

Mission Statement: The Unitarian Church of Underwood is a welcoming community of diverse people where our celebration of life and common search for meaning bind us together.

Underwood Unitarian Church 125 Years of History

*“All great movements in the world have originated from dreams and dreamers.
Take away the dreams or ideals from the life of humanity and you have taken away
all that which makes human life glorious.”*

Rev. Dr. Amandus Norman ~1919

On January 13, 1889, a small group of Norwegian immigrants, determined to establish a liberal forum in which to explore new religious philosophies in this new land, met in Johan Kolstad's Underwood home to organize a church which they called *Den Fri Kristne Menighed* (The Free Christian Congregation). Eschewing the dogma, orthodoxy, and absolutism of the Lutheran Church, their vision, now expressed as “a celebration of life and common search for meaning,” has inspired generations of free-thinking Minnesotans.

At that first meeting in January, a constitution was adopted and Hans P. Bjorge, and Otto Nilsby were elected as president and secretary. At the incorporating meeting in September, other officers were elected: Johan Trondson, vice-president; Johan Kolstad, treasurer; Josepha Medjaa, Anne Kolstad, Peder Jensen, Martin Nass and Christian Kolstad, trustees. The group at that early date gave suffrage to women.

The leadership and inspiration for *Den Fri Kristne Menighed* was provided by the Norwegian activist, writer, and Unitarian minister Kristofer Nagel Janson (1841-1917) who was commissioned to do missionary work among the Scandinavians by the American Unitarian Association (AUA). Starting in 1881, he organized churches in Minneapolis, five other sites in Minnesota and at Hudson, Wisconsin. Underwood's Populist state legislator Hans P. Bjorge (1856- 1942) heard Janson speak in Minneapolis and brought him to Underwood twice in 1888. Kristofer Janson is recognized as the historical founder of the Norwegian Unitarian Church, established in 1895.

Church building - The first services were held in member's homes, upstairs over the Bjorge and Sjordal Store, or at the liberal Union Hall. In 1894 the congregation purchased the Hall for \$300. A bequest by Frances Ellison financed a 2005 handicap-accessible building addition.

Cemetery - A year after the church was organized, a two-acre plot near Bass Lake was purchased from Ole Foss for \$20. Members were asked to pay a dollar each. An arch denoting *Fremenigdhens Gravlund* (Free Congregation's Cemetery) was erected in 1895. Now called Lakeview Sunset Memorial Gardens, it is a public cemetery open to anyone.

The first resident minister, in 1891, was John Brauti, who also served the Unitarian Society in Fergus Falls. Later Kristofer Janson's protégé Amandus Norman (1865-1931), who served the Minneapolis and Hanska, Minnesota churches, lectured and assisted at the Underwood church.

The Rev. John L. Erickson of Crookston conducted his first service at Underwood on Christmas Day in 1893 and continued to serve two times a month until 1898, when he was censured and asked to resign for drinking.

Several ministers served briefly and occasionally. The church apparently was at low ebb from 1910 to 1914. Because of inactivity, sale of the church was considered. An attempt was made to secure a visiting minister at least once a month. Except for construction of the church basement, there was little activity from 1916 to 1919.

The Women's Alliance was organized in 1911 despite this general indolence. By holding annual harvest auctions, bazaars, and dinners, it was able to respond to appeals from church organizations as far away as Boston and South Carolina and also make significant financial contributions to the local church. Records show it once served 262 dinners for the Creamery and Shipping Association meeting for 25 cents apiece. In 1929, the house to the north, once owned by H.P. Borge, was purchased as a parsonage for \$3000 after the deal had been pending for three years. The Women's Alliance made the payments, maintained it, and turned rent income over to the church treasury.

A Young People's Religious Union was organized in 1923 and joined the national organization. Activities included a harvest social and Christmas festival. One of the YPRU meetings attracted 200 people.

Norwegian to English – Services were conducted exclusively in Norwegian until about 1915. The Rev. Oswald E. Helsing, a Unitarian minister who resided at St. Cloud, served the church from 1919 to 1928. During his tenure, services alternated between English and Norwegian. The annual meeting was conducted in English for the first time in 1924.

Depression years - In 1929, John Flint (1880-1976) came to serve the church in the difficult Depression years. An ordained Lutheran minister who served in Alaska and North Dakota, he left the Lutheran Church in 1925 in disagreement with its conservative politics. He became active in the Farmer-Labor party, serving as county chairman, and was involved in the Farmers Holiday movement, which sought to disrupt or prevent farm foreclosure sales. His wife Josephine, who had a master's degree in music from The Institute of Musical Art, (now Juilliard), organized junior and senior choirs, gave voice lessons, and otherwise enriched the community.

The American Unitarian Association (AUA) subsidized as much as 80 percent of the salaries for Rev. Flint and Rev. Helsing before him, until 1939. Then non-resident Unitarian ministers from Hanska, Winnipeg, and St. Paul served the church for a time, as did non-Unitarian ministers. Membership in the national associations AUA and UUA, has been uninterrupted. Dr. Dana Greeley, president of the AUA, conducted services in Underwood in 1965 and 1981.

Turbulent times – In 1945 a fieldman of the Red River Presbytery, informed that the Unitarian Church was having difficulty retaining clergy, proposed a merger among the Maine, Clitherall, Ashby, and Maplewood Presbyterian churches and the Free Christian Church of Underwood. A Presbyterian minister would serve all the churches and Presbyterians would have voting rights in the Underwood church. But the congregation voted against the merger when a committee,

formed to study the matter, recommended non-trinitarian services and Beacon Press (Unitarian) materials. Consequently, twelve members left the church, including four board members.

Following this action, the Minnesota Unitarian Churches arranged for the Underwood church to be served by the Rev. Konrad Bose from Willmar. His humanist philosophy did not appeal to conservative members of the Underwood church however, and six families left. In 1944-45, only 11 services were conducted.

A new direction - John A. Gronner Jr. (1903-1981), long an active member of the church but living in Topeka, Kansas, had been involved in defeating the 1945 Presbyterian merger. In Topeka he met Rev. Collins, who was moving to Minnesota to become secretary of the Minnesota Congregational Conference. With Collins' influence, the Rev. Ray Ewing, who served a Congregational church at Staples, began also serving the Underwood church. He and his wife, also an ordained Congregational minister, served from 1947 until 1954. Visiting Unitarian ministers supplemented his ministry.

Members of the Gronner family have served in various capacities throughout the Church's history. John A. Gronner Jr., president of the congregation for 24 years, was presented the *Unsung Unitarian Universalist* award in 1979 by the Unitarian Universalist Association "for making the most significant expression of Unitarian Universalist religion." John Gronner Sr. was church treasurer for 20 years. John Gronner Jr.'s brothers Alfred and Hjalmer each served as president, Alfred for a total of 10 years. His mother, Emilie, sisters Ethel and Olga served for a total of 41 years in religious education. Ethel Gronner was secretary for 24 years

Following Rev. Ray Ewing, the pastor at the Maine Presbyterian Church, Rev. John D. Meyer was assigned to Underwood by the Minnesota Congregational Conference and he served both churches until the Underwood congregation voted to terminate the Congregational affiliation in 1964.

New name - In 1965 the name of the church was changed to the Unitarian Church of Underwood. The "Free Christian" label had led some people to believe no financial support was expected, and it did not indicate a Unitarian affiliation.

Frances Ellison's bequest of \$480,000 in 2004 financed a handicap-accessible building addition and the Empowerment Grants which support Unitarian principles.

Today - Sunday services featuring interesting and diverse speakers and talented musicians are conducted year-round. Additional opportunities for spiritual awareness and growth abound, with adult and youth religious education, covenant groups and book discussion groups. Member Celebrants conduct ceremonies. The church building, a proud symbol of the church's heritage, is well-kept and features visual art throughout. An Outreach Committee oversees assistance for Shan refugees, Senior Dining, and many other programs. Annual Empowerment Grants address issues such as poverty, social injustice, environmental challenges and abuse.

Prairie dreams - *"Long before we came into being we were a dream in someone's eyes, in someone's heart who envisioned the "Light on the Prairie" we came at one time to be called, and saw what people like us could contribute to society, and to the world in ages yet unborn. Their*

thoughts, their dreams, their vision made possible this congregation and Unitarian Universalists anywhere and everywhere.” Bob Worner.

Bibliography:

Unitarian Church of Underwood board minutes

Kristofer Janson in America – Draxten.

A History of the Underwood Unitarian Church – Deibert

On Our Own Two Feet – Worner

John Gronner notes

Various Church histories

Nora UU Church History

Fergus Falls Daily Journal articles

Historical Timeline

1881-82	Kristofer Janson organized churches at Minneapolis, Hanska and Hudson, Wisconsin.
1882	Janson called to serve Nora church, Hanska, MN
1888	Kristofer Janson makes two trips to Underwood.
1889	Den Fri Kristne Menighed (The Free Christian Congregation) of Underwood organized
1889	Church incorporated, first annual meeting, election of trustees
1890	Cemetery land purchased; Janson makes 6 trips to Underwood
1891	John Brauti resident Pastor for one year
1892	Annual meeting at Union Hall; six new members reported
1893	Samuel Garborg minister
1893-98	John L. Erickson serves as pastor
1896-99	Meetings held at Bjorge and Sjoldal hall
1898	Voted salary of \$125.00 for Rev. Erickson. Pastor Erickson - later censured for drinking.
1899	Pastor Haugerud
1901	Ole F. Loseth submits apology for his derogatory remarks about the Church and Pastor Peterson
1902-18	Amandus Norman of Nora Church in Hanska makes frequent visits to preach
1904	Union Hall purchased (present church building) for \$300
1907	Pastor Haugrup Nissen serves a short time, is dismissed by congregation
1910-14	Apparent nadir of Church activity – no minutes
1914	Committee organized to re-vitalize Church
1916	Church building elevated; barrel-vaulted ceiling, basement installed
1919-28	Oswald E. Helsing serves as Pastor
1923-40	English and Norwegian language services mixed
1924	Annual meeting conducted and recorded in English; forty-seven adult members
1926	Name change to "Unitarian Church" rejected
1927&1936	Minnesota Unitarian Conference held at Underwood
1928	Rev. Helsing translates Constitution to English
1929	Parsonage purchased for \$3000 with loan from the AUA
1929-40	John Flint serves as pastor
1939	AUA discontinues subsidy for pastor
1940-45	Various ministers served
1945	Merger with Maine, Clitherall, Ashby, and the Maplewood Presbyterian Churches voted down; four board members resign
1945	Rev. Konrad Bose serves as pastor
1946-54	Congregational Conference assigns Rev. Ray Ewing to provide two services a month
1948	Dual affiliation with Congregational Conference ratified
1948	Constitution re-written, specifies "non-trinitarian" services
1953	American Unitarian Youth (AUY) and Universalist Youth Fellowship (UYF) merge
1954-64	Rev. John D. Meyer assigned to serve by the Congregational Conference
1961	American Unitarian Association merges with the Universalist Church of America to form the Unitarian Universalist Association
1964	Affiliation with the Minnesota Congregational Conference terminated
1965	Constitution changed, name changed to Unitarian Church of Underwood
1979	John Gronner receives the <i>Unsung Unitarian Universalist</i> Award
1979	Lakeview Sunset Memorial Gardens cemetery incorporated as a separate entity
1999	First Chili dinner fundraiser for senior dining
	Administrative Coordinator/consultant position created
2004	Same-sex marriage endorsed, Iraq war opposed at annual meeting
2004	Frances Ellison bequest received
2005	Building gets new entrance, addition to west end, elevator
2007	First Church website
2007	Empowerment Grants started
2010	U Groups (Covenant Small Ministry Groups) begun
2010	Church services every Sunday year-round
2010	Celebrant program begun

2011	U-Groups established - now four in number
2013	Structural support added to building
2013& 2017	Fall Area Workshops hosted
2013	UCU Foundation established
2014	Trained Celebrants authorized for rites
2016	Sverdrup Suites apartments purchased

Unitarian Church of Underwood Presidents/Chairpersons

1889	Hans P. Bjorge
1892	Otto Nilsby
1893-1899	Peder Jensen
1902-1904	Peder Jensen
1905-1906	Hans P. Bjorge
1907-1908	G. G. Moen
1909-1922	Theo. Sjoldal
1923-1924	Elof Hagen
1925	Haldor Moen, Hjalmer Gronner
1926-1927	Haldor Moen
1928-1944	Elof Hagen
1945	John Shodin
1946-1955	Alfred Gronner
1956-1979	John Gronner
1979-1982	James Gray
1982-1985	Rick Long
1985-1988	Marguerite Andrews
1988-1989	Harold Gray
1989-1998	Rick Long
1998-2003	Ron Roller
2003-2007	Susan Groff
2007-2008	Stephanie Sanderson
2008-2010	Luke Anderson
2010-2011	Kathy Kensinger
2011-2015	Ellen Eastby
2015-2016	John Miersch
2016-2017	Mary Anderson