



First Parish in Bedford Named a Green Sanctuary by the Unitarian Universalist Association

*Over Two Years of Environmental Education,
Stewardship, and Activism
Garner Prized Certification*

The First Parish Unitarian Universalist congregation in Bedford has been awarded certification as a Green Sanctuary by the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA). Headquartered in Boston MA, the UUA is the coordinating organization for over 1,100 congregations, 20% of which have earned this certification.

According to First Parish senior minister Rev. John Gibbons, “Since 2013, First Parish has been working on earning Green Sanctuary accreditation – an effort supporting the vision that, together, we can create a world in which all people make reverence, gratitude, and care for the Earth a core part of our lives. We have explored what it means to live on an imperiled planet and to become environmental stewards. We are very proud of our new designation and will continue to pursue sustainable lifestyles as individuals and as a faith community collaborating, as we have, with other organizations locally and beyond.”

First Parish undertook 13 major projects in the areas of environmental justice, worship and celebration, religious education, and sustainable living, many of which were collaborations with other organizations.

Environmental Justice:

- The junior youth group replaced decorative plantings around the church with an organic vegetable garden that yielded over 150 pounds of fresh food for the Bedford food pantry in a single growing season.
- First Parish conducted several public film screenings, common book readings, and group discussions on environmental justice to promote education, dialogue and motivation to get more people active and involved in related issues.
- First Parish implemented a bus service using a local bus company as a contracted operator to provide Sunday scheduled bus service from several locations in Bedford to First Parish as well as St. Michaels Roman Catholic and St. Paul’s Episcopal churches. Subsequently, we added stops at a local hotel that is currently housing homeless families as part of a state emergency response to a

severe housing shortage in the Boston area. This enables people at the retirement community and hotel to attend the church of their choice at no cost to them, and cuts down on traffic.

- As more parishioners engaged with recently homeless families, we learned that there have never been more homeless families in Massachusetts than now. (Each night, nearly 3,100 families are in shelters and 1,850 more families are in motels with great risk to their children's health and development.) One of Bedford's motels houses families whom we initially reached out to to provide local transportation. We came to see that many factors contribute to how people can become marginalized. Through outreach, we connected with Advocacy Network to End Family Homelessness & Cooperative Metropolitan Ministries, Episcopal City Mission, Citizens Housing & Planning Association (CHAPA), Mass Coalition for the Homeless, UU Mass Action Network. Together, we sponsored the Eleventh Annual Forum on Family Homelessness in March 2015 at First Parish.

Worship & Celebration

- We have added more services dedicated to the improvement of the environment as well as several outside services and earth-based spirituality classes that enable parishioners to connect more closely with nature.
- We celebrate the Universe Story – from Big Bang to present – through the creation of three intergenerational, environmental education programs.

Religious Education

- We used the Northwest Earth Institute's six-session discussion course, *Hungry for Change: Food, Ethics and Sustainability*, to help attendees explore the impact of our food choices on our earth and our health, and considered the ethical and political implications of our choices.
- First Parish children wanted to understand our environment and how their choices affect it. So, we developed a four-part curriculum entitled *Eat Your Values* to inform the children about how what they eat can affect them, their communities, and the environment as a whole.
- Believing that the more our children understand our environment, the better stewards they will be, we created a four-part Earth Circles curriculum (*Water Water Everywhere*, *Visits with Nature*, *Soil and Seeds*, and *The Fruitful Garden*) of written material and video clips to demonstrate various project and experiments for the kids to undertake. This program is being distributed to other congregations around the country.

Sustainable Living

- First Parish worked with Boston-based Next Step Living (NSL) and other Bedford churches to help people save energy and money, and reduce their carbon footprint at home through a seminar program and free home energy audits.
- We increased recycling efforts at First Parish events, which has led to over 900 people attending our annual church events to recycle over 500 pounds of material and has led to more families recycling at home.

- By replacing over 65 incandescent lights inside and outside the church building with CFL (compact florescent light) or LEDs (light emitting diodes), we have reduced our power consumption by almost 4,000 watts, saved over 4200 kWh, and reduced our energy costs by \$720 per the year.
- We also reduced our reliance on water for our vegetable gardens by collecting, storing, and recycling rainwater in a 500-gallon a rain barrel.

All of these initiatives have helped parishioners build awareness of the significance and complexity of environmental issues, encourage personal lifestyle changes, engage in community action on environmental issues, strengthen the connection between spiritual practice and Earth consciousness, and work to address environmental injustice.

The creation of the town of Bedford in 1729 was due in part to the creation of First Parish, because it was a requirement that every town have its own church. Since then, First Parish has been a voice of liberal religious practice underpinned by personal inquiry, common worship, and public responsibility.

Parishioners come from 28 local communities in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Organizations looking to partner with First Parish on environmental projects can contact us at minister@uubedford.org or 781 275-7994.