



# FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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## **For Immediate Release**

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## **DR. TIMOTHY AHRENS, SENIOR MINISTER and SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE, RETIRING AFTER 40 YEARS of MINISTRY**

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, longtime senior minister of the historic downtown [First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ](#), author, and social justice advocate, will preach his last sermon from the First Church pulpit on Sunday, October 20, 2024. The Rev. Dr. Ahrens has served for forty years in ministry, spending the last twenty-five at the 172-year-old church. Upon his retirement, which will be celebrated at the Columbus Museum of Art, he will be the second longest serving senior minister, preceded by the Social Gospel leader the Rev. Washington Gladden, who served for thirty-two years.

A dynamic and engaging preacher, Dr. Ahrens' gift for delivering thought provoking and timely sermons each week helped First Congregational Church, UCC double its membership during his tenure. This growth happened despite a dramatic decline in UCC membership, as well as five of the eleven downtown churches closing their doors. He helped lead the effort for the church to purchase the adjacent piece of land, which would eventually become the [Washington Gladden Social Justice Park](#). His knowledge and passion for First Church's history, The Rev. Washington Gladden, and the Social Gospel has allowed him to educate and inspire others.

Throughout his time in Columbus, Dr. Ahrens has been a strong voice of the religious community, promoting the importance of interfaith collaboration and support. In 1996, he was a founding pastor of [BREAD](#), a group of congregations of different traditions that address serious community problems, help find innovative and proven solutions, and hold public officials accountable. In 2006, to move compassion for the poor forward across Ohio, Dr. Ahrens launched [We Believe Ohio](#). He served from 2009-2013 as a member of the board of directors of [Faith in Public Life](#), a faith-based national organization that seeks to influence public policy, has been involved with the [Universal Health Care Action Network](#) in Ohio, was notably asked to give the opening prayer at President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign kick-off rally and has spoken at many rallies at the Ohio Statehouse on issues of social justice.

Dr. Ahrens has continuously written on issues of faith as a contributing editor to the *Columbus/Dayton African American Journal* since 2011, and for *The Columbus Dispatch* for over thirty years. His first book, [The Genius of Justice](#), was

published in 2022, and tells the story of fifty-three people from all different fields of work and walks of life working for justice.

Leading a 172-year-old church founded as an abolitionist congregation has been a mission and an honor to Ahrens who likens the early movement to a salmon swimming upstream. “This position, this community and this church is unique. I’ve been given a lot of freedom to shape it, but it is in our DNA as a congregation to do justice. It’s just *there*. When I think of how churches start, it’s often demographic reasons, spiritual reasons, or traditions they’re trying to uphold. But any congregation that starts on day one to abolish slavery as its purpose is set up to do justice. It’s like a salmon swimming upstream, saying ‘that’s not what we’re going to do!’ And that’s special.” Ahrens looks forward to seeing the future and continuing social justice movement of First Church for the next 25 years. “I’m excited to see where that goes!”

Ahrens is a 1980 graduate of Macalester College with a double major in religious studies and political science. He earned a Master of Divinity from Yale Divinity School in 1985 where he later received the [William Sloane Coffin Award](#), from the School honoring his commitment to peace and reconciliation, the only local church pastor to have received the award. In May 2015, Dr. Ahrens earned his Doctor of Ministry degree from Chicago Theological Seminary. His thesis was entitled: “Young and Growing Stronger: Creating a Model of 21st Century Prophetic Witness Leaders with a New Generation.”

Dr. Ahrens has preached in churches across the country and has served as preacher of the week in Chautauqua, New York; Lakeside, Ohio, and Bay City, Michigan. He has preached, lectured, and taught at Yale Divinity School and Chicago Theological Seminary. He has preached at the MAAFA celebration at St. Paul’s Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, N.Y. In October 2011, he spoke and offered a eulogy at a home-going celebration for the Rev. Dr. Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, Alabama.

Ahrens serves on the Board of Directors for The Children’s Defense Fund of Ohio; Jewish Family Services, Columbus; The Center for Community Solutions based in Cleveland and as a community representative on the Editorial Board of *The Columbus Dispatch*.

Dr. Ahrens was ordained in his home congregation, St. John’s United Church of Christ, in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, on June 23, 1985. Before coming to First Church, he served as senior pastor of North Congregational United Church of Christ in northwest Columbus for more than 10 years. Prior to that, he served Bethany UCC, Cleveland, Ohio, and served in three urban settings of ministry in St. Louis, New Haven, and Philadelphia, before his ordination, stimulating growth and revitalization by helping congregations to become more multi-racial, more multi-cultural and more accepting and tolerant of all people.

A devoted husband, father, and grandfather, Tim and his wife, Susan Sitler, have been married since November 1985 and are the parents of four adult children and grandparents to five grandsons and three granddaughters.

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