

**GREEN SANCTUARY 2030**  
**FIRST UNITARIAN CONGREGATION OF OTTAWA – SUBMISSION**

## **1. Activities**

The attached Green Sanctuary Action Plan has been updated to provide the status of the various activities planned and undertaken. Where available, outcome information has also been provided. While not all activities have been fully undertaken, we believe that sufficient action has been taken to warrant Green Sanctuary accreditation. At the same time, we recognize that our work is not done and will not be done until the tide has turned and real and sustained progress is being made to address climate change and to prepare for its impacts within our congregation, within the larger community and by governments at all levels.

## **2. Impacts**

2.1 Congregational Transformation: The impact of the climate action/Green Sanctuary focus on the congregation is most apparent in three areas:

**Commitment to Climate Action:** At the instigation of the EAG, in 2021, FirstU's Board approved a motion which set goals of 50% reduction in emissions by 2030 and net-zero by 2050. One action of note stands out. Rather than install conventional air conditioning in the church's Fellowship Hall as was originally intended, the Board agreed to the installation of heat pumps despite the higher costs. The congregation has also shown its commitment to climate action by among other things voting not just to divest from fossil fuels but to put a portion of the congregation's funds into green investments. There is also greater awareness and commitment to reduce waste and increase recycling. For example, at our Fall Fair last year, compostable containers were used for take-out food; this year the decision was made to do eat in only, in part because of the reduced risk of covid but also to avoid any need for disposable containers.

Over the course of the past 4 years, a member of the EAG has made weekly announcements during Sunday services encouraging congregants to take specific actions on climate change. This helped ensure that the climate focus remained top of mind for congregants. As a result, congregants report a greater awareness of the need for action on climate change, and many are taking steps as individuals to reduce their carbon footprint.

### **Climate Justice**

Perhaps the greatest transformation has been in the area of Justice and in moving away from a charity model to working directly with a marginalized group that stands to be significantly impacted by climate change. This has not always been an easy transition but [Ajashki](#), our Indigenous-led climate change and food security initiative (see description under 2.4 below) is now recognized as a congregational program and is a source of pride for FirstU. Because of its cross-sectional nature, Ajashki has also helped breakdown silos between our social justice teams, engaging not just our Environmental Action Group but also the Justice and Equity Action Group (who are now leading the way on a grocery support/food pantry program with Ajashki), the Truth and Reconciliation Action Group and the Mental Health Support and Action Group.

Ajashki has put in place Friendly Agreements with each of these groups, as well as with the Friends of the Meditation Gardens (for joint composting program), to clarify roles and expectations.

## **Campus development**

Campus development First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa is located on a four hectare 'campus' seven kilometers West of Downtown Ottawa. The campus includes the church, a daycare centre and a seniors' residence as well as an area of meditation and memorial gardens. Despite these uses, a considerable portion of the Campus area is either fallow or used for parking. For the past six years, the congregation has been [exploring developing](#) much of the fallow and parking areas for residential development. The intention was to have a large portion of the residences be lower cost social housing. Two years ago, First U started a collaboration with Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services (OAHS). Our current plans call for the construction of two buildings with one of them involving a land grant or free lease to the OAHS for the development of Indigenous housing in Ottawa, the other larger building will be market housing with a significant portion being at less than market rents. The granting of land to OAHS is a gift and a reconciliation action being taken by First U with Indigenous people.

While development of FirstU's campus had been under consideration for a number of years, consensus on development plans was only recently attained. One of the factors that contributed to this shift was the commitment to environmental sustainability in keeping with the congregation's focus on climate action. The Goals and Guiding Principles for development were revised in 2019 and among other changes, more explicitly reflect this commitment with the following statement: "'Green', environmentally sound principles must be used in the design and execution of any developments. In this regard, measures should be adopted to adapt to and mitigate the current and anticipated effects of climate change, including, for example, measures to increase energy efficiency and to address possible risk of flooding". As a result, climate considerations, have and will continue to play a central role in this development. The siting of the buildings was heavily influenced by a natural assets survey of the campus. As the area will soon be served by Ottawa's expanding light rail system, the majority of parking will be eliminated and the First U campus will now be a place reached increasing by transit or active transportation. With respect to active transportation, interconnections with neighbouring multi-use pathways are being planned. With respect to the developments themselves, net zero buildings are being pursued. The developer working is investigating developing a small geothermal district energy system to serve new and existing buildings. The passive house building standard is being considered for the new buildings. The planning group is also considering low energy management of snow, renewable energy generation, rainwater management and ensuring good source separation of solid waste. It is hoped that the culmination of these efforts will be the development of a campus which will be a showcase for the community.

## **2.2 Mitigation**

Mitigation work has involved the church building, personal mitigation actions by congregants and work by the congregation in encouraging climate action in society. In all areas there have been significant actions, impacts which will endure.

With respect to the church building, the church property committee had started energy and water conservation efforts before the work started on Green Sanctuary. This started with a building audit in 2008 by [Envirocentre](#) and many of the recommendations from this audit with respect to electricity, water and gas conservation have been undertaken. Additionally, before the start of work on Green Sanctuary, the

congregation made a commitment to purchase green energy for the church and has been purchasing renewable natural gas from a local green energy provider, Bullfrog Power, for the church's seasonal heating requirements.

Since the start of First U's work on Green Sanctuary accreditation, commitment and activity on mitigation has increased. In terms of commitments, the congregation has agreed to improve the energy and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions performance of the church in line with the City of Ottawa's Community climate plan Energy Evolution. This will require a reduction of the church building's heating demand of roughly 60% prior to switching most of the building heating from renewable natural gas to heat pumps. Although the renewable natural gas the church uses through [Bullfrog Power](#) is close to being carbon neutral, its current level of consumption exceeds the amount which would allow the community as a whole to decarbonize and therefore further conservation and conversion to use of heat pumps is required.

Fortunately, work on improvements to the church building has taken place as a result of our application for Green Sanctuary. Gas use has been reduced through the elimination of a gas cook stove, the conversion of water heating from gas to electric and the installation of an air source heat pump which serves approximately 6% of the church floor space.

In terms of planning for future work, members of the church's Environmental Action Group (EAG) have done thermographic imaging on the church and have benchmarked its energy performance. We have now started communication with a group called Greening Sacred Spaces which support the greening of meeting places of faith communities in Canada.

Beyond the church building itself, First has undertaken action with our other large collective asset, namely our money. In 2014, First U was the second faith community in Canada to divest from fossil fuels and we do this by following The Carbon Underground 200 list. More recently, in 2021, we made a commitment to actively invest 15% of the church legacy fund in companies directly involved in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Further discussions to expand actively invest more of the legacy fund are continuing.

In addition to actions at the congregational level, members of the congregation have taken personal actions to reduce their carbon footprint. This has been encouraged by many actions and initiatives undertaken by the EAG. This included our Earth Speak speaker series and presentations at the men's breakfasts. These presentations explained Ottawa's community climate plan and encourage many actions including vegetarianism/veganism (the congregation developed a vegan cook book), reduction of food waste, reducing the use of plastic, stepping up efforts on recycling, home energy improvements and retrofits, and encouraging sustainable choices for transportation. We have surveyed the congregation twice (see Appendix A for survey results) and believe that all metrics in this area have improved as evidenced by the following:

- Ten congregants installing heat pumps and our solar panels at their residences.
- Several congregates making the switch to electric or hybrid personal vehicles and reducing the degree to which they fly.
- Our Earth Speaks session on "Are You Banking with a Fossil Bank" has encouraged several congregants to move their banking and investments away from fossil fuels.
- Many congregants reducing or eliminating meat and dairy consumption and reducing food waste.
- Strong participation in a church-based recycling plan where congregants can bring in used coffee bags and pill bottles for recycling.

Finally, the action advocacy aspect of the congregation has influenced the wider community. This has taken the form of the congregation, through with the approval of the First U board stating a position, the EAG encouraging congregants to take positions on climate issues, via the e-newsletter and a couple dedicated Facebook pages and through the congregational participation in key events such as demonstration, public hearings and electoral debates.

Our most frequent form of engagement has been through our regular call for eco-advocacy. This has involved directing congregants towards First U's climate action page on its website, where anyone visiting the page is encouraged to take actions or sign petitions on climate issues of importance. Examples would include advocating for elimination of fossil fuel free electricity generation, advocating for electric school buses and demanding preservation of a large urban greenbelt in Ontario. This form of call to action by individuals has also included recommendations to participate in public meetings, including virtual open houses on Ottawa's climate plan and virtual meetings regarding the province's electricity systems.

### **2.3 Adaptation and Resilience**

Adaptation and resilience have been acted upon perhaps less than mitigation or justice, however, there have been some significant actions in this area.

At the start of our involvement in Green Sanctuary, a key focus was on addressing climate anxiety and building emotional resilience through a photovoice/storytelling initiative and a workshop Hope to Action: Transforming Anxiety to Empowerment based on the work of Joanna Macy. The photovoice initiative had 30 participants across the age spectrum, each of whom committed to taking at least one action to address climate change.

Our justice activity also has a huge resilience aspect to it. The Ajashki program, discussed below, grows food, both seasonally in an area outside the church and in year-round hydroponic grow towers inside the church. As importantly, Ajashki's education component has begun to more intentionally focus on resilience, by teaching Future Food Warriors not only how to grow and prepare their own food but also about mental health and well-being. The latter has been grounded in the seven Grandfather teachings and the seven Dimensions of Wellness.

Our advocacy through our Earth Speakers speaker series has emphasized consuming local food, which in turn supports local food sources and avoids long supply chains which are subject to disruption. This has included talks by representatives from Second Harvest, and presentations about the Parkdale Food Centre.

Finally, First U has been an annual financial supporter of Seed Change. Seed Change, formerly known as the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada, several years ago began focusing on supporting small-scale farmers around the world in their struggle for health, justice and sustainability. Their work focuses on supporting farmers, who are facing challenges from both corporate controlled agriculture and climate change, to grow healthy, sustainable harvests by keeping seeds in farmers' hands and strengthening farmers' knowledge of sustainable farming methods.

Work has also started on a policy to position the congregation to respond to climate emergencies, both in meeting its own needs as well as those of congregants and the community at large. Unfortunately, our team

member who was leading this work, Sherri Watson, passed away unexpectedly in early 2023 and we have been unable to find the volunteers or the energy to continue this work at this time. Survey results (see Appendix A) confirm that more work is needed in this area, with very few congregants having taken steps to prepare for a climate emergency,

## 2.4 Justice

As noted above, it is in the area of climate justice that the most significant and impactful work has been undertaken. Prior to selecting climate change as the focus for its social justice work in 2019, the focus for FirstU's social justice activities had been Indigenous issues and significant work was undertaken to educate congregants on Indigenous history and the impacts of colonization and residential schools on Canada's indigenous population. Despite the focus on indigenous people and the attempts to connect with local indigenous groups, there was little opportunity for partnerships and hands-on work. Nonetheless, it made sense to reach out to the local Indigenous community to see if there was an opportunity to work together on climate action. A congregant contacted a local Algonquin Anishinaabeg elder, Verna MacGregor who suggested holding a 'sharing circle on the land'. It was out of that circle, attended by Elder Verna as well as members of several FirstU social justice groups and two other representatives of the Indigenous community, that the idea of an Indigenous learning centre focused on caring for the land arose. FirstU was put in contact with Kayoki Whiteduck, a young Algonquin Anishinaabeg farmer and horticulturalist who helped give life to the vision of an Indigenous learning centre, focused not only of caring for the land but also on climate change and food security.

With Kayoki as the Food and Climate Educator and strong volunteer support from FirstU, the project quickly began to take shape. The focus would be on training Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to be Future Food Warriors (FFWs), to help them learn, not only about gardening, but about climate change and food security. At the same time, the FFWs, who are paid a living wage, would learn basic skills for employment. The program has expanded in numbers – from 2 FFWs the first summer to 11 this past summer – and also in scope as it responds to the interests and needs of the FFW. A breakfast and lunch program provides not only needed nutrition, but also helps FFWs learn about food preparation, including how to use all those wonderful vegetables from the garden. The education component has expanded to include teachings on mental health and well-being, helping the participants build stability and resilience. And this year, thanks to funding from Crime Prevention Ottawa, the FFW have also been able to explore and grow their artistic abilities – with beautiful Indigenous-themed murals a testament to their growing talents.

Ajashki has formed a close partnership with the local foodbank and has received 4 grow-towers that allow Ajashki to continue to grow food year-round. Over the past couple of years, Ajashki has developed a close working relationship with local Inuit organizations. Through the Inuuqatigiit Centre's [YESS](#) (Youth Employment and Skills Strategy) and high school programs, Ajashki has been linked with Inuit youth, with 7 Inuit participating as FFWs in 2023. Ajashki and Tungasuvvingat Inuit's (TI) Food Security Program, which provides food including traditional country food to 600 Inuit every two weeks, have developed a reciprocal food sharing program which helps ensure no food goes to waste. In addition, TI has also started renting space at FirstU for some of their programming, including their monthly Inuit Elders Tea and Country Food lunch and a weekly Inuit Sewing Program.

Ajashki has received several awards in recognition of the important work it is undertaking, including being named The David Suzuki Foundation Future Ground Prize Finalist (2021), receiving the CUC Shining Lights

award (2022) as well as an award from SOUL (Society for Organic Urban Landcare) Greener Greenspaces (2023). Most recently, Ajashki received a Climate Champion award from Ecology Ottawa, with Kayoki being invited to speak at Ecology Ottawa's Awards Gala.

Ajashki is now recognized as a program of FirstU. It continues to receive significant in-kind support (land/meeting rooms, payroll) and in 2024 for the first time, has been included in FirstU's budget.

The congregation's involvement with Ajashki has made it more receptive to engaging directly with Indigenous people. In 2022, the congregation voted 97% favour of giving a parcel of its land to the Ontario Aboriginal Housing Society to build a 6-storey apartment building for Indigenous individuals and families.

## **2.5 Engagement with UU and/or other climate-related groups**

As one of the first congregations to begin seeking accreditation under GS 2030, FirstU's Environmental Action Group was initially quite involved both in providing feedback on the new forms and process as well as participating with other congregations in our cohort. We enjoyed the information sharing offered through the cohort sessions.

Through the EAG (Environmental Action Group), the congregation has also become more engaged with other climate-related groups. Representatives of several groups have spoken at Earth Speaks, providing an opportunity to make congregants and members of the public aware of the issues they champion and the work they undertaken. Groups include the Ontario Clean Air Alliance, the Electric Vehicle Council of Ottawa and Friends of the Earth Canada. The congregation has also worked with Ecology Ottawa to host a Tree Giveaway Program event. In addition, as one of the monthly climate actions, congregants were encouraged to support a local environmental group, with a list of possible groups being provided on the Climate Action Page.

The grand finale for the 4 year focus on climate change included an amazing choral performance by Aella, an Ottawa-based upper voice ensemble of The Earth is Tired, a concert acknowledging the collective feelings of climate anxiety and grief while also providing hope and inspiration. As part of the event, six environmental groups were invited to set up display booths providing an opportunity to increase their profile. Over 100 people attended the event and feedback was extremely positive, including from the environmental groups who participated.

## **2.6 Ongoing Climate-Action Work**

As noted above, we do not consider our climate-action work completed. Our priorities moving forward will be:

1. Continue efforts to reduce emissions from the church building and to meet the Board-approved goal of 50% reduction in emissions by 2030 and net-zero by 2050. Exact actions are going to be somewhat contingent what happens with campus development. If the development incorporates a GHG neutral district energy system, this will positively impact our plans for net zero.

As we wait for plans for campus development to unfold, we will continue to consider ways to improve the building. This means that any new net-zero solutions for heat and cooling has the potential to be downsized as an improved church will better hold its temperature during seasonal temperature extremes.

In addition to improvements to the church building, there is discussion on ways to encourage people to use active transportation or transit to get to the church. The most frequently discussed measure is improvements to bike parking and lock-up. Also, all designs of campus development call for a great reduction in car parking despite the increased use and occupancy of the church campus. There is even discussion of charging for the use of parking such as at our annual fall fair.

2. Build resiliency, including during long term power failures. With recent ice and wind storms and tornadoes causing week-long power outages in some parts of Ottawa, this is of increasing importance. Although the local electrical distribution company is making efforts towards increasing the resiliency of the electrical grid, increasingly frequent power outages appear to be a reality. A serious ramification of power failures is loss of refrigeration in people's homes, resulting among other things in food being thrown out. To address this challenge, the EAG is considering the purchase of batteries and portable solar panels to keep fridge and freezers running. Such a set-up could be deployed at the church where freezers employed by the Ajashki program are located. If there is a power failure in Ottawa in locations other than the church, this system could be lent out to congregants needing power to keep their food refrigerated.

3. Continuing to support Ajashki as it grows in its role of being an Indigenous learning centre focused on food security, climate change and climate resiliency.

4. Continue to advocate for action on climate change at all levels of government, including encouraging congregants to participate in climate strikes and other protests.

5. We will continue our support outreach work, through the holding of services, Earth Speaks sessions, and writing in our weekly newsletter and in the quarterly church publication, the spire.

Results of surveys undertaken at the beginning of the 4-year focus and after two years:

