



## One Step Leads to a New Path for this Small Church

by Alan Timm, Grace United Church, Fort Atkinson

**Grace United Church** was formed in 2010 with the merger between Friedens United Church of Christ and Shalom Presbyterian Church in Fort Atkinson. The almost seven-year history of Grace can be divided into two unequal parts. At the beginning, financial issues consumed us and kept us from looking outward. Eventually these were resolved but we needed something to change our direction. We were still inward-focused.



The change came when one of our members needed a liver transplant. To assist with the financial burden, Grace organized a **spaghetti dinner and auction fundraiser**. Involvement went beyond Grace to the whole community getting involved. The net result was approximately \$10,000 raised. This was a small amount compared to the medical bills involved, but the effect on Grace was profound and far beyond the amount of money raised. **Suddenly we had an attitude of we can do anything** and were looking at ministries outside of our walls.

Since then we have continued involvement in the **food pantry**—both of our parent churches had been charter members of the Fort Atkinson Food Pantry since its beginning in 1982. We provided spices to the items available at the food pantry in response to a survey we took. We also collected and handed out **slow cookers** to those who could use them. In December we held a “**Spicy Christmas**” to collect spices to distribute when we are in charge of food distribution at the food pantry in February.



We have also expanded our focus beyond the food pantry. We:

- Began a program to provide **school supplies** for one of the classes at one of the elementary schools in town,

- We receive a “**noisy offering**” of loose change to support the local **free dental clinic**, the **humane society**, and the **food pantry**.
- We provided support for a **summer meal program** organized by our pastor’s son to provide lunches for students in the gap time between the end of summer programs and the beginning of the school year.
- We initiated a scrip program several years ago that has provided the funds to send our youth members plus several nonmember friends of our church youth to **church camp**.
- In fall we began preparations for a **butterfly garden** on the church grounds.
- In December we borrowed a page from one of our fellow UCC churches and did a “**Loads of Love**” **event** at one of the local laundromats to provide assistance to families doing laundry. After one occurrence, the results of this are being evaluated.



**Now we are always looking for the “next thing” to reach out to those in our community.**

Despite all the activities and outreach, **the thing I am most proud of** happened in the monthly governing board meetings. Some questions had been raised about the transparency of the handling of our financial matters and we undertook a review of the whole process from the counting of offering money through to disbursement of collected funds to pay bills. A review of the procedures by a CPA gave us some positive measures to take to improve our transparency and protect those entrusted with handling funds. The attitude of the board and the thoughtful and professional way they worked through this situation made me proud to be a member of the governing board and a member of Grace United Church. In a small church the relationships between the members are quite close and encompass all the members. No one is on the fringe and all of these relationships are important. We conduct our business to protect and nourish these relationships.