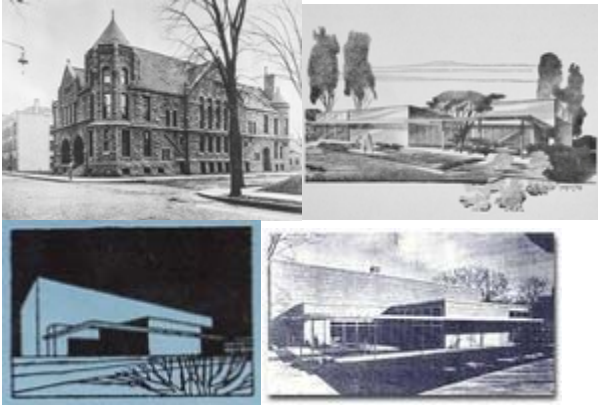


# History of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis



## FUS History

The First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, which is housed in a handsome modern church built in 1951 at 900 Mount Curve Avenue, was founded in 1881. At the time of the Society's founding, Minneapolis was a scattered, open frontier city of 50,000 people without a foot of paved street but with an almost savage faith in their ability to control their own destiny. The founding of the Society was an expression of that faith. On November 18, 1881, meeting in the old Adventist Hall on Third Street and Nicollet Avenue, the Society was incorporated and its aims set forth:

*"Where people without regard to theological differences may unite for mutual helpfulness in the intellectual, moral, and religious culture and humane work. And that all persons whatsoever who sympathize with these aims shall be welcome to this Society."*

**Henry M. Simmons** was minister of the Society from its founding in 1881 until 1905. Under his ministry the Society soon outgrew Adventist Hall and in 1881 began to hold services in the Jewish Synagogue at Fifth Street and Marquette Avenue. Construction of a new church was undertaken in 1885. Located at St. Mary's Place, now Eight Street and LaSalle Avenue, the handsome church,

designed by a noted architect of the time, L.S. Buffington, was dedicated in June 1887. Mr. Simmons, a powerful and provocative minister, established a standard of excellence that has been a hallmark of the Society's ministers ever since.

The Society continued its growth in size and stature under the ministries of **E. Stanton Hodgkin**, who served from 1905 to 1909, and **Wilson Backus**, who served from 1910 through 1916. Next to assume the pulpit was **John H. Dietrich**, a major figure in the development of the Society and of American Unitarianism in the Twin Cities and in the nation.

Under Dr. Dietrich, who championed carefully conceived religious humanism, the Society experienced rapid and exciting growth so great that Sunday services were moved to the Garrick Theater in Downtown Minneapolis and later to another large downtown theater, the Shubert, to accommodate the audiences that regularly exceeded 1,000. Eventually the Dietrich sermons were extensively broadcast on radio and published in leaflets that were mailed to religious liberals throughout the world. Thus, during the 1920s and 1930s the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis became a center of religious liberalism in the upper Midwest.

In 1926, the Society moved from its church in downtown Minneapolis to the Unitarian Center at 1526 Harmon Place. Sunday services were still held in the theaters to accommodate the large audiences while the Center itself became the scene of a variety of innovative programs.

After Dr. Dietrich's retirement in 1938, the pulpit was filled by another dynamic humanist religious leader, **Raymond B. Bragg**, who served during and after the difficult years of World War II.

Ray Bragg was succeeded by **Carl Storm**, who served for an 18-year period that saw the Unitarian church move to its present location. From the Hartford Courant: "[Storm] was a Unitarian minister for many years, serving parishes in South Weymouth, MA, Edmonton (Alberta, Canada), Exeter, NH, Lincoln, NE, Minneapolis, MN, Schenectady, NY, and most recently Lynchburg. He

also taught sociology at Tufts, the University of Nebraska, and Lynchburg College.

During the mid- 1930's, he traveled extensively. Due to his interest in social and political developments particularly in the Far East, the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany, he worked on a cattle boat in order to reach Europe and travel through Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union.

These experiences reinforced his commitment as an active spokesman for the League Against War and Fascism. His activism led to his opposition in the 1950's of McCarthyism. Selected to speak for those who had served twenty-five years in the Unitarian ministry, he was a long-time member of the Unitarian-Universalist Association and in recent years, the Retired Unitarian Universalist Association."

**Robert Lehman** succeeded Carl Storm, from 1965 to 1978.

**Khoren Arisian**, began his service with the Society in 1979 and continued to strengthen the religious humanist tradition of John Dietrich and other past leaders of the Society. Mr. Arisian, in addition to his vigorous leadership of the Society, was instrumental in the formation of the North American Committee for Humanism and the establishment, by the Committee, of the Humanist Institute, which has its headquarters in the Meeting House of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. The institute serves as a national training center for humanist leadership education. Mr. Arisian, a graduate of Tufts University, also studied at Harvard and at Oxford. He served in Unitarian Universalist ministries in Iowa City, Iowa, and Sarasota, Florida, and as a religious leader with the Ethical Culture movement in Boston and New York.

**Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons** was called to the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis in 1998. Kendyl has a long-standing commitment to theological education and the future of ministry. She has formally supervised more than twenty student ministry internships, and been an informal teacher

and mentor to dozens of seminarians. She has been an adjunct faculty member of the United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities, and former Co-Dean and Mentor for the Humanist Institute. She currently teaches in the areas of worship and liturgy, and the dynamics of professional leadership, and serves as adjunct faculty at her alma mater, Meadville/Lombard Theological School in Chicago.

As an active member of the Minneapolis Downtown Interfaith Clergy group, Kendyl traveled to Jerusalem and Bethlehem with twelve Christian, Muslim, and Jewish colleagues in January of 2007. Among her Unitarian Universalist colleagues, she recently chaired the committee that revised the Ministers Association code of conduct and professional guidelines."

**Rev. Dr. David Breeden** began his service as Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Society in August 2013. He holds an MFA degree from The Iowa Writers' Workshop, a PhD from the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi, and a Master of Divinity from Meadville Lombard Theological School. Prior to joining at First Unitarian, Breeden was the first settled minister at the Minnesota Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Bloomington, MN.

Rev. Breeden is a published poet and author, and a social activist. He is committed to asserting the historic role of Humanism with the Unitarian Universalist tradition.

Through its members the Society has always been a strong force in its community. A number of civic and social organizations, such as the Minnesota Memorial Society, the Humanist Credit Union, and Group Health (a pioneer Health Maintenance Organization) largely had their beginnings among member of the First Unitarian Society. FUS ministers and members continue to be active in social justice issues.

*Janet Salisbury with updates by George Green*