



UNITARIAN CONGREGATION OF NIAGARA

A Congregation for Everybody

UCN NEWS

December 2023

Our Covenant

We come in peace
To this place of fellowship and love,
Searching for truth and meaning,
Seeking justice and equity through action,
Supporting each other and serving our community,
Acknowledging and preserving the gifts of this world,
This is our covenant with each other and with all.

UPCOMING SERVICES

All Services begin at 11:00 am every Sunday unless otherwise noted. All services can also be accessed via Zoom. Contact Roy Blake at ucn.communications@gmail.com for your Zoom connection.

December 3 - Christmas History: The Sacred - service presented and led by Karen Stovell and Susan Glassford

This service is a celebration of Christmas through the singing of carols that many of us know and grew up singing. Select congregants will lead us in each carol making it a truly interational event.

December 10 - Christmas History: The Secular - service presented and led by Karen Stovell and Susan Glassford

This is a further celebration of the holidays through songs that have been popularized on pop charts, movies and beyond. Select congregants will lead us in song.

December 17 - Chasing Our Star of Wonder - service presented and led by Jim Glassford

December 24 - It Came Upon a Midnight Clear - service presented and led by Karen Stovell.

December 31 - Beginnings and Endings - service presented and led by Shaun Ironside

EVENTS 33rd ANNUAL UNITARIAN MIDWINTER RETREAT
February 2-4, 2024

This year's theme is "Becoming Reacquainted," and the topic of the keynote speaker, Rev. Linda Thomson, will be "For Such a Time as This." The participants will reflect on the challenges of recent years, and ask how we can rebuild and strengthen our UU-community.



"Becoming Reacquainted"

**33rd Unitarian
Midwinter Retreat**

**@ Cedar Glen,
February 2-4, 2024**

Information: <http://uumidwinterretreat.blogspot.ca>
or Helen Iacovino, Registrar at Midwinter@FirstUnitarianToronto.org

Unitarian Midwinter Retreat
February 2 - 5, 2024 - arrival after 5pm Friday until after Sunday lunch YMCA Cedar Glen Outdoor Centre 13300 Concession 11 Schomberg, Ontario, L0G 1T0

- Full weekend, 2 nights, 6 meals, double occupancy - \$375.00 per person
- Full weekend, 2 nights, 6 meals, single occupancy - \$535.00 per person
- Saturday program, one day only with lunch and dinner - \$100.00 per person
- Saturday program, one day only, with lunch only - \$80.00 per person

There will be a wide variety of workshops and out door activities. A brochure with details will be sent out later.

Registration

Early Bird Registration will be open until December 29, 2023, and deadline for all registration is January 12, 2024. To register go to:

<https://uumidwinterretreat.blogspot.com/>

SOCIAL ACTION

Community Care Food Hamper

Please continue to bring a food item each week for the food hamper situated at the rear of the sanctuary. An item brought weekly by each congregant will provide the equivalent of a week's worth of groceries for a family.

We have received a letter of appreciation from Community Care for our last contribution which was in excess of 25 pounds of food. Let us continue with this trend, most notably at Christmas time. We know our efforts benefit others and are deeply appreciated.

Community Care Hampers for Seniors

This is a Community Care initiative that collects funds for disadvantaged and marginalized elders in our community. In the past, UCN has collected items and money to put toward this project. The money has been converted to gift cards to be given to individuals so they can purchase what is specific to their needs. Community Care believes this latter option gives the beneficiary of the card the opportunity to choose what is most important to them.

In this spirit, UCN is collecting only money this year. We are doing this by means of a Memory Tree, a Christmas tree placed at the front of our sanctuary where individuals can sign and hang a bulb on the tree in memory or in celebration of a loved one. In turn, a donation is made and placed in a collection box. The bulbs, pens and donation box are placed on a table beside the tree for you.

Niagara Mobile Closet

203 Church St (rear door)

Tuesdays and Fridays - open 10:00 am to Noon

Sunday - open Noon to 2:00 pm

They are currently in need of work wear, job interview clothing, winter wear including boots and, especially, men's coats. You can donate any of these items that are in good repair.



Amnesty International - Write for Rights

UCN will be hosting a Write for Rights event on Sunday, December 10 from 3:00 to 5:00 pm.

Amnesty International believes in the transformative power of words and knows from experience that the simple practice of writing letters has created major changes and liberty for those whose human rights have been violated. From their website: “For 20 years Amnesty International Write for Rights Campaign has been a beacon of hope for those whose rights have been wronged. It’s a global movement where individuals come together to use the power of their words for positive change.”

This event has been organized by Mary-lyn Hopper who will provide us with the direction we need to write these letters and to whom. Or you may come knowing what issue you want to address and where you want it directed. Form letters will be provided or you can write your own letter. Please invite others to participate who are interested in Human Rights. For those unable to attend the event on Sunday, December 10, there will be form letters available you can sign after service on that day.

Let us all Write for Rights and make a difference.



The banner features the Amnesty International logo in the top left corner, with navigation links for CAMPAIGNS, LATEST, ABOUT, and SHOP. A 'TAKE ACTION' button is located in the top right. The main text reads 'WRITE FOR RIGHTS 2023' in large white letters. Below this, it says 'Join the world's largest human rights event. Write letters and sign petitions in support of people at risk of human rights abuses. Take action now and change a life.' A yellow box at the bottom contains the slogan 'WRITE A LETTER. CHANGE A LIFE.' The background shows a group of diverse people holding up letters and petitions, with a map of the world visible behind them.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

- Matt Virro

Does a Rising Tide Raise All Ships?

As the year closes, I find myself weighing how much sun, cloud and rain touched my face. For me, it was a good run. I had the support of a loving family and a steadfast congregation during the year. I felt in control of finances, food and shelter. I knew I had packed my parachute well enough. I'm here to prove it. I reminded myself that I am happy and grateful to be living in a privileged place in history and born into a time of possibilities and plenty.

But blue sky stories like mine are not shared in large parts of this world and, yes, within our own borders. Poverty and food insecurity are a present-day reality between every coast of Canada.

This readership is well aware of the impact of being cold, distraught and unhoused. It's unfair and it's wrong. The saying goes, "a rising tide lifts all boats" (John F. Kennedy). People become more charitable with newfound dollars and prosperity. But as the metaphor goes, of the many floating boats in the harbour, it is the poor who watch and wave from the shoreline. Looking out at the harbour are there not fewer boats in the harbour today? Are they not owned more by rich skippers for whom boats will yet rise with a fresh tide at all times while the middle class, hollowed out by inflation and insecurity, will have abandoned ship. The middle class, I suspect, is ever more joining those on the shoreline, asking what happened to their dream.

There are two important public policy reports from 2023:

- 1) Food Banks Canada has painted a graphic picture of poverty and food insecurity in Canada this month. They offer helpful recommendations to governments to act, not just talk. Evidence is abundant. Every province that signals neglect is worthy of a good swat of tar. They all received failing report cards (link below).

One in seven food bank clients are employed; 8.9% are seniors; 33% who used food banks are children who represent 20% of the population; one in four say they ate less than they should because there was not enough money.

- 2) The Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto and the North York Harvest Food Bank in their new Who's Hungry Report of 2023 (link below) points to a 51% increase in food bank use year over year to 2023 and a 3 million visit increase to GTA food banks up to Spring, 2023. Anyone can see this trajectory is unsustainable and requires immediate government intervention. Charity is not the answer to food insecurity.

These recommendations from 2023 point to a crying need for clear poverty reduction targets: doubling income for individuals and families who have insufficient earnings; a family tax credit for Ontario families; modernizing Ontario Works and ODSP; and the establishment of clear realizable affordable rental and co-op housing construction. Such construction, by the way, was stopped by the Mulroney government in 1992 as they gutted the co-operative housing program. Social housing has been underfunded ever since. That's more than 30 years of underfunding.

In this time of hospitality and sharing, courageous congregations can choose to press buttons with city, provincial and federal officials to restore the lifeblood of the poor and middle class. We need to re-create a proper social minimum that supports the poor and rebuilds a middle class, the worker bees of the world.

Charity was the essential backstop before WW II. With postwar prosperity came social policy. But these reports point to sliding back towards the charity model of social assistance. It's misguided and unsustainable. Governments look no further than their nose, their high inflation and public debt create priorities that stress personal responsibility, often on the backs of the less fortunate. Which adage best describes governments as you know it:

- 1) Stop, Think, Go? or
- 2) Go, Think, Stop?

We know, but do they?

As the New Year approaches, I am wishing for a rising tide to benefit everyone in the harbour. It's our time to demand places on board for all.

Food Canada Report 2023

<https://fbcblobstorage.blob.core.windows.net/wordpress/2023/10/Annual-Report-2023-Final-ENG.pdf>

Who's Hungry Report 2023

<https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/DB-WhosHungryReport-2023-Digital.pdf>

POEM FOR PEACE

The following poem, titled “A Very Short Poem for Peace,” was submitted by Gracia James. Gracia is a current member of UCN whom many of you may not have met. Do not be fooled by her absence in UCN activities as being an indication of her commitment to the principles of Unitarian Universalism. She lives the principles in all facets of her life, most evident in her community awareness, and her social action initiatives and participation. She was the Unitarian Religious Education Director for six years at the Unitarian Fellowship of Northwest Toronto, and then of the Unitarian Fellowship of Niagara (now UCN) for 16 years.

Gracia’s poem for peace comes with hope and encouragement at a most critical time in this world’s history.



A Very Short Poem for Peace - Gracia James

If we could live in Peace,
Just one more year, or three or five
Perhaps some how, some place, some way
We’d know we can survive
By reaching hands across the void,
And hearts, and souls, and minds.

WHO WE ARE
Sarah MacLaren

Humming and playing around with different vocalizations, playing dress up, and drawing made up characters and maps, I think a lot can be inferred about who I am from these very early childhood delights. Broadly speaking, creativity and self-expression have always been deeply important to me.

When I was in Kindergarten my parents got divorced, and my sister and I spent the next four years being raised by Mom in a two-bedroom apartment in Whitby. I have magical memories of that apartment building, playing tag all around the property, going to craft nights in the downstairs community room in my pyjamas, and being in a short-lived imaginary girl band with some childhood friends who lived in the building too. It was short-lived likely because we could barely harmonize, and we spent most of the time figuring out stage names and matching outfits.

One year after my parents divorced, my mom started attending Durham college and obtained a diploma in Electrical Engineering while working at BiWay and arranging pick-ups and drop-offs for us kids. It's one of those life events that was hard to witness and grasp at the time. I just remember missing my mom a lot. Looking back now and understanding the nuances of the situation, I often find myself drawing inspiration from her determination and drive. Or, at the very least, her perseverance in the face of adversity.

When I was 11 years old, we moved to a house in the country, just outside Peterborough, a move which I believe helped me develop a better understanding and appreciation of nature. Our backyard had a tiny forest with a stream where I would often go to search for frogs and turtles, or identify trees using my Trees and Shrubs of Ontario guidebook.

I carried a lot of pain and existential confusion in my pre-teen and teen years, and the answers to some of my biggest questions were either darker than I anticipated or led to more questions. I became a fair bit skeptical of and resentful towards capitalism. Every book by George Orwell that I could find in the high school library became my friend, guiding me and challenging me to understand the human condition beyond my comprehension.

Music has been vital in expanding my consciousness as well, but I could write a whole other bio just on that alone! I will say that I have been a super-fan of David Bowie since high school; his confidence, his creative risk-taking, his gender binary-defying presence were revolutionary to my eyes and my ears! Every time I listened to his music I felt creatively energized and emboldened, and more

attuned to myself than I had been before. I am always seeking out music and am drawn to music that holds this sort of power over me. It is one of my greatest joys in life!

One summer weekend when I was 15 years old, after almost a year of deep consideration and moderate research, I decided to become vegetarian. I consider that moment to be a deeply spiritual covenant that I made with the universe, the first and most powerful one that I have consciously made. It was a ritual: I had a last meal moment of everything, and then I began my journey rooted in love and dedication. Since then, I've developed a real love of vegetarian cooking and find delight in discovering creative and interesting ingredient and flavour combinations.

When it comes to my working life, I've had many experiences in different fields of work. I've worked at Apple Support in Niagara Falls where (as you may have seen in October's newsletter) I first met the love of my life, Shaun. Then I worked in a pita shop for awhile, then a pet store, then on to dog grooming for a few years, then a swift left turn working in a health food store, then into purchasing within the health food industry. I believe life is for experiencing and learning, and that practical experience is just as valuable (and complementary, I would say) to academic experience.

These days I am really grateful to have reconnected with the love and light of my life, Shaun. My happiness is a collection of precious, sparkling moments that involve a lot of shared laughter, meandering conversations that go on into the early morning hours, sharing of my vegetarian meal creations, snuggling up and watching movies together, dancing and singing together, and being one of two doting cat parents to our elderly feline children; Cricket, Tigger, and Pumpernickel. I'm looking forward to expanding our little garden next year (and maybe building a "catio" for our fur children) as we continue to learn and grow together into the New Year!



2024 PLEDGE DRIVE



It is that time of year again when congregants are asked to determine how much money they can contribute to UCN over the next year. Your contributions are critical in keeping our church financially viable.

Your pledge money is directed to the many costs associated with our goals and objectives. This includes the more practical aspects of operation, including annual CUC membership fees and building maintenance and enhancements. Your contributions are also used for guest service speakers and musicians, educational materials and social action initiatives.

Brian Jones, our treasurer, will be sending out pledge forms for you to complete before the end of 2023. You can contribute in one lump sum, monthly or any interval that works for you. Your pledge is a promise of what you want to give, but we recognize that your situation may change and so may your contribution. If so, there is no need to advise anyone.

Your treasurer and board work arduously to spend your money wisely and invest it in ways that help us build reserves for large initiatives or unforeseen costs. Brian provides a monthly statement of costs, expenses and investments which you can access by examining the minutes of our monthly board meetings.

Your pledge is confidential and only the treasurer knows what you give. Your financial gift is eligible for income tax deductions.

Please contribute what you can afford. Your contributions are appreciated and essential to keep our congregation functional, vibrant and relevant.

HOW DO I GET MY MONEY TO UCN?

There are several ways of honouring your pledge:

- You can contribute at services via cheque or cash. There are small envelopes where you can insert your contribution and place it on the Offertory plate set out at the table at the bottom of the ramp. Please put your name on the envelope so we can issue you a tax receipt.
- You can mail your pledge directly to Brian Jones c/o UCN, 223 Church Street, St. Catharines, Ontario L2R 3E8.
- You can e-transfer your pledge using Interac. To do this you must be registered with your financial institution on-line. Just set up Unitarian Congregation of Niagara as an Interac payee using the email address ucn.communications@gmail.com.

CHANGES AT UCN

- Mary-lyn Hopper

The vision of the UCN creative design team is to create a welcoming, meditative place in our sanctuary. We have completed the first step of the process by removing the book shelves and books, the pictures and flags around the windows to the back room which has opened up the sanctuary.

The next step is to repair or replace the ceiling near the kitchen which was damaged because of a leak which occurred before the roof was repaired. Then, painting of the sanctuary can begin. Decisions about decor for the walls will occur, rehangng wall art that most fits the vision and possibly adding new elements. Finally we expect to make adjustments to the lighting and sound system.

If you are willing and able to help with painting or related chores, you can contact me, Liina Veer or LesLee Turmel.

NOTEWORTHY

This is the section of the Newsletter which provides a forum for UCN congregants to contribute material that is of interest to them. This may include personal reflections, experiences or general information consistent with UU principles and interests. *This month's contribution is by Paul Pipher.*

THE VIEW FROM HERE

- Paul Pipher

Regarding the Democracy Service of November 26, 2023:

Kudos to Abu Hosein on his provocative service about Democracy. It was Unitarians at their best, expressing their faith as questions. It was also an example of democracy providing the opportunity to consider a question, whether or not it leaves the listener at ease in his position on the Right / Left Spectrum. In support, I offer a few questions of my own in hopes of confirming our faith:

- What is democracy?
- What criteria did the German data company use in judging the degree of democracy in each country?
- The American people elect their President, Senators, Representatives, and many of their police chiefs and judges. Does this make America more democratic than Canada?
- Donald Trump continues to bring up many serious problems vital to saving America, including a broken and broke health system, unlawful immigration and economic warfare. Should Americans ignore the problems he raises because they find themselves on the opposite side of the Right / Left Spectrum?
- How do we know if we are extremists, Right or Left?
- What is the Comfortable Pew?

Thank goodness for Unitarians' faith and support of asking questions. Let's make sure this spirit lives on.

**Unitarian Congregation
of Niagara**

223 Church St.
St. Catharines, ON L2R 3E8
905-687-8433

unitarian-stcatharines.org
ucn.communications@gmail.com

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**Deadline for January Newsletter:
December 15, 2023**

