

New Brunswick church has long Unitarian history

UNITARIANS HAVE BEEN A part of Saint John, N.B. since the New England “Lumber Barons” settled here in the 1850s. Some of the founding families grew up in the Old Ship Church founded in 1635 near Plymouth, Massachusetts. It was known as a liberal renaissance congregation in the early 1700s and that spirit was carried to Saint John.

The local Unitarian community has taken on various forms over the years. Early services were held in Jewett’s “castle” and even in a former Baptist mission hall. At the time of the Great Saint John Fire of 1877, when nearly all of the uptown area was leveled, the first Unitarian congregation’s meeting place narrowly escaped. Although the building has since disappeared, the original bible has been retained as a memorial and link to our past.

By 1900 Saint John had two Unitarian houses of worship, The Independent Presbyterian Church on Main Street (North) and The Church of the Messiah on Hazen Avenue. The 1960s saw Unitarian House on Germain Street.

The 1970s and ’80s brought declining numbers and the near extinction of a UU presence in Saint John, but in the mid-1990s a dedicated group of the original congregation started meeting again and more people joined. The congregation evolved from fellowship to full charter status in June 2003.

Although many are surprised at our deep roots, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Saint John is very much in the present and looking to the future of maintaining a modern, liberal religious presence in our city. Our congregation is small, with about 50–60 people attending a full service. But we’ve outgrown our present rented space at a community centre and are actively

searching for larger accommodations.

Our church activities include twice-monthly formal worship services as well as informal singing Sundays, adult discussion groups, social gatherings and a professionally planned children’s program.


The church sponsors a community drum circle and helps staff an inner-city soup kitchen. Our Faith in Action committee has in the recent past contributed funds to organizations such as a local human development group and will this year make a contribution to the operation of a mobile soup kitchen.

Within our congregation, we have folks that range from Buddhist to Pagan to Christian to agnostic leanings. Discussions can be lively! At the present time, we are in process of becoming recognized as a Welcoming Congregation.

The congregation is served by a part-time minister, Rev. Kitsy Winthrop,

who travels from Portland, Maine every month to conduct a service and attend to pastoral needs. As well, once a month we hold a lay-led service, and a couple of times a year we invite other UU ministers as guest speakers.

Two congregational lay chaplains are licensed with the province to perform weddings and other rites of passage. There is also the hard-working Director of Children’s RE, and an equally hard-working and dedicated Board of Trustees.

This year, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Saint John has taken on one of its largest projects, as host of the CUC’s Annual Conference and Meeting. For a church of 43 members, hosting an event like this involves nearly everyone in the congregation – talk about a leap of faith! 

For more about the Saint John congregation, visit: www3.nbnet.nb.ca/uucsj



Volunteers from Saint John and Fredericton are hard at work organizing the 2006 CUC ACM.