

A mini-history of our involvement in IHN-Alpha House

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In the early 90s Ann Arbor winters were already cold but homeless families did not have good options for shelter. In 1992, an effort spearheaded by two Ann Arbor women, Roddy Wares and Christine Clark, brought together several congregations to create the Interfaith Hospitality Network of Washtenaw County, now also known as Alpha House. The story of how we became involved attests to our commitments to social action and the dignity of every person. At their September 1992 meeting, the Board of Directors of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor entertained a motion from then congregant and board member, now Reverend Valerie Mapstone Ackerman

“that we formally approve of our membership in the Interfaith Hospitality Network (a rotating shelter for homeless families) and that we offer space in the church for temporary housing.” (quoted from the 1992 UUAA annual report)

Reverend Ackerman credits then-fellow board member Laurie McLean with helping her persuade the Board to join IHN and to allocate a budget line of \$1000 to support the work of our volunteers. Ever since, as one of the founding congregations, First UU has been active in supporting the mission of IHN. Don Anderson, who had been congregation president, describes what the IHN concept was

Homeless families needed a place to live, and congregations had empty space almost every day of the week. The idea was that families would stay at a congregation ... during one week, and then move to another congregation on the weekend. Congregational volunteers would spend the days and nights with the families preparing food, ensuring the families' well-being, and protecting the congregation's property. (quoted from letter from Donald Anderson, 10/15/14)

Paula Christensen remembers bringing her now grown children to play with the resident children, and many families have done that since. We have been hosting families several weeks per year, always including the

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Thanksgiving week, for 22 years now. The number of volunteers and volunteer hours keeps growing: Our congregants cook, serve food, stay overnight, buy supplies and housewares for families, entertain children, donate appliances for the shelter, and assist the staff. When I stepped down from the position of volunteer coordinator this past May, our list of UU volunteers included more than 250 adults, plus many youth and children. The volunteer work is the core of our mission, but this has been only one of the ways in which our congregation has helped support of homeless families.

Advocacy for the vulnerable has been another way. This advocacy is evident in a letter sent to the IHN Board in May 1994 by then-president of our board, Nancy Schewe, and our then-senior minister, Ken Phifer. After reaffirming our congregation's commitment to the mission of IHN and the values of caring, dignity, respect, and safety, Nancy and Ken wrote

we have had growing concerns about certain activities that do not appear to be in keeping with the mission statement. These include such practices as a strip search, urine screening, [and the list continues]. We consider such practices and others to be indignities toward our guest families. We do not approve of such practices, nor will we engage in them. (quoted from letter found in the IHN Archives)

The problems were addressed and none of those practices are done these days at IHN. The intervention from our leadership was a demonstration of compassion and reason in action. What a way to stand for what is right and protect the vulnerable!

Material support has been another way. At its start, the Interfaith Hospitality Network had only two staff persons, an executive director and a case worker whose office space was provided by the YMCA. But that arrangement only lasted until 1995. In 1995 First UU stepped in and provided office space for IHN at what was called the Carriage House—a small building outside our church on Washtenaw. The Carriage House had been the domain of the YRUU at the time, who were generous and supportive of IHN's move into their premises. For six months beginning in April 1995, IHN operated on our premises paying neither rent nor utilities. We doubled the budget dedicated to support our work with the families and included an additional cash contribution from the church to the IHN budget.

Principled leadership is another example. As I looked at records at Alpha House I was surprised to see that in 1996 First UU hosted the families in our building for six weeks during the year. The number seemed elevated considering that the year before there had been 21 congregations involved. I found an explanation in the UUAA annual report for 1995. In the report, Volunteer Coordinators, Randy Stone and Tish Fonda explain that

This increased commitment was necessitated by loss of several hosting congregations from the county-wide IHN organization during late 1994 and early 1995. One of the factors that precipitated this “exodus” was a request for shelter from a family that was headed by lesbian partners. The congregations that left IHN felt that housing this family was not in keeping with their principles. Because the volunteers and coordinators of UU IHN felt that loving and helping all homeless families is a part of the very essence of our principles, we committed to “picking up some of the slack.” (quoted from 1995 UUAA Annual Report)

The increase in service added strain to our volunteers, but it also enabled us to practice the inclusiveness that we preach. That is another bit of history that should make us proud.

In the Spring of 2000, the St. Joseph Mercy Health System made an incredible promise to IHN. They offered a then decommissioned detox facility named Alpha House for IHN to have both its offices and its shelter for families. They did that through a 15-year lease at \$1 a year. The IHN newsletter of Spring 2000 announcing the move to Alpha House indicates however that congregations would still play a central role in the operation of the network. They quote our then volunteer coordinator Bev Todd saying that

We really need people to understand that this move does not let the congregations off the hook! (quoted from the IHN Newsletter, Spring 2000)

As an example of that needed involvement at the time of the move, UU member Alison Paine volunteered to be their ‘furniture coordinator’ and procured all the furniture for the bedrooms, the living room, and the kitchen appliances and cookware. Members of our church made at least a dozen quilts for the bedrooms. Ever since, families have not had to move from one congregation to another each week, and instead they have had

their own room, a dining room, a living room, and a large play room for children in the basement.

Fundraising has been an aspect in which Unitarian Universalists have played a leading role. Our own Terri Wilkerson organized in April 1993 the very first fundraising event for IHN. It was a party at our church building with live music by locals George Bedard and the Kingpins. The event, which is now known as Gimme Shelter, has continued every year since, and it has become a major contribution to IHN's operation, raising this past September more than 10% of the shelter's annual budget. UU members have continued to play a role in Gimme Shelter: Bob and Beth Hospadaruk have shared the emcee role, Brandy Sinco has played the piano while attendees eat dinner, Angela Barber has coordinated the desserts for the whole banquet, and many more have attended and donated money. Several members from the congregation have been consistent financial contributors to the work of the shelter, including some who since 2009 have participated of the Friends of Families program, which calls for a multiyear financial commitment. Our congregation shares the Sunday collection once a year with IHN. Most recently three 5th graders who usually volunteer with their families, Katie Krushelnik, Mateo Wakeman, and Ben LePottier applied for a small grant from the Ann Arbor Community Foundation and spoke on behalf of IHN Alpha House. It costs IHN \$20 to shelter one child a night, but every dollar helps to give homeless children a place to call home.

Finally, our congregation has been active in the leadership of the IHN organization since its incorporation. Annie Blackman was the first UU member of the IHN Board of Directors. Others included John Lefeber, Tish Fonda, Stephanie Surfus, and Don Anderson, who served as IHN President for two terms. Presently Lorraine Gutierrez and myself are members of a board of directors that includes both members of congregations and other community members.

Those are just some bits of history I have collected so far. Our history with IHN has involved many of our members and I'm sorry I cannot mention them all. Please send me your memories as I expect to enlarge this mini history into a larger document. The gist of it is that we helped start and maintain something really good. I can anticipate that there will be many ways for us to continue to be involved in the years to come. Rev. Ackerman noted that back in the 90s

“We were changed by our volunteer work too: Many members of the congregation learned about the crisis of poverty and affordable housing issues through their volunteer efforts with IHN.”

In my experience, this continues to be the case. Through our volunteer efforts we come to understand a bit better about the lives of the poor and the homeless. When we do something as simple as taking our children to play with the children residing at Alpha House we are betting that **their common humanity is stronger than their material differences.**

As Unitarian Universalists we are fortunate to be part of a community that looks at homelessness not as a matter of scorn, but as **an opportunity for compassionate social action.**