

What Makes First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis Unique?

The First Unitarian Society—often known simply as FUS—is proud to be part of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA). However, our contribution to the UUA is unique. Unlike other Unitarian congregations that formed in the nineteenth century, FUS started not as a church but as a reading group. Specifically, a group that read and discussed the work of Charles Darwin.

The Society became a Unitarian congregation in order to employ Rev. Henry Symmons, a famous speaker on the subject of Darwinism who also happened to be a Unitarian minister.

In their articles of incorporation, the group stated their purpose:

to form an Association where people without regard to theological differences may unite for mutual helpfulness in intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and humane work.

“Without regard to theological differences.” For the founders of FUS, this was not just code for liberal Christianity. For them “without regard to theological differences” included freethought, agnosticism, and atheism.

In the summer of 1916, John Dietrich was called to serve as the minister. Dietrich had been a Christian minister, but was tried for heresy and defrocked. Dietrich became a Unitarian minister and had begun to call himself a humanist. Thus religious humanism was born, a movement that we nowadays call congregational humanism. This has been the practice of the ministers and people of FUS for more than a century.

The first insight of early humanists is that a Protestant-style “service” can work perfectly well by incorporating any number of the twenty-eight million different gods and thousands of scriptures that the fertile minds of humanity have devised, or by not mentioning any of them. In place of scriptural readings, early humanists read from novels, poems, and even the newspaper. Rather than traditional hymns, humanists used secular music, including classical, folk music, and the popular songs of the day. Rather than following old rituals, humanists celebrated life’s passages—birth, death, marriage, children—in ways that were meaningful to them.

Another insight that Dietrich had was that religion is about the allocation of human resources: Where are we going to spend our time, our energy (both physical and psychic energy), and our money?

We can spend time, energy, and money in speculation about, and worship of, the gods, but humanists believed that those expenditures are missing the point. We should be working to make our society and our planet more livable, more just, and more compassionate—right here and right now.

The early humanists attempted to change the course of Unitarianism from a largely white, upper-middle-class, and monolithic movement into—in Dietrich's words—

a common meeting ground for all people, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, theist and atheist, on the single common basis of religious fellowship.

At FUS, we continue that tradition today, remembering the mission set down back in 1881:

to form an Association where people without regard to theological differences may unite for mutual helpfulness in intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and humane work.

-- Rev. Dr. David Breeden, Senior Minister