

Unitarian Fellowship of Kelowna



Kelowna: the little fellowship that does it all

A poetry group – Japanese flower arranging – a youth group – a book club – an inter-faith homeless project – a partner church in Transylvania – a part-time minister (Rev. Wendy McNiven): the Unitarian Fellowship of Kelowna has all this, and more. And they've got another big project on the go: hosting the CUC annual meeting this coming May.

With about 85 members and friends, Kelowna isn't the largest UU congregation in B.C., but they're surely one of the most active. Their members still manage to form a circle at the conclusion of each service, then sing "Carry the Flame" together. There's some debate about whether they've outgrown this custom, but "it's a pleasure to look around the room at the faces of all the people you consider friends," says President Glenda Malcolm. She wants to retain the practice.

Situated on Lake Okanagan in the interior of B.C., Kelowna has had a fellowship since the mid-1960s. It began when two Unitarian ministers visited the area and put an ad in the local paper looking for religious liberals. A year later, in 1966, 10 families affiliated their fellowship to the UUA.

It grew slowly, says Glenda Malcolm, until a bequest in 1994 allowed them to purchase a downtown church. "I discovered the fellowship about six years ago, again from an ad in the newspaper," says Malcolm. "I was a recovering Catholic, and was attracted to a community that combined spirituality, a liberal approach, and social justice."

Perhaps their most ambitious new project is "Inn from the Cold," a program they founded jointly with the Catholic church this winter. "We put up five to 25 homeless people per night, providing shelter and a warm breakfast," she says. The Inn is in the Catholic church, but the Kelowna fellowship contributes five teams of two volunteers. Each team either welcomes the people to the Inn at night and stays until morning, or serves them breakfast and cleans up the rooms afterwards.

"It's a brand new thing, and we're on a huge learning curve," says Malcolm. "Most of us aren't accustomed to homeless people, so we have to learn to serve

them in a non-judgemental way."

John Palmer, Malcolm's husband, is also a volunteer. "Every one of us was a little scared at the start," he says, "but you learn that they're people, just like you, but without as many opportunities. After awhile you get to know individuals, they say hi, you connect a little – it's very rewarding."

Kelowna is a prosperous community of 100,000. It was a shock when a homeless man – "Dumpster Dan he was called," says Palmer – froze to death last winter. It galvanized the church to establish the Inn. Now the United Church is thinking of joining as well.

The fellowship also has a youth group of 10 members. They'll get a shot in the arm as they host the youth conference that runs in conjunction with the CUC annual meeting. About 50 youth from across the country are expected for the gathering; they'll sleep and meet in the church building, although for showers they'll have to take a bus to the recreation centre.

"It's a marvellous opportunity for our church," says Palmer, who is also chair of the host committee for the annual meeting. "It's a chance to show the rest of the country what we're doing here, and I think that some of the CUC energy will get left behind as well."

Not that Kelowna seems to need it. Other fellowship projects this spring include publishing a book of poetry by their strong group of writers (see haiku example, front page); a Secret Pals RE project; maintaining the connection to their partner church in Czehetfalva, Transylvania; and a group that studies *ikebana*, the Japanese art of flower arranging.

They also have a serious congregational issue to decide. "We love our old building," says Palmer, "but it's not wheelchair accessible." Renovations could be very costly, and contain many unknowns, so a move may be necessary. "That means we have to do some long-term planning, in order to sort out all the different priorities." □

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