

## **A Brief History of Prairie UU Society** (updated on 8/29/23)

### **The Beginning**

Prairie Unitarian Universalist Society was established in 1967 as an offshoot of the First Unitarian Society of Madison (FUS) in an effort to relieve overcrowding in FUS's religious education program. In 1966 a group of members of FUS had purchased a portion of a prairie area on Madison's far west side as a potential location for a second Unitarian Universalist congregation, and it is from that piece of land that Prairie Society takes its name. That building site, however, was never used and is now split between Madison's Raymond Ridge Park and the University of Wisconsin Arboretum. Some 30 adults and 78 children began church school and discussion-type Sunday morning meetings on September 17, 1967, in space made available at Holy Name Seminary on High Point Road.

In the spring of the following year, temporary by-laws were drawn up, 41 people became charter members of the Prairie Society, and an executive board was elected. During 1968-69, Prairie members numbering over 65 adults and 100 children continued to meet at the Seminary. The new group took advantage of the UUA's (Unitarian Universalist Association) minister-on-loan program for a six week visit in the spring of 1969, hosting the colorful R. Lanier Clance and taking his advice to start a newsletter and to affiliate with the UUA as a Fellowship.

### **Our Meeting Places**

The next 11 years found Prairie moving from one rented location to another until buying its own permanent building in 1980.

- August 1969 - YWCA on the Square in downtown Madison
- December 1971 - Portal-Foster Center on West Lawn Avenue
- September 1978 - Montessori School on Colby Street
- January 1980 – own building at 2010 Whenona Drive near the Verona Road/Beltline intersection, remodeled in 1988 and again mid-2019 through mid-2021.
- 2013 – purchased the house next door at 2006 Whenona, which is used for offices and meetings since 2015 (called the Annex)
- August 2020 through February 2021 – met at Oak Park Place, 4327 Nakoma Road, during remodeling
- Since March 2020 – mostly meeting by Zoom since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic with an interlude inside from mid-summer 2021-October 2021, and again in person since March 2022

The 1988 remodeling increased the basement RE space, added an upstairs kitchen and made both the main floor and basement handicap-accessible. The entrance was moved from the Whenona side to Crawford Drive side. The most recent remodeling added considerable space to the lobby with a spectacular window wall to the east, installed a third restroom upstairs and improved the one downstairs, updated the upstairs kitchen with a commercial dishwasher, removed the stage and closet in the front of the main meeting room to provide more seating space, removed wood paneling and painted the entire space white, added a large closet space behind the meeting room, widened all the downstairs classroom doors, and drastically improved ventilation in the meeting room. More recently we have purchased air filtering units for the lobby and for each religious education classroom to help prevent spread of COVID-19.

## **Important Decisions**

An important early decision in our history was arranging for a half-time student minister, Dave Meyer, from Meadville Lombard Seminary in Chicago. He worked with Prairie from the fall of 1970 until the spring of 1972, introducing circle dinners, the symbol tree celebration, musical groups, and a play-readers group, which continue to enrich the congregation. This was a heady time!

In April 1972, facing financial reality and confident of its ability to carry on, Prairie voted for a system of lay ministers. This system engaged Prairie members and others from the wider community to lead Sunday services for the next 33 years. This strong lay leadership legacy continues even as the Society has engaged professional clergy. Consult the Annotated Prairie Chronology for the names of many lay leaders who have contributed to our thriving congregation over our 55-year history.

Another important decision was changing our governance structure. Through most of our history, the Board consisted of the four officers and the heads of all the committees, resulting in a huge governing body of up to 14 people. That was about 1 in every 7 members. On July 1, 2012, the decision to change to a policy board was implemented, shrinking the Board to 7 people. Members on the Board are assigned liaison duties to particular committees so as to facilitate communication.

It should be mentioned that throughout our entire history we have always had paid religious education directors who work with volunteers to provide quality experiences for our children. Our kids are the hope for the future. They often make life-long friendships here, and we know they carry our basic religious principles with them whether they continue as UUs or not.

## **Our Ministers Since 2005**

Our ministers, since we again began to work with professional clergy, have been Jody Whelden (quarter-time August 2005–June 2006), Ralph Tyksinski (quarter- to half-time November 2006–June 2010), Jane Esbensen (half-time August 2010–April 2011), Sandra Ingham (half- to 60%-time September 2012–March 2019), and our first fulltime minister Matt Aspin (August 2021–July 2023). Jody started us on the path to developing our Congregational Covenant of Good Relations which was adopted during the ministry of Ralph Tyksinski at the end of 2007. We were pleased that his wife Karleen Tyksinski added her considerable musical talents to the congregation. Since we were unable to get an interim minister after Matt Aspin's departure, Rev. Tyksinski began serving us for pastoral care only in August 2023.

## **More...**

Throughout our history, Sunday services and other activities have focused on creating opportunities for individuals to grow through participation. We are known for having people of all ages provide special music, for being friendly to every visitor and providing a supportive friendship network for all ages, for our focus on interaction with the natural world, and for supporting social justice awareness and action, including through giving half of our loose Sunday offering to local charities. The Society became a Welcoming Congregation in 1998 (renewed in 2020) to support of the LGBTQ community. It received Green Congregation certification in 2011. Over the years initiatives have been undertaken to support immigrants, the homeless, the Allied Drive area of the neighborhood, to reduce Wisconsin's prison population, and more. Most recently, the Prairie Board has been considering the recommendations made by the Prairie committee that studied the UUA report Widening the

Circle of Concern. That report focuses on making the church more deeply welcoming to Blacks, Indigenous, people of color, and those of other marginalized identities such as LGBTQ and those living with disabilities.

Prairie's first fall Prairie retreat took place in 1970 at Upham Woods (near Wisconsin Dells). We continued there until 1999 when we switched to Bethel Horizons (near Dodgeville) for this social and spiritual highlight of the year. COVID-19 forced us to make the retreat local (outdoors) and mostly on Zoom for two years, but in 2022 we returned to Bethel Horizons.

On September 17, 2017, Prairie celebrated its 50th anniversary with gala Saturday night and Sunday morning events. The History Committee completed a two-volume 50-year history over a nearly five-year period, releasing the books on April 27, 2019. (Still available). The history joins the 1982 cookbook of member recipes, *A Prairie Kitchen Companion*, which was republished in a facsimile edition in 2016.

Prairie's membership has hovered around 100 – give or take up to 20 – during most of its history: Sunday service attendance has varied widely from the 30s to the 60s. Since we have returned from COVID-19 isolation, we have shifted to a hybrid model of in-person services which are also carried on Zoom. Continuing our tradition of congregational participation, our services almost universally include a discussion period after the presentation. Always a very musical congregation, during these Zoom times or live, we try to include music done by individuals or small groups of members during Sunday morning programs.

Consider joining us. We'd love to have you shape our ongoing history.

See the online [Annotated Prairie Chronology](#) for more insight into our history. The entire History book set can be viewed electronically on the Prairie website, Archives section. The [hardcopy history book set](#) is available for \$25 and is given free to new members.