/about-4-10#ff-promo>. Help them declutter while supporting FirstU.

More donations + more shoppers = a spectacular sale!

Volunteer Your Time

Whether you've got an hour or a whole day, we need you! Opportunities include sorting and setup (the week before), sale-day tasks, and takedown/dispersal (the week after).

It's a fantastic way to connect with your congregation. Check our volunteer page:

<https://www.firstunitarianottawa.ca/about-4-10#ff-volunteer> or contact Eva at: ffvols@firstunitarianottawa.ca.

Questions?

Email Amalilly at: directorff@firstunitarianottawa.ca

Let's make Fall Fair 2026 unforgettable!



Bob Thomson: The Whistleblower for Chilean Refugees, 1973

In October 1973, as a junior CIDA project officer, I leaked secret cables from the Canadian Ambassador to Chile, cables which supported the [deadly military coup](#) of September 11, 1973, against the democratically elected government of President Salvador Allende. The military, under General Pinochet, killed the President and thousands of Chilean supporters and governed Chile for 16 years. A time characterized by severe human rights abuses, including the torture and execution of thousands of opponents and the creation/exile of some 200,000 Chilean refugees around the world.

My action was a result of youthful anger at our ambassador at the time, for his acceptance of violence against people he called “the riff-raff of the Latin American left.” As a consequence, I lost my Canadian government job and security clearance in December 1973. But publication of those cables played a crucial role in catalyzing the existing and growing network of hundreds of Canadian churches, unions, and human rights activists which confronted the Pierre Trudeau government’s recognition of the military shortly after the coup. [That network eventually created enough momentum to bring some 7000 persecuted Chileans to Canada and ultimately, to include refugees as a special class in our immigration act.](#)

Hugs from some of those refugees in recognition of my small role in their lives, together with that of many other Canadians, have been an important part of my life. Human rights activists supported me in my ten-year effort, all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada, to (unsuccessfully) reverse my CSIS security denial for a government job.

Losing my government job and security clearance brought me into the growing non-governmental (NGO) network of organizations working for change

in our relations with the “third” world. I had been a CUSO volunteer in Peru from 1968-70 and was hired by CUSO in 1974 to help manage its Latin American program and later its Caribbean program. I went on to a 'career' in international solidarity and fair trade certification, speaking English, Spanish, French and a bit of Quechua, which changed the way I see the world—quite differently from what I would have experienced as a development bureaucrat.

Over the years I’ve frequently run into Chilean Canadians in all sorts of places: an artist neighbour who painted our local grocery store, which eventually got turned into an Ottawa tourism postcard; a Quebec cabinet minister; a union member at a fair trade workshop who, when I asked him where he was from because of his strong Spanish accent, told me he came from Chile thanks to church sponsors who were motivated by “some guy who leaked the Canadian Ambassador’s cables supporting the coup”. He knocked his chair over jumping up to give me a hug, when a colleague told him I was “that guy”!

In 2024 I was asked by the Centre for Free Expression at Toronto Metropolitan University to donate my files on Chile and those of the [Space Research Corporation](#) to a new Whistleblower Archive at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. I received the Canadian Business for Social Responsibility award for “Ethics in Action” in 1999 for my fair trade work and the [Canadian Journalists for Free Expression \(CJFE\) award in 2013](#) for my whistle blowing. Now, fifty-three voyages around the sun later, I can look back and say, it was the right (left?) thing to do.

~ submitted by Bob Thomson

Volunteers at FirstU

~Lisa Sharp, Volunteer Coordinator

Looking for something fun and meaningful to do?

If your child or grandchild needs volunteer hours for school; if you are recently retired and feeling like you have too much time on your hands, or if you are interested in helping others, FirstU has a long history of providing volunteer opportunities for people of all ages. Volunteering can provide a way to make new friends, to feel part of a community, as well as experience for your résumé.

As many of you know, over 200 volunteers make our Fall Fair happen each year, and hold many important roles such as sorting and selling items, parking, food preparation, recycling and cleanup, to name just a few.

But it's not just the Fall Fair. At FirstU we have dozens of other dedicated folks helping out in different ways, such as:

- answering telephones and other assigned tasks in the office
- keeping our gardens looking beautiful
- purchasing and organizing food for our food cupboard
- organizing our participation in the Pride Parade
- leading action groups focusing on climate, poverty, human rights and mental health
- visiting members to provide support and organizing caring cards

- participating in governance, communications (eg. putting the Spire together), property, or being a board member
- organizing participation in social justice activities including protests, letter writing campaigns, and fundraising for charitable projects
- taking refugees to medical and other appointments
- leading groups such as Mapmaking, book clubs or games night
- facilitation of Our Whole Lives programming

As well on Sunday mornings, volunteers do many tasks including:

- greeting people and taking up the collections
- operating our elevator for those who need assistance
- preparing snacks and beverages for coffee hour
- selling books at the book table
- assisting with the service as worship associates
- singing in the choir or house band
- helping in our children's program and youth group
- giving people a ride to church.

Looking forward, there will be many new ways to help our growing community thrive.

If you would like to find out more about any of these opportunities, we would love to talk to you! Please contact Lisa Sharp at: lisasharp@rogers.com to set up a phone call or meeting.



First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa

30 Cleary Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K2A 4A1

Email: uuoffice@firstunitarianottawa.ca

Website: www.firstunitarianottawa.ca

Facebook: www.facebook.com/First-Unitarian-Congregation-of-Ottawa

Office Hours: Monday to Friday, 9:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

2026–2027 Board of Directors bod@firstunitarianottawa.ca

Mary Ella Keblusek, President president@firstunitarianottawa.ca

Maury Prevost, Vice President

Chuck Shields, Past President

Guy Belleperche, Treasurer

Lisa Boulay, Carmen Contreras, John Emond, Jane Lindsay - Members at Large

Program Staff

Rev. Lara Cowtan, Minister minister@firstunitarianottawa.ca 613-725-1066 x 225

Jenn Berntson, Music Director music@firstunitarianottawa.ca 613-725-1066 x 230

Jodi McIntosh, Director of Religious Exploration dre@firstunitarianottawa.ca 613-725-1066 x 234

Lay Chaplains

Guy Belleperche, Lisa Boulay, Lee Rose

Worship Associates

Kris Cormier, Jonathan Dench, Laurie Foster-McLeod, Paul Julien, Alexis McKenzie, Lee Rose

Administrative Staff

Jen Brennan, Operations Manager omr@firstunitarianottawa.ca 613-725-1066 x 221

Michelle Jackson, Finance Manager fm@firstunitarianottawa.ca 613-725-1066 x 222

Allison Armstrong, Communications Coordinator (e-UU and Communiqué) publications@firstunitarianottawa.ca

Building Staff

Julia Defalco, Audiovisual Coordinator av@firstunitarianottawa.ca 613-725-1066 x223

Dee Mollema, Lead Custodian leadcustodian@firstunitarianottawa.ca 613-725-1066 ext 224

Eden Bigras, Julia Defalco, and Leaf Holmes, Custodians 613-890-1067 (cellphone)

Spire Contributors

Lisa Boulay, Rev. Lara Cowtan, Alexandra Devine, Mary Ella Keblusek, Nina Knox (photo on pg. 1), Jodi McIntosh, Lisa Sharp, Susan Spence, Amalilly Sullivan, Bob Thomson

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Spire Editorial Team:

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***Our church is a liberal, spiritual congregation located
on the shores of the Ottawa River***