

First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee

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First Unitarian also Connects to:

- Fourth Congregational Society, Milwaukee
- Olivet Congregational Church, Milwaukee
- St. James Episcopal, Milwaukee
- Unitarian Universalist Church West, Brookfield

Historical Overview

The founding of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee was influenced by evangelism and the migration of New Englanders. Unitarianism had spread to Chicago, where early evangelical efforts attempted to spread it to Milwaukee. In July 1841, a minister from the First Unitarian Church of Chicago, Joseph Harrington, visited Milwaukee and was able to attract a crowd for what he referred to as the “Milwaukee experiment.” By May 1842, a society had formed with many prominent civic and business leaders forming a congregation. The society worshiped at a variety of locations until it built its first church at the northwest corner of Grand Avenue (now Spring Street) and Second Street.

The First Unitarian Society had shaky beginnings. The society disbanded from 1849 until 1856 after the first church was foreclosed upon and sold to St. James Episcopal. The society reformed in 1856 with the support of a visiting minister and still active members. A second church was constructed on Cass Street between Juneau (now Division) and Martin Streets in 1857. However, by the 1870s, membership declined, forcing the society to lease their church to Olivet Congregational Church from 1872 to 1875. Despite its early struggles, the congregation and ministry of First Unitarian Society was and remained active in the community, helping found organizations ranging from a local soup kitchen to the Wisconsin Humane Society, or being outspoken advocates on issues such as abolition, temperance, and civil rights.

Membership began to recover, and by 1890, the society decided to construct its current church at 1009 East Ogden Avenue, which was completed in 1892. The establishment of the new church occurred between two controversies that came to shape modern Unitarianism. Unitarians were viewed as liberal Christians until several ministers in the 1870s-1890s proclaimed they believed in a universal God and viewed Jesus as one of many spiritual leaders and followed agnostic and atheistic ministers adapting a humanist platform in the 1920s-1940s. Promoting free religious association allowed Unitarianism and the First Unitarian Society to attract new members and community activists outside a denominational niche. The congregation remained relatively small and concentrated, being the only Unitarian congregation in the Milwaukee metropolitan area until the establishment of Unitarian Church West and Unitarian Church North in the 1960s. A decision to construct an addition rather than relocating the congregation due to expanding membership was influenced by the proximity of the existing congregation, development of the neighborhood surrounding the church, and its proximity to cultural and educational institutions aiding

Unitarianism's strong presence in urban communities. Following 1986, the congregation had tripled to 800 members and 228 students under a politically conscious ministry active in social justice and environmental movements.

Timeline

[I appreciate the hard work you put in here on the timeline. But there's some extraneous stuff here. The point of these PoW reports is to tell people about the history of the congregation. So please go through this and cut the items not explicitly related to the congregation. Thanks. Also, cut the footnotes from the timeline. I felt like they distract.]

- 7/1841 Joseph Harrington, the first permanent minister of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago from 1836-1857, visited Milwaukee to preach doctrine at the courthouse attracting interest in the formation of a society. He concluded that "Unitarian stamina" in Milwaukee was better than any other town outside Chicago and referred to evangelicalism in Milwaukee as the "Milwaukee experiment." During his visit, \$500 was pledged for a church and locals had already been "preaching on their own hook for a number of months."
- 8/1841 An advertisement is placed in the Milwaukee Courier asking anyone friendly to Unitarianism to meet in Roger's building at early candle light.
- 7/1841 The Unitarian Society of Milwaukee formed. It had 40 members and 20-30 prospective members by May 1842.
- 5/1842 Joseph Harrington visited Milwaukee, preaching 14 times in two weeks. In a letter appealing to Mr. Briggs to become a minister in Milwaukee, he notes that a society had formed since his visit the previous summer.
- 1841 The congregation of the First Unitarian Society met at numerous locations prior to building their first church. They met at the "Old Court House" at Cathedral Square, the Roger's Building, a warehouse owned by Bryon Kilbourn at the corner of W. Water and Chestnut Streets, and Shepardson's Hall on 376 E. Water Street.
- 1843 The Unitary Society constructed its first church on the northwest corner of Grand Avenue (Spring St.) and Second Street.
- 1849 The first Unitarian church was foreclosed.
- 1850 The first Unitarian church was bought by St. James Episcopal, which it demolished in the late-1920s. It had been moved to a site next to their current building, built in 1867, in the 1850s.
- 1849 The First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee was effectively disbanded as a result of its finances. Services were held "now and again" by Reverend A. S. Ryder and Reverend Frederick Tenny at the Milwaukee courthouse. During this time the society could not find a permanent minister.

- 1856 A meeting held by A.F. Clarke and Rev. William G. Elliot to resurrect the First Unitarian Society was held at the home of local industrialist and philanthropist, William Metcalf. Approximately \$6000 was raised for the “Church of the Redeemer.”
- 8/1856 The Unitarian Society constructed a wooden gothic revival church on Cass Street between Juneau (Division) and Martin Streets after plans to relocate to a Presbyterian church were thwarted. During construction, Young’s Hall on Wisconsin Street was used for services. Membership consisted of 26 families. Construction ended in February 1857.
- 11/24/1859 Nahor A. Staples, minister of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee from 1856-1861, delivers “A Sermon on the Irrepressible Conflict,” which received national attention. The sermon condemns slavery as part of a “an unceasing conflict” between the moral righteousness that stems from God and the imperfections of man, which would persist until it was “destroyed.”
- 3/17/1859 The First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee was incorporated.
- 7/1861 Nahor A. Staples resigns
- 6/1862 Christian A. Staples resigns
- 1864 Membership of the First Unitarian Society reach 86 families and 70 students at Sunday school.
- 1865 A national representative body for Unitarians, the National Conference of Unitarian Churches, was organized and adapted a Christian platform.
- 1870s A controversy over Unitarianism’s Christian Identity emerged when several Unitarian ministers proclaimed their belief in a universal God and viewed Jesus as one of many spiritual leaders. This controversy would last until the 1890’s
- 1/1872 The Unitarian church was leased to the Fourth Congregational Society/ Olivet Congregational Church following a succession of ministers and declining attendance.
- 7/1875 Regular services continued.
- 1879 Wisconsin Humane Society develops as an independent organization originating from the activities within the First Unitarian Church.
- 10/1889 Towbridge B. Forbush, minister of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee from 1886-1889, resigns to become Western superintendent of the American Unitarian Association.
- 11/1890 The Unitarian Society voted to sell their church. Services were held at the Athenaeum until the current church was constructed.
- Spring 1891 Construction of the First Unitarian Society’s current edifice at 1009 East Ogden Avenue, Milwaukee, Wisconsin began.

- 4/21/1892 The constitution of the first Unitarian Society was amended. Members were required to pay \$10 fee and sign a Bond of Union to make membership more definite.
- 5/15/1892 First service at the current edifice.
- 1892 After the death of her husband William, Caroline Metcalf paid the remaining debt for the church, approximately \$20,000 of 40,000, in memoriam of her husband.
- 1895 Mrs. Caroline Metcalf donated an oak Sedalia designed by Ferry and Clas.
- 1919 Robert Loring was minister at the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee. Although he was a theist, he defended Unitarians with expressed atheistic humanist, agnostic, and spiritual viewpoints. He would serve as minister under 1935.
- 1920s Beginning of the Humanist Theist Controversy. The Unitarian church, though not being completely Christian centered, has a long tradition of theism. The Unitarian church was deciding if it should also allow humanism into its official doctrine.
 Unitarian ministers, such as Revs. John Dietrich and Curtis Reese adapted humanist platforms, resulting in the incorporation agnosticism and atheism platforms into Unitarianism. The controversy would end in the 1950's with a general acceptance of both theism and humanism.
- 11/15/1959 The First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee established a west branch at Underwood Court in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.
- 5/15/1961 The American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merge to form the Unitarian Universalist Association.
- 1961 The west branch of the First Unitarian Church formed the Unitarian Universalist Church West. Their church was constructed at 13001 W. North Avenue, Brookfield, Wisconsin.
- 11/1962 The North Shore Unitarian Fellowship was founded, changing its name to Unitarian Church North in 1969. Services were held in the homes of congregational members, Country day school in Whitefish Bay, and the Mequon Women's Club until it's edifice at 13800 N. Port Washington Road, Mequon, Wisconsin was constructed in 1987.
- 12/1962 There were 470 members and 250 students enrolled in church school at the Unitarian Society. The society's planning committee deemed the current building at Astor and Ogden to be inadequate to support its membership and activities. It recommended that a new church be built, an unoccupied place of worship be purchased, the establishment of a new church to serve the northern suburbs, or the acquisition of adjacent property for the construction of an addition.
- 1966 The First Unitarian Society constructed an addition abutting the southeast side of the church, joining an apartment it had acquired on the property to the south. Construction ended in 1967.

- 1981 John Cyrus, Minister from 1956-1981, dies of Cancer. A memorial is held in his honor.
- 1986 Andrew Kennedy becomes senior minister at First Unitarian. Under his ministry the congregation grew to 800 members and 228 children.
- 1986 First Unitarian welcomes 92 new members.
- 1988 Andrew Kennedy was arrested for civil disobedience along with 1,259 others for protesting the testing of nuclear bombs in Nevada.
- 8/1992 Andrew Kennedy and members of the First Unitarian stood against anti-abortion protestors known as the “prophets of the preborn.” The number of protestors ranged anywhere from 2,000 to as much as 8,000.
- 1996 The church held its doors open to the homeless during a recent spike in homeless mothers. The church would be open for a month and as many as 90 volunteers helped.
- 2000 The Unitarian Christian Conference is founded with the union of several Unitarian Christian churches independent from the UUA with the goal of returning to classic Unitarianism.
- 1/2003 Andrew Kennedy was arrested for a second time for civil disobedience for protesting the proposed war in Iraq.
- 2014 Andrew Kennedy Retires as head minister of the FUSM
- 2016 Reverend Jennifer Nordstrom becomes senior minister of the FUSM

Ministers

Mr. Moore (Informal, c. 1841)

Joseph Harrington (Visiting, July 1841 and May 1842)

William Cushing (1842-1843)

William H. Lord (1843)

William Huntington (1843-1849)

A. S. Ryder and Frederick Tenny (c. 1849-1856)

Nahor A. Staples (1856-1861)

Carlton A. Staples (1862-1868)

Edward H. Hall (Interim 1868)
Samuel Longfellow (Interim 1868)
William C. Gannett (1868-1870)
Rowland Connor (Jan.-Nov. 1871)
Gustavus E. Gordon (1875-1885)
Towbridge B. Forbush (1886-1889)
Henry T. Secrist (1891-1896)
William G. Eliot Jr. (1897-1901)
James C. Hodgins (1901-1907)
Walter F. Greenman (1908-1919)
Robert S. Loring (1919-1935)
Ralph E. Bailey (1935-1956)
John W. Cyrus (1956-1981)
Raymond J. Baughan (Interim 1981-1982)
Dale W. Robinson (1982-1985)
Neil H. Shadle (Interim 1986)
Andrew C. Kennedy (1986-2014)
Jennifer Nordstrom (2016-Present)

Annotated Bibliography

UWM Collection/houses FUSM collection, which still actively collects

This is the largest, and most extensive, collection of information on the FUSM available. There is a total of 39 boxes, spanning over 150 years, covering 14 different subjects. Much of the early information about the FUSM was destroyed during a bank riot, so much of the collection spans from 1861 to 2014.

Playing Soccer with Buddha

This is a book published Drew Kennedy, minister of the FUSM for 28 years, in 2014. It describes his personal philosophy as well as the teachings he taught at the FUSM while he

was their senior minister. He also goes over a brief history of the FUSM from its foundations to the modern day.

Historic American Buildings Survey

Much like the NRHP, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) gives an overview of the architectural history of the FUSM. The report spans about 17 pages.

National Register of Historic Places Report

The National Register of Historic Places report (NRHP) works like the HABS report. It covers a longer history of the FUSM current location than the HABS report. It consists of 23 pages.

<https://uumilwaukee.org/>

This is the website of our congregation. It shows current and former ministers, as well as all current clubs and activist groups the congregation holds. The website covers recent activities of the church and provides biographical information of church leaders such as Jennifer Nordstrom and Andrew Kennedy.

Memorable moments of ministry in Milwaukee

This pamphlet illustrates moments that Kennedy highlighted during a sermon close to his retirement. This shows church history during the tenure of Andrew Kennedy.

Stories to keep from our first church heritage

This pamphlet illustrates a brief overview of the church's history through highlighted points. This includes a struggle between the Midwest Unitarians and the eastern Unitarians, historic stances against slavery, and the first advertisement leading to the first meeting of the FUSM.