

OUR OWN STORIES

We are not consumers of congregational life, but co-creators. Linda Thomson

What unites us are our core principles that uphold seven real-world values:

- *Believing in the worthiness of every person.*
- *Showing compassion and fairness.*
- *Accepting others for who they are.*
- *Growing through a personal search for truth.*
- *Leading with democratic spirit.*
- *Working for justice.*
- *And understanding that everything is interconnected.*

- **Lorna Wyllsun**
- **Mary Kate Gilbertson**
- **Brian Hawker**
- **UU Congregation of Boulder, CO**



Lorna Wyllsun recently stepped into the role of Communications Coordinator (mid-March). She is the one responsible for collecting, redirecting and disseminating information to UCG members and friends, the Board and committees, and the outside community. Lorna is taking over from Roya Matsui who laid the groundwork for getting us organized beginning last summer.

Lorna's Story

I first came to a service at UCG some 35 plus years ago. We had a different name then and I didn't know anything about Unitarian Universalism. I was interested in a particular speaker and topic that was being presented one Sunday. I don't remember how I heard about it and I didn't intend to return but I did quite often because of the people who were so welcoming and unconditional in their acceptance. I particularly remember being invited to a gathering at the Dixon's home where my daughter and I were so warmly welcomed by Sherry Dixon that I felt as if I belonged despite

being very new and a relative outsider to the group at the time. Unfortunately my daughter's passion for horses and competition took us in another direction on Sunday mornings and it was many years before I was able to come back.

It was about 17 years ago that I returned to the congregation - they were in a new location but the same welcoming group. My life was very full and quite chaotic at the time. I had many commitments and enjoyed coming to UCG on Sunday mornings, participating in services, absorbing the atmosphere while remaining somewhat anonymous and staying on the periphery.

However, that all changed with an invitation from Linda Reith to attend a Sunday Services Committee Retreat. Linda's enthusiasm and drive are infectious and I soon found myself a member of the committee working with others to plan services and recruit presenters. The SSC is a dynamic, creative and fun group that I thoroughly enjoyed being part of and was privileged to take over the role of committee chair when Linda moved on to be President of the Board.

I don't remember if it was before, during or after this time that I was also part of teaching the children's program downstairs. Adults were recruited to share the teaching and this wonderful opportunity to work with our young people also introduced me to outstanding people who were also UU's such as Albert Schweitzer and Beatrix Potter. I had no idea until I worked with the kids!

In 2009 I was encouraged to take on the role of President of the Board. This would have been an incredibly daunting task if it weren't for the culture of collaboration already established by Linda as the previous President (are you sensing a pattern?) and for the committed and hard working team I had the opportunity to work with. Boards and Committees can sometimes be tedious and plodding but this board was open minded and eager to do what we could for the congregation.

In 2010 I had the experience no parent should ever have to endure. Words fail to describe how meaningful the support of my UCG community was for me following the death of my son Matthew. Never before in my life have I experienced such unconditional love and support. It was profound and I will always be grateful for all the members of UCG did for me during that time of shock and loss.

There is so much more I would love to say about the breadth and depth of my experience at UCG- Unitunz, coffee, soup, Earth Based Spirituality, service leading, etc but space is limited. I haven't even begun to talk about my spirituality or how important I believe the UU message is for our world today! Ask me.

Mary Kate Gilbertson

I grew up as part of a Unitarian Congregation in Ottawa. I have very vivid memories of how it felt to be part of a welcoming and open minded spiritual community as a small child.

I have always felt like I could be a crusader for higher purpose. My parents are both people who dedicated their lives to creating the world in a different way. My mother had grown up in a strict Methodist family in Northern Ireland and during her university years had got involved with civil rights. The spiritual community she had grown up in no longer made sense to her. When she moved to Canada with my father and was a young mother without support she started to yearn for the community of a spiritual home but the dogma

she had grown up with no longer made sense. In her search she found Unitarian Universalism and this became the spiritual home for our family.

My parents made a move to Guelph about 10 years ago. The UCG was an integral part of them finding their new community in Guelph. The community at the congregation is very welcoming and supportive. It was so rapid that both of my parents and my younger sister spoke of Guelph as more home to them than the city they had lived in for the previous 18 years. UCG was a huge reason for the ease and success of their transition.

My father is still a regular at the UCG and the community has been a solid support to our family during my mother's journey towards her death. My mother was a big part of this community and when she became ill members of the congregation were able to provide her with what she really needed (connection, celebration, song, speaking forum). After her death the congregation helped our family greatly to create a celebration of her life and identify elements of the service that would have been meaningful to her. Later, in her memory, our family donated some of her favorite music books to the congregation and even now when I see those books and hear the songs that she loved so much I am present to her in the space with me.

My husband Mike and I have left the beaten path. We started out with careers: as a high school teacher and an environmental consultant. There was purpose to our work, financial security and safety.

We are parents of three fabulous children and we want to create the space for them to be free-thinking individuals. Something changed for us with the arrival of our children and the death of our mothers which happened at the same time. We became more and more aware of how impossible it is in our society to successfully balance creating a magical childhood for our children with the demands of full time employment. We were intensely aware that our family was only young for a short speck of time.

We live in an intentional community in downtown Guelph and we care about creating connected communities. We live for amazing conversations, laughter and love. We want to create neighbourhoods that function at a high level and are grounded in love, even when we don't all agree. We care about a successful transition to low carbon living. We are entrepreneurs in the Gig Economy. This means we run a number of businesses ranging from backyard chicken rental to online courses to video production to carbon offset sales and environmental consulting to Air B and B. We want to use business as a source of impact and change to create the world that we want to live in.

Our family comes to UCG because there is something for everyone: it is a whole family experience. My older daughter, Rowan (9 years old) can stay upstairs during the service and is interested in learning more about a variety of issues. She knows that to stay upstairs means she needs to sit quietly and listen. Each week she chooses to do that and has been exposed to a wide variety of topics that she had likely never considered before, such as: the impact of racism, Buddhism, Paganism, nature connection, living a life with purpose. She thoughtfully listens and takes it all in. Later, at home it has sparked insightful, empathetic conversations about things that she had never really considered.

My younger two children (Sikhona 7 and River 5) look forward to the fun and games they have during the Sunday children's programming. They love the story and then travelling under the arch created by the adults to the tune of Go Now in Peace as they leave for a fun hour of music, crafts and action. They have a whole group of kids that they get to spend time with.

All of my children have had an opportunity to participate in the service through lighting the chalice, having opportunities to speak in front of a group and expressing their joys and concerns. Sometimes my older daughter really wants to share a joy and I can see that she has to muster up a lot of courage to get up and

share but the opportunity is there for her to work that through. Sometimes the idea of speaking in front of a group causes them to want to hide and other times they march up and take on their role. It is a safe and accepting place for them to try out their public speaking.

For my husband and I, we love the topics, the rhythm and the community of people. Each week there are interesting services and it is fulfilling to have a different focus and explore issues that are outside of my area of day-to-day thinking. There is the opportunity to stay afterward for a conversation circle and engage in a deeper dive or just enjoy bowl of soup. It has become a Sunday tradition that sets us on a course together and joins our family together. We look forward to spending a Sunday with you soon!

Brian Hawker – My Journey to Unitarianism

In November 2016 Brian was asked to be part of a service where three of our members were invited to share what it means to be Unitarian Universalists.

Lorna introduced him: Brian was raised as a Baptist. He decided to abandon organized religion while living with Moslems in Tanzania in his mid-twenties. He enjoys the Unitarian perspective because it recognizes the dynamic, not static, nature of reality rather than adhere to absolute truths. He has only been a serious Unitarian for a couple of years. Before that, he experimented and Unitarianism allows him to continue doing that.

Chapter 1 Early 60s

- It started with a woman. I met Linda. She was a Unitarian.

- She brought me home to meet her family. They were happy people, supportive of each other, liked each other, no meanness, no sarcasm, no silly competition. This had not been my experience and I started to wonder if all Unitarians were like that. She brought me to her church and I always left the services with something to think about.

- As a Baptist, I had been used to hearing the same message over and over. It wasn't entirely a bad message - lots of good ideas but once I had nailed the message I wanted more and Unitarianism offered me challenges.

- Linda and her family moved away but I will always be grateful to her for introducing me to a faith that really made me think. I like the fourth Principle about the responsible search for truth and meaning. This is difficult because the responsible search for me is not about finding answers that support what I think.

After that I went back to the Baptist, the church of my parents. Some habits are hard to break and like I said, some of it was just okay although I was baptised by total immersion at age 13 and I've had a bad hair day ever since.

Chapter 2

In the late 60s, I went to Tanzania to teach for two years with CUSO where half the population was Moslem, half were a mixture of Christian religions and the third half were animists. The math doesn't work out but that's how it seemed to me. The government didn't acknowledge that there were animists so I created a third category to fit the reality of what I saw. But that's when I got really confused. If every religion was right except the one you believed in, then obviously this was a recipe for conflict. I came back determined to create my own faith, based on what was inside my own head,

my experience and with a certain amount of plagiarism from some of the ideas in the world religions. I looked at the cafeteria of ideas and created my own fusion cuisine.

Chapter 3

May 25, 1987, Wilhelmina Tiemersma, the sadly suicidal organist of the Unitarian Church in Montreal, set fire to the church. It was completely destroyed. What is interesting about this horrible event is the reaction of the congregation. Not only was there no judgement of her behaviour, the members of the congregation went beyond being silent in facing this terrible loss and expressed unconditional forgiveness and support for this woman who was clearly a fellow suffering human being. This blew me away. These Unitarians had taken some Christian principles and kicked them up a notch.

Chapter 4

A year after Andrea and I moved to Sioux Lookout in 2000, she went back to school in TB to get her teacher's certification. We would often go to the Unitarian Church there. Great people. Artists. Ex-Jews, ex-Roman Catholics, ex-Baptists. Students. Unemployed people. A few token affluent people. Young. Old. Aging hippies. Lots of bio-diversity. One memory stands out apart from the Sunday messages that I really liked. It was Ken Morrison. He was the church's unofficial Elder. He was like Harold, a steady presence even when he can't make it to Sunday service, committed to the principles and always willing to pitch in. I wish Harold good health for many years.

Chapter 5

Andrea and I moved to Guelph in 2014. We knew two people. And what better way to make more connections than to look for a Unitarian church. This is where we found the right mixture of like-minded and non-like-minded people which seems to characterize Unitarian Universalists. Here, judgement is replaced by curiosity.

That's the end of my story about how I got here.

My personal challenge is trying to figure out what's between being a theist and being an atheist. I can't accept that there are only two options. I don't want to be a fundamentalist anything and that's why I became a member here last year because I like to be surrounded by people who are just as confused as I am. I have learned that resolving tension starts with asking good questions independent of the need to find answers.

Bring on the cognitive dissonance I say because it keeps me sharp and as I get older this is becoming more and more important.

I will close with two quotes about curiosity which reflect how I think about Unitarianism:

The first is from Rachel Naomi Remen, an author and professor at the Oster Center of Integrative Medicine at the University of California:

Perhaps real wisdom lies in not seeking answers at all. Any answer we find will not be true for long. An answer is a place where we can fall asleep as life moves past us to its next question. After all these years I have begun to wonder if the secret of living well is not in having all the answers but in pursuing unanswerable questions in good company.

The second quote is from a different kind of Ph.D., an Elder I met up north at a literacy conference.

It is very important that you see everything that is in front of you. Everything, including the food, your plate and the table under it, comes from nature and there is a teaching in every single object you see. Ask yourself questions about these objects, where they came from, where they're going. Ask yourself questions about the people at your table. Learn about their strengths and their struggles. What you learn from these objects and these people are teachings and these teachings will carry you. Just look at what is in front of you. The biggest cause of accidents is being somewhere else with your mind. See everything. These teachings will carry you because they are all connected to the source of what I call spirit. That's what I call it. You might call it energy or something else. It's what connects you to the other people and the objects in front of you. Watch, listen, pay attention. What is important is that you are grateful for these teachings and for the energy that gives life to everything. And whatever you do, don't forget to laugh and play because there is no healing without humour.

This next story is the one that helped spark and inspire the Rev It Up Team. It opened our thinking to the fact that there are many kinds of ministers: Interim, Developmental, Settled...to name a few. It also helped us realize we are not alone – many UU congregations, large and small, have been down this path, and there are many resources for us to tap into on both sides of the border – Canadian (CUC) and the USA (UUA).

UUA Breakthrough Congregation: Unitarian Universalist Church of Boulder, Colorado

Just five years ago, things were so bleak at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Boulder, Colorado, that there was a question as to how much longer it would survive.

The congregation went years without paying the mortgage on its building. It hadn't paid its [Fair Share denominational dues](#) to the Unitarian Universalist Association since the 1990s.

The building was dilapidated, the minister's office was hard to find, and the religious education building was unavailable because the church, desperate for income, rented it out to local schools.

Worse, it had the cliquy atmosphere of a social club, so unwelcoming that the church flunked a "secret visitor" evaluation when a UUA Mountain Desert District representative attended a service unannounced. At one point, membership dwindled to eighty, with so much infighting that when longtime member Barbara Richards became congregation president in 1993, friends warned her she would need a sledgehammer to call meetings to order.

"If I had walked in five years ago instead of four, I would not have come back," said Whitney Wheelless, who joined the church in 2009 and is now president of the five-member board of trustees.

Today when you walk up the sunny pathway to the church on a Sunday morning, you're met with radical hospitality, as two smiling congregants—one is from the rapidly growing young adult group—greet everyone before they reach the front door. Inside the sanctuary, built in

the 1960s in a shape reminiscent of a Pueblo kiva, scores of new members and newly invigorated long-timers occupy nearly every seat.

The service is joyful and energetic and emphasizes the church's new focus on social justice. On a Sunday in May, nine members of the church's new Social Change Immigration Ministry described their recent BorderLinks trip to the Arizona-Mexico border. They placed items they'd found in the desert, such as empty water bottles, on a makeshift altar at the front of the church.

At coffee hour, children run about, people discuss the church-wide social change events, and a crowd of twentysomethings laugh as they plan their weekly pub meeting, Spirituality on Tap.

"You step back and you think, 'Not long ago, this was like the apocalypse,'" said Jennifer Skiendzielewski, who will be board president next year. "There is an amazement that things have changed so dramatically."

Since 2008, when the Rev. Howell Lind arrived as part of a bold experiment that has evolved into the UUA's new Developmental Ministry program (see "[What Is Developmental Ministry?](#)" page 36), the Unitarian Universalist Church of Boulder has more than doubled its certified membership, from 110 to 233, with an unofficial count of 270. It has swept away a \$50,000 deficit and raised \$170,000 for capital developments, including a beautiful new playground and solar panels. It has become a teaching congregation for student ministers; it has pioneered Mindful Meetings to give a spiritual base to all church business; and it has instituted a Small Group Social Change Ministry model for social justice, with church-wide events that build community.

In what may be the most exciting development, it now includes fifty-five young adult members between 18 and 35—an astonishing fifteen-fold increase in five years—who attend church services on Sundays, meet at least weekly outside church, and are deliberately incorporated into all levels of church leadership. "The environment is just so much more exciting and fun to be a part of," said Susie Belmont, who was one of only three young adults when she joined the church in 2009.

The church is doing so well that it is mentoring Mission Peak UU Congregation in Fremont, California, as a Leap of Faith congregation.

Each year, the UUA's Office of Growth Strategies recognizes a handful of congregations that have broken through barriers to achieve exemplary goals. For the Boulder church's remarkable change of course in such a short time, it has been named a [Breakthrough Congregation](#) by the UUA. (See [more photos](#) and share a [study guide](#) about this story.)

While the members appreciate the outside recognition, they are more delighted that they have rescued their beloved community by choosing to stay at the table rather than giving up and by being open to significant change and experimentation.

"People who've come back to the church after having been away ten years or whatever, they find it's a different place—there's excitement, enthusiasm, and the noise level [at coffee hour] is unbelievable," said Lind.

"We're at a really good place that we weren't at even a couple of years ago," said

Wheeless with a broad smile.

In the dark days, as members call the recent past, the church was falling apart, both literally and figuratively.

Founded by a young mother in 1947 as the American Unitarian Association's [first fellowship](#), the church had more recently developed a quitting culture, where disgruntled members would leave rather than staying and working through conflict. By the mid-2000s, with no money in the coffers and a couple of bad matches between ministers and congregation, the church was on life support. "Oh, we were in trouble," says Skiendzielewski.

But a core group decided they needed to pull themselves together, as Skiendzielewski puts it, and they reached out to Mountain Desert District Executive Nancy Bowen. With the Boulder church about to enter a ministerial search, Bowen suggested an innovative lifeline: decide what they as a congregation needed to do to become functional, then hire a minister who would help them reach those specific goals over a five-year period.

They jumped on it.

"I think we wanted to find a direction that would be successful instead of this constantly rotating door of un-success, so we were willing to try something new," said Jenny Fitt-Peaster, immediate past-president of the board. After much explanation and lobbying by the board, the congregation voted unanimously to switch to a new kind of search.

"They knew that they were in really bad shape and in some ways on a path to self destruction. It was time for someone to come in from outside," said the Rev. Keith Kron, director of the UUA's Transitions Office, which now oversees the Developmental Ministry program.

They began with an interim minister, the Rev. Becky Gunn, now minister at the UU Society of Bangor, Maine, who got them headed in the right direction. In 2007 the board devised a set of goals to get the church back on its feet. The board worked with Bowen and the Rev. John Weston, then-director of Transitions at the UUA, to find a minister whose expertise was on point. They chose Lind, an expert in organizational systems and finances who, in addition to ministering to churches in three states, served fourteen years as district executive of the UUA's Metropolitan New York District.

"My experience as a field staffer for the UUA helped, in that I'd seen a variety of congregations—those with bad practices and those with good—so I had learned what works," said Lind, who is married to Bowen. "Ministry to spiritual needs is more than just pastoral; it also means knowing how to build a community. It's having a sense of how to motivate a congregation to move the way it wants to. I think the Developmental Ministry program is an excellent way to do that."

It's important to note that the goals were set by the board, not by Lind, creating shared leadership. And because the minister contracts with the board for five years, it gives them incentive to make the relationship work. "That's significant, because it means the board is in the game no matter what," said Wheeless. "It allows some buy-in and commitment [from

the board] even if the congregation starts being concerned about changes.”

As soon as Lind arrived, his every step was strategic, to help the congregation reach its goals, including the shedding of its image as a social club.

“The first Sunday Howell stepped into the pulpit, he wore his robe,” recalled Richards. “He wears it every Sunday he’s preaching. It sets the stage—it says that this is a place of worship and that we belong to a larger association than ourselves.”

Lind moved the minister’s office from a secluded area in the back of the building to the front, signaling access, visibility, and transparency. He then persuaded the congregation to fix its run-down building: first, a new front door, then carpet and paint.

“We had let the place get run down because we had no money,” said Fitt-Peaster. “He said our physical structure needed to look good in order for us to feel good about ourselves. He wasn’t afraid of asking for money and he was able to get it, when we hadn’t before. He opened our eyes to the fact we weren’t a poor congregation, and I think that opened doors for other things to happen.”

The board made governance changes and amended bylaws and policies so it could move toward its goals, and most of its members have attended the UUA’s regional Russell Lockwood Leadership School. The changes began to build on themselves. In a controversial move, the board stopped renting out its religious education building so the church could use its own space. As the congregation got healthier, it took on a series of intern ministers, who proved essential to attracting and retaining young adults, and Lind gave them room to be creative.

“There was never any ego in it, in terms of what [Lind] offered to us,” said Richards, a decades-long member and hospitality ministry coordinator.

At the same time, added Skiendzielewski, Lind’s persistence proved invaluable: “His stubbornness allows him not to care that people don’t like everything from the beginning. He doesn’t bend to appeasement.” When Lind encountered criticism to changes, rather than backing down he’d urge the congregation to ride it out with the idea of tweaking things down the road.

A capital campaign raised \$65,000 for a new playground, and at least 100 members of the rapidly growing congregation came together over four days to build it, with teens and seniors sawing and hammering next to each other. It was an important community-building event. The church raised \$105,000 more for other projects, and it donates \$2,000 a month from the weekly offerings to local social justice organizations.

Stung by failing the mystery visitor’s evaluation, the congregation now emphasizes welcoming newcomers. “The big thing that makes us a Breakthrough Congregation is that it’s a very welcoming place now,” said Lind.

The young adult group is especially organized, tight knit, and enthusiastic. The group immediately adds visitors to its email list and invites them to get-togethers at local pubs, where five to twenty people gather each week. Lind seeks the group’s input for Sunday services, and as a result the music is more contemporary, said Belmont. Young adults serve on the board of trustees and on every other committee.

"We worked really hard to incorporate young adults immediately into the leadership," said Lind. "They want to be taken seriously and they want their vision and values to be heard." The success of the young adult group in creating community has inspired an over-35 group, Wine and Spirit, and now the church is focusing on attracting and retaining more young families.

The congregation has reached its goals so quickly that it's now working on a five-year strategic plan that seeks to extend improvements in worship, family development, buildings and grounds, and more. Lind, who has enjoyed the challenge, has agreed to stay on until a settled minister is called; the congregation's search will begin soon.

"It takes about seven years to change a church culture," said Lind, who may take on another developmental congregation. "If they choose someone next year, that'll be seven years, and enough culture change has already happened to get it out of the social club. It doesn't mean the work is all done, but I think they're more than stable now, to the point where congregational polity can be returned and they can call a minister."

He's leaving them in excellent shape, they say. "When you look at where we were, and where we are," said Richards, "there's no comparison."

"There is something better, and it can be done—that's the message we can carry forward," says Fred Cole, a member for forty-seven years. "Change takes work, dedication, commitment—and it takes the whole village."