

A History of the Congregation – First Unitarian Church Alton Illinois 1836 - 2022

Prepared by Mary E. Johnson – Updated March 2023

The information compiled below was derived from multiple sources, including church newsletters and church board minutes, and some of the text is taken verbatim from these sources.

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The Early Years

By 1831, Dr. William Samuel Emerson, his wife Olive, and their young son Lincoln, had moved to the rough and lawless Mississippi River town of Alton, Illinois where Dr. Emerson set up practice as the town's first physician. The Emersons were from Kennebunk Maine. William was the second cousin of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Olive was from a prominent shipbuilding family. Both were affiliated with the Unitarian church in Kennebunk. Life was much different in Alton than "back east," and Dr. Emerson wanted to bring to Alton his family's ethical religion – Unitarianism – to this turbulent town on the edge of the frontier. He perhaps had a more personal reason also. In 1832 Mrs. Emerson wrote in a letter to her brother back in Kennebunk, "I thank you for telling me so many hymns and tunes that your sing ... I take my hymn book and find the hymns and then sing them ... there is nothing that reminds me ... of home as that. Oh how I long every Sunday morning to be in Kennebunk and go to my own meeting. It is so different here."

Over time others in Alton joined them in practicing this liberal religion, and Sunday services were held in Dr. Emerson's office. Occasionally the Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot from the Unitarian Church in St. Louis would make the trip up the Mississippi by steamboat to preach to those gathered. By 1836 the Unitarians called their first minister, the Rev. Charles Andrew Farley, an 1832 graduate of Harvard, and he preached his first sermon on December 7, 1836. This is the date that is considered the founding of the Unitarian Church in Alton. Farley's sermon was published and distributed widely throughout the town.

However, soon the congregation was faced with challenges. After an illness of some length, Dr. Emerson died on September 28, 1837, at the age of 36. Earlier that year the publisher, minister, and abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy had brought his abolitionist newspaper and free press views to Alton, arousing conflict and violence on both sides of the question, and mob rule became the law.

Lovejoy was murdered on Nov. 7, 1837 and the social upheaval continued. Rev. Farley apparently tried to remain neutral. In a sermon he gave on December 31, 1837, he stated:

“... adherents of the conflicting parties are one-sided men. Each is about half right, and half wrong ... With no sympathy for the agitators be their principles right or wrong, and claiming the privilege of holding and expressing my own principles in my own way, it seems an act of moral suicide, in the present state of things, to go all out with any party.” (Gill, p, 233, 1958).

Rev. Farley decided not to stay in Alton, and soon moved back east. The small Unitarian congregation grew even smaller because of these events and stopped holding public services, gathering instead in homes. But Rev. Eliot kept an eye on the Unitarians in Alton and would make an occasional visit to preach to them, providing ongoing support and encouragement.

The Last Half of the 19th Century

By the early 1850s those interested in starting a Unitarian congregation had grown strong enough again to begin public worship and formed the First Congregational [Unitarian] Society in 1853. Their first minister, the Rev. William D’Arcy Haley, arrived in October of that year.



In 1854, for \$3,000, church member Joshua R. Stanford purchased the corner lots (Lots number one and two in Block number 14) on a hill where the Catholic Church had burned on Feb. 18, 1854. He then transferred the deed to the Trustees of the First Congregational [Unitarian] Society of Alton. Construction work was begun, and by October 1855 the new sanctuary was dedicated.

Soon after the new church was built, Rev. Haley along with other members of the Alton community, initiated plans for a high school, as there was no high school in Alton. In December 1855, a tuition based “Classical and High School for Young Ladies” opened in a temporary location. In the spring of 1856 a large school room was built in the basement of the Unitarian church and by the fall a “Young Ladies Select School” opened in that school room and through 1857 provided young ladies an “English education.” In 1858 the school became co-ed and was added to the Alton City free school system. The school was now called the “Advanced School” and the City paid rent to the Unitarian church to house the school. Thus, the first public high school in Alton started in the Unitarian Church and remained there until 1866 when the City built a new school building and the students were transferred from the Unitarian Church to the third floor of that school. The report, entitled “*Alton’s First High School and Its Beginnings in the Unitarian Church*” can be found at [Our Congregation’s History](http://www.firstualton.org) under the [About Us](http://www.firstualton.org) tab at <http://www.firstualton.org>.

During Rev. Haley’s tenure with the church (1853-1856) the policy of “freedom of the pulpit” was instituted following a congregational upheaval concerning Haley’s anti-slavery sermons about the “Kansas Question,” which was a major issue of the times. The Kansas Question was related to the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854 whereby the people of each territory were to decide whether or not

that territory would enter the Union as a slave or free state. Both sides sent thousands of settlers into Kansas to prop up votes. Kansas became a battleground both politically and literally and the territory was often called “Bleeding Kansas.”

Numerous members of the congregation complained about Haley’s preaching “politics” from the pulpit. On July 13, 1856 he offered his resignation saying:

“... I denounce such enormous wrongs from root to branch ... I am compelled to say, that if I cannot be an honest man, and be your pastor, I will at least remain honest; if I cannot preach the whole truth I will not preach at all.”

Following an initial vote to accept Haley’s resignation, a second motion was made and approved, asking him to remain. That motion said in part:

“... that however we may as individuals differ in opinions upon the numerous questions political and others constantly presented to us, yet as a Society we will never condemn a person for upholding the cause of Truth, Justice, and Morality ... this Society ... will uphold him [Haley] in his Christian ministry.”

Even after getting the support of the congregation Haley stayed only a few more months, leaving in October 1856.

Two years later, on October 15th, 1858, the City of Alton hosted the seventh debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. This debate was held in a square a few blocks downhill from the Unitarian church. Lincoln asked “Does not this question [the institution of slavery] make a disturbance outside of political circles? Does it not enter into the churches and render them asunder? What divided the great Methodist Church ...? What has raised disturbance in every Presbyterian General Assembly ...? What disturbed the Unitarian Church in this very city two years ago?” There are two events to which Lincoln is referring. The first was the upheaval in the church regarding Haley’s preaching about the Kansas Question and the congregation’s response which ultimately resulted in his departure. The second happened less than a year later when the Western Unitarian Conference met at the Alton church in May 1857 for the WUC’s annual meeting which drew 40 – 50 ministers. After the first day of the gathering, resolutions were introduced “... on the religious duty [of ministers] to speak out against slavery.” The two day debate was very divisive, with those on one side saying that political issues should not be preached from the pulpit and that the conference had no power to proscribe to any Unitarian minister what or how they should preach. Other speakers stated that slavery was an abomination. They said slavery was not in keeping with Unitarian beliefs and anti-slavery messages should be preached in Unitarian churches. The Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot, from St. Louis, one of the early founders of the WUC and a leader in the denomination, was strongly against preaching politics from the pulpit. During the second day of the ongoing debate, he took his delegation and walked out of the conference, never to attend another one. This schism in the WUC was never completely healed. (Perry, Lewis, and Matthew C. Sherman. “What disturbed the Unitarian Church in this very city?” : Alton, the slavery conflict, and Western Unitarianism.” Civil War History, vol. 54, no.1, 2008, pg. 5-34).

Soon after Haley left the congregational called another minister. Over the next five decades the congregation had nine ministers, some staying but a short time, others eight years or more. No services were held from 1861–May, 1863. In 1878 a brick parsonage was built on the church grounds. By 1880 the congregation was active in community service – there was a committee that established the Free Library in Alton, and a committee for “Cooperation and City Works.”

In December 1890 the members of the First Congregational Society of Alton voted to change the name of the Society to the First Unitarian Church of Alton. The affidavit of Incorporation was notarized on February 6, 1891 and can be found in Book 181, page 367 in the Recorder of Deeds for Madison County.



In 1898 the women of the church formed a women's group to help the needy in the community and do "good works." The group was called the Anna D. Sparks Society (later called Alliance) in memory of Anna Davenport Chapman Sparks, a church member and community activist who had died in 1896. Starting in 1878 Anna D served an eight year term as church treasurer, a position not usually held by a woman in those times. Though the decades, members of the Anna Ds (as they are called), continued serving the community, the church, and the denomination, and are still active today.

The First Three Decades of the 20th Century

By 1900 the church was free of debt and had about fifty-seven families with an active Sunday School.

On October 25, 1903, the congregation celebrated the semi-centennial of the church. That same year, the congregation voted to build a new church on its hill-top corner overlooking the Mississippi River. This is the same church the congregation meets in today. The new building was dedicated on October 29, 1905.

During this period the church had nine ministers. In 1913, the **Rev. Dr. Curtis Reese** (1913-1915), later a signer of the Humanist Manifesto, was head of the Alton Anti-Crime Syndicate and had his life threatened numerous times.

In August of 1917 the church signed a contract with Underbrink Construction to make certain alterations and repairs to the church building and the parsonage.

1934

On Tuesday afternoon, November 20, the body of the church's minister, Rev. Phillip Mercer, was found hanging from a transom in a corner of the fellowship hall. His death was declared a suicide. He had been with the church since 1930 and was well-liked. Those who knew him said that he had been worrying about his health. After a funeral service at the church his body was put to rest in the Alton City Cemetery mausoleum waiting for family members to claim it. No one ever did.

Many years later, in 1998, Rev. Mercer and the Unitarian church became part of Alton's ongoing haunted history tours, and many claim to have seen his ghost or felt his presence while in the church.

1936 – 1946

In 1936 the church celebrated its 100th anniversary with the compilation of a church history written by its minister, the **Rev. Wallace W. Robbins** (1934-1938).

Between 1936 and 1946 the church remained active in community life. Boy and Girl Scout troops, led by church members, met at the church; the Coast Guard met there during the war; donations were collected for the Alton Memorial Hospital Building Fund. By the early 1940s the congregation was growing and the Sunday School was very active. In 1944 the minister, **Rev. John Gill** (1944-1950), was invited to join the Alton Ministerial Alliance and the church became a member of the Alton Council of Churches.

1946 - 1956.

By 1946 the church had over one-hundred members with fifty children in the Sunday School.

In the decade between 1946 and 1959 the church was very active. In 1951 the Anna Ds had 83 members and did much work for the community and church. The church sponsored movies for children, programs for parents, a philosophy group, art classes, and programs for teens. The Alton Art Guild and the Alton Civic Orchestra met at the church.

However the church also went through a difficult time in 1949-1950. Rev. Gill and many members of the congregation supported and worked for school integration, and they received angry calls, threats, and criticisms from segregationists—and even from some of the church members themselves.

In 1951 the congregation called **Rev. Zoltan Nagy** (1951-1958), a displaced Unitarian minister from Hungary. He held fireside discussions about Unitarianism for all in the community who wished to attend. By 1953 the membership rose to 137, with 65 children registered in the Sunday School. The church ran a capital campaign amounting to \$23,500 to purchase a new parsonage, and used the parsonage next to the church for the Sunday School classes.

1956 - 1966

Between 1956 and 1966 the church prospered. By the end of the decade there were 138 children in the church school, the church buildings were in good condition, and were used for church and community activities. In 1958 Rev. Nagy resigned and went to Austria to work with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) in helping Hungarian refugees. Special donations were made by church members to support this work. In 1959 **Rev. Hugh Kennedy** (1959-1970) was called to the Alton ministry. Pledge drives began, new hymnals and a piano were purchased. The house purchased as a parsonage was sold and the money invested in the American Unitarian Association general fund. The church celebrated its 125th anniversary in 1961 with a gathering of 100 members. The Rev. Dana Greely, president of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) was the guest speaker.

In 1961 the art glass windows in the sanctuary were repaired using special art glass cement.

1966 - 1976

The decade between 1966 and 1976 was a time of change and upheaval for the Alton church and the country. In Lottie Forcade's history of the church written in 1986 she discussed the societal

changes and the development of psychotherapy methods called Sensitivity Groups or Encounter Groups. In 1968 Rev. Kennedy visited the Esalen Institute in California and came back to Alton wanting to set up such groups in the congregation. These groups proved to be very controversial—some members found them helpful, others believed them harmful. However the groups, along with other experimental changes in the Sunday services, have been blamed for the departure of Rev. Kennedy in 1970 and the split that occurred in the congregation, with many members, especially those with children, leaving. Although the Encounter groups continued for two more years after Rev. Kennedy's departure.

Grace Madison's update to the church history written in 2009 postulates that another cause for the split may have had to do with finances. In 1967 the congregation had voted to proceed with the construction of a new Religious Education wing. A building drive fund which produced \$55,000 plus endowment money provided a total of \$92,000. The costs of the new wing and renovations to the fellowship hall were estimated to be \$130,000 and the Board did not feel that they had enough money pledged to go to a bank for a mortgage, so they took out an unsecured loan, assuming that the growth in membership would continue and that the loan could easily be paid back.

However, this was not the case, and the church lost many members as mentioned above. Following Rev. Kennedy's departure, the Unitarian Interdistrict Representative suggested that the congregation hire an interim minister before searching for another settled minister. However, the Board felt there was not money to take that step and gave some thought to becoming a "fellowship." However the congregation decided they wanted a minister and in October, 1971 voted to call **Rev. Kelley Wells**, (1971-1972). However membership and pledges continued to decline, and the only available funds were in the Building Fund. When in June 1972 the minister asked for an increase in salary he was refused because the Board did not want to use the Building Fund money for salary, so the minister left and **the congregation was without a settled minister until 1979**. Sunday services were conducted by church members, speakers from the community, part-time ministers, and ministerial students. UU ministers in the St. Louis area were contracted for weddings, funerals and pastoral counseling.



1976 - 1986

In 1976, with the receipt of a financial legacy, it was decided to establish a Ministerial Fund for the calling of a future minister. However, serious building maintenance problems required funds and members were invited to loan the church money for these purposes. Another split in the church came in 1977 when the Board proposed that the building loans (plus the loans taken for the needed repairs) be paid off with the legacy fund. This would have taken the entire amount of the legacy. The congregation over-rode the Board's proposal and voted instead to set aside \$14,500 in the Ministerial Fund, pay off the mortgage (\$3,200) and put the remaining \$3,500 towards the building maintenance repayment.

According to the UUA Active Congregation History Report, in 1976 there were 60 members on the rolls, down from 208 in 1971. A profile taken from a Long Range Planning report shows "... a small, ageing congregation scattered geographically, academically oriented due to the presence of local colleges, and financially unremarkable."

In **1977** the church participated in a “Minister on Loan” program whereby another Unitarian Church would “loan” its minister for a six week period to provide an outsider’s view of the congregation and help them with future planning. At the end of the six weeks the congregation developed a list of “hopes and dreams” for a five year period, ending in December 1982. Some of the items on the wish list included: 150 members, 100 in church on Sunday morning, groups to fill people’s needs, an active Religious Education program, a settled minister, social action work within the community, and active involvement within the denomination.

By **1978** the church had the financial means to call the **Rev. Sylvia Falconer**, (1979-1983), who began her work with the church in January, **1979**. Rev. Falconer brought new life, and her three children, to the church and to the community. She brought a new perspective to the pulpit, and revamped the worship service structure which had become lax and informal during the years without a minister. She included the children in the worship time. She provided counseling for women at the Oasis Women’s Shelter, worked for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in Illinois, and became president of the Alton Area Ministerial Alliance. By the time she submitted her resignation in December, 1982 and moved to a larger church in the spring of **1983**, the congregation membership had grown to around 100 with 15 children in RE.

In September **1982**, church member and sculptor Ned Giberson presented the church with a brass chalice that he designed and crafted. This is the chalice that we continue to light every Sunday.

Knowing it was important to keep the growth momentum, the church immediately appointed a Search Committee and the **Dr. Rev. Jean Gilpatrick**, (1983-1985), began her ministry in December, **1983**. Several committees were active during this time. The Sunday morning Forum provided an avenue for discussions, the Anna Ds Women’s Alliance was thriving, and an additional Religious Education Classroom was needed. However, there was restlessness among the members—some complained that Rev. Gilpatrick’s sermons were too academic and that she didn’t relate well to the children. Income was once again falling behind expenses, and for these and other personal reasons, Rev. Gilpatrick moved back to Virginia in **1985**.

1986 – 1996

UUA membership records for this decade show a high of 92 with a low of 76 and a spread in Religious Education (RE) attendance between 0 and 30. Average worship attendance was in the mid-40s.

In September **1986**, the Alton church began sharing an Extension Minister, the **Rev. Martha Newman**, (1986-1993), with the newly formed Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel in West St. Louis County, Missouri. Although there were few children registered in Alton’s RE program, overall membership remained fairly constant in the low 90s with an average Sunday attendance in the 40s through the late 1980s. In 1990 Rev. Newman’s Extension Ministry tenure ended and Emerson Chapel was seeking a full-time minister. As Rev. Newman was nearing retirement she did not wish to have full-time work, so agreed to serve the Alton congregation on a two-thirds time basis.

By October **1991** there were twenty-five children registered in RE and a local Endowment Fund started to help provide for future needs. Rev. Newman retired in **1993** and a practicing Unitarian Universalist Buddhist, the **Rev. Alex Holt**, (1993-1994), was hired for a nine-month appointment. He was a popular leader and the congregation voted to extend his Interim Ministry for another year. However, then the furnace needed to be replaced, and a new copier was needed in the office,

along with other unplanned for expenses. To finance large item expenditures the Board decided to initiate a Capital Fund campaign in addition to the regular budget. The Board explored the viability of obtaining a bank loan to pay for large ticket items as well as for the minister's salary. Although the **1994** pledge drive saw a 10% increase in pledges, the church's total income was projected to fall \$13,000 short of the proposed budget. Rev. Holt indicated that due to his recent marriage he needed health insurance in his package, plus a twelve month contract, and he didn't believe the church should borrow money to pay salaries. He resigned effective at the end of the 1994 church year and the church struggled with some members' concerns regarding whether we had breached our contract with Rev. Holt and whether we needed to provide him with additional severance pay.

In the "*First Unitarian Church of Alton History Update 2009*," Grace Madison sums up the previous three decades by saying:

"... a recurring pattern emerged. 1) the congregation would be without a minister for a time during which money would be set aside in anticipation of hiring a minister; 2) because of our small congregation and budget, our search invariably resulted in hiring a very recent graduate of Seminary; 3) in a few years, our reserve fund would be exhausted, we would not have grown enough in members or money to maintain a ministerial presence and the process would start all over again. We had become a "boot camp" for new ministers. While this process had resulted in an interesting time of exposure to varied views and personalities, it meant a lack of continuity and a constant 'reinventing of the wheel.' It was decided to try more cautious alternative methods of leadership."

In the fall of **1994**, **Dr. John Hoad**, retired Leader Emeritus of the St. Louis Ethical Society, was hired to fill the pulpit two Sundays each month, with congregation and community members filling the other weeks. In addition, the Board contracted with **Rev. Aline Russell**, a local Presbyterian Minister, to provide pastoral counseling services. These people, along with a part-time paid church administrator, a secretary, and an organist, helped to maintain the essentials of a functioning church. In addition, there was also an influx of members from the recently disbanded Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Fellowship on the Missouri side of the Mississippi River.

1996 – 2006

UUA membership figures for this decade show a high of 87 to a low of 60 with the average number of children in RE ranging from 30 to 16.

In **1996** the church developed a website, which in the coming years would be a vital tool for growth. At the congregation's annual meeting in **1997** there was overwhelming support for more emphasis on Religious Education. The search began for a quarter-time Director of Religious Education (DRE). The second priority expressed at that meeting was for a half-time minister to grow to full time.

In **1998**, as a fundraiser, our church started participating in Alton's Haunted History Tours. This participation has continued through the present day (2020). Alton is sometimes described as "one of the most haunted small towns in America" and the church is a popular stop on the tour. Tour Leaders (not associated with the church) indicate places in the church building where visitors might sense the presence of an apparition. Leaders speculate that "ghost" might be the Unitarian

minister who hung himself in the building in November 1934, the Rev. Phillip Mercer (1930-1934).

At a weekend Board retreat in **1998** the Board developed a long-range plan, known as *Focus on the Future*. Under this plan old committees were restructured, new committees were organized, and committee responsibilities were defined.

In January of **1999** the Board announced that the church had \$20,000 in the ministerial fund, and appointed a Ministerial Search Committee. Later that spring the Committee recommended that **Carol Dole**, the former DRE at First Unitarian Church, St. Louis, and graduate of Eden Seminary in St. Louis be called as our half-time minister. Continuing in the pulpit on the remaining Sundays would be **Dr. Hoad** and **Dr. Ron Glossop**, a church member and philosophy professor at nearby Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville. Carol was ordained at First Church St. Louis in July and installed at our church in October. She resumed using her birth name of Wolff.

In **2000** a progress report on the *Focus on the Future* plan showed that a local endowment fund had been established, a different pledge drive approach brought positive results, and a new subcommittee—the Caring Committee—was formed under the Members Committee. An excellent office manager had been hired as well as a part-time DRE, and central air conditioning was added to the entire church building.

In **2003**, a Board and Committee Chair retreat developed new goals. They were: To have the membership grow to 100 members by 2008; to do needed maintenance to improve the aesthetics of the building; and to achieve greater consistency in Children and Youth Programming. Stated objectives, action steps and a timeline accompanied these goals.

In May **2004**, Rev. Wolff submitted her resignation to take a full-time position at a Unitarian Church on the East Coast.

A Search Committee was formed to find another half-time minister, and arrangements were made for the pulpit to be filled by Dr. Hoad, Dr. Glossop, lay speakers, other UU ministers, and **Khleber Van Zandt**, a student at Eden Seminary. The congregation expressed the desire not to have another interim minister, but to have a permanent minister who would start at half-time and progress to full-time. A financial plan was in place to provide for a full-time minister within another year if growth progressed.

The Search Committee interviewed several candidates, including Khleber Van Zandt, who was preaching at the church on a regular basis and would graduate from Eden Theological Seminary in May 2005. The rules of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) state that if an individual has preached or provided ministerial services at a specific church, that individual may not be called as a minister there. However, the UUA granted special permission to allow the congregation to formally call Mr. Van Zandt. At a special meeting in April **2005** the congregation voted unanimously to call him as our minister. Khleber served our church from 2005 to 2014. Although his ministry did not formally begin until July 1, he immediately started taking an active role by attending board meetings and becoming familiar with the people and activities of the church.

The congregation held Khleber Van Zandt's Ordination and Installation service at the church on November 15, **2005**.

2006 – 2010

During these five years church membership grew from 61 in 2006 to 131 at the beginning of 2010. Enrollment in RE grew from 16 to 62.

Pastor: Rev. Khleber Van Zandt

The congregation continued social service programs already in place, such as food donations to the Alton Crisis Food Pantry, financial and other support for the Oasis Women’s Center, and participation in Alton’s Annual Community Christmas toy and clothing drive.

New programs and activities were started during these years, some continuing to the present time. Other new programs were put in place to answer a specific need or were for a limited duration.

In **2006** the church began a year-long study program aimed at becoming a Welcoming Congregation, in support of GLBTQ individuals and their families. In May 2007 the congregation voted to become part of the UUA Welcoming Congregation program. Banners were hung on the fence in front of the church, one saying “Laws Don’t Make Families, LOVE makes Families and YOUR FAMILY IS WELCOME HERE”

In June 2007 church members participated in what would become an annual event, marching with our banner in the GLBTQ Pride Parade in St. Louis.

As part of its efforts to work on environmental issues, the church began working with the Missouri Adopt a Highway project, and church members regularly picked up trash along a stretch of Highway 367 leading from Missouri into Illinois. This effort continued for several years.

An interfaith discussion group called “All God’s People” was started and met monthly at the church for some time.

In January **2007** Rev. Van Zandt’s status was changed from half-time to full-time.

Covenant groups (aka chalice circles) were introduced, and 5 active groups were organized over the year, including a Pagan group and a Parents group. There are currently no “official” covenant groups, as over time most disbanded or became “interest groups,” no longer holding to the guidelines for chalice circles.

In February **2007**, seventeen people from the church, including Rev. Van Zandt and several children/young people, went to New Iberia Louisiana to help restore homes damaged by Hurricane Katrina. A team from our church went down to Louisiana the two following years to help fulfill the continued need for assistance.

In February **2007** the congregation offered the *Our Whole Lives* (OWL) sexuality education program for junior and senior high groups.

In the spring of **2007** the church became part of a social justice interfaith group--the Alton Area Cluster of the United Congregations of Metro East, a community organizing affiliate of the national Gamaliel Foundation. Work with the Cluster and UCM continues.



In August of **2007**, the congregation started sharing the (non-pledge) Sunday collection twice a month through a program called the Community Outreach Offering. This program continued until April of 2013 when the church's financial crisis made it necessary to retain the funds for normal operations.

In October **2008**, a new social justice venture began—the 4th Saturday Lunch—providing a hot meal for local people struggling financially or for those living on the streets or in the several homeless shelters near the church. The distribution of personal care items was later added to this ongoing monthly activity. The attendance at these lunches averaged between 60 and 70 people.
2008 church statistical information submitted to UUA 1-23-09: 117 members; 40 children enrolled in RE; 76 pledging units.

In February **2009**, the church started an educational sponsorship of three Unitarian students in the Khasi Hills of India. This was a 3 – 5-year commitment.

In April **2009** the Confluence Covenant of UU Pagans initiated a monthly SpiralScouts program for children in the church and community. This program continued for several years.

In November **2009**, a new Director of Religious Education was hired with increased hours and new RE programming began.

2009 church statistical information submitted to UUA 1-25-10: 131 members; 62 children enrolled in RE; 93 pledging units.

In January **2010**, the Board approved the recommendation by the Second Service Committee to start holding two services as of March 21, one at 9:30 and the other at 11 a.m. The two service Sundays continued through May and resumed on September 19. Having two services remains somewhat controversial yet today, with one of the two services having a very small attendance.

In March **2010** the Social Justice Committee ran an eleven-week pilot program called KNOW (Kids Night Out Weekly) for children living at a nearby homeless shelter. A meal, social activities, and homework help were provided each Tuesday evening by church volunteers.

In April of **2010**, a group of Unitarian-Universalist sexual orientation minorities and gender queers and their friends met at First UU in Alton to share a meal together, socialize, and plan for future activities. All four metro St. Louis UU congregations were represented: First Church in St. Louis, Eliot Chapel and Emerson members joined Alton's sizable contingent. In addition to creating social opportunities within the UU LGBTQ community, attendees were interested in working with LGBTQ youth and elder organizations. Many members marched with their respective churches at St. Louis Pridefest over the summer.

In September **2010** the Board appointed a Capital Campaign Committee to investigate the possibilities of having a fund drive to support needed building maintenance and improvements which could not be paid for out of the annual budget.

2010 church statistical information submitted to UUA 1-28-11: 129 members; 50 children enrolled in RE; 88 pledging units.

2011

Board Members elected June 2011:

Sayer Johnson (President); Marty Moore Johnson (President Elect); Cheryle Tucker Loewe (Past President); Sarah Lazarz (Secretary); Jerry Johnson (Treasurer); Jim Moore and Don Allen (Members at Large) Note: None of the Johnson were related.

Pastor: Khleber Van Zandt

In January of **2011**, a UUA Congregational Stewardship Consultant made a three-day “assessment visit” to the church. At her suggestion, a committee was formed to develop a five-year strategic plan to help us plan for the future and spur on the Capital Campaign.

In March the church started its ongoing participation in Alton’s community weekly Lenten Services and Lunches.

In **2010** it had been discovered that one of our members, a lawyer who was on the church Endowment Committee, had forged the name of one of our elderly congregants on a \$130,000 inheritance check and had used the money for his own benefit. He was found guilty, and on the day of sentencing in July **2011** committed suicide. There was concern that the church’s endowment fund may have been compromised, but that was found not to be the case. There was also caring concern expressed for this man’s family, but they never returned to the church.

In late July, adults, children, and youth from our congregation participated in the first annual week-long outdoor Campfest at Pere Marquette State Park. Campfest happened for several more years.

Signs of potential future financial problems were noted by the Treasurer in his announcement to the Board of a deficit for FY’10-’11 of at least \$6,800.

In September **2011** it was announced that our church was one of 18 across the nation that had been invited to join the UUA’s Leap of Faith” pilot program designed to help congregations learn how to grow. We were paired with a mentoring church—Bull Run UU in Manassas VA and our Leap of Faith Team participated in a startup workshop in Minneapolis, later making a weekend visit to Manassas to work directly with their Pastor and selected committee chairs. A video made in 2012 by Rev. Van Zandt about the Leap of Faith experience and its results is available on the UUA website <http://www.uua.org/growth/leap/230837.shtml>. Unfortunately our involvement with the Bull Run church ended when its Pastor moved to another church the following year.

In the fall of **2011** the church Board hired a Capital Campaign consultant to help design and oversee the fund-raising process.

On December 3 the church celebrated its 175th anniversary. A video prepared for that celebration is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpTJkrvu3Yo>.

2011 church statistical information submitted to UUA 1-30-12: 126 members; 73 children enrolled in RE; 89 pledging units.

2012

Board Members elected June 2012:

Marty Moore Johnson* (President); Jennifer Timpe* (President Elect); Sayer Johnson (Past President); Sarah Lazarz (Secretary); Michelle Bryant Barbeau (Treasurer); Kelly Crone Willis and Sandy Shaner (Members at Large)

***Resigned**

Pastor: Khleber Van Zandt

In January 2012, an Ad Hoc Architecture Committee developed priority projects to be funded by the Capital Campaign, and in late February the church kicked off a three year, (2012-2014), “Restoring the Future” Campaign. By May the Campaign had received pledges totaling \$254,000 from 46 pledging units.

At the May 2012 Annual Meeting the Congregation approved the following proposed projects: a new roof over the fellowship hall and RE wing; energy efficient windows and new façade on the RE wing; a remodeled kitchen and coffee center; handicapped accessible parking; a safe play area for young children; upgrade to the HVAC system.

In July the Board reviewed the \$5,000 deficit incurred in the church year just ended and made decisions about dealing with the total deficit, now reaching \$15,000.

In August the first Capital Campaign project was completed—the new roof over the Kate Wuerker Room (fellowship hall) and RE wing.

During the fall the Building Committee installed a new water fountain in the hallway, replacing one that had not worked for several years. They also installed a gas fireplace in the Kate Wuerker Room to replace the wood-burning one that had been unsafe to use for many years.

In December, the church president, elected the previous May, announced her resignation. The most recent past president, stepped into the President position.

2012 church statistical information submitted to UUA 2-01-13: 127 members; 80 children enrolled in RE; 64 pledging units.

2013

Board Members elected June 2013:

Kelley Crone-Willis (President); Sabrina Trupia (President Elect); Cheryle Tucker-Loewe (Past President); Sandy Shaner (Secretary); Michelle Bryant-Barbeau (Treasurer); Lee Suarez and Paul Fischer (Members at Large).

Pastor: Khleber Van Zandt

By January 2013 new computerized financial accounting systems were being put in place.

In February the Board reported that the budget for FY '12-'13 had projected an income of \$10,000 from fundraising but as of January only \$3,613 had been raised.

In March the second Capital Campaign project was completed—the renovation of the kitchen and the installation of a coffee center in our fellowship hall, the Kate Wuerker Room.

In March a special congregational meeting was held to discuss the church's almost \$30,000 shortfall. To continue to pay church bills and staff salaries the Board used \$45,000 from a \$50,000 undesignated bequest, putting the remaining \$5,000 into the Endowment Fund. An outside accountant was hired to establish and manage an online financial system using QuickBooks and Church Help Mate. After a careful review of financial statements the Board concluded that the problem was one of revenue rather than expenses. The Board asked the members to contribute to the "Over and Above" campaign, whereby members would commit to meeting their original pledges as well as paying an additional amount to help defray the shortfall. Over the next few months the church also received donations totaling \$14,819 from the three Unitarian Universalist churches in St. Louis.

It was decided to discontinue our Community Outreach Offering program due to the budget deficit.

The *Our Whole Lives* (OWL) sexuality education for junior and senior high was offered in the Spring of 2013.

In late May the raccoon that had been living in the ceiling of the Wuerker Room for six weeks and wreaking havoc throughout the building, was caught in a live trap and released across the river.

The church was unable to continue paying the salary of the Director of Religious Education and he resigned as of July. A church member was hired to be a part-time Religious Education Coordinator.

In August a plan was put in place to "rebuild committees" through new policy governance. There were to be three program areas—Preaching/Teaching; Outreach; and In-reach. The minister was to be responsible for overall oversight, with each program area having a Chair, with relevant committees and task forces in each program area. This turned out to be only marginally successful. Difficulties arose in finding committee / task force chairs and volunteers.

2013 church statistical information submitted to UUA 2-03-14: 108 members; 54 children enrolled in RE; 64 pledging units.

2014

Board Members elected June 2014:

Sabrina Trupia (President); Debby Lovell (President Elect); Kelley Crone-Willis (Past President); Sandy Shaner (Secretary); Michelle Bryant-Barbeau (Treasurer); Bob Larson and Paul Fischer (Members at Large).

Pastor: Rev. Khleber Van Zandt (Resigned)

Pastor: Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe (Interim)

In April, the third Capital Campaign project was completed—the installation of energy efficient windows in the RE wing.

In April, Rev. Khleber Van Zandt announced his resignation. He had accepted a call from the UU Congregation in Venice Florida. In May the Board began the search for an interim minister.

In July it was announced that the Board selected Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe as interim minister. Pastor Wolfe began serving the church in August 2014. Ghe self-identified as “genderqueer and transgender.”

On August 9, a young black man was killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri—a municipality not too far from Alton, and home to several church members. Pastor Wolfe and other members of the congregation, especially those living in Ferguson, became heavily involved with pro-community, “Black Lives Matter” activities in Ferguson.

As interim minister, Pastor Sunshine’s role was to prepare the congregation for the arrival of a new, settled minister, and as such, over time, ghe made several changes to elements of the worship service (e.g., announcements, joys/concerns), some of which were not well received by some members. Meetings were held to discuss the “whys” of the changes.

Pastor Sunshine also started offering “Inspire Programs.” These classes, held twice monthly on Sundays, were added to the church’s Adult Religious Education Enrichment (ARE) program.

The OWL sexuality education for junior and senior high students was offered again during the 2014-2015 church year.

2014 church statistical information submitted to UUA 1-23-15: 107 members; 63 children enrolled in RE; 47 pledging units.

2015

Board Members elected June 2015:

Debby Lovell (President); Dee Evans (President Elect); Sabrina Trupia (Past President); Pat Moore (Secretary) Lisa Strangeman (Treasurer); Paul Fischer and Paul Hebert (Members at Large).

Pastor: Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe (Interim)

In March, a new Worship Associates Program began with five members who would take turns assisting with the service on Sunday mornings during the regular church year. The Associates would also give the sermons during the summer.

In March, a congregational covenant workshop was held, and a new church covenant was developed and approved at the annual meeting in May. With the acronym “HERE” the covenant reads—

To strengthen and nurture with love, compassion, and respect we covenant together to:

Honor and make space for our diversity; respect our volunteers, leaders and staff by supporting balance in their lives and in their personal and professional pursuits;

Encourage each member to develop a personal spiritual practice that cultivates honesty and acceptance;

Remembering our humanness, we acknowledge our imperfection and extend forgiveness to ourselves and others;

Engage within our own and the larger community with integrity, by taking responsibility for our actions, facilitating right relationships, and living into the journey.

A different approach to the annual pledge drive—called Abundance Sunday—was kicked off in March with the minister from the First Unitarian Church in St. Louis advising.

In May a Ministerial Search Committee was nominated and approved at the Annual Meeting.

Also at that meeting the Board announced that due to budgetary restraints there would be no paid RE Coordinator for the 2015-2016 church year and no professionally staffed nursery. The Religious Education program would now be coordinated by a RE Council which was charged overseeing the Nursery, Spirit Play/Elementary, Youth Programs and Adult Programs.

By June the last pledge was paid to the Capital Campaign. The total donated to the Campaign from February 2012 through June 2015 was \$244,609, and the project expenses totaled \$234,219. Of the six projects proposed, four were completed—upgraded HVAC, new roof over the Kate Wuerker Room and RE wing, renovated kitchen, energy efficient windows in the RE Wing. There were not enough funds to provide for a handicapped parking area, nor did the plan for an outdoor play area materialize. At the end of the Campaign \$10,390 remained in the account. The Church Board was enabled to select appropriate smaller facility improvements to undertake with the remaining funds.

In June a new church structure for the 2015-2016 church year was announced. The responsibilities and accountabilities were divided among the Board of Trustees (representing the Congregation) and the Minister.

In August Unitarian Universalists from all St. Louis churches participated in rallies and marches on the one year anniversary of the death of Michael Brown. Some of our members provided home hospitality for participants coming from a distance.

In September a new church newsletter editor was appointed to replace the former editor who had served for 14 years. Also in September Pastor Sunshine reorganized the worship schedule to include a vesper service to be held at 4 p.m. on Saturdays, intergenerational worship would be at 10:15 a.m., and religious education classes for children and adults would follow the service at 11:30 a.m.

The fall months were filled with ministerial search activities. In August members were asked to fill out a survey about their ideas for ministry. In September a “Beyond Categorical Thinking” workshop regarding non-discrimination in hiring was held, conducted by a UUA consultant. In October a congregational mission/vision workshop was held. Search committee members assembled the online Congregational Record packet and in December activated the ministerial search website.

In September, due to water leakage from the roof, part of the ceiling in the east foyer came down, leaving a large hole. Karlas Construction, the company that had laid the roof in 2012 had gone out of business due to the death of the owner, so the warrantee given to the church was useless.

In October the Board decided to use the remaining funds from the Capital Campaign to repaint the sanctuary, choosing the Color Concepts company from the bids submitted.

The development of the church’s Policies and Procedures Manual was ongoing.

2015 church statistical information submitted to UUA 1-30-16: 96 members; 40 children enrolled in RE; 47 pledging units.

2016

Board Members elected June 2016:

Dee Evans (President); Michael Schmidt (President Elect); Debby Lovell (Past President); Lisa Strangeman (Treasurer); Pat Moore (Secretary); Robin Crane and Paul Hebert (Members at Large).

Pastor: Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe (Interim) – through June

Pastor: Rev. Dawn Fortune (Interim) – August 2016 – June 2017

A new mission / vision statement was approved at the Semi-Annual meeting in January.

“Outward Reaching – Inward Seeking”

“We are creating and nurturing an intentional community that values acceptance, social justice, and the embodiment of Unitarian Universalist principles. Come, let us question together.”

The sanctuary painting was finished early in the year, except for the entry foyers, which would not be painted until the tower roof was repaired.

The treasurer reported in February that members were far behind in paying pledges. The church also did not pay anything to the UUA in 2015. If nothing is paid the church would not be eligible to have delegates at General Assembly in June. The Board voted to pay \$100 to the UUA.

The church continued to participate in the Alton Community Lenten Services.

In April the RE schedule was changed back to having classes for children and youth at the same time as the worship service.

By May the Ministerial Search Committee announced it was unable to find a ministerial candidate to present to the congregation. There had been no responses in the 1st round of the search and there were only three responses in the 2nd round. The Committee eliminated one candidate outright. After extensive reviews of the other two candidates' packets, phone interviews were conducted with both. The Committee learned that each candidate had already received offers from other congregations and that the Alton church's financial package could not match those offers. The Committee was later informed by the Board that there was not enough money in the budget to even support the proposed financial package.

Another Search Committee had been formed in April to seek an interim minister in case no settled minister could be found.

A fund-raiser “History Extravaganza” Trivia Night was held in May.

At the Annual Congregational Meeting on June 5, members voted in favor of a shared ministry with Emerson Unitarian Chapel in West St. Louis County and approved the hiring of Rev. Dawn Fortune who was beginning their second year of interim ministry with Emerson.

Motions regarding by-law changes were approved with 26 votes in favor, 2 opposed, and 4 abstaining.

After serving the church for two years, Rev. Sunshine Wolfe's last worship service was on June 19, although she would be available through early July. Rev. Sunshine accepted another Interim position in the east. Worship Associates conducted the remaining summer services. Rev. Dawn Fortune's first worship service at the church was August 28.

Saturday lunches for those in need were cancelled for July and August due to vacation absences and lack of volunteers.

A "Healing Energy" group was organized and met twice a month at the church.

After investigating several options, the Board decided to move all accounts to Liberty Bank from US Bank due to complicated signing requirements and fees being added to some accounts.

In September Beale Roofing installed a new roof in each tower at a cost of \$4599.

The leadership of the 4th Saturday lunch program decided not to resume serving hot lunches as Morningstar MB Church two blocks away was also serving lunches on the 4th Saturday. Instead we emphasized and expanded our provision of personal care items donated by members and friends of the church. Such items tend to be expensive and are not included in the government SNAP program. Snacks and beverages are made available for those waiting to select their needed care items.

In November a Ministerial Search Committee was once again established to look for a half-time minister to start next August.

On December 4, in celebration of the church's 180th year (marked as December 7, 1836, when Rev. Farley preached his first sermon in Alton) a special event in the Wuerker Room followed the worship service. A display of church-related documents, photographs, and items of historical interest were on display and a short account of their significance in the life of the church was given.

2016 church statistical information submitted to UUA 1-30-17: 96 members; 20 children enrolled in RE; 48 pledging units.

2017

Board Members elected June 2017:

Michael Schmidt (President); Paula LaFond* (Vice President); Dee Evans (Past President); Pat Moore (Secretary); Robin Crane (Treasurer); Phil Embree and Tracey Howe-Koch (Members at Large).

***Resigned – Later name change to Moore.**

Pastor: Rev. Dawn Fortune – through June

Pastor: Ms. Amy Brooks – from August

A ministerial search committee was formed in January to explore hiring a half-time minister to begin in August, as our interim minister, Rev. Dawn Fortune, could not serve another year.

Discussions continued about the need for better building accessibility, including the possible installation of an elevator, which currently is beyond what the church can afford.

The Board decided to purchase a monthly subscription to a Unitarian Universalist Association program called "Faith Rocket" which would provide complete worship services that could be conducted by the Worship Associates if there no minister or speaker were available.

The roof over the fellowship hall was repaired by Lakeside Roofing. A church member repaired the water damaged ceiling in the east entry foyer and repainted the foyer.

An average of 54 people each month came to the church's ongoing 4th Saturday community service program of providing personal care items to those in need. This effort is supported through contributions of products or money from church members and friends.

In October, the multi-year lease on the park next to the church which the church had with City of Alton, was terminated by the City. For decades, possibly as far back as 1905, the church had been maintaining the park, or decades paying the city \$1.00 per year as the lease fee. The City turned the park over to Simmons law firm which had purchased the former Miller's Mutual building adjacent to the park and the church. Several large trees which had shaded the park for generations were cut down and part of the park bulldozed. Negotiations continued between the church and the law firm regarding lawn and sidewalk maintenance.

The congregation participated in a workshop to brainstorm about how to carry out the Church's "Vision and Mission."

In June the congregation approved a budget for the 2017-2018 church year of \$140,000, which included the salary for a ¼ time Religious Education Coordinator and the hiring of an additional nursery attendant. To compensate for the pledge shortfall, the congregation approved the transfer of Reserve Fund and Endowment Fund monies into the operating budget up to a total of \$37,000. No such transfer had been required as of the end of 2017, but without significant changes, transfers will be needed in 2018.

The Board announced that Ms. Amy Brooks had been hired to serve half-time as the church's minister, starting in August. Pastor Brooks was finishing her last year at Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Groves, Missouri.

In September, Mary Johnson, a church member volunteered to take on the task of preparing the documentation needed to apply for 501(c)(3) status with the IRS. This status would make the church eligible to receive corporate contributions for major church projects.

In November, long-time church member Audrey Wiseman died. She and her husband David (who survived her) were married in our church in 1954. Over the ensuing decades the Wisemans were active in many aspects of church life.

2017 church statistical information submitted to UUA 1-29-18: 54 members (based on newly revised criteria for determining membership); 20 children enrolled in RE; 40 pledging units.

2018

Board Members elected June 2018:

Chris Strangeman (Board President); TBD (President Elect); Michael Schmidt (Past President); Robin Crane (Treasurer); Sandy Shaner (Secretary); Phil Embree and Tracey Howe-Koch (Members at Large).

Pastor: Amy Brooks

Church Personnel

Pastor Amy Brooks was accepted for “aspirant status” with the UUA, the first step in becoming a full fellowshipped UU minister. Amy graduated from Eden Seminary in May 2018. Her ministerial contract for the new fiscal year was changed from her working 4/8 time to working 5/8 time.

Zipporah Lee was hired in January to be the RE Coordinator. Zippy had a Master of Divinity degree from Eden Seminary and an affiliation with the United Church of Christ. Her contract was for 4 Sundays per month through June 2019. Becky Green, who had been our Church Office Administrator for almost eighteen years, retired in June. Phillip A. Harris, a student at Eden Seminary, was hired in July as the new Office Administrator. The Nursery, for ages 5 and under, was under the direction of paid staff.

Worship Services

Pastor Amy preached two Sundays each month, supported by a team of Worship Associates who took turns as pulpit assistants. On other Sundays a Worship Associate, or an outside speaker, or another church member, provided the sermon with a Worship Associate serving as the pulpit assistant.

The church continued to subscribe to ‘Faith Rocket,’ a complete worship service produced by the Church of the Larger Fellowship (UUA). This resource is most often used by the Worship Associates in preparing their services. From June 17 through September 2 a different kind of worship service evolved, coordinated by Pastor Amy and Zipporah Lee. It was called “UnrUly” [unruly]. It was a program for all ages based on weekly themes. It offered a “free form” experience with multiple stations to explore – song and dance, nourishment, daily devotion, prayer and meditation, and a conversation corner.

In December, a grand piano was donated to the church by our accompanist Nicole Robbins.

Religious Education

From January through May the elementary school aged children studied world religions. The Youth Group discussed Social Justice. Starting in February, the “Our Whole Lives” (OWL) sexuality education program for middle schoolers and younger teenagers was taught every other week for two months by Juliette Crone-Willis and Robyn Berkley.

In March, the Youth Group held an after-church spaghetti and salad lunch as a fundraiser. They netted around \$150 to put toward a social justice project.

During the summer, the children and youth participated in the “UnrUly” Sunday worship service. In the fall the RE schedule changed, primarily due to the lack of people volunteering to teach. The Youth Group now met on the first 1st and 3rd Sundays and the elementary class met on the 2nd and 4th Sundays. For 5th Sundays children and youth attended the service in the sanctuary.

The fall/winter RE program came from the UUA *Tapestry of Faith*. The Youth Group used the “Place of Wholeness” curriculum and the Elementary Class used the “Signs of our Faith” curriculum.

The Adult Religious Enrichment discussion group, called The Seekers, met weekly after the Worship Service to discuss the sermon as well as a topic chosen for the month.

Building and Grounds



For many decades the church had leased the small park between it and Easton Street from the City of Alton for \$1.00 per year, dutifully maintaining the grounds. In 2017 the City of Alton turned the park over to the use of another organization. Several large shade trees in the park were cut down. The two lots of land on which the original Unitarian church was built (in 1855) were bought by the Unitarians in 1854 and the exact boundary line between the church grounds and the park was lost over time. The current church was erected on the same property in 1904. Marquette High School received permission from the City to close off the top of Easton Street between the school and the leased Millers’ building, making it safer for students to walk between

the two buildings. This closure took away most of the spots available for the church’s handicapped parking. Members met with school and City officials and attended a City Council meeting to express their concerns, but no additional access was made available.

Water flooding into the basement level of the church building was an ongoing problem. Old deteriorating drain pipes and a strained drainage system cause rainwater to back up and flow under doors, into window wells, through walls, and into the classrooms on that level. A water alarm was installed to immediately notify the church contact person when water was coming into the basement. The floor tiles in the boys’ restroom downstairs were broken and worn and it was determined that tile was made of asbestos and needed special handling to be removed. This expensive removal work was finished in December. The church administration office was moved from the basement to the main floor next to the minister’s office. Masonry work was done on the slate roof of the sanctuary and roof repairs done to the roof over the Kate Wuerker Room (the fellowship hall). The plexiglass over the round stained-glass window facing 3rd Street was damaged and new plexiglass installed.

Finances

A couple who wished to remain anonymous gave an unrestricted donation of \$20,000 to the church. In March, the Treasurer estimated that the church year ending June 2018 would end in a deficit of \$12,000 - \$13,000. The Board approved transferring money from the Reserve Fund to cover current expenses.

In June the treasurer reported that for the new ’18-’19 FY expenses were estimated to be \$143,000 with income budgeted at \$117,500 leaving a deficit of \$25,000. The Board approved supplementing normal sources of income with \$25,500 from the Endowment Fund. And approved the use of an additional \$11,500 from the Endowment in case of unbudgeted emergency.

The church’s application for 501c(3) status was submitted to the IRS in May and was approved in October making the church eligible to apply for grants and receive other financial benefits.

Online giving in support of the church was made available through Givelify.

Social Justice

The 4th Saturday Distribution Program which provides health care and home care products for those in need began in 2016. In 2018 this monthly program provided products for 720 individuals, for a monthly average of 60 people selecting the items they needed.

The church joined with other UU churches in the Southern Illinois area to work with the Unitarian Universalist Association of Illinois (UUANI). In April several members attended the UUANI conference “Living Our UU Values Beyond Our Doors” at the Unitarian Church in Springfield IL.

Voter Registration was a church focus during this year with several members taking registrar training through the United Congregations of Metro-East. Our registrars registered voters at the Animal Pet Pantry, the 4th Saturday Distribution, the Farmer’s Market, and Alton High school.

Outdoor signs were designed indicating that our church welcomed all who wished to marry. The signs were placed in various locations on the church property.

Denominational Connections

In June, Pastor Amy and several members of the church attended the UUA General Assembly held in Kansas City, Missouri. The theme was “All Are Called.”

In November / December, Satellite groups were started with once a month Saturday gatherings in North County (Missouri) and Glen Carbon/Edwardsville (Illinois). These were in an effort to attract people living in those two areas who perhaps had attended services at one time but for one reason or another no longer came to church on Sunday.

Interfaith Connections

In March the church once again participated in the Alton Community Lenten Services. Rev. Charles Burton of Unity Fellowship Church gave the sermon. Luncheon was provided by our members. Later in the month Pastor Amy gave the service at Unity Fellowship.

The Book Club of the Alton Area Cluster of the United Congregations of Metro-East continued to meet monthly at our church.

Social Connections

The Anna D. Sparks Women’s Alliance met monthly at one restaurant or another in communities around Alton. The Alliance was formed in 1898 and is possibly the oldest women’s group in Alton. A history of the Alliance can be found on the church’s homepage under the About Us tab.

The Men’s Lunch Group (sometimes called the ROMEOS – Retired Old Men Eating out) met monthly at the Best Buffet in Wood River, IL

2018 Membership Information Sent to the Unitarian Universalist Association (2/4/2019)

Members: 54; RE Enrollment 15; Average attendance 35; Total Expenditures \$132,497.

2019-2021

These three years were rather tumultuous ones for the church.

At the congregational meeting in January 2019, Lee Suarez, and Char McAllister (a married couple) were elected as President and President-Elect for the new church year beginning in July 2019.

In June, a CPA team was hired to help with preparing the budget for the new fiscal year, and a new church treasurer was appointed. Over the next months it was discovered that there was a major shortfall in church funds and that this loss had been happening gradually for some time. By the fall, Mr. Harris, the Office Administrator hired in 2018, became less and less forthcoming in answering questions and often did not attend meetings planned to discuss church financial affairs. He was asked to resign and did so on November 30, 2019. Following his resignation, more investigation into his activities found that a personal paypal account (and payments for other personal interests) had been used to take funds out of the church accounts. At this point it was estimated that \$24,000 had been taken. Further investigation over time by the CPA team found that a total of \$35,443.39 of church funds had been embezzled by the Office Manager. The police were contacted on December 23, 2019, charges were filed, and a detective was assigned to the case. On February 6, 2020, the police notified the church president that Mr. Harris had been arrested and he had confessed to the charges, but was released from custody because it was not a violent crime. The date of his court hearing was scheduled for March 13, 2020, but by then the courts were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. By Nov. 1, 2021 his case had not yet been heard due to the backlog of cases. The current Board met with the State's Attorney and the expectation is that the case will be resolved in the near future.

In the Fall of 2019, before these serious financial problems came known to the congregation, a series of meetings were begun to discuss if we should stay in our 1905, not very accessible, building or seek to move to a different location.

2020 began with plans for both the Stay Task Force and the Go Task Force to research challenges, possible outcomes, proposed solutions, and actions to be taken regarding either remaining in the present church or locating elsewhere. Accessibility as well as the need for ongoing building maintenance and repairs were two major factors in considering moving elsewhere.

However, Covid-19 put a halt to all such efforts. In-person worship services, as well as all church gatherings of any sort were cancelled. Board meetings were held on zoom. Starting on March 15, 2020 Sunday worship services were on-line only, with the minister or speaker, worship associate, and pianist all sending videos of their parts of the service to Alex Hoeft, a Tech Team member, who compiled the videos and loaded them weekly onto the church's Facebook page and YouTube channel. A live zoom "coffee and conversation" hour was available following each online service.

The contract for the CPA team that was hired in 2019 to manage the church's financial work was renewed.

In June 2020 the budget preparation for the new fiscal year (July 2020 – June 2021) was put on hold as pledges were not coming in as expected. The deficit was expected to be around \$20,000. The Board recommended reducing the minister's hours from 5/8 to 4/8 due to the income shortfall. However, the Board and Pastor Brooks could not reach an agreement on a contract for the upcoming church year. Without a contract, Pastor Brooks stepped back from all ministerial duties effective July 1st and sent a resignation letter in mid-July as she had accepted a position at a UU Church in another Illinois community.

In late June, President Lee Suarez and President Elect Char McAllister unexpectedly resigned their respective offices (Past President and President) for the upcoming 2020-2021 church year. Letters were sent to the congregation detailing the reasons for their resigning. Also, the terms of three Board members expired on June 30. There was only one Board member remaining whose three year term was not over. Thus, effectively there was no Board and there had been no Annual Congregational Meeting in June to elect new officers.

The Worship Associates had been working all along putting together services when the minister or guest speaker was not in the pulpit, so with Pastor Brook's resignation, the Worship Associates then planned and led all the Sunday services, along with an occasional guest speaker filling the pulpit.

The church bylaws state that five or more members of the congregation may call a congregational meeting. Such a called meeting was held via zoom on **July 26, 2020**, to elect new Board Members. At that time, the following were elected for a three year term: **Robyn Berkley (President); Mary Johnson (Secretary); Carol McGrew (Treasurer); Alex Hoefft, Nathan Brown, and Pat Moore as Members at Large. Aiden Crist was the remaining member from the previous Board. For personal reasons, shortly after the election, Carol had to turn down the position of Treasurer, and Nathan Brown was appointed to fill that position, with Carol staying on the Board as a Member at Large. The Past President and President Elect positions remained vacant.**

The newly elected Board members took on the responsibility of committee oversight and office management. The budget developed by the previous board was reviewed and it was decided that without having to pay the salaries of the Minister and the Office Administrator, those monies could be moved around to provide funding for Sunday morning guest speakers and building and grounds repairs and maintenance

An agreement was made with Dr. Rev. Claudia Hall, a UU Community Minister and Kohenet Jewish Priestess, to provide ministerial and pastoral support as needed. The church was now lay led, with the Board making and implementing decisions with email input from the congregation.

Board members continued to meet monthly via zoom and began in-person discussions with Alton City officials as well as Simmons Law Firm, a major player in City affairs, regarding the City's plans for the park next to the church including how access to the church could be improved through creating accessible parking spots in the park or a ramped sidewalk from the street.

Board discussions continued about a phased reopening of the church with the guidance of a Pandemic Task Force. The reopening began in Summer 2021 with safety protocols in place. Options to offer the service remotely while also having live services in the sanctuary were provided by the tech team to accommodate those who didn't feel ready to return.

In July 2021, the Board began discussing the possibility of a contract minister for the 2022-2023 year with the priorities being Preaching, Leadership, and Pastoral Care. The Board believed that the greatest need for the current year was for an RE Coordinator. A job ad for the position was sent to the other UU Congregations in the area, but there was no response.

Five security cameras were installed around the church building in the summer..

The membership count in July 2021 was 73 members. At the Annual Congregational meeting in July 2021, it was announced that Nathan Brown had resigned as Treasurer and now much of the financial accounting was in the hands of the paid CPA team of Katherine Valley and Buddy Stricker.

Due to rising concerns about the Delta variant of Covid, remote services were started again. The Tech Team purchased the needed equipment to do hybrid live zoom services which started on August 15, 2021 with only the speaker, worship associate, pianist, and the two-man Tech Team in the sanctuary.

Two in-person services were held outside on the church lawn in October, attended by members of the congregation wearing masks and practicing social distancing. But subsequent cooling temperature forced the decision to go back to live zoom hybrid services indoors. However, in consultation with the church's Pandemic Task Force it was decided in November that in-person services would resume in the sanctuary on December 5, 2021 with all safety precautions in place.

In October 2021 a surveyor was hired to determine the property lines with the thought of possibly selling the building. It was determined that the church building (built in 1904-05) was four and one-half feet over the property line into the City owned park. The Board President discussed the issue with the City and a legal agreement is in the works to obtain a permanent easement for the property that reflects historical fair use by the Church.

As Christmas approached, the congregation once again generously supported a family from Oasis Women's Center through gifting them \$375 worth of Amazon gift cards.

With the startup of full worship services in the sanctuary on December 5, 2021, it is hoped that the work of the church to inspire love and seek justice will once again grow strong in the hearts and minds and actions of the congregation.

The number of Members for 2021 submitted to the UUA on 1/20/22 was 72.

2022 (January – December)
****The church fiscal year is July ‘22 – June ‘23**

Board Members: Robyn Berkley (President); Mary Johnson (Secretary); Nancee Magilson (became Treasurer in June 2022); Alex Hoef, Aiden Crist, Jennifer Lewis, Carol McGrew, and Pat Moore, Members at Large. The Past President and President Elect positions remained vacant.

Ministerial Support:

Rev. Krista Taves: Pastor (contract started at 50% time in July 2022)

Rev. Dr. Claudia Hall: Consulting Minister, monthly speaker, and RE Coordinator

Pianist: Joy Hoef

Tech Team: Ken Hoef, Alex Hoef

Financial Advisors: Buddy Stricker (Budget Analyst); Katherine Valley (CPA)

2022 was a year of new beginnings with plans for endings.

In January, the church’s ministerial search application was submitted to the UUA and an Ad Hoc Search Committee was formed.

Only virtual worship services were held in January through mid-February due to the increased prevalence of the Covid Omicron variant, but the church returned to hybrid (in-person and virtual) services on February 20. The average hybrid weekly Sunday attendance for 2022 was 38 adults and 2 children.

On March 6, Rev. Dr. Claudia Hall led a training workshop on “Difficult Conversations” – how to have difficult conversations without ruining relationships. This workshop helped the congregation prepare for the upcoming stay/go discussions.

After a hiatus for over a year due to Covid, a simplified version of the 4th Saturday Personal Care and Household Product community outreach program restarted in April, but ended following the December flood in the RE wing basement, and in the late winter of 2023 the remaining products and \$1000 in funding (from the money donated for the distribution program, not from the budget) were given to the nearby First Presbyterian Church to continue the program.

On May 22 Rev. Dr. Hall led a workshop for the congregation on developing a “Right Relationship Covenant.” A draft covenant was written to be reviewed and voted on at the Annual Meeting in July. (See Addendum).

Two new furnaces were installed in May at a cost of \$8,735.

In June the Board announced that the Rev. Krista Taves would be our new minister for the 2022-2023 church year. Rev. Taves would be 50% time with Alton, and 50% time with Eliot Chapel in Kirkwood, MO. Rev. Taves preached her first sermon at Alton on July 17. The title was “*Claiming Sacred Ground.*”

The Stewardship Campaign was extended through July 8. Financial pledges for the 2022-2023 church year came in at \$63,620.

The park area on the east side of the church, which for decades was leased from the City of Alton for \$1.00 per year, and maintained by the church, was taken back by the City in 2017. The park was transferred to the Alton-Godfrey Rotary Club and was redesigned in 2022 and named for that Club. The church applied to the City for an easement based on the 2021 land survey showing that the Kate Wuerker Room (the fellowship hall) extended 4.5 feet into the park property. Getting an easement was particularly important to the church’s plans to possibly sell the building.

In July, members of the congregation participated in the Unitarian Universalist Advocacy Network of Illinois’ (UUANI) post card writing campaign in support of the national *UU The Vote*. Postcards were sent to a pre-selected list of voters in the Alton area.

The Annual Congregational Meeting was held on July 17. Copies of the “Right Relationship Covenant” developed in May were distributed, and members voted to approve it. There was then an open discussion led by Dr. Rev. Hall about the stay/go decision and the mission of, and hopes for, our church.. Following that discussion, the members (in person, virtually or absentee) voted by secret ballot whether to continue to stay in the church building with its problems of accessibility, parking, and maintenance or to move the congregation to another place (share, rent, buy). The vote was 21 to move, 10 to stay, with 1 abstention.

In August, Rev. Taves began monthly, 4 p.m. “Coffee Hangouts” at the Post Commons in Alton, and in December started a “Hangout” in Edwardsville, meeting at various locales.

In August, Rev. Taves prepared a Transitional Plan draft which was made available to the members. In September a special congregational meeting was held to discuss the plan, and feedback was incorporated into the final form of the Plan which was unanimously approved by the Board. The Plan called for a Selling Team (Board rep. Nancee Magilson), a Moving Team (Board rep. Alex Hoeft), and a Congregational Care Team (Board rep. Carol McGrew), with detailed descriptions of the duties and tasks of each Team.

In September and October Rev. Taves led, along with church board member Jennifer Lewis, a four-part Zoom series called “Starting Point.” This series allowed attendees to learn about Unitarian Universalism, explore their own personal journeys, and connect with others.

In October our new RE program began under the coordination and guidance of Rev. Dr. Hall. The curriculum chosen was “Holidays and Holydays” and Carol McGrew with other volunteers were the class teachers. There were 5 children enrolled in RE and the class met on the 1st and 3rd Sundays.

On October 23 the first Congregational Conversation was held (in person and on Zoom) regarding identifying priorities for a new home. Five groups were formed, with each person in the group giving their personal priorities. Accessibility was a shared priority among the groups. Differences included where to move (Alton or other community) and what type of facility (share, rent, buy). A second Congregational Conversation was held on November 13 and focused on possible locations

to which to move. Over the next weeks members of the “Moving Team” visited several churches in other communities, considering the possibility of space sharing. The Center for Spirituality and Sustainability (the Buckminster Fuller Dome) at SIUE was also under consideration.

Through the generosity of our members and friends, in December gift cards for \$250 each were given to a mother and her 7-year old daughter who were part of the Oasis Women’s Center. Donating to families at the Oasis Center has been part of the church’s tradition for many years.

On December 23 or 24, due to extremely cold weather, a pipe burst in the basement ceiling of the RE wing, flooding the entire lower level up to an inch or inch and a half with water. This was discovered by those arriving early for the Christmas Eve service. Not only were the floors damaged, but also the walls and ceiling. The Church Mutual insurance company was contacted and Cardinal Catastrophe Company was hired to do the cleanup and repair work. Church members and friends spent hours over the next week sorting through the downstairs rooms making decisions on which items could be saved and which items were so badly damaged that they had to be disposed of. The church’s insurance policy through Church Mutual paid over \$92,000 to cover the repair work.

During 2022 the Anna D. Sparks Women’s Alliance (the Anna Ds), founded in 1898, met monthly for lunch at area restaurants. The Men’s Lunch Group (known as the Romeos – Retired Old Men Eating Out – though one needn’t be old or retired to participate) also had monthly gatherings at favorite restaurants.

There has been no information regarding the whereabouts of Mr. Harris, the church Office Administrator accused of embezzling over \$35,000 from the church between 2018 - 2019. There is an outstanding warrant for his arrest.

Our endowment investment funds dropped from \$219,027 in January 2022 to \$193,913 as of December 31, 2022.

**The amount budgeted for Pledges for the July 2022 through-June 2023 fiscal year was \$65,020. The pledge income received for the six months from July ‘22 – December ‘22 was \$42,172. Total income received over these six months was \$77,003 and expenses \$61,880 for a six-month net income of \$15,123.

The number of Members for 2022 submitted to the UUA on 1/18/23 was 70.

Addendum 2022

First Unitarian Church of Alton Right Relationship Covenant

Approved by the membership on 7-17-2022

I Covenant with Myself to...

- See my strong emotions as a sign of a deeper trauma. I will look within for what I need when I am stressed.
- I will ask for help to process my strong emotions as I need
- I will assume that other people have positive intentions

- I will assume that other people do not intend to harm me or the church
- I will listen to understand, rather than jump to responding.
- I will do my best to adjust to changes, even when they are out of my comfort zone.
- I will commit to this congregation for the long-haul, even if the decision isn't what I wanted.

I Covenant with the Congregation to...

- Seek to hear the felt needs without becoming defensive or hostile.
 - Believe that everyone will support the covenant together!
 - Ask for what I need, be it more explanations, a moment to think, a hug, or whatever else I need
 - To offer what I can, without needing to 'fix' anyone's emotions or difficulties
 - To listen and understand, trusting that everyone wants the best for the congregation
 - To not see this as a binary win/lose decision - whatever the decision is, we are still a community who loves each other
 - To care about and be cared for by everyone here.
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