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# Unitarian

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A Quarterly Publication of The First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis



## Autumn 2010

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# 🌀 Discovering Our Shared Mission

by The Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons, Senior Minister

The UUA General Assembly in Minneapolis went very well, and I am extremely proud of our FUS presence, and grateful to so many people who volunteered and attended all the various events! Feedback from some of the GA regulars was enthusiastic about the amenities of the city, as well as the welcome from local UUs. The Humanist Homecoming conference on Saturday at FUS also ran very smoothly, thanks to more than a score of volunteers who really showed that hospitality is a humanist value. We all did our part to help make these very complex gatherings fun and satisfying for the participants, and we can all take satisfaction in knowing that our visitors had a good time, and were impressed by both our Minnesota culture and our congregational generosity. Way to go, Minneapolis UUs, and much gratitude to everyone who pitched in to help!

No student of the history of Humanism can fail to be impressed by the impact of the commercially viable printing press upon European society and scholarship. It is certainly arguable that the Reformation could not have come about, or spread as widely and quickly as it did, without the unprecedented reach of readily available books. And no institution felt this revolution more forcefully than the Christian church, which was transformed from its thousand year hegemony into a kaleidoscope of smaller, diverse, competing denominations.

I think about that transformation from time to time, as I watch the rise of the Internet revolutionize the ways in which people in our own culture today receive and share information, connect with each other, and seek out community. E-mail and Twitter, texting and Facebook, all have

Is FUS becoming an historical artifact?

Welcome to the new *The First Unitarian*, formerly the FUS monthly newsletter, and now a quarterly publication.

You can keep updated on the latest FUS news and events by:

- 🌀 visiting the new FUS website at [www.firstunitarian.org](http://www.firstunitarian.org)
- 🌀 subscribing to *The Unitarian FLASH*, our bimonthly e-newsletter
- 🌀 attending Sunday services at 10:30 a.m.
- 🌀 being an active member of our community.

radically changed the way our social worlds are going to be constructed. I'm not saying this because I like it especially; I'm as resistant to change as the next person, and technology doesn't fascinate me, so I am what is called a "late adopter." I have to know how something works, and why bad things will happen if I don't get on board, before I get dragged into the newest generation of high tech systems.

I was puzzled for a long time why it seemed that the Fundamentalists and the Evangelicals were always two or three steps ahead of the liberal and progressive churches when it came to taking advantage of new technologies—this has been true since the early days of TV preachers. Then one of my colleagues offered what struck me as a very intelligent hypothesis. He suggested that when your doctrines and beliefs are firmly established, not open to argument or change, you may have the energy and openness to innovate in the way that you do things, whereas when your ideas are always up for reconsideration and improvement, it may be hard to embrace new techniques at the same time. In other words, theologically

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conservative churches are technologically innovative, whereas theologically innovative churches are technologically conservative. It's not something inherent in the ideas themselves; it's a question of limited energy, and what you want to spend it on.

Nevertheless, whether we want to or not, we are part of a transitional generation—living, I tend to think, in a nodal moment in history that will bring about changes in human society so profound that the world will never be the same, because of this shift in technology. That awareness is rather intimidating, to be sure, but I also suspect that it contains a lot of grounds for hope. When the printing press that could not be controlled by a centralized church or government allowed heresy to be published and spread, what came out of it was the Enlightenment, one of the greatest intellectual advances in western history. I cannot help believing that the immediacy of information and personal connections across the globe that we are only just beginning to realize, will ultimately be to the advantage of the common good. I don't necessarily think it will make us more comfortable—better information doesn't usually do that! But it will make us more knowledgeable citizens of the world, and if it is true that knowledge is power, then genuine democracy—together with all its attendant dangers—will benefit in the long run.

As it happens, we humanists often find ourselves awkwardly poised between the claims of elitism and those of actual democracy. If what the majority

wants, relative to any given issue, conflicts with the vision of the common good that we share among ourselves, we are often willing to have that vision enforced, on the theory that it is good for people, whether they know it or not. On the other hand, when we see views that are opposed to our own being enforced by religious or economic or governmental power, we insist strenuously on the virtues of democratic process. This is a paradox

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faced by everyone who advocates particular strategies and policies relative to specific issues, and at the same time believes in process ideals, such as democracy. There is never any guarantee that what the majority wants will be, in fact, the best solution, so the democratic process is a bet, not a sure thing. But I still think that the more people actually know, the better decisions they

usually make, so that being able to get information from around the world in real time is fundamentally a good thing.

What I'm not at all sure about yet is the impact that this enormous innovation is eventually going to have on the churches of our own day. Most of us are aware that the percentage of those polled who describe themselves as Christians has fallen steadily over the past two decades, while the percentage of those who say they have no religious affiliation has doubled. Is the institutional church, even of the most liberal sort, really just a vestige of a by-gone era, dwindling into irrelevance and destined to disappear? It's possible, though as you probably know, I am nervous that if the difficult, demanding,

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thoughtful kind of religion vanishes, what will take its place will be the kind of superstitious, charismatic, dogmatic religion that always frightens me very much.

But if the church—especially our type of church—is not to melt away into an historical artifact, then we are going to have to decide, more clearly than ever before, what we want that community to be, and to be for. If we are going to use the possibilities of new technology in the service of our shared mission, we will have to have some clarity about what that mission really is. At our annual congregational meeting in May, I suggested that there are three different ways we might think about what our

### What is the primary task of our community?

Society is trying to do, and each of them has implications for how we ought to move forward. I don't see how we can do them all at the same time; I would be interested in other points of view, but my sense

is that they are mutually exclusive. And I would be curious to know what you think—so which of these is most important to you?

- ✂ That FUS should spread the word and help create more humanists, whether or not that builds a comfortable, familiar community for ourselves;
- ✂ That FUS should build a shared community of service to the larger world, even with those who are not humanists;
- ✂ Or that FUS should maintain a familiar and comfortable community for a small band of loyal humanists.

It should be remembered that only through the practices of hospitality and generous friendship can we achieve any of these purposes; there is no legitimate way of understanding our mission that does not call us to be a competent, grown-up, welcoming community. But is it our primary task to introduce and advocate the ideas of humanism, or to make the world as a whole a better place for everyone, or to find and enjoy like-minded companions for our journey? If we had clarity about the answer to this question, both our volunteer leaders and our dedicated staff would find it easier to set priorities. It is a question that every congregation and community must address, as we move on the tide of this great cultural transition. And that is part of why we have religious institutions, because the largest challenges of history are rarely individual, but reveal themselves to us as we form and maintain communities. During the coming year, I hope we can wrestle with this one together in good faith and candor, by speaking our truth in love. ✂

# ☞ Fearless Free Thinking Families

by Jan Devor, Director of Religious Education

I marvel at the role that fear plays in our society today and in the bringing up of our children. What power it has. Not that there aren't things to be fearful about — I know. And, fear of the unknown has served mankind over the course of history to protect and help with self preservation. But today, in the modern world, I think, it has become such a destructive emotion. Dale McGowan pointed out in the Fahs lecture at the recent UU General Assembly that actually crime statistics are going down — who knew? We are actually safer today than ever. He points out that fear has the ability to make people less empathetic, less tolerant, less patient. Fear closes down communication and makes authority figures easier to follow. Fear leads to an “us and them” attitude.

Most religions in the past and present play on fears — fears of punishment, of hell. The fundamentalist religions are spewing fear and our religiously liberal children, usually by the age of six, are confronted with some small tot telling them they are going to hell for some reason or other. Fundamentalists fear different family configurations and different sexual identities. They fear choice for their children and divergent thinking from what they consider right. Follow, follow, follow, and do so because it makes one seem more in control and the fear factor goes down.

Unitarian Universalism offers families a way to raise their children without fear — well, without fear that free thinking will send them to hell. We relish putting information out there and letting the questioning begin. We celebrate examination and a free discussion of ideas. This is our gift to

our children. We think that multiple world views empower children and that religion is a journey of free thought and exploration over a lifetime. We actually teach other world views and go to other houses of worship so our children gain firsthand experience of others religions. Breaking down barriers, opening the shutters to closed areas to gain

**Our religiously liberal children are told, usually by age 6, that they are going to hell.**

understanding of differences usually leads to a reduction of fear. What a blessing for our children! We teach that individuals are to be respected but their ideas need to be examined. We want kids to have non-categorical thinking. What are all of these boxes we put ideas and people into anyway? We seek to broaden the traditionally religious language to encompass our openness. Why should the religiously conservative have a monopoly on such words as “blessings” and “soul”? We promote Purposes and Principles and not dogma.

Let us as a church, an institution, help you the parents open up your child's mind. Let us help you to offer your children a way out of some fear. Let us present to your children a liberal way of thinking that will empower free thought and examination of important life and religious questions. It is important and it is the work we do. Come. Let us join together. ☞

# The Wordless Part of Us

by Barbara Brooks, Music Director

As I sit at my computer I feel frozen in knowing where to start in talking about music and the significance it has in our lives. Perhaps the reason it's so tricky to put into words has to do with the


Music is a wonderful way in to that deep place.

thought that music involves and reaches the “wordless” part of us. Often, when I meet with folks trying to figure out music for a memorial service, they will throw out ideas and memories and

will talk earnestly about what might “fit” well in the service. Invariably, when I begin playing a song or piece they suggest, their tears begin to flow and the feelings that were right below the skin begin to surface. Sometimes it's a trickle and sometimes it's a torrent, but more often than not, it comes.

I believe that one of the greatest challenges in our lives on earth is awakening and opening up to the broadest, deepest versions of whom we really are. Our grandest version if you will! It takes great courage to really feel this experience called life and to face the challenges of a myriad of emotions and feelings. I truly believe that music is a wonderful way in to that deep place. Whether it is singing your favorite hymn at the top of your lungs, weeping silently at a melody that touches you, or just getting a goose-bump from a passage of music, the experience moves you to the center of your heart and soul. I say experience because I truly believe music is meant to be experienced!

As music director at FUS, I am interested in creating venues for people to have the experience of music in their lives. Whether you join a music group, sing

heartily at services, or experience the music through listening to a performance, I hope that the music will deepen your humanity and lift your spirit. I have always felt so lucky frankly to be on this earth as a musician. I encourage all of you to open to music and all it's great blessings! Get involved! I promise it will be great for your heart. 

## Upcoming Music Program Performances

October 24

December 5

March 6

May 15

# Sharing Our Values—Building Power

by Carol Koepp, Social Justice Coordinator

**We have an opportunity to activate our values exponentially.**

Our congregation is very proud of our UU humanist values and the potential they have for positive impact on the world. Supported by

these values, we are active as individuals and collectively in work that we believe will make the world a better and safer place, now and in the future. We discuss and deliberate over what position to take and how to

activate those decisions in the greater community. As humanists, we take seriously our responsibility to create a world where the worth and dignity of each human being becomes a reality. Sometimes, however, we feel frustrated because, relatively speaking, we are a very small denomination.


As members of the Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness (DCEH) we have an opportunity to activate our values exponentially. In spite of the wide range of theological traditions in DCEH, we come together on the belief that no one in our community deserves to be homeless. Not only do we come together on the need to end (not manage) homelessness, but we agree on the method; change public policies. The leadership in all of the DCEH congregations has decided that systemic changes need to be made.

I emphasize leadership because in many of the congregations being politically active is a new way to “do church” for the membership. This is where FUS distinguishes itself in the group and can serve as a model. Giving attention to public policy is just part of who we are; it’s one way to actively express our humanist values.

Individual FUS members have played key roles as volunteers in the DCEH: Teresa West helped design the website; when web technical skills were asked for, Jessie Halter and Andy Lyman-Butler volunteered; Sue Tinchler volunteered her graphic mapping skills and is creating visual documentation to illustrate the vastness of DCEH potential influence based on where DCEH members live; Molly Illes is volunteering her grant-writing skills in an effort to obtain funding for DCEH beyond congregational donations; Bob Aderhold and George Hutchinson have both had letters to the editor published in the Star Tribune regarding the issue of ending homelessness and the need for providing health care to the very poor (a DCEH issue); Jerry Edwards and Barbara McKernan are both very active in the DCEH Inter-faith Committee.

FUS members are, as a group, well-informed and skilled people. DCEH can use more of those skills in the up-coming legislative session and I’m hoping we can add more names to the list above.

The work of the DCEH Advocacy Team is at the core of our systemic focus. This is the team that prepares the DCEH Action Alerts many of you receive via email or at the TAKE 5 tables on Sunday mornings. This work is our strength.

If you have a special interest in preventing youth homelessness, advocating for support services, preventing homelessness for ex-offenders or other issues surrounding homelessness—your skills and passion are needed! Contact [sac@firstunitarian.org](mailto:sac@firstunitarian.org) and let’s talk. 

# Looking Into the Future

by Beth Gohdes, Chair of the Board of Trustees

Many folks attended General Assembly this year in various capacities from participant to volunteer to delegate. A “debrief” meeting was held on July 11 to share ideas for what we might carry forward to FUS over the next program year and beyond. Over 30 people attended and many ideas were generated.

Some of the broad themes that emerged included:

Membership:

- ☞ engaging the next generation
- ☞ connecting with populations currently underserved
- ☞ managing with statistics

Adult Education:

- ☞ expansion of offerings, like the Seven Virtues series and UUA study action groups like Immigration

Enhancing our program:

- ☞ bringing in specific speakers
- ☞ exploring alternative assemblies, music, visuals in the service

Energizing our congregation:

- ☞ creating opportunity for more small group conversations
- ☞ debates within the Society
- ☞ using more task forces and fewer standing committees

Humanist Message:

- ☞ make humanism compelling and relevant and modernizing

Social Action:

- ☞ more action, expanded topics—get more involved in actions of immediate witness

Denomination:

- ☞ closer ties to UUA—take better advantage of their services and adult education offerings

Marketing:

- ☞ more visibility on the web
- ☞ use of marketing devices like FUS “business cards”

Stay tuned as the Board, the Strategic Planning Committee, our Leadership team, and our congregation at large put some of these ideas into action!

# Leadership Team at FUS

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