

# First Unitarian Universalist Church of Winnipeg



Winnipeg Unitarians meet in the back yard of their new, riverside church. Inset photo: Church members march in front of the Manitoba legislature on Gay Pride Day.

## Building a deeper church, one Chalice Circle at a time

**One of the fastest-growing** Unitarian churches in Canada is the First UU Church of Winnipeg. The 240-member congregation moved to a new, central location four years ago and hasn't looked back. Their unique building – a large heritage home with office, meeting and RE space, connected to a large new addition they built as their sanctuary – is busy every night of the week.

They have a seven-class religious education program on Sunday mornings (115 registered children), a great music program and choir, a diverse adult education program, a youth coordinator on staff, and Our Whole Lives programs (sex education) for all ages. In the past year they've added small group ministry to their agenda – which they call Chalice Circles.

Whew. But if that isn't already enough, the next four months are going to be especially busy for the Winnipeg church. They're hosting the cuc annual conference on the May long weekend. The local organizing committee will do much of the legwork in setting up the four-day event, as well as par-

ticipating in the planning and overall direction.

However, there's an interesting tie-in between the cuc meeting and the local congregation. A major focus of the meeting will be small group ministry – something the Winnipeg church has some fresh experience with, and a technique it is using to manage their membership growth.

Winnipeg's Chalice Circles are an attempt to create an intimate space in a larger church – a concept that is sometimes called covenant groups, cells, or simply small group ministry. Each group of seven to 10 adults meets monthly to discuss spiritual and ethical questions, including topics like:

- What is my individual responsibility to find truth?
- How can foreknowledge of my death contribute to my life?
- How much do I have to do for the world before I feel comfortable?

"A minister can discuss these sorts of things on Sunday," says Rev. Susan Van Dreser of Winnipeg, "but the small groups give people a chance to speak in-

dividually, with a respectful audience. These aren't the sorts of questions you can talk about with co-workers. It's a chance to get down deeper."

The Winnipeg church currently has seven Chalice Circles, which are mostly organized around meeting times (although one is a bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgendered circle, and one is "child-friendly" – it has babysitting). Each circle has a facilitator, who is trained and coached by Van Dreser.

How do they prevent the Chalice Circles from becoming a church within a church? "We all discuss the same questions," says Van Dreser, "and the facilitators meet together themselves every month." As well, the groups are kept deliberately small; as more congregation members express interest, they'll create new Chalice Circles rather than enlarge the current ones.

"The circles have been especially important for us, because of our growth," says Van Dreser. "They allow new people to get to know us intimately and to feel immediately comfortable, and they allow older members to get to know the new ones, so they don't feel like their church is being taken over."

Winnipeg's other major way of dealing with congregational growth has been a carefully managed visioning process. After more than two years and the involvement of most of their members, they've identified seven key areas where they want to make changes:

- connecting and caring
- meeting community needs
- choices for religious experience
- nurturing volunteers
- welcoming youth and youth adults
- making the organization work
- sustaining their strengths

In specific terms, they want to tackle conflict resolution, improve social action, and welcome young adults better.

They've got a lot on the go in Winnipeg. Perhaps the decision to hold the annual conference there is a little like the saying: "If you want to get something done, ask a busy person to do it!" ☐