

# MINI-HISTORY: FAIR HOUSING PROTESTS IN THE 1960S

**Presented by Jane Ferguson, March 8, 2015**

Many people may think of marching for civil rights in the 60's as something that only happened in the South, but as those protests were escalating, some local people began to focus on shortcomings here in Ann Arbor and we marched for fair housing.

Fifty years ago Ann Arbor was growing almost faster than the housing industry could build. Most new homes were slight variations of similar ranch houses in similar subdivisions beyond Stadium Boulevard and Dexter Avenue. Nice similar houses with nice similar lawns, nice similar sidewalks and nice new schools. And the young families buying these homes were similar too – They were all white.

Realtors and lenders were not openly turning down black families, but there was always a “problem”. Privately they admitted their fear was that if they sold to the first black family that theirs would become the “black neighborhood” and the rival subdivisions would get all of the good real estate deals.

Some people became concerned, along with Rev. Erwin Gaede, who was beginning his ministry at the First Unitarian Church of Ann Arbor back in our Washtenaw Avenue location.

Conversations were held with realtors and lenders and paired qualified buyers, who tested the market only proved the existence of discriminatory practices and the belief that something should be done.

In June, 1962, our Board of Trustees voted to officially establish a Social Action Committee to pursue concerns about discrimination. Don Pelz was the acting chair. This committee created a petition endorsing fair housing and made the petition available in the church for members to sign, which several did. Encouraged, the committee mailed the petition to all Unitarian member household and 87% of members signed, approved and mailed back the petitions immediately. Others followed.

The statement and signatures supporting fair housing were printed in the Ann Arbor News and copies were sent to City Council members and the mayor. Rev. Gaede read the petition at a public hearing of the City Council in June 1962. The petition was then made available city wide for more signatures. In the fall of 1962 it was printed again in the News, with not only more Unitarian signatures, but an additional 3,536 signatures, many from prominent Ann Arbor citizens.

In the spring of 1963, Mayor Cecil Creal formed a committee and requested that the Unitarian Church Board of Trustees and the Council of Churches draft a statement of principles for a fair housing ordinance. They would advise Mayor Creal and University of Michigan President Harlan Hatcher on a proposed ordinance. Member Don Pelz headed that committee.

It was decided that we should march in support of the ordinance and prospective picketers were trained in Dr King's non-violent practices.

Throughout the hot summer and fall of 1963, Unitarians and other supporters marched, chanted and sang around the City Hall whenever the City Council was in session, carrying signs demanding the

Council pass the "Fair Housing Ordinance". The marchers made local and national news in newspapers and on TV. We do not know the weekly or monthly or total number of marchers. In some evenings, certainly more than 100. Families, children included, marched week after week, every week in peaceful picket lines through heat, rain and heckling until the ordinance finally passed in the fall of 1963.

The picketing of City Hall stopped, but continued in Pittsfield Village through the winter of 1963-64 until the university finally agreed to rent its Pittsfield Village Townhouses to all.

53 years later, most of the picketers are gone, but we do know of six picketers who are still members of this congregation. They are

**Don Pelz**

**Joan Buchele**

**Jane Ferguson**

**Eppie Potts**

**Louise Kazarinoff**

**Ruth Lamphier**

Only last week the original petition was found in the church archives. It contains the names of five more signers who may also have marched and who are still alive and members of this congregation. Cheers also for:

**Shirley Axon**

**Judd Coon**

**Bill Lewis**

**Don MacMullan**

**Maxwell Reade (now age 99!)**

[http://oldnews.aadl.org/aa\\_news\\_19630716-pickets\\_supporting\\_housing](http://oldnews.aadl.org/aa_news_19630716-pickets_supporting_housing)

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The ordinance is mentioned in Ann Arbor's Wikipedia entry:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Ann\\_Arbor,\\_Michigan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Ann_Arbor,_Michigan)