

The following Profile of UU Schenectady was submitted to the UU Ministry for Earth and accepted for Stage 1 of our Green Sanctuary Re-Accreditation. The answers to questions 10 and 11 cover our learning about the history of our congregation, of systemic racial injustice in the Capital District and New York, and of our congregation's justice work. The answer to question 12 discusses our motivations for pursuing re-accreditation.

UUA Green Sanctuary 2030: Mobilizing for Climate Justice

A Roadmap for Congregations to Rise to the Crisis

Stage 1: CONGREGATIONAL PROFILE

1. Name of the Congregation: *Unitarian Universalist Society of Schenectady*
2. Address of the Congregation: *1221 Wendell Ave, Schenectady NY 12308*
3. Website of the Congregation: *<https://uuschenectady.org>*
4. Green Sanctuary point person: Nancy Peterson, gs.uuss06@gmail.com 518-374-5810 Paula Shaw georgeandpaula@icloud.com 518-847-2927
5. Co-Ministers of the Congregation: Rev. Lynn Gardner, revlynn@uuschenectady.org 518-374-4446 Rev. Wendy Bartel, revwendy@uuschenectady.org 518-374-4446
6. Membership: UUSS's current membership, including regular members and youth members, is 347. If you also include Emeritus members, that number goes up to 355.
7. Religious Exploration enrollment Children: 47, down from 94 pre-COVID Adults: unavailable 8.
Type of congregation: [x] Urban [] Rural [] Suburban *The location is urban but the congregation is mixed, and live in at least four different counties.*
9. Please provide the vision/mission/goals statement of your congregation.

SEE P2

UUSS Mission Statement

Connecting in spiritual community, we celebrate life with joy, grow in compassion, create justice.

UUSS Vision

We will boldly live our Unitarian Universalist Principles, within our church and in service to the larger community

We will nurture mind and spirit through lifelong learning, engagement and growth We will create a community that welcomes, embraces and supports all. We will worship in ways that comfort, inspire and challenge

Green Sanctuary Ministry Team Statement of Purpose

With reverence for the interdependent web of all existence, Green Sanctuary works to inspire environmental awareness, action, and justice through education, celebration, example, alliances, and advocacy, both within our congregation and with the larger community.

10. Help us understand your congregation's historical context: are there any recent highs or lows that might impact how you will approach taking on this transformational climate-change journey?

The First Unitarian Society of Schenectady became a certified congregation in 1901. In 2013, the name was changed from First Unitarian Society of Schenectady to Unitarian Universalist Society of Schenectady, better describing who we really are. For more detail about our history and activism, click this link: <https://uuschenectady.org/about-us-2/about-us/> We are located on the Mohawk River, the land of the Mohawk nation of the Haudenosaunee.

General Electric, Schenectady, was a major employer of past and present UUSS members, including many of the original members who founded our congregation in 1901. One of those was socialist and inventor Charles Steinmetz. Congregation members have also been employed by Union College and by State and local government, among others.

Through the years, congregation members have been founders or participants in The Schenectady Human Rights Commission, Planned Parenthood of Schenectady, RID (Remove Intoxicated Drivers), the Hamilton Hill Arts Center, Re-Tree Schenectady, Mooncatchers, SICM (Schenectady Community Ministries), local government, and many other organizations pursuing social reform and a just society. UUSS has contributed to the arts by hosting A Place for Jazz and A Place for Folk. The congregation acted early to become a Welcoming Congregation.

In 1961 the congregation moved from their original location at the corner of Union Street and Wendell Avenue to their current building just a couple blocks away, at 1221 Wendell Avenue, next to

the property of Charles P. Steinmetz. Edward Durell Stone, a notable architect of the mid-20th

p. 2 of 11

Century, was chosen to design the new modern building, quite innovative at that time, with its domed roof, large plate glass windows and fountain plaza facing the street. Stone shared the symbolism of his design, as recounted by Rev. Bill Gold on the 10th anniversary of the building (Gold, 1971). The entire front of the building is a concrete wall with interlocking circle design (symbolizing interconnectedness) that is carried throughout the building's exterior and interior. This solid wall front is meant to cut us off temporarily from the world, with a moat to cross via a bridge with slits at either end so that you realize that you walk into a different experience as you walk into the building. Stone observed that Unitarianism is a faith that is built on fellowship, so he designed a circular tiered amphitheater that descends into a central circle (which is a tiled yin and yang mosaic). Stone maintained that the fellowship hall encircles the worship area; there is no way to access worship without walking through fellowship, and when you leave worship, you again walk through fellowship. Stone said that fellowship holds the world together, so the amphitheater and dome represent the sphere of the world. Floor-to-ceiling picture windows line the back of the sanctuary to provide a view of the gardens, woods and stream, Stone's way of looking out on the world again (Gold, 1971).

Our unique building is infused with meaningful symbolism, but it was built at a time when little attention was given to energy efficiency. We who inherited the pride of our ancestors – and responsibility for its carbon footprint - are dedicated to increasing the building's energy efficiency. In the midst of the pandemic, a fire broke out in Sept. 2020 in one of the furnace rooms when no one was in the building. Fortunately, the Schenectady Fire Department happened to be driving by and noticed the smoke. They had to break into the building and were able to put out the fire before it spread far. Fairly extensive smoke damage required replacement of some draperies and carpeting. This was a setback in trying to make plans to move ahead with infrastructure improvements that will decrease the building's carbon footprint. Nonetheless, the dome roof will be replaced this year and will incorporate insulation; together with the previous flat-roof replacement, our building will have a completely insulated roof for the first time. In recent months, replacing the gas furnaces with ground- or air-source heat pumps was explored through consultations with vendors. Both options are prohibitively expensive at this time (~\$1,000,000 and ~\$600,000, respectively). An additional challenge with air-source heat pumps is that they are not effective in the coldest winter temperatures

experienced in our area, so back-up heat source would be required. One exception is in the office, where an air-source heat pump would be most effective. The current proposal is to replace the

p. 3 of 11

furnaces with conventional natural gas furnaces over 3 years (vendor concluded that high-efficiency furnaces cannot be used), and focus energy-efficiency efforts on building upgrades such as insulation. It is hoped that green energy options will be more affordable in the future.

11. As part of your review of your congregation's historical context, we ask that you take a long view, even as far as identifying the indigenous people whose land you occupy. Across our denomination, as part of the national reckoning around systemic racism, congregations are identifying their location in the context of historical oppression of indigenous people and of all people of color. Research and identify any historic moments when systemic oppression was locked in for people of color in your area. Examples include redlining, sundown towns or counties, abrogation of treaties with indigenous people, or pervasive repression of voting rights. This process will further your understanding of systemic racism in your region, and it may also help you identify a future justice project and a potential partner for collaboration. Please describe whether this information is new to your congregation or was already known prior to this opportunity assessment.

Our team's prior knowledge of our long-term historical context was limited and covered primarily recent events - with a general awareness of historical oppression, but missing many details. We are grateful to have learned from answering this question.

We look forward to continuing to learn from and build on our collaboration with other ministry teams and community partners as we continue working for environmental justice in the GS 2030 reaccreditation program.

Our building in Schenectady is located on the lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) nation of the Haudenosaunee people, today a league of six nations (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, Tuscarora). The Haudenosaunee are known for their deep knowledge of polycultural agriculture, especially the cultivation of the Three Sisters - corn, beans, and squash - together, which mutually support one another's growth and the sustainability of their environment, and symbolically represent the essential role of collaboration and supporting relationships in Haudenosaunee society.

Prior to colonization their agricultural, food preparation, preservation and storage skills and relationship with the lands on which they lived - the lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka encompassed much of northeast New York State and those of the Haudenosaunee much of New York State - ensured a strong year-round food

p. 4 of 11

supply and that their people were well-nourished. Early colonial settlers relied on Haudenosaunee knowledge to learn to grow their crops.¹

In the 17th century, the Haudenosaunee formed a treaty with the White Dutch settlers who had come to colonize their land, represented by the Two Row Wampum belt - symbolizing the friendship and peace forever as equals and the separate paths of the Haudenosaunee and White people in two rows of purple wampum beads, showing the canoes of the Haudenosaunee and the ships of White settlers: "In one row is a ship with our White Brothers' ways; in the other a canoe with our ways. Each will travel down the river of life side by side. Neither will attempt to steer the other's vessel."²

Chief Irving Powless Jr. writes that Haudenosaunee have never violated the treaty of the Two Row Wampum - have never told White people how they ought to live - and view it as a living treaty for their relationship with White people today. But, as he continues,

"You and your ancestors, on the other hand, have passed laws that continually try to change who I am, what I am, and how I shall conduct my spiritual, political, and everyday life. Because you don't understand the religions of the Native Americans, you have said, "They must be wrong; therefore, we must pass a law that prevents them from doing that."³

White people - both the Dutch and the English colonists who came afterwards - have violated this treaty with the Haudenosaunee many times.

Colonial military campaigns specifically targeted the crops - in particular corn granaries and cornfields - to dominate the Haudenosaunee people. In 1779, George Washington ordered Major General John Sullivan to lead a campaign with the express goal of destroying the power of the Haudenosaunee:

Congress approved Washington's plan on February 25, 1779 "directing him to take all measures

necessary to protect the settlers and to punish the Indians.” Washington wrote to Sullivan on May 31, 1779 “...The immediate objects are total destruction and devastation of their settlements and the capture of as many prisoners of every sex and age as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops in the ground and prevent their planting more.”

p. 5 of 11

When the campaign ended in September of 1779 Sullivan reported that 160,000 bushels of corn as well as other fruits and vegetables were destroyed, forty Indian settlements had been burned to the ground, and thousands of Haudenosaunee sought refuge under the British at Fort Niagara. People recall that the winter of 1779-80 was severe and most of the Haudenosaunee territory was covered in five feet of snow. It was presumed that many Haudenosaunee died from cold and starvation.⁴

By the 1800s, cold, starvation, disease and violence had claimed the lives of many of the Haudenosaunee and the Haudenosaunee were forced to settle on lands far smaller than their traditional size - and without the ability to relocate villages every 10-20 years, as had been traditional to sustain their living on the land without resource depletion, or access to forests traditionally used for gathering of plants and hunting or traditional sacred sites. Today some Haudenosaunee are vulnerable to food insecurity due to many factors including lack of access to sufficient quality land, economic injustice, and disconnection from traditional knowledge.¹

In addition to the history of systemic violence and injustice towards indigenous peoples in our area and state, our area has a history of slavery, injustice, violence and mass incarceration of Black and Brown people.

Some Black people were enslaved in New York State through the 1700s. In 1790, most Black residents of Schenectady were enslaved (464 out of 499).⁵ An act of the New York State Legislature required emancipation in 1799, but this was a gradual process - records indicate that Black people were enslaved in New York State as late as 1827, when slavery was fully abolished. Major landowners - including those whose homes are recognized as historic sites in the Capital Region, such as John Mabee in Rotterdam and Phillip Schuyler in Albany - held slaves.⁶

Union College, Schenectady, the current campus of which is located a short walk from our congregation's building, used slave labor to build early buildings on its original campus after its founding in 1795. A quarter of the original Board of Trustees of Union College owned slaves.⁷

p. 6 of 11

Schenectady was also a stop on the Underground Railroad⁸ - a statue of Harriet Tubman, along with politician William Seward with whom she had a friendship, was recently erected in front of the Schenectady County Public Library.

The history of systemic injustice from White supremacy towards Black people in Schenectady continues far beyond the Emancipation Proclamation, however.

Black men in New York State who did not own at least \$250 of land were explicitly barred from voting - in 1821, this requirement was changed to apply specifically and only to Black men, not to White men - and this requirement remained in place until struck down at the federal level by the 15th amendment in 1870.⁵

Employment discrimination was also rampant. In the late 19th century most Black people in Schenectady worked in agriculture - increasingly less viable as Schenectady became more urbanized - or in poorly compensated labor and servant positions.

Historical research indicates that another major employer in Schenectady, The General Electric Company, from which Schenectady's nickname "The Electric City" is derived, engaged in systematic discrimination against Black applicants for employment in the 1930s. GE employees described observing applications from Black applicants being marked in red pen and being put at the bottom of the pile. At first, all but a few Black applicants were refused. Later, during World War II, Black applicants were considered only for janitorial work, while White applicants with fewer skills had more opportunities with better pay.⁹

The lack of employment opportunities for Black people in Schenectady - in contrast with the many White immigrants living in Schenectady in the early 20th century, who had many opportunities at GE - meant that in 1930, there were only about 600 Black residents of Schenectady - less than 1% of the population, and in 1950 only 734. (The population temporarily increased during World War II due to war-related labor.)⁹

Systemic housing discrimination also contributed to this - as in many cities across the US in the 1930s, Schenectady mortgage lenders used redlining for housing segregation.

p. 7 of 11

[Many of the redlined areas of Schenectady](#) are still neighborhoods that many Black people live in and experience the most social, environmental, and economic injustice today. (It is worth noting that our congregation's current building is located in a "green" area of Schenectady that was and is among the most well-off areas of Schenectady - originally built for General Electric executives and their families.)

In the 1960s our congregation included a number of Black members - including Margaret Cunningham, who founded the Hamilton Hill Arts Center, an African-American cultural center dedicated to serving the needs of Schenectady's youth in Hamilton Hill and promoting, preserving, and developing knowledge of African and African Diasporic culture.¹⁰

Many of those members left - around the same time as the Unitarian Universalist Association's failure to fund the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus led to many Black UU's leaving denomination-wide in the 1960s. We are grateful to the Rev. Viola Abbitt who researched the experiences and contributions of Black congregation members at UUSS during her ministerial studies.¹¹

Schenectady today is still profoundly shaped by White supremacy culture and prevalent systemic racial injustice - from income and wealth inequality and high child poverty rates, to food deserts, to educational injustice, systemic police bias and mass incarceration.

The historically marginalized neighborhoods in Schenectady are the neighborhoods in Schenectady today with among the highest poverty rates and with the least access to grocery stores providing a wide variety of nutritious food. Congregation members have been active in leading and supporting local organizations

that seek to address this need, including Schenectady Urban Farms and the Electric City Food Co-Op.

Redlined neighborhoods in Schenectady - as with similar neighborhoods in Albany, Troy, and elsewhere in the US - have less tree cover than Whiter neighborhoods and will be more vulnerable to the Urban Heat Island effect as temperatures rise due to climate change¹², as well as having less access to nature affecting physical and mental health.

Schenectady schools - like many schools in New York State districts serving Black and Brown children - were systemically underfunded by state aid formulas for decades, even after court orders to New York

p. 8 of 11

State to provide all districts with adequate funding for a K-12 education. Many years of advocacy from groups like the Alliance for Quality Education have led to some funding increases, but more work is still needed to reach educational equity.¹³ Black teachers are also extremely underrepresented in Schenectady schools - in 2021, only 4% of Schenectady City School District's teachers were Black while 33% of Schenectady students were Black, which has been shown to adversely affect student outcomes.¹⁴

Our ministers are active in an interfaith collaboration, Schenectady Clergy against Hate¹⁵, which brings together local clergy of different religious traditions, including Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Druid, and Sikh faith leaders - to bring our communities together and speak out against injustice and bigotry whenever it occurs in our community, holding vigils and advocating for justice, including for change in racially-biased policies and actions in the Schenectady Police Department that put Black and Brown people in Schenectady at greater risk.

Statewide (and beyond!), we also know that environmental injustice disproportionately impacts Black and Brown communities, ranging from air pollution due to fossil fuels in Albany's South End and elsewhere around the state to vulnerability of low-lying areas to climate change. UU Schenectady's proximity to Albany, the state capital, gives us many opportunities to participate in environmental justice advocacy on a state level as well as a local one, including collaborations with NY RENEWS¹⁶, a statewide coalition of environmental organizations working to advocate for climate legislation that includes NY Unitarian Universalists for Justice, an organization of which UU Schenectady is a member and which also includes and centers voices of marginalized communities. Thanks to years of advocacy from NY Renews including tireless efforts from members of our Green Sanctuary Advocacy Subteam, in 2019 the Climate

Leadership and Community Protection Act passed the New York State legislature, setting targets for CO₂ emission reductions and mandating that at least 35% of the benefits of investments but further advocacy efforts are still needed - and ongoing - to ensure that the CLCPA is funded and that funds are allocated in a way that truly centers the needs of marginalized BIPOC communities. Continuing to support the work of NY RENEWS is an important part of our congregation's continuing commitment to climate justice.

References

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p. 9 of 11

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12. Reflect on why the congregation is pursuing Green Sanctuary accreditation or re-accreditation. What is motivating you to undertake this comprehensive program? Congregations pursuing re-accreditation should include reflection on their initial accreditation and how re-accreditation will build and extend the work accomplished in that process.

Being in a denominational program helped Green Sanctuary to establish credibility in our congregation. We were also challenged by the program, particularly in climate justice areas, but also challenged to live our values through improving our congregation's carbon footprint and introducing other Earth friendly practices. In March of 2015, during the interim ministry here of Rev. Margret O'Neall, our congregation voted to choose a single social justice initiative to concentrate on. Two winning initiatives (work with Family Promise and work on Environmental Justice) each received a comparable number of votes. The congregation decided to pursue both at the same time. Climate justice leaders from Green Sanctuary

p. 10 of 11

then asked interested people to sign up for one of four climate justice initiatives: Education and Information, Energy Efficiency, Advocacy and Communication. During the Climate Justice initiative we sponsored education sessions and book discussions, held a congregational information session with Fred Small, and did advocacy and energy efficiency work.

Our advocacy chair was on the board of Interfaith Impact of NY State, which gave us more denominational networking (at the time the IINYS board was 90% UU) and a lot of capital area UU's attended their advocacy days whenever environmental bills were on the program. Members of our Social Justice Team and other interested parties are now joining environmental advocacy efforts. Our letter writing campaigns on Sunday mornings get higher participation than the weekday lobby days and rallies. At weekend events we meet more people from our congregation.

We have recently had an increase in activity around energy efficiency in our buildings. We networked with our Buildings and Grounds committee, our Infrastructure Team, which the board has now dissolved, and also networked with a member of UUSS who works for New York Department of Environmental Conservation, who helped us to establish recycling and composting in our buildings (indoors and out).

Now, due in part to Green Sanctuary reaccreditation initiatives, our challenge is to expand our support for the climate justice initiatives of those most affected by the climate crisis. We are learning from NYRenews and Climate Can't Wait, which are largely organized by people of marginalized communities. They organize people from around the state, both for legislative advocacy and demonstrations, provide transportation, help with translation for Spanish speakers, train new members how to advocate and give a voice to young people. We also will be supporting the rallies and legislative advocacy of NYUJJ. Our congregation has been motivated by our co-ministers who have delivered inspiring sermons on climate, not only on Earth Day, but also as crises arise.