

*first* **UNITARIAN**  
CONGREGATION | *Est.* 1845  
OF TORONTO

# Annual Report

## July 2023 to June 2024



## Contents



Who We Are .....	3
Report from the Chair .....	4
Highlights of the Year .....	5
Letter from the Interim Minister Search Committee ....	6
Spiritual Care .....	7
Programs and Services	
Lifespan Religious Programs .....	8
Music Program .....	9
Eco/Justice Initiatives	
Amnesty International Group 142 .....	10
Green Sanctuary Group .....	11
Reconciliation Work Group .....	12
Refugee Sponsorship & Settlement Program .....	14
Our New Home - 473 Oakwood Ave	
Real Estate Task Force .....	15
Capital Campaign Update.....	17
Building Connections with Oakwood-Vaughan ..	18
Financial Reports	
Team Generosity .....	19
A Note of Gratitude .....	20

## Who We Are

### Our Mission

We welcome all to come together to seek to understand the meaning of our lives, connect with others as we are, and serve life to build a better world.



### Our Leading Principle

The free exercise of private judgment in all matters of belief is the leading principle of the congregation. While we hold diverse beliefs concerning the nature of God, humanity and the universe, each person is committed to the preservation of personal integrity, the continuing search for truth through the use of critical inquiry, the democratic method in human relations, and the obligation to work together with love for the greater good of all.

### Our Covenant

We, the members of First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part;
- Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions.

## Report from the Chair

*Tanya Cothran, Co-Chair of the Board of Directors*



Living in transition is unsettling! This year, I was continually impressed with how the congregation stuck together as we faced each new unknown. As we said goodbye to Rev. Lynn, welcomed the interim ministry team, and switched back and forth from online to hybrid services, we continued to journey together in a community of care and respect.

In the past year, we experienced many meaningful moments, such as the Solstice Service and guest speakers from Black Urbanism TO and Thunder Woman Healing Lodge. We also had joyful occasions, like the trivia nights and the fall gathering with Rev. Victoria. During our Spring AGM, we approved a new governance bylaw that aligns with the Ontario Not-for-profit Corporations Act.

I am so thankful for the many volunteers and our talented, dedicated staff who generously share their wisdom and time with our congregation. Special thanks to the 2023-2024 Board of Trustees: Rich Bailey, Aleza Coldevin, Helen Iacovino, Chris Lee, Nacia Miller, Owen Smith, Brigit Swenson, and Ken Wulff. Together, they brought a range of perspectives to the questions of policy review, real estate, budgeting and fiscal oversight, health and safety, and congregational engagement. I'd also like to thank the wonderful Karen Dunk-Green, who contributed many helpful charts, advice, and encouragement this year in her last year on the Executive Committee. I am excited to work with our newly elected board, Chris Lee as my co-chair, and RevJ, our new Lead Minister, as we seek, connect, and serve together.

As we enter the 2024-2025 fiscal year, we are on the brink of new transitions. We have established ourselves in the Oakwood Vaughan (OV) neighbourhood, holding monthly gatherings at the Nia Centre for the Arts, and building connections with other organisations in the OV area. Sometime this year, we will be moving into our new building. I acknowledge that it has been a long time coming, and I commend our collective resilience as we continue to dream, work, share, and live into our collective future, day by day.

## Highlights of the Year



- **Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kūpono Kwong (he/they)** hired as Lead Minister for the 2024/25 term
- **Our Capital Campaign exceeded its goal and raised more than \$1.8 million!**
- **\$358,000** was raised through our annual campaign
- **Our Whole Lives Program cycle began anew as we welcomed families with children at the Senior K to Grade 2 level**
- **14 Lay Chaplain Services**  
Our Lay Chaplains officiated at seven weddings and seven memorial services.
- **100+ Journey Group Participants**  
More than 100 people explored spiritual themes through Journey Groups and more than 50 members received one-on-one spiritual support.
- **A celebration & appreciation of FirstU donors & volunteers on June 8**  
A full-house enjoyed a buffet feast and performances by members Aleza Coldevin and Kim Saltarski

# Letter from the Interim Minister Search Committee

*Chris Lee (Chair)*



In early 2024 the Interim Minister Search Committee renewed its search for a full-time interim minister. With guidance from the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Canadian Unitarian Council, we revised our process to search for a contract minister who could take on interim ministerial tasks.

The Interim Search Committee met with three candidates and we were unanimous in our decision to invite Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kūpono Kwong (he/they) to be our Minister for the next year. Rev. Jonipher most previously served as Interim Minister at The Fourth Universalist Society in the City of New York. He was previously Minister of the First Unitarian Congregation of Honolulu, and he has held multiple other roles within the denomination and UUA.

We are very excited for “RevJ” to join FirstU, where he will serve as our lead transitional minister and will support our congregation's ongoing interim tasks. If it is mutually agreed upon with the congregation, RevJ also has the opportunity to move into an “inside track” for the settled minister role by the end of 2025. We aim to complete the settled minister search process in 2026.

In the meantime, we wish a warm welcome to RevJ!

We wish to thank the CUC who provided a grant to support the legal costs of RevJ's move to Toronto.

Many thanks to the Committee members for their dedicated work: Karen Dunk-Green, Tanya Cothran, Margaret Kohr, Stephanie Hodnett, Alexandra Hodnett.

## Spiritual Care

*Angela Klassen, Director of Lifespan Religious Education*



First Unitarian's Spiritual Care Team (SCT) provides support for members and friends of the congregation during times of transition, discernment, loss and varied life passages.

This year, the SCT acted as an extension of the care provided by our three contracted ministers, Rev. Stephen Atkinson, Rev. Victoria Ingram and Rev. Nicole McKay.

We're thankful to Rev. Nicole McKay who served as our team supervisor until February 2024 while serving members and friends as our contracted Minister of Spiritual Care. From March to June 2024 Rev. Victoria Ingram provided supervision while offering care particularly for members and friends at end-of-life and their families, as well as conducting a memorial service. We are also grateful to Karen Dunk-Green who hosted a Grief and Gratitude circle, at Oakwood Collegiate in April, so that members could share memories of beloved members, Judy Magney and Rev. Dr. Peter Hughes.

Approximately 50 people per year receive direct one-on-one Spiritual Care support through FirstU's ministers, spiritual care teams and/or group connections through online drop-in programs such as the Awakenings Group which continued through its third full year and was facilitated by Rev. Stephen Atkinson.

Members of the Spiritual Care Team have been certified through the Unitarian Universalist Association's(UUA) Lay Spiritual Care training program and receive Safe Steps supervision. Thanks go to Jane Larimer for facilitating the ongoing review of our formal UUA training during our monthly meetings.

On behalf of the congregation and as a colleague serving on the team, thank you to the Spiritual Care Team for the commitment each member offers to ongoing education and to confidential, compassionate listening.

Team members this year were Tanya Cothran, Jane Larimer, Yvonne Raaflaub, Barb Wentworth. We also extend our deep gratitude to Allan Brand and Barbro Vice whose service concluded in the 2023-4 year and have both served members faithfully throughout many configurations of the team over the course of the past two decades.

# Programs and Services

## Lifespan Religious Programs

*Angela Klassen, Director of Lifespan Religious Education*



Despite a shortened year with only two in-person terms at Oakwood Collegiate Institute (OCI), we stayed connected and achieved notable successes in our lifespan programming. Creative efforts, while meeting online, included delivering seasonal activities to regularly attending families, sharing multi-generational projects at the Fall Open House and hosting a four-session storytelling series led by Lynn Torrie which culminated in participants sharing their chosen stories during worship services.

Upon returning to OCI, we began rebuilding preschool attendance to pre-pandemic levels and reintroduced the Spirit Play class for JK-SK, led by Maya Saltarski. All-ages elementary programming was based on UU values and a new generation of families began their Our Whole Lives (OWL) journey at the Senior K to Grade 2 level, thanks to our dedicated facilitators Kelly Ferguson, Julie Matheson, Meridith Morrissey, and Jeremy Powell.

We welcomed our new Youth Advisor, Meghan Edmonds, who joined Nicole Johnson in leading the Coming of Age program for teens. Rachel Morris has supported parents and caregivers of our Coming of Age group in their reflection sessions.

We're deeply grateful to the facilitators of our ongoing adult programs and affinity groups, including Rev. Stephen Atkinson who led the Tuesday morning "Awakenings" group online. Special thanks go to the approximately 100 members and facilitators of 13 journey groups and to the production team who supported our monthly theme publication *The Journey* on themes drawn from the new UUA (Unitarian Universalist Association) values of justice, equity, transformation, pluralism, interdependence, generosity and liberating love.

An engaged learning community explored a mix of philosophical and practical topics around end-of-life in our nine-session series "Date with Death Club Part 1."

With a new home and new possibilities awaiting us, we are so thankful for the staff, leaders, volunteers, and members who have helped to see us through with their enduring commitment, resilience and grace!

## Music Program

### *Dallas Bergen, Director of Congregational Music*



While the 2023-2024 year saw our congregation weathering another year of transition in interim spaces, the familiarity of having services at OCI and choir rehearsals at St. Matthew's meant that music at FirstU began to feel familiar again.

Our Water Communion service, and first service with Rev. Victoria Ingram, marked a great beginning to the new congregational year. A few weeks later we honoured the ministry of—and said goodbye to—long-time Associate Minister, Rev. Lynn Harrison. The music featured a choral setting of Lynn's song *Do Not be Daunted*, arranged by our Congregational Pianist, Adam Sakiyama.

Harpist Sharlene Wallace shared music at a contemplative and well-attended Winter Solstice Service at St. Matthews, and the following week the choir performed at our Christmas Eve (morning) service at Neighbourhood UU Congregation.

In June we enjoyed the popular music of talented congregants, Aleza Coldevin (appearing with James Bryan as *Sunshine State*), and Kim Saltarski's band *The Bliss Monkeys*, featuring Kelly Ferguson, Dallas Bergen, and guest, Greg van Riel.

In June we also bid farewell to Resident Musician (tenor), Danny Fong, who moved to Saskatoon. Danny was a Resident Musician from 2017-2024.

Many thanks go to the following team for their outstanding contributions to our music program:

Congregational Pianist: Adam Sakiyama

Guest Pianists/Directors: Michel Ross, Gregory Oh, Susanne Maziarz

Resident Musicians: Tahirih Vejdani, Gabrielle Byrnes, Danny Fong, Tom Lillington

Harpist: Sharlene Wallace

Choir Support: John Cummings, librarian; Adele Massena, coordinator; Judy Clarke, membership

# Eco-Justice Initiatives

## Amnesty International Group 142

*Chair: Ted Wood*



Amnesty Group 142 campaigns to stop and prevent human rights abuses with our primary focus on the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) calls on all states to honour treaties and agreements with Indigenous Peoples, to protect Indigenous languages and cultures, and to uphold Indigenous Peoples' rights to lands, territories, and resources.

We have been posting actions and news in First Light and held letter signing after Sunday services. In addition to supporting Indigenous rights, in the last year we have also taken action to support 2SLGBTQQIA+ communities, women's rights, and environmental and human rights defenders.

We participated in Amnesty's annual Write for Rights campaign in November and December 2023 and celebrated International Human Rights Day during service on December 10.

We are thankful for the ongoing support of the congregation for the extremely important human rights work of Amnesty International.



*Image source: amnesty.ca*

## Green Sanctuary Group (Green Team)

*Members: Cathy Brown, Kate Chung, Gwen Harris, Linda Heron, Marg Wiebe*

In all of our decisions and actions, the Green Sanctuary Group is guided by our congregational mandate to promote and adopt environmentally responsible practices within our own space and the wider community beyond.

Realizing the importance of pivoting to more face to face engagement with the congregation, we met with the Board in March to seek their approval and support for a higher profile for environmental and climate change issues in our worship services. The response was positive. The Earth Day service we planned was a departure from the usual focus on hope through action to explore instead our growing sense of anxiety and grief as we contemplate the enormity of the climate crises we are now facing. It included a moving testimony by Leslie Solomonian sharing her personal struggle with this reality, and was closed by breakout groups for coffee and discussion.

Other Activities included:

- Joined with RWG for a Humber River nature walk and viewing of colourful indigenous murals
- Designed and made available printed postcards to urge Ontario premier and Transportation Minister to cancel the proposed building of Hwy 413 and to protect the Greenbelt.
- Met with Coming of Age group to explain our role as GSG and to present pros and cons of building Hwy 413 and listen to their response.

We continue to encourage letter writing to all levels of government, to make petitions available for signing, to promote attendance at rallies and marches, to post relevant information in First Light, including Linda Heron's biweekly Green Moment, and to contribute to the flow of information through the Eco-Social Justice email group.



## Reconciliation Work Group (RWG)

**Members: Gilbert Salgado and Wendy Youens (Co-Facilitators),  
Doug Buck, Judy Clarke, Donald Cole, Maya Ferguson Klinowski, Joshua Grant, Winnie McDonagh, Lynda Robson, Adam Sakiyama, Susan Weinert, Melanie Wilson**

FirstU Unitarians are treaty people. We acknowledge our personal and community responsibility to listen and learn the true history of Indigenous people in Canada. We strive together to grow and engage in right relations.

This year we were pleased to:

- Host the Braiding Sweetgrass August book event with many enthusiastic participants
- Engage in the volunteer fair attracting curiosity in our activities
- Walk in support of justice for Grassy Narrows First Nations
- Advocate to the board to have space at 473 for Indigenous groups, an Indigenous mural and consider meeting in circles for better relationship building in our congregational settings
- Demonstrate a strong attendance at Native Earth Performance Arts theatre shows
- Be multi-generational support at the MMIWG2S and gender diverse February 14th protest
- Assist Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society (TWHLS) in their December Turkey Drive deliveries and welcome Patti Pettigrew on International Women's Day March service
- Fundraise as a congregation for TWHLS programs - Thank You
- Walk and learn with the Green Group and Children's program in the guided Nature Walk and Indigenous Mural viewings
- Submit and secure approval at the CUC annual meeting for the addition of Terra Nullius
- Create a yearly activity calendar template with goals for the next congregational year
- Update and recreate the Truth before Reconciliation: Indigenous Learning Resources



# Refugee Sponsorship and Settlement Program (RSSP)

*Steering Committee: Merrilee Brand, Richard Kirsh, Sue Meggs, Wendy Peebles, Margaret Postlethwaite, Beth van der Weerd*

Private refugee sponsorship is a legal commitment made to Canadian Immigration to provide 12 months of financial and settlement support to refugee newcomers. Each sponsorship has a support team of 10-15 volunteers.

Since 2015, FirstU has completed eight full congregation-wide sponsorships which has enabled 30 people to build lives in Canada. We have also undertaken co-sponsorships with community members; one for a family of three has been completed.

Unfortunately, sponsorship applications take years, and there are still several pending.

Full, congregation-wide applications are still in process for:

- A Syrian family of 6, submitted 2016
- An Afghan family of 4, submitted 2023

In addition, co-sponsorship applications are still in process for:

- A single person from Eritrea, submitted 2022
- A Syrian family of 2, submitted 2022
- A Syrian family of 5, submitted 2022
- A Syrian family of 5, submitted 2024
- A Syrian family of 4, to be submitted 2024

That's a total of 27 people waiting for their applications to be approved.

Since 2015, more than \$400,000 has been raised to support FirstU's sponsorship of refugees. From July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024, a total of \$7,750 was donated. We are very grateful for your support.

To continue this work, and to support other refugee families, volunteers are needed. All are encouraged to reach out for more information to [RSSP@FirstUnitarianToronto.org](mailto:RSSP@FirstUnitarianToronto.org).



# Our New Home - 473 Oakwood Ave

## Real Estate Task Force

**Members: Karen Dunk-Green (Chair), Richard Kirsh, Craig Mahood, Beth Ann McFadden, David Priebe, Loo Russell, Greg Suttor**

The renovation of 473 Oakwood “got real” this year; from hoarding to rubble and missing windows, we saw physical changes bringing our drawings and designs into 3D. Flat Iron orchestrates the interdependencies of which tradespeople can do what/where/when; it is a complicated, shifting puzzle. LGA Architects and their engineering partners assess the quality and completeness of all work before we pay invoices. At bi-weekly onsite status meetings with LGA and FI, issues are discussed and solutions worked out (in addition to daily issue management with the trades). Our professional partners are proceeding with skill, integrity and generosity.

Despite not making deliberate changes to our design, we accumulated over 30 small and moderate change orders which were necessary to respond to various building conditions and anomalies in specifications, discovered during the deeper steps of construction. To date, the cost of these changes has been absorbed within our planned contingency budget.

We have continually assessed our financial resources and our scope, particularly the option of adding a large meeting room to the ground floor by enclosing the loading dock. After reaching out to some of our most generous donors (with many thanks), and by anticipating the impact of some pending bequest payments, the Board was able to decide to proceed with the addition. We continue to monitor cost projections and cash flow implications.

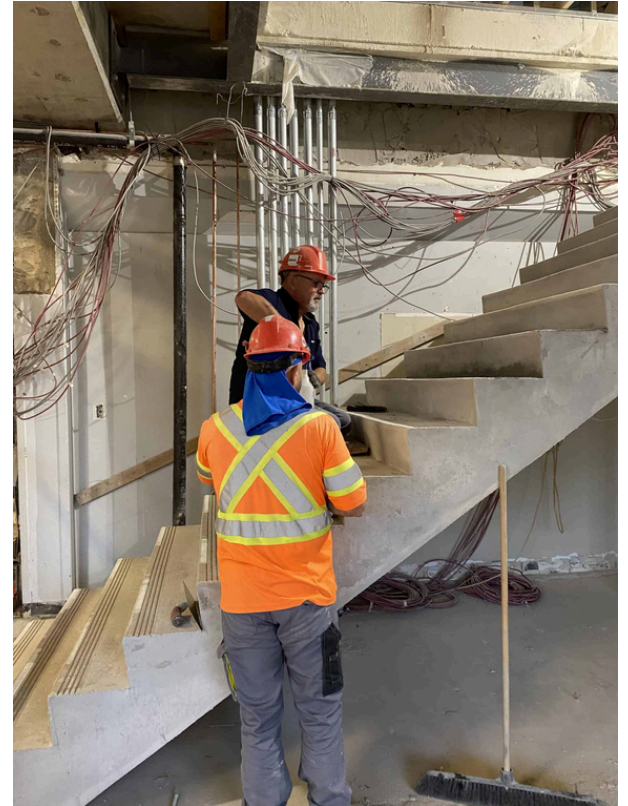
There are many months of work to go, with the most significant physical changes still to come. Onward!



*Preliminary architect's rendering of the front of our new building on Oakwood Ave*



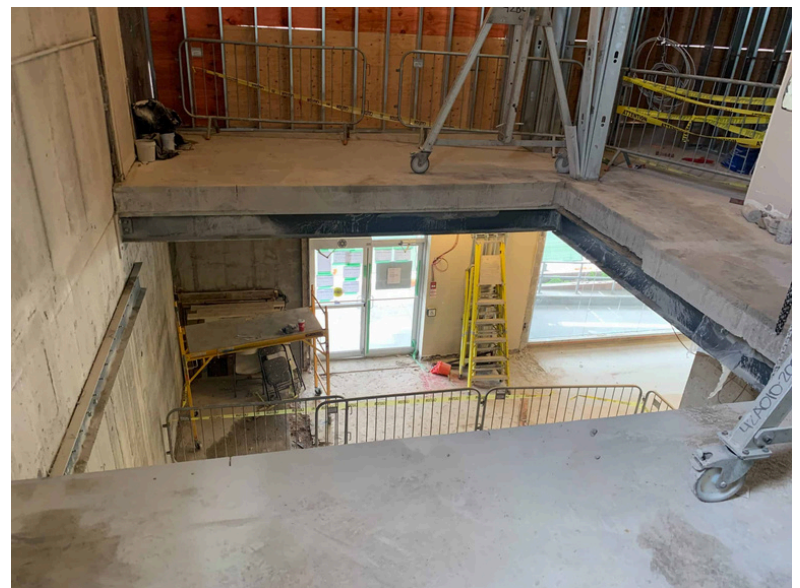
Hoarding on the front of building



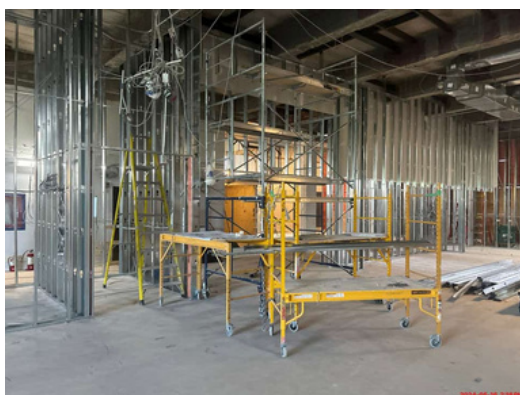
The main staircase



The west meeting hall on the ground floor under the old loading dock



The opening for the stairwell from the second floor to the lobby



Framing on the second floor

## Capital Campaign Update

*Nacia Miller, Campaign Committee Member*



Along with my fellow Capital Campaign Committee members – Chair Robbie Brydon, Karen Dunk-Green and Rich Bailey – I am pleased to bring you news of our ongoing effort to raise funds and cover the cost of renovating FirstU's new home at 473 Oakwood.

While our original goal was a daunting \$1.5 million, as of this report we are thrilled to say that the campaign has exceeded this ambitious target by more than \$300,000. This brings our total raised to a remarkable figure of more than \$1.8 million!

Achieving such success was cause for a congregational celebration. And celebrate we did!

On Saturday June 8, in the splendid sanctuary of Neighbourhood UU on Danforth Avenue, we met to recognize all of our donors, those who gave money as well as those who give their time and commitment each and every day.

Congregants Kim Saltarski and Aleza Coldevin, along with their bandmates, brought their prodigious musical talents to the stage and blew us away with superb performances, including rousing sing-a-longs that brought down the house. We all left in the spirit of joy and gratitude.

Thanks to everyone who participated and gave their best to this monumental effort. Truly an extraordinary and humbling result.



Rebuilding Together

## Building Connections with Oakwood-Vaughan

Catherine Lake, Chair



Building Connections with Oakwood-Vaughan (BCOV) was established in November 2022 to:

- Build relationships with residents and leaders in Oakwood-Vaughan (OV)
- Promote and support the congregation's learning about OV
- Introduce the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto to the OV neighbourhood

Our team of volunteers have been very active in the community from introducing ourselves and supporting local businesses to attending community meetings and most importantly, building relationships with community organizations. We've been warmly welcomed and excited to connect with the impressive people and organizations within this dynamic community.

Key activities to represent First and support our neighbours include:

- Ongoing outreach to local groups who share a commitment to community building and social justice
- Attending community meetings regularly and social events
- Volunteering with local organizations and at events
- Submitting neighbourhood happenings to First Light to connect the congregation with the neighbourhood
- Outreach to educators and research on cross-cultural and anti-racism resources

BCOV was absolutely thrilled to host two special services and connect the congregation with:

- March 17 — Bill Worrell of Oakwood-Vaughan Community Organization (OVCO) who spoke about the network of local residents advocating for social justice in the Oakwood-Vaughan area and his vision for transforming a world of neighbourhoods through action and joy
- May 26 — Anyika Mark of Black Urbanization Toronto (BUTO) who shared with us her tapestry of experience living in the Oakwood community and BUTO's work which includes reinvigorating Little Jamaica and developing Community Land Trusts

Members of BCOV are actively supporting: Little Jamaica Revitalization, Healthy Aging, Youth and Housing Rights — among other initiatives — and will continue to do so in the coming years.

Thanks to those who've supported our activities in attending BCOV meetings and providing insight. I especially wish to acknowledge with gratitude the following core committee members who've undertaken so much of the seeding and nurturing of these new relationships: Sue Berlove, Judy Clarke, Richard Kirsch, Terry Lee, Karen MacDuffee, Lynda Robson, Gilbert Salgado and Barb Wentworth.

We are looking forward to inviting all our new friends to the 473 Oakwood Opening!

## Team Generosity

*Stephanie Hodnett, Chair*



As your rookie Chair of Team Generosity, I'm pleased to report on the outcome of our Pledge Campaign for 2024/25. FirstU is funded almost entirely by our cumulative pledges.

We have faced some headwinds in recent years, leading to a decline in the total number of pledges, from 205 in 2023/24 to 183 in 2024/25. However, I am pleased to report that despite this decline, the total amount pledged fell only slightly, from \$360,000 to \$358,000. The average amount pledged per person rose from \$1,754 to \$1,956, showing remarkable generosity and commitment from our members and friends.

We are deeply grateful for each pledge received.

I also want to extend heartfelt thanks to the many people who provided advice and support (Karen Dunk-Green, Catherine Lake, Crystal Mitchell, Michael Sims, Mary Anne Roche and Tanya Cothran), made phone calls (Kathleen O'Hara, John Cummings, Jan Mahood, Karen MacDuffee, Winnie McDonagh), gave a pledge-themed testimony (Jennifer Beer and Donald Cole), and an extra big shoutout to Mo MacMahon and to Winnie for doing all the heavy lifting to make this machine go.



## *A Note of Gratitude from the Board of Directors*



FirstU depends on the generosity and goodwill of members and friends for the delivery of our programs and services. We gratefully acknowledge the rich contribution of all our working groups and committees to the life of the Congregation. Detailed information on their initiatives and ways to get involved can be found on [our website](#).

A deep and heartfelt thanks to the volunteer finance and investment teams, who provide dedicated and expert service to the Congregation throughout the year: Michael Sims, Treasurer; Garrett and Sable MacLean, Co-Chairs, Funds Management Committee; Bill Dunk-Green, Financial Coordinator; Winnie McDonagh, Payments Coordinator; and Mo MacMahon, Donations Coordinator.

To our many donors, we extend our deepest appreciation for your belief in the power of community to build greater love and justice in the world.

To members of the Unitarian network, including the Canadian Unitarian Council and the Unitarian Universalist Association, your steadfast friendship and encouragement is invaluable.

A special thanks to our community partners for their ongoing collaboration and support in 2023/24:

- New Visions Toronto
- Nia Centre for the Arts
- Oakwood Collegiate Institute
- Oakwood Vaughan Community Organization
- Oakwood Vaughan Seniors
- Oakwood Village BIA
- St. Matthew's United Church
- Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society

**2023-2024**  
**Board of Directors**

**Rich Bailey, Aleza Coldevin, Tanya Cothran (Chair),  
Helen Iacovino (Secretary), Chris Lee,  
Nacia Miller (Vice-President), Owen Smith, Brigit Swenson, Ken Wulff**

**Staff**

**Rev. Victoria Ingram, Senior Transition Minister**  
**Rev. Stephen Atkinson, Minister**  
**Rev. Nicole McKay, Affiliated Community Minister**  
**Dallas Bergen, Director of Congregational Music**  
**Angela Klassen, Director of Lifespan Religious Education**  
**Mary Anne Roche, Director of Administration**  
Learn more: [FirstUnitarianToronto.org](https://www.FirstUnitarianToronto.org)

A copy of the 2023-24 Audited Statements is available upon request to  
[administrator@FirstUnitarianToronto.org](mailto:administrator@FirstUnitarianToronto.org).



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