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Deadline for next Spire submissions: Feb 15, 2026

"This past week we marked an important milestone in our journey of reconciliation..."

Find out more about this exciting congregational news from our President, Chuck Shields on page 3!

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

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From our Minister

~ Rev Lara Cowtan

It's hard to believe that I've already been here a little over three months. In some ways it feels like I just arrived, and in others it feels like I've been part of this community much longer. I am grateful for the warm welcome I have received and for the many conversations, warm smiles, hallway chats, fruitful meetings, and shared silences that have already shaped my understanding of this vibrant congregation. Each week brings new faces, new stories, and new glimpses into the heart of this community. It has been a delight to learn my way around—not only the building, but the culture, rhythms, and spirit that make this place feel so alive.

And then there was the Fall Fair! I had heard that it was something special, but experiencing it firsthand was another thing entirely. The dedication of the organizers, the creativity of the volunteers, the steady stream of neighbours coming through the doors—all of it spoke volumes about who you are. The Fair was far more than an event; it was a living expression of generosity, teamwork, and the wide circle of connection this congregation maintains with the broader community. You have every reason to be proud.

As many of you know from experience, ministerial transitions inevitably bring change—sometimes gentle, sometimes a bit bumpy, often a mix of both. Change can be energizing, and it can be unsettling. I am deeply appreciative of your willingness to try new things with me, your patience as I learn "how things are done here," and your openness as we find our shared rhythms. Thank you for your trust, your honesty, and your good humour as we navigate this season of becoming together.

We now turn toward Advent and the winter holidays—a time that can be both beautiful and heavy. Many people are carrying quiet (and sometimes not-so-quiet) anxieties about the economy, global conflicts, political tensions, and the increasingly real impacts of climate change. In such times, our faith communities matter more than ever. They become places of sanctuary and steadiness, where we can bring our fears and our hopes, our grief and our joy, and know that they will be held with care. Together we cultivate resilience. Together we kindle hope.

I am honoured to be among you in this meaningful work. As we look toward the new year, I am excited for all that we will continue to build—side by side, heart to heart—for a bright and flourishing future.

With gratitude and blessings,
Rev Lara

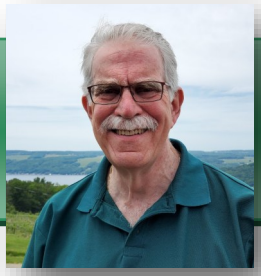
In Memoriam

Dawes, Marianne, died 8 October 2025, at age 99; mother of Lesley, Jan, Barbara, Philip and Jennifer; grandmother and great-grandmother.

Lishman, Judith Diane (Judy), died 23 November, 2025 (b. 5 February 1943) - wife of Donald, mother of Paul (Wendy) and Anne (Michael), and grandmother of five.

Splinters from the Board

~ Chuck Shields



We have had a very busy and invigorating beginning to the congregational program year. Rev Lara Cowtan has begun her ministry with us and we, and she, have begun learning about each other. From what I have been hearing from congregants, they have been responding very positively to her presence and contributions. Our ministry start-up activities in early October were well attended and created a strong foundation for her time with FirstU.

This is an auspicious beginning to Rev Lara's ministry. In an article earlier this year in the Spire, I explained that following a very rapid search process, Rev Lara accepted the board's offer to serve as our minister on a 'contract-to-call' basis for three years. As part of this, in about a year she and the congregation will begin a discernment process through which she and we will consider how this ministry is working for her and for us and whether to call her as our 'settled minister', a term used to refer to ministers who are installed to serve as a congregation's minister for a long period. Look for more information about this discernment process next spring and early next fall.

As I write this, we have just finished another successful Fall Fair that helped, as it always does, to build our community and made a strong contribution to our financial resources. We need to extend thanks to the hundreds of volunteers who made this possible, and an especially big 'Thank you!' to Catherine Pope, who organized all these strands as the Fall Fair Director!

Over the past couple of months, the board has been pleased to welcome six individuals into membership. There are also about ten more who are likely to become members by the time of our next 'Welcome New Members' service in early December. It is exciting to have these individuals join us and contribute to the life of our community.

Also, this past week we marked an important milestone in our journey of reconciliation. At the beginning of our planning for campus redevelopment, we, as a congregation, affirmed that we wanted one of the main objectives of this effort to be an act of reconciliation. In the process of creating our plans, it was decided to work with Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services (OAHS) and for them to construct a 60-unit building for affordable housing on our campus on land we would donate to them. This week the multi-year process of discussions with them led to both parties signing a land donation agreement that will transfer part of our campus to OAHS.

This is an exciting time for FirstU, with many positive developments as we continue to build our joint ministry with Rev Lara. I look forward to seeing many members at one of the many Holiday Season gatherings and wish you and your family and friends a joyful time.

Mary Ella Keblusek, Vice President, and Chuck Shields, President, signing the Land Donation Agreement with Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services

RE-flections: Our Whole Lives

~ Jodi McIntosh

Bridge and Branch: Where We Connect and Grow

What if learning felt like community? That's the vision behind Bridge and Branch, our new learning cooperative for homeschoolers at First Unitarian—and it's already growing into something special.

This initiative, part of our Religious Exploration program, invites homeschooling families to learn together while being supported by a caring community. It's more than classes—it's a way for our congregation to live our values in the wider world. By creating a space that's open to everyone, we're building real connections and showing that First Unitarian is a place of welcome and inclusion.

Unlike many homeschool co-ops, this one is different: everyone is welcome. Families don't need to share the same beliefs to join in. They simply agree to the values that guide us—Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence, Generosity, and Love. These aren't just words on a page; they shape our activities and conversations.

Each term is shaped collaboratively by the families and taught by the parents through the lens of our values. This fall, preschool and school-aged children explored interdependence by listening to stories about nature and our connection to the earth—many written from Indigenous perspectives. They wandered through our gardens and nearby NCC land, discovering that connection isn't just about people—it's about the natural world too.

Our World Celebrations program took kids on a journey around the globe, learning about different holidays and the traditions that go with them in ways that are respectful and culturally sensitive. Through cooking, stories, and discussions, these experiences help them see the beauty of diversity and the richness of human life.

Our teens have been working diligently in their nature journals, practicing observation and reflection as a way to connect with the environment. They also participated in a body-positive nutrition class, learning how to care for their bodies in healthy, affirming ways. These activities encourage self-awareness, resilience, and respect for the interconnectedness of life.

Why does this matter? Because outreach is more than an idea—it's a practice. Every time we open our doors and share what we value, we create opportunities for connection and understanding. Bridge and Branch isn't just serving homeschool families; it's building bridges between our congregation and the wider community. Already, several families have asked about our Unitarian faith—not because we preached, but because we welcomed. That's the power of living our values out loud.

Our hope? That Bridge and Branch keeps growing—offering ongoing support for homeschooling families and strengthening ties between our congregation and the greater community.

Continued on page 5...

RE-flections: ... *continued from page 4*

About the Program:

- **What:** Bridge and Branch Learning Cooperative
- **When:** Tuesdays 10-2
  - Current session runs until **Dec 16**
  - Next session: **Jan 6 – end of February**
  - **Where:** First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa
  - **Who:** Homeschooling families from various backgrounds; currently 7 families enrolled with 14 children ages 2–14
  - **Cost:** $150 for first child, $10 for each additional sibling age 3 and over.
  - **Contact:** Jodi McIntosh, Director of Religious Exploration Email: dre@firstunitarianottawa.ca

Notes from Jenn

~ Jenn Bernston, Music Director

We've had a wonderful fall of music-making, and you will have many more chances to enjoy music at FirstU this month.

Upcoming events include:

Elbows Up! – Sunday, December 7 at 1:00 p.m. Join us for an afternoon of Canadian music with *Elbows Up!*, a concert from the choirs of FirstU. Childcare is available for those who register in advance; contact dre@firstunitarianottawa.ca by Friday, Dec. 5!

Food Cupboard Benefit Concert – Wednesday, December 10 at 7:00 p.m. Support FirstU's food cupboard and enjoy a wide range of music from the Beacon Community Concert Band; come early for refreshments at 6:30!

Carols & Cocoa – Saturday, December 20 at 1:30 p.m. Celebrate the season with our family-friendly carol singalong! We will have cocoa for everyone and jingle bells for anyone feeling especially festive. If you have a special carol request, please email me at music@firstunitarianottawa.ca so I can make sure we have lyrics for it!

All events are by donation, so come as you are and enjoy the music!

Lastly, if you'll be around on Christmas Eve, we'd love for you to be part of our **Christmas Choir**. If you're normally not able to commit to weekly rehearsals, this is a great option for you - we have only two rehearsals, on **Thursday, December 11** and **Thursday, December 18** at **7:00 p.m.** Come in through the basement door on the west side of the building and join us in the sanctuary. The choir will perform during the **7:00 p.m. Christmas Eve Service**.

Wishing everyone a very musical December!

Reflections on Embracing Change

During the month of October 2025 our congregation contemplated the theme of "Embracing Change", a theme that I consider to be well worth pondering and acting upon. As a participant in a Journey Group, I tried to reflect deeply on this topic.

At the same time, within the group, I also tried to reflect upon, and to say a few words about, what seems to me to be the reality of "Changelessness". Let me endeavour to share some of my thinking on this subject.

The Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), among other pursuits, put a good deal of effort into thinking and writing about the nature of knowledge and the nature of ethics. He also possessed a working knowledge of Newtonian physics and astronomy. Near his tomb there is a plaque on which is inscribed (in his own native German and in Russian) a famous quote from his ethical writings. In English translation this quote reads as follows:

> *'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and perseveringly my thinking engages itself with them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.'*

The starry heavens above, the night sky, is attractive to behold. It also involves the science of astronomy related to the movements and processes of stars, planets, comets, etc. Certainly, it is worthwhile to embrace a scientific knowledge of such changes. The night sky gives rise to admiration and awe aesthetically and scientifically.

But as regards the moral law within, Kant would wish to assert that it contains changeless elements. Consider the following ethical rule or moral command which he would regard as connected to the moral law: "Never harm or kill a human being just for the fun of it." He would *not* wish to say that yes this is an inner command we should obey today but, who knows, maybe after a million years of future evolution, a change may occur whereby the command will no longer be binding. No, Kant would want to assert that this rule or command constitutes a changeless aspect of morality. And I think that most, if not all, Unitarians would agree with this outlook. In the view of our philosopher this ethical command was changelessly true before there were any human beings, is changelessly true now, will be changelessly true in the future including if and when humankind goes extinct. No wonder that Kant was filled with admiration and awe as he contemplated the moral law.

In conclusion, then, embracing change is very important, but I also think that a place must be made for changelessness in our approach to reality.

~submitted by Brian Cowan

Editor's note: the Spire would welcome more articles of reflection and comment on spiritual topics (450 words or less). Thank you Brian.

Once Again – Our Fall Fair!

Well, the Fall Fair is over for another year. It has been a wonderful event!

And a big Thank you to all of the **Coordinators, Convenors and their Volunteers** that helped to make this year's Fall Fair a success. From removing the hymnals the prior Sunday, to transforming this building into the Fall Fair event, and then quickly back into shape for the Sunday service.

And a Big Shout Out to the FirstU Staff for all of their hard work and a job well done!

To Operations Manager Jen Brennan, who along with taking care of many Fall Fair details, created the Fall Fair Shoppers Guide. She also worked with the Parking Coordinator and Communications Coordinator on signs to make parking more easily accessible.

To Finance Manager Michelle Jackson, who because of the Square system she created over the past two years, made training of volunteers a much smoother process.

To Dee, our head Custodian and her team for making sure that the building was in great shape for the Fall Fair and after its completion.

To Rev Lara who welcomed and served coffee to our shoppers on Saturday morning.

There were tons of donations, great displays and many shoppers who came to the Fall Fair in spite of the threat of freezing rain which thankfully held off until after 3 p.m!

As I checked in on rooms before the big day, I found volunteers hard at work. Sorting, doing some ironing, determining prices and organizing. Some of the volunteers told me that they enjoy their work at Fall Fair, and the tasks are not onerous because they meet other volunteers here once a year and love the week that they spend together, working with others for a cause that they believe in.

I have to mention that sharing food together with other volunteers at lunchtime during the week before Fall Fair is always a treat here. The soups, made by volunteers, were amazing. For me it was wonderful being able to spend time talking with people that I do not typically spend time with.

The First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa is an amazing bunch of people, and it shows in the community spirit that we have. To me the Fall Fair really is about building Community!

~submitted by Catherine Pope

Mary Ella Keblusek dressed in a yellow slicker promoting Fall Fair to traffic on Richmond Rd (this year sitting due to ankle fracture!)
Catherine Pope (2025 FF director)

Friends of The Meditation Gardens

Despite considerable challenges, the Meditation Gardens flourished during the 2025 gardening season. With Ottawa experiencing the warmest March 11 on record, followed by another new record for the coldest April 9, the concern was that early budding had frozen. Then, following a late spring bloom, the gardens faced a summer drought. We are fortunate that a member of our team resides at Unitarian House and was able to spot-water vulnerable plants daily.

In addition to these environmental concerns, the Friends team has been tackling the issue of campus development as it affects the gardens. Over the winter, representatives from Friends participated in a site planning charette, which allowed us to raise our concerns. The resulting final site plans were presented at the team's first meeting in April by the FirstU Campus Development Committee. While there are construction impacts to the gardens, they are considerably less than originally envisaged. This was confirmed in a walkabout in August with Friends and the Theia (development company) site planner. We will lose 12 mature trees and forfeit a triangular slice from the southwest corner of the north garden, and unfortunately, after contacting arborists from a variety of companies, we conclude that we cannot (as originally hoped) relocate the memorial pendula spruce. Adjacent to the spruce is a memorial hydrangea that our transplant team, on a very cold day in November, was able to carefully move to a safe location in the lawn area opposite the church. For that task, we are grateful for the extra assistance from Charles Triemstra and, earlier in October, Jan Andrews and Colleen Glass were an enormous help in moving other vulnerable plants to new locations – including a memorial weigela.

In a cold late spring, we displayed our collection of red dresses for our annual May 5 recognition of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The exhibit seemed particularly poignant this year without the usual spring foliage. Special thanks to Jen Brennan for creating our poster to hang from the garden arbour entrance, welcoming visitors and informing those who might otherwise be surprised by the spectacle of so many dresses hanging from trees.

The transplant team: James Freeh, Charles Triemstra, Lori Snyder and Margaret Linton.

Friends of The Meditation Gardens *cont...*

A collapsing footbridge that crosses the creek in the south garden was another unanticipated challenge earlier in the season. For safety reasons, we restricted access to the bridge and obtained estimates for its replacement. Thanks to the suggestion of Jen Brennan and with the help of Dee Mollema, FirstU Lead Custodian, we hired All in One Landscaping (they have a long-standing contract to snowplough the campus). This company provided an estimate without charge for labour, so the gardens paid 4K less than the next-lowest estimate. Many thanks to All in One for building us a safe, new footbridge.

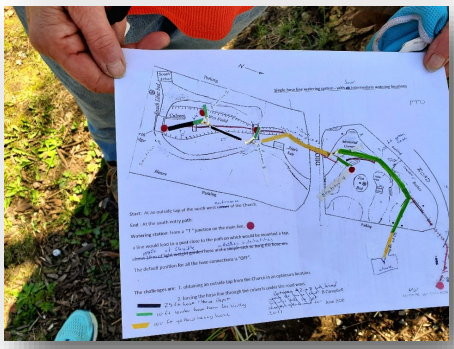
In addition to our usual gardening tasks, we undertook applying a fresh coat of stain to the garden shed and distributing new gravel on the garden paths. Thank you to the Friends team for their dedication to the Meditation Gardens: Beverley Armstrong, Sooky Dunton, Karen Ellis, James Freeh, Marilen Gerber, David Hudson, Margaret Linton, Susan Mellor, Anne Orfald, Lori Snyder and Kathryn Taylor.

A Friends' Tribute to Elizabeth (Betty) Campbell

Over a span of 30 years, Betty Campbell made an enormous contribution to the development of the Meditation Gardens. At its beginning, Betty was a member of a small group of volunteers that explored the idea of creating a meditative garden in the area fronting the church. The work to create this special place through the choice of plants and layout was the feature of an episode of the documentary series Spiritual Gardens (2007) that aired on Vision TV.

Betty then lent her expertise to plans for cultivating the land facing Unitarian House with memorial tree plantings, paths and footbridge designs. Her career was in aerial photography and photogrammetric mapping, and these skills became an asset when she created not only maps of the garden but a photo inventory of the various plants in the new gardens. Betty had display cases made for visitor information at the garden entrance, where plant photos were showcased monthly.

When Betty was no longer actively involved in the gardens, she remained a patron both financially and with her valued advice. While in her mid-90s, Betty invented and financed the installation of an easier watering system – see Betty's diagram:



The photo of Betty on the previous page was taken on May 4 this year in front of the star magnolia the day before Red Dress Day, and 10 weeks before her death. In 2023, the Friends honoured Betty with a commemorative bench and plaque, and to celebrate her life on what would have been her 100th birthday, we tied balloons to Betty's Bench.

Submitted by Susan Mellor

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