

## **A Welcoming and Inclusive Green Space A Tier 2 Oberlin Community Grant Program Proposal from The First Church in Oberlin**

### **Summary of the Project**

Like most churches, synagogues, and mosques in America, the First Church in Oberlin's impact extends far beyond its own members. One study found that 87% of those participating in the community programs and events housed in sacred spaces are not members of the religious congregation. "In effect," the study's authors wrote, "America's sacred places are *de facto* community centers" (Partners for Sacred Places).

The First Church in Oberlin has always claimed an identity as a community center. We are located right in the center of the town and campus. Completed in 1844, our building was for many decades the largest religious structure west of the Alleghenies, built with the intention of gathering the community together. To this day our worship space is called the Meeting House rather than the sanctuary or chapel. It is open to all. In fact, when a national antislavery leader wanted to address the community in 1852, the founders formally voted to open the space for secular and even political meetings. Today, our property continues to be used for myriad community activities every day of the week.

With one exception. Like many other churches, community members primarily access our facilities from a parking lot in back. Therefore, the church's wide front and side lawns are left largely unused. Even though on the inside, the building is bustling with activity, the view of the church from the sidewalk gives an impression of a museum or uninhabited space! We believe community members do not know they are welcome to use the lawns. While any green space is valuable in and of itself, our goal is to create a welcoming and inclusive green space that will extend our historic tradition of letting the community meet here. This project will meet the city's need for recreation space because, unlike Tappan Square across the street, we will install equipment for play, music, and picnicking. From reading a book, to hanging out with friends after class, to playing on natural equipment, to making music, Oberlinians of all ages and abilities will be able to enjoy this outdoor space.

We will install one or more of the following pieces to create a natural play- and soundscape on our lawn: table with seats, stepping stumps, pedestal pipes, drums, bench(es), Adirondack chairs, "mushroom" stumps, and a flying amandinda (wooden xylophone).

## **Social Equity Alignment**

The First Church in Oberlin is a church committed to social equity. In policy, practice, and personnel, we are an Open and Affirming (to LGBTQIA+), Just Peace, Global Mission, and Green Justice church. We declare and ensure that Black lives matter and that all persons are protected regardless of immigrant status. Our facilities are accessible to those of diverse and divergent abilities. Historically, we have been known for educating children and adults and for promoting the arts, especially music.

This particular project will advance Oberlin's Social Equity Principles of culturally responsive and inclusive service especially well. In our green space, we will install pieces of play and musical equipment made of natural materials that are ADA compliant, engaging, and beautiful. We will purchase equipment for play and rest designed for bodies both large and small. Musical equipment will be simple and intuitive to use regardless of musical ability, inviting everyone to contribute to a shared community soundscape. We will be providing community enrichment and recreation in a location within Oberlin that currently has few other spots explicitly designated for play. At the same time, our location echoes with memories of Oberlin outdoor concerts, steel bands, and drum circles, not to mention more formal musical events.

## **How will the project/program address Youth & Recreation priorities?**

Our project will address Oberlin youth's need for accessible and affordable recreation as well as for greater physical, social and emotional well-being. We are not proposing a formal program of activities, but rather a space that opens possibility for many different informal activities. The more inviting outdoor spaces young people have in their town, the more they thrive. Advocates of natural play spaces say they prompt imaginative play, social interaction, cooperation, and can even promote brain health. (For example, a traditional monkey bar has set distances between bars and limited things to do on it. It thus invites competition and domination by more athletically inclined children who are "better" at the monkey bars. A tree, by contrast, can be climbed in many ways and by several children at one time.) Bringing music to an outdoor space in their community can improve youth's intellectual, social, and physical development. Public musical instruments such as chimes can be created to produce pleasant sounds no matter how they are played and thus stimulate and reward budding musicians.

## **Community Need Statement**

Cities like Oberlin need partnerships with their sacred places. Oberlin needs institutions that promote the arts and cultural opportunities and make them accessible to community members and visitors. It needs partners to enhance the lives of young people and to help them thrive. It needs well maintained open space that its residents can access. Religious congregations like the First Church in Oberlin can and should become such partners, because we serve these public needs as well. We engage in and make possible a wide range of non-religious activities for the community. We share the values of the non-profit and academic communities. We are a trusted and trustworthy historic institution. We maintain quality facilities that already exist and do not have to be built. But like most churches, the First Church in Oberlin in turn needs partnerships in order to make the most of its assets and to put them toward good community-serving uses.

## **Beneficiaries**

It is difficult to imagine anyone who would not benefit from a creative, inviting green space! But since our plans specifically incorporate equipment that is by design inclusive of all users, the beneficiaries of our project will indeed be everyone. However, because of the playful nature of the space we will create, younger people—who are often underserved by urban and town centers—will be specific beneficiaries. Since our location resides at an intersection of two well-traveled roads, residents and visitors alike will benefit. Since we are surrounded by the campus of the Oberlin College and Conservatory, students who traverse the campus will benefit. City and campus workers might benefit from having another pleasant place to take a break or eat lunch.

Sacred places are often seen by the public as safe and neutral spaces within the civic environment, and First Church is no exception. Many individuals and groups who already use our facilities regularly report how much they benefit from doing so. We already serve people in need and make the community stronger. In short, we are a trusted institution by many beneficiaries and plan to develop trust with even more, by making our institution and its resources more visibly recognizable and by literally drawing people onto our grounds.

**Relevant Experience**

The First Church in Oberlin has long served the educational and recreational needs of children and youth in Oberlin. Until recently we operated a preschool with a playground. We also have abundant experience in creating and sustaining public arts and music opportunities for and with the community, both in the Meeting House and in our Fellowship Hall.

**Staff/Volunteer Capacity**

With less than 48 hours' notice, seven members of First Church gathered to form a grant writing task force for this proposal. We have ample volunteer capacity for this project which has had many adherents for some time. Our governing body has approved the project and related expenditure in advance of a potentially successful grant. Our grounds maintenance volunteers have weighed in on the project and stand ready to implement it. We have many experienced musicians among our staff and membership.