

Letter to the Editor,

The members of the historic First Congregational United Church of Christ of Algona Iowa wish to share news with the public about changes that will be happening in our church. Over 165 years ago, our founder, Father Chauncey Taylor, traveled from Massachusetts, walking the last forty miles from Ft. Dodge to then Call's Grove. He conducted the first worship service in the community in the Moore cabin only one block south of our church property today.

In the late 1870s, the church christened the remarkable sanctuary where many thousands have since admired the design of architect Abram Wolfe as they sang praises and shared the elements honoring our Savior's sacrifice in that space. Its soaring arched ceilings cradle the voices of the choir and amplify the notes from the cherished pipe organ, as brilliant sunlight pours through the majestic stained glass windows, bathing the space in a magical light.

Many of our community's most prominent and progressive citizens were members. Doctors, judges, elected officials, teachers, and business owners all shared the pews with farmers, craftsmen, artisans, laborers, and clerks. And we wear the rainbow symbol as a badge of honor as our members proudly voted to declare our church Open and Affirming, meaning we do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. In living our faith, here all are truly welcome.

But times do change. Our beloved longtime minister, master ice cream maker, and cotton candy spinner, Chris Burtnett, and his terrific wife, Pam, are leaving when Chris retires in August. Chris has been the quintessential rural pastor and he will be sorely missed. But after careful guided discussion, our members decided not to replace him.

Like most other churches, our membership is dwindling. Many factors account for this. At our peak during the Baby Boom, the county had a population near 30,000. Changes in agriculture have resulted in a population of roughly half that today, yet there are more churches now than then.

A survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) confirms that participation in organized religion is falling. "In a single decade, from 2013 - 2023, the percentage of Americans saying religion is...among the most important things in their life plummeted to 53% from 72%." Among categories of declared "Christians," "Unaffiliated" is the only category growing, according to PRRI. And the number of Millennials or GenXers rejecting organized religion is rising even faster.

But our church is not dissolving, it is evolving. Our members are working with others who wish to utilize and celebrate our wonderful spaces in new ways. We will use our endowment to maintain the facilities. It will be available for weddings, funerals, and christenings. And it may also host community concerts, lectures, art classes, or institutes. We foresee many exciting novel ways to “welcome the stranger” while making “a joyful noise unto the Lord.”

So keep an eye on our sign. It’s not going anywhere and neither are we. Our members will continue our traditional ministries: Care Team, Meals on Wheels, Food Pantry, our radio ministry, support of the Omaha tribe, and the Mahana and Sefrit Scholarships. So when events are announced, please come, for all are welcome here.

With Blessings,

The UCC Board of Directors