

PRESS RELEASE  
November 5, 2014

My name is Michael Schuler, and for the past quarter century I have served as Senior Minister for the First Unitarian Society of Madison on University Bay Drive. Having been apprised of prospective cuts in the County Human Services budget that would eliminate funding for the Community Action Coalition's clothing distribution program, I agreed to participate in this press conference in order to share my perspective.

The First Unitarian Society is a well-known local faith community founded in 1879. The congregation consists of approximately 900 families – 1500 adults and 500 children. In addition to our faithful and costly stewardship of one of the nation's most notable examples of modern church architecture – the Frank Lloyd Wright Meeting House, in recent decades we have increased our outreach efforts. Currently we contribute significant human and monetary resources directly, and in collaboration with a number of community partners. In our last budget year, for example:

- FUS members prepared and served 36 meals and contributed 101 volunteer shifts at 3 shelter locations in the Madison area.
- Provided 79 grants to households to prevent evictions or assist with move-ins, totaling \$15,000
- Via our weekly shared outreach offerings, our members gave \$22,500 to 21 local organizations.
- Our Family-to-family holiday giving program provided 135 families – 569 children and adults – with groceries and practical items such as clothing, furniture, appliances and sundries. The estimated worth of these annual holiday gifts is \$30-40,000.

We are a reasonably affluent but not a particularly large religious community. Nevertheless, our direct and in-kind contributions to disadvantaged Madison and Dane County families now total in excess of \$70,000 per year. We also employ a 25 hour per week Social Justice Coordinator, who manages these programs and helps us engage in effective advocacy work.

But these are not easy times for faith communities in Madison and around the country. Membership growth at First Unitarian Society has been flat since the recession, and per member giving barely covers our expenses. I know from conversations with colleagues that other congregations are in a similar bind. Thus, the suggestion that area churches can fill the gap created by shifting County priorities and the curtailing of badly needed assistance programs doesn't strike me as either responsible or realistic.

It is not as if area faith communities and faith-based organizations like Madison Urban Ministry, Middleton Outreach Ministries and MOSES have been sitting on their hands. Each year these organizations and their partners try their best to cope with