



A HISTORY OF THE MARQUETTE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION

Early in 1961, a group led by Roland Schwitzgoebel (Education Department, NMU) formed a fellowship of like-minded people, and, like most starting UU groups, it met in people's homes for discussion and conversation. The group (15-20 members) lost several key members by untimely death and didn't last.

In the 1970s, another group formed, again with Roland as the lead "organizer," again with participation of additional NMU faculty members (Gail Griffith, Mike Gorski). Membership was about 15-20, they met in people's homes and in the Federated Women's Clubhouse in Marquette for discussion and conversation, often using UUA material. The group disbanded due to leadership fatigue.

A group was started around 1992 by Kathy Melanbacher and Gail Griffith, and was again led by Roland and other NMU faculty. The group used the "Church in a Box" from the UUA and received formalized acceptance by the UUA in 1998 when Nancy Sullivan was President (her husband, Tom Sullivan, was on the faculty of NMU). By 1992, the group had grown, and met in the basement of the Village Inn on Third Street. The group was led (1994-2002), once per month, by ministerial students (Bill Sasso was the first) from the Meadville Lombard Theology School on the University of Chicago campus. Bill provided substantial sermons, led discussions and helped with Religious Education for a significant number of children. The focus on UUA principles with a knowledgeable leader proved very important. On the other Sundays, services were led by members and lay guest presenters.

In 2002 the group, now a UU Congregation with 40 members, rented a house on Brickyard Road and also employed a half-time minister (Rev. Kayle Rice). The Religious Education program was housed in the basement of the house. Kayle provided a broad range of sermon material and enhanced the focus on the UUA and its broad activities. The relationship with Kayle frayed and she left Marquette. By 2006, the congregation had grown to 50 members.

In September 2006, the congregation moved into its present building on M-28, with Sari Embley as President. The RE program had grown significantly under Melissa Middleton. Sermons were varied, and each week a forum was held, usually preceding the Sunday service. Sunday Services Committee Chair Tom Sullivan was highly effective in ensuring that every service had a suitable focus, with a variety of speakers. The focus on the UUA and its expanding range of direct involvement was reflected in the range of services offered on Sundays. By 2012, membership had grown to 65.

The period of 2017 to the present has posed significant challenges for the congregation. The national trend of lower interest in church-related activities has been felt by all small religious groups, including MUUC. Leaders important to the congregation passed away or moved to other geographic locations. By 2020, when the COVID pandemic started, membership had fallen to 40. The pandemic led to the limiting of in person gatherings, causing sharp decreases in attendance at UU churches and fellowships everywhere, including MUUC. In June of 2022, membership stood at 23. However, MUUC now has a new group of leaders committed to raising MUUC's profile in the community, and hopefully leading to an increase in attendance and membership.

The Marquette Unitarian Universalist Congregation has adopted the Welcoming Congregation designation, has participated in Marquette activity for the homeless, and continues to be a presence in the community for those who have spiritual needs, and are seeking an environment acknowledging all spiritual directions and meanings. It has maintained close relations with the UUA and frequently has some of its members attend the UUA annual General Assembly.