

First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa

The Parkway Spire

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Deadline for next Spire submissions:
May 15, 2026

"If you have patience, kindness, curiosity, and a desire to grow with our kids, there is a place for you in this ministry."

Find out more about this meaningful opportunity from our RE director, Jodi McIntosh, on page 4...

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*



Spring at FirstU: Buds, Bulldozers, and Becoming

If ever there were a season that understood a congregation, it would be spring.

There is mud.

There is promise.

There are tender shoots pushing up in places we did not expect.

As we settle into the rhythm of our first year together, I feel something stirring at FirstU. The congregation is budding — stretching toward light, trying new things, growing in ways that are both beautiful and occasionally a little unruly. (Spring, after all, is not a tidy season.)

Membership is growing. Journey Groups are deepening. Social Action initiatives are gathering energy. Fellowship activities are drawing people into meaningful connection. There are more conversations in the hallways, more laughter in the sanctuary, more hands reaching out to serve.

And this spring, we will quite literally break new ground. The Odayanhaway building project will soon move from vision to shovel-in-the-earth reality — a milestone that carries both hope and holy disruption. As construction begins, traffic patterns will shift. Landscapes will change. Familiar paths may feel unfamiliar for a time.

But this is the work of growth. Odayanhaway is about more than bricks and mortar. It is about providing affordable housing. It is about deepening relationship with the Indigenous community. It is about living into our values in concrete ways — sometimes with actual concrete.

We will also have the opportunity to work even more closely with our campus partners — River Parkway Children's Centre and Unitarian House — because this season will remind us that we truly are in this together.

Meanwhile, other forms of growth are quietly flourishing. The grow towers in the Food Pantry are lush and generous — and ready for harvesting. Stop by. Take what is ripe. Share in the abundance.

The Ajashki program is being re-envisioned with a more sustainable structure, strengthening community and outreach with Indigenous youth and Indigenous leadership. This, too, is careful tending — pruning and replanting so that something resilient can take root.

Our gardens are beginning to stir. They will need volunteer hands and attentive care, just as they always do. And they will continue to offer peace and shelter to visitors who find their way to our benches and winding paths.

There are so many things growing here.

Later this spring, I will be leading a workshop for our Worship Associates as they prepare for summer services. If you feel called to help shape worship — to craft words, readings, and ritual that hold our community in meaning and care — I would love to hear from you. Please reach out at:

Minister@firstunitarianottawa.ca.

I remain deeply grateful for the creativity, dedication, and generosity of this congregation. Thank you for your willingness to try new things. Thank you for the grace you offer when ideas need adjusting. Thank you for leaning into shared ministry with open hearts.

Spring rarely unfolds exactly as planned. Seeds surprise us. Roots go deeper than we imagined. Sometimes the most remarkable blooms appear in unexpected corners. I have a feeling that may be true for us this year as well.

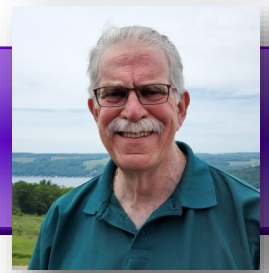
With gratitude and hope,

Rev. Lara Cowtan



Splinters from the Board

~ Chuck Shields



As I'm writing this, I'm beginning to really have the feeling that the New Year has started and I'm remembering to write 2026. And it is going to be quite a year for our congregation! Construction is expected to begin for the Odayanhaway Project, we are continuing to add new members and we will begin the discernment process with Rev. Lara regarding moving beyond her contract status with us.

Construction on our Odayanhaway Project is expected to begin mid-year. This will bring tremendous upheaval for about two years. Extensive planning is taking place to minimize problems this will create for all of us on the campus, but the changes and stresses will require each of us to keep in touch with our better selves. We will need to emphasize our covenant and take special care to be kind with each other.

Our new members will help us with this and are bringing increased energy. It has been wonderful to see the degree to which they have been stepping up and becoming involved. There is certainly much to be done that can be shared.

Last April, after a two-month minister search process, we invited Rev. Lara to join us on a 'contract-to-call' basis for a three-year period. We knew that around the middle of that period, which will be this fall, the congregation and she would need to begin a discernment process. Through this process, FirstU as a congregation will reflect on who we are and who we want to be, and whether Rev. Lara Cowtan is the

minister we want to move into this future with. Rev. Lara will also spend time in discernment about her own ministry with FirstU and what she envisions. This discernment process will include broad involvement of all in the congregation, and we expect it will be completed in early 2027 with a congregation meeting and vote about whether to "Call" Rev. Lara to be our Settled Minister. A committee to begin this process of discernment on behalf of the congregation will be identified and submitted for approval at the upcoming Annual General Meeting on April 26.

This is the last time I will be writing one of these columns to members of the congregation as president of the board. My term will conclude at the end of April and I will move into the past-president role.

The last two years have been full of joys and challenges, along with a positive sense of what we have accomplished together. There have been many key activities we have tackled and I've been extremely gratified that when I asked congregants to step up to take on key responsibilities, they have done so. That has reinforced in me the sense that the strength of our congregation is all of us, as members of the community, working together to ensure that FirstU continues towards its mission to create a vibrant faith community that nourishes all of us and makes a positive difference in the broader Ottawa community.

Editor's note: Many thanks to Chuck for his service and to all who serve on the Board of Directors.



RE-flections: Our Whole Lives

~ Jodi McIntosh



Growing Together: An Invitation to Join Our Children & Youth Ministry

Over the past three years, our Religious Exploration (RE) program has blossomed in ways that continue to surprise and delight me. When I first joined the staff team as Director of Religious Exploration, we had just four children attending sporadically on Sunday mornings. Today, we welcome between 12 and 24 children every week, filling our downstairs rooms with energy, curiosity, laughter, and community.

With this growth has come transformation. What was once a single classroom has now expanded into three vibrant learning spaces:

- The Rainbow Room (ages 6 and under)
- The Chalice Room (ages 6–8)
- The Wonder Room (ages 8–12)

Each room is lovingly guided by one of our four dedicated staff: myself; our RE Assistant, Esther; our Childcare Coordinator, Rita; and our new Childcare Assistant, Anousha, who brings joy and calm to our youngest children each week.

As our program continues to expand, so does our need for a wider circle of adults who feel called to support children and youth in our congregation. Our dream is to create programs that are rich, reliable, and sustainable—and we can only do that with your help.

Why Volunteer?

We are seeking adults who are compassionate, responsible, patient, and willing to learn alongside our children. You don't need teaching experience—just a caring heart and a willingness to be present. We offer training, support, and a chance to be part of a team that truly makes a difference.

Volunteering is also a way to find your place within the life of the church. Years ago, our RE program ran with the help of up to 25 volunteers every Sunday—parents and other congregants weaving a beautiful tapestry of

intergenerational ministry. I hope we will grow to that scale again, but for now, my focus is on offering a thoughtful, meaningful program to the children and youth we have right now.

What We Need

Each Sunday, both the Chalice and Wonder Rooms require one volunteer, working alongside staff who plan and lead the curriculum. With enough volunteers, each person would serve once every 3–6 weeks.

We also have a growing group of youth (ages 11–17). Currently they meet once a month on Friday evenings, but my hope is to develop a weekly Sunday morning youth group—a consistent space where they can build community and deepen their UU identity. To make this possible, we are looking for youth advisors who are passionate about working with teens. Training is provided, and the time commitment depends on the size of the advisor team.

A Note About OWL & Spring Needs

From April 19–June 21, we will be offering the K/1 level of Our Whole Lives (OWL). Many of our 5–7 year-olds will take part, but we will still run two classes every week for our youngest children and our older group. Volunteers will be essential to keeping these spaces open and welcoming.

Safety & Support

All volunteers complete a vulnerable sector check and a short orientation with me. You will always be paired with staff or another adult—we follow a strict two adult policy to keep everyone safe. Staff set up the rooms; volunteers simply join the children as they head downstairs and help tidy at the end.

If you have patience, kindness, curiosity, and a desire to grow with our kids, there is a place for you in this ministry.

I would love to talk with you about how you might get involved.



Musical Notes

~ Jenn Bernston, Music Director



The music program has many exciting things in the works. This term, our three adult choirs are singing music of resilience and resistance. Our spring concert will feature tunes sung at protests and rallies, with lyrics that express and affirm our UU values and principles. We will be learning music from social movements around the world, including the Singing Revolution in Latvia, the nueva canción movement in Latin America, and anti-Apartheid protest music from South Africa.

As always, if you're interested in singing some of this music with us, please email Jenn at music@firstunitarianottawa.ca to discuss which choir is the right fit for you!

I am also thrilled that we will be starting a FirstU Children's Choir. The first session will be March 25

(after March break), Wednesday nights from 5:00pm - 6:00pm! The children's choir is open to anyone, not only current FirstU members, so feel free to put the word out. I am also looking for volunteers to help with the program - if you're interested in providing musical leadership or administrative support, both would be wonderful!

If you or someone you know would be interested in joining the children's choir, you can register here:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScZk3iPbSGxZhKL-AoeL7ylcw3rYcLXQP0eKD4k0D-PIHDQ3Q/viewform?usp=header>

Looking forward to a wonderful term of music making!

Yours in song,

Jenn Bernston



✦ In Memoriam ✦

Janice Adelaide Tait (née Johnson), died 25 December 2025, (b. Brantford 5 August 1929); married to Richard Tait for 23 years; mother to Ruth, Alison (Jim) and Catherine (Roger); grandmother to Jesse, Sean (Brittany), Eric (Pam), Max, Nicola (Daniel) and Beatrice; great-grandmother to Ruby, Liam, Ayla, Nora, Archer and Oscar "Ozzy".

Margaret Ridewood (née Allen), at age 98, died 18 December 2025 (b. 25 March 1927), wife of the late Donald Ridewood, who died in 2014); survived by daughter Carol (Ed Falkowski).

Kenneth (Ken) Westbrook Edwards, died 9 January 2026 at 91 (b. 1934); father of Jennifer Edwards. Son of Percy Anway Edwards and Elva Mae Westbrook.

The Joys and Frustrations of Refugee Sponsorship

by Eva Berringer and the Refugee Support Team

Last January, we had the joy of welcoming two of our refugees from Burundi, Elvis Nikiza and Landry Nizigiyimana to Canada. Arriving in the Canadian winter must not have been easy, but both have adjusted well to their new lives. Elvis has found employment in Brooks, Alberta, while Landry is enjoying the francophone environment of Longueuil, Quebec. Our one-year sponsorship period has now ended, but both Elvis and Landry are very grateful for FirstU's support. To quote Elvis – "Your support and encouragement have been incredible and have allowed me to start a new life here." Landry expresses his thanks to "all the wonderful people who helped us reach Canadian soil. Since that day, a new chapter in our lives has begun, and I am deeply grateful."

Applications for two other refugees from Burundi, Jean Niyongabo and Régis-Franck Binyaruka, were submitted at the same time as Elvis and Landry's. Frustratingly, despite it being 32 months since the applications were submitted, neither of them has had their initial interview which is the critical first step in the processing of their applications abroad.

We were also very disappointed when in June 2025, the Alamasalmehs, a family of 9 from Syria (mom, dad, six children and their grandmother) felt they had no choice but to withdraw their application for refugee sponsorship. After 3 1/2 years, there was still no word from IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada), and Jordan, where they were staying, was withdrawing support for refugees. Among other things, this would have meant that the children would have no access to schooling. The family made the difficult decision to return to Syria, despite the continuing uncertainties there.

We have received no word yet on our most recent sponsorship, Qandagha Karimi, a young man from Afghanistan who remains in hiding in Pakistan. Qandagha's aunt, who had been badly beaten by the Taliban before escaping with Qandagha's help to Pakistan, arrived in Canada in October. While this is certainly good news, we are concerned that it places Qandagha at even greater risk of being deported back to Afghanistan where he will be targeted by the Taliban. We remain grateful for the swift response of many FirstU congregants to the financial appeal to cover Qandagha's sponsorship.

Our one other application, for Mekdelawit Mesganaw Getu from Ethiopia, was submitted in 2023. There has been no word on its status.

Despite the frustrations of these delays and uncertainties, we remain committed to our refugee sponsorship program and will be actively seeking a family or individuals to sponsor this year (subject to spaces being available from the CUC). And we're also hopeful that we'll be welcoming some of our other refugees to Canada soon. If you are interested in learning more about Refugee Support at FirstU and how you can help, please contact us at refugees@firstunitarianottawa.ca.



Reflections on Lay Chaplaincy

by Lisa Boulay on behalf of the FirstU Lay Chaplain Team

Serving as a Lay Chaplain at the First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa has been such a deep learning and growth experience for me. On a personal level it has allowed me to continue to explore the meaning and expression of calling and vocation in my life. As a Unitarian Universalist it has allowed me to carry our principles into action, especially our First Principle.

So how did this come to be? In 2018, when I decided to retire, a new and unforeseen dilemma surfaced; how do I retire from my calling? Is that even possible?

I also, coincidentally, became a member of FirstU in early 2018 at the suggestion of two dear friends, Rev. Linda Goonewardene and Paula Theetge. I had found my spiritual home and began exploring and participating in various groups, each of which deepened my commitment to be an active, contributing member of the congregation.

In a conversation about my impending retirement with Rev. Linda she said, “I can see you as a Lay Chaplain.” This intrigued me and so I started doing research about Lay Chaplaincy as well as seeking out and speaking to congregants who had been Lay Chaplains. The more I learned the more interested I became. Lay Chaplaincy seemed like the next step for me and so I applied and the rest, as they say, is history with lots of support from Bob Armstrong and Alex Campbell, both exceptional former Lay Chaplains.

There is something so incredibly special about being of service to individuals, couples, and families as they face major life transitions like marriage, child naming ceremony, the death of a loved one or animal companion, or honouring the end of a marriage, among others. I have heard the most tender and loving words and tributes, and

seen incredible expressions of creativity; like the time a couple decided to make a banana and peanut butter sandwich as their unity ceremony in their wedding, it was so right, so them. Officiating interment services at the National Military Cemetery at Beechwood have been particularly moving experiences.

Many people reach out to FirstU for support in preparing rites of passage with our Lay Chaplains because of word of mouth or because they have attended other rites of passage or concerts at FirstU. This creates an opportunity to be ambassadors for our faith community. I have had a number of conversations with individuals who were curious about UUism. Some have become members of our congregation.

Key aspects of serving as a Lay Chaplain involve being present, actively listening, providing support, and assisting individuals, couples and families in designing rites of passage that authentically reflect themselves and/or their loved ones.

Lay Chaplaincy proved to be the ideal path for me—could it be the right choice for you as well? If this does interest you, please reach out to me or Guy Belleperche. We would be happy to chat with you.

“The nature of the calling can change over time, taking a person down pathways never anticipated. The calling opens new territories within the heart; this in turn deepens the calling itself. This is the creative tension that dwells at the heart of vocation.”

John O’Donohue

Lay Chaplains at First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa are Guy Belleperche and Lisa Boulay. The Chair of the Lay Chaplain team is Sharmila Khare.

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