

Unitarian Church North

Bridget Greuel

2022

Unitarian Church North also Connects to:

- N/A

Historical Overview

The Unitarian Church North of Mequon, Wisconsin was organized on November 26, 1962, by its nine original members as the North Shore Unitarian Fellowship. An original member explained later that they felt a liberal, progressive organization was needed for people in Ozaukee County. At the time, there were two other Unitarian Universalist Churches in the Milwaukee area, both of which still exist: one in downtown Milwaukee (since 1891) and the other in the western suburbs (1961). The original group met in each other's homes until August of 1963, when they moved to holding their Sunday meetings at Country Day School in Whitefish Bay (today the Milwaukee Jewish Day School at 6401 N. Santa Monica Boulevard, notably in Milwaukee County). In August of 1966, the members changed their name to Unitarian Church North and achieved full accreditation with the Unitarian Universalist Association, with 23 families as members. In September of that year, Sunday meetings moved to the Mequon Women's Club building at 1425 W. Mequon Road, where the church rented space for Sundays only.

As membership grew and the hardship of not having a permanent location for the church became more apparent, the congregation established a Facilities Trust Fund for donations to a future building in December of 1979. This transitioned to a Building Committee established in April of 1980 with the goal of securing "a permanent home for the Unitarian Church North." In September of that year, the congregation purchased eight acres of land on the east side of North Port Washington Road, just south of Pioneer Road. In early 1984, the Building Committee proposed to reconstruct an octagonal barn that had been disassembled the prior year from its location about one mile south of the church property (11656 North Port Washington Road). However, by May of 1984, the congregation voted to accept a Building Committee proposal to build an octagonal barn structure in the tradition of the Clausen Barns built along Port Washington Road during the late 1800s. Kubala Washatko Architects, a local firm in nearby Cedarburg, was retained for design and construction management. April 1986 saw groundbreaking for the new church with a July 1987 ribbon cutting ceremony whereby the members took possession of their new building.

Unitarian Church North decides, as a congregation, whom to hire as minister, and whether or not to be led by itself as a lay-led church, or to hire a part-time or full-time minister. While the bylaws state only a majority of votes by members is needed to hire a minister, the congregation prefers in practice to reach at least 90% consensus on whether or not to "call" a minister. As the congregation grew, it hired its first full-time minister, Dale Robison, in 1975. By 1983, a part-time Religious Education Director could be afforded and a new minister, Brent Smith, was called to the congregation. Smith's energy was instrumental in realizing the construction of the church building. A diagram made by a church member charted the congregation's membership from 1969 to mid-1985. It was updated over the years with projections for future membership. Consistent growth was seen from the early 70's until the early 1980's, when membership plateaued. However, projections on the chart indicate optimism for future growth. In fact, the church building was planned to accommodate 350 members between two services per Sunday. However, that growth did not materialize in

the first half of the 1980s. By 1989, membership had increased from 155 to 186 over seven years. By 1994, membership had grown to an historic high of 220 members. After Elena Rigg was called to be a full-time minister in 1998, the church continued to see steady growth. By 2005, the congregation was breaking ground for an addition to the original barn building to accommodate its growing Religious Education program and add office space. In early 2007, Rev. Riggs announced her departure. However, Sunday services were increased from one to two and an interim minister hired. Rev. Julie Forest was called to be a full-time minister in August of 2009. A membership directory published in the fall of 2009 contained 83 family photos and 184 family units listed in total. But, by 2015, the congregation, due to falling membership, needed to decide whether to keep the church building or the full-time minister, as they could not afford to do both. They chose to let the minister go and keep the building. For the next three years or so, the congregation was lay-led with members and guest speakers giving the sermons. By 2019, they were able to hire a part-time minister, Tony Larsen, who continues to this day. Membership as of this writing is at 133 people.

The mission of UCN states that they are “providing the light of religious freedom in the warmth of a caring community.” Long-time church members commented that the congregation has occasionally revisited this mission statement but feel that it continues to accurately portray UCN. Social justice and environmental concerns are high priorities for the congregation. Extensive records have been kept since 1986 on the landscaping around the church building, emphasizing the native plantings and care for the land they own. UCN has its own social justice programs, such as food pantry donations and “Share the Plate,” in which half the offerings are donated to a non-profit organization chosen by the members. Volunteers from UCN support Family Promise of Ozaukee County in providing services to the homeless in the area. It is also a Welcoming Congregation, a UU designation meaning the members have completed education and awareness training and are welcoming to the LGBTQ community. UCN is also a member of other social justice organizations in the Milwaukee area, such as Black Lives Matter to Universalists, NAACP of Ozaukee County, Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAHA), the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, and the Wisconsin Unitarian Universalist Social Action Network. A pastoral care program assists members with any needs they may have, creating the caring community envisioned by UCN’s mission statement.

The character of the UCN congregation might be viewed in terms of struggle and growth. The congregation views its struggles over the years – to afford and find ministers and a permanent home -- as opportunities for growth. In its focus on justice and democratic processes, it is clear that finding the “right” way is important for those who are a part of UCN. For example, the congregation took three years to come to a consensus before making a public statement condemning the war in Iraq. In terms of personal growth, the road may be different for each member, and that fact is respected. The church serves as inspiration and support for each individual’s path. In its welcoming stance, the church strives mightily to be inclusive to all and create benefit for its community. As is the case today with many congregations, it continues to struggle with an aging congregation and low membership numbers.

Timeline

- 12/3/1962** North Shore Unitarian Fellowship begins organizing at Dr. and Mrs. Owen Miller home, applying for membership as a Unitarian Universalist Association church (UUA).
- 1/11/1963 The UUA Board met and approved membership for the church.
- 1/27/1963 The first service was held at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Owen Miller, presided by Reverend Christopher Raible, a minister of the Unitarian Church West.
- 1963** **Services began to be held at the Country Day School, 6401 North Santa Monica Blvd. in Whitefish Bay (today the Milwaukee Jewish Day School) with student ministers F. Jackson Zylman and Charles Howe, Sunday service held every two weeks in the evening.**
- 9/1963 Children's religious education program begins.
- 9/1966** **Began renting the Mequon Woman's Club at 1425 W. Mequon Road in Mequon, Wisconsin, and increased services to every Sunday. Student ministers Fred Campbell and Frank Carpenter rotated preaching.**
- 1966 The first annual picnic is held.
- 4/1968** **23 families who were members voted to change the name to Unitarian Church North.**
- 9/1968 Richard Marshall begins serving as part-time minister, preaching two times per month.
- 11/1969 Marshall is ordained at UCN and becomes first resident minister on a part-time basis.
- 1969 UCN donates part of a five-volume set of the Pentagon Papers to the Weyenberg Library of Mequon-Thiensville and completes the set in 1970.
- 3/1970 Marshall resigns as minister to accept a full-time ministry elsewhere.
- 9/1970 Randolph Becker becomes part-time minister.
- 1971 Flaming Chalice is donated to the church by Betty Gienke and family in memory of Dr. Erwin L. Gienke.
- 5/1972 Becker resigns to accept a full-time ministry elsewhere.
- 9/1972 Maryell Cleary becomes part-time minister.
- 1973** **Religious Education Committee is formed. Pilot group formed for "Warmth, Breadth, Depth, and Growth."**
- 5/1974 Cleary resigns to accept a full-time ministry elsewhere.
- 1975 First choir is started, led by Jean Stone.
- 9/1976 Rev. Dale Robison becomes the first full-time minister. Membership is 63 with 26 family units. Attendance at Sunday service averages 29.
- 12/1979 Facilities Trust Fund is established to raise funds toward a permanent church building of their own.
- 4/1980 Building Committee is formed to find a permanent home for UCN.
- 12/1980 8-acre lot in Mequon at 13800 N. Port Washington Road is purchased.
- 12/1981 First Coffee is held on the Sunday between Christmas and New Year's.
- 4/1982 Membership numbers 155 people with 73 children enrolled in Religious Education on Sundays. Sunday attendance averages 70 people.
- 5/1982 Rev. Robison resigns to become minister of First Unitarian Society in Milwaukee.
- 9/1982-5/1983 Rev. Robert Clarke serves as interim minister.
- 1983** **Rev. Brent Smith is hired as a full-time minister. The first part-time Religious Education Director was hired, Vicki Schaus.**
- 5/1984** **Plans are accepted to build an octagonal barn as a new church building at 13800 N. Port Washington Road.**

- 11/1984 Congregation approves a Capital Fund Drive of \$135,000 towards new construction.
c. 1985 First paid, part-time Religious Education Director, Vickie Schaus, is hired.
4/1986 Groundbreaking for the new church occurs.
c. 1986 “Joys and Concerns” becomes part of Sunday service.
7/19/1987 Ribbon cutting ceremony officially gives possession of the new building to the congregation.
9/13/1987 The first service in the new church is held with a walk from the old location to the new church home, symbolizing a “moving experience.”
- 1989 A bridge was built over the pond, the play yard fenced, and a Council Ring with fire pit and path with two additional small bridges were built. UUA World Magazine featured the church with photos of the octagonal barn.
- c. 1989 Membership is 186 people.
1990 UCN hosted the UUA’s visiting ministers with a Door County-style fish boil. (The annual convention – called the “General Assembly” -- was held in Milwaukee that year.)
c. 1990 Virginia Knowles arrives as interim minister with the departure of Rev. Brent Smith. She begins the “First Sunday Lunches”.
- Fall 1991 First color photo membership directory is published.
1991-1995 James Ford serves as full-time minister. He begins including Zen Buddhism influences in the worship service.
- c. 1994 Membership stands at about 220 people.
1994-1997 Religious Education classes are held in nearby house at 13844 N. Port Washington Road due to lack of space in the church.
- 1995 Gil Church, a lawyer by profession and a graduate student of Meadville Lombard Seminary, becomes acting minister.
- c. 1996 Vote to retain Gil Church as full-time, permanent minister fails by one vote. Robert Flanders is chosen to act as interim minister.
- 1997 Permit obtained from City of Mequon to install a 3-room trailer on the site for additional Religious Education space.
- 1998 Elena Rigg is hired as the 4th full-time minister by unanimous vote.
c. early 2000s Fund for Social Justice is established and invested with the Milwaukee Foundation, earning yearly interest that is donated to a direct service program in the greater Milwaukee area.
- 12/2003 Purchased 11 acres of land, including a house and outbuildings, on the property immediately to the north of the church, at 13844 North Port Washington Road, Mequon WI.
- 2004 UCN met the criteria for and became certified as a Welcoming Congregation by the UUA.
3/6/2004 Fire destroys the Religious Education trailer.
6/6/2004 Congregation votes to proceed with construction of an addition.
3/20/2005 Broke ground for a building addition to the north of the existing building.
1/8/2006 Dedicated new space, which includes offices and a new entrance and lobby, with additional classrooms on the lower level.
- Early 2007 Rev. Elena Rigg announced her departure. Rev. Marino was hired as interim minister. RE director of 18 years, Trudy Mandel, resigned. Decision made to increase Sunday services from one to two.
- c. 2008 Dedicated a peace pole in a rain garden.
8/2009 Rev. Julie Forest is hired as the new full-time, permanent minister. Rev. Joyce Palmer is hired as a part-time Religious Education Director.
- c. 2009 Color photo membership book is published with 83 family photos and 184 total family units (singles and families) listed.
6/4/2010 Adjacent 11-acre parcel of land to the north is sold.

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| 5/4/2013 | Announcement made that UCN would be trying only one Sunday service per month due to low, sporadic attendance, in an effort for a greater feeling of connectedness when full. |
| 2015 | Rev. Julie Forest is let go after funds are only available to either maintain the building or a full-time minister. Director of RE resigns. Drew Kennedy and Tony Larsen, settled ministers elsewhere, each occasionally give the sermon. |
| 2019 | Rev. Tony Larsen, now retired, is hired as a part-time minister. |
| 3/2020 | The Covid-19 pandemic causes the congregation to move to online services. |
| 7/2021 | Services resume with online continuing to be an option. |
| 12/2021 | A spike in Covid-19 cases leads the congregation to return to online services only. |
| 3/2022 | Services return to in-person and broadcast for online participation. Membership is at 133 people. |

Annotated Bibliography

Unitarian Church North Records.

Held in the lower level of Unitarian Church North, Mequon, Wisconsin. The collection dates to early 1963 at the time of the church's formation. It includes meeting minutes and "Order of Service" copies for most services. Financial records are extensive. There are few, scattered mentions of membership and no vital records. Several scrapbooks documenting the history of the congregation are present.

"Unitarian Church North – Mequon," *Architecture: The AIA Journal* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute of Architecture, 1989) Volume 78, 72.

An article describing the new church building for an architectural audience. Noted that the church was built for a congregation of 350 people.

www.ucnorth.org

The congregation keeps an up-to-date website with general information about Universalist Unitarianism, their congregation's particular practices, recordings of past sermons, current events, and archived newsletters dating to 2020. A blog with weekly posts dates from mid-2018 to the present (May 2022).

<https://www.myuua.org>

Directory of UU Ministers and their dates of service and names and locations of congregations served.