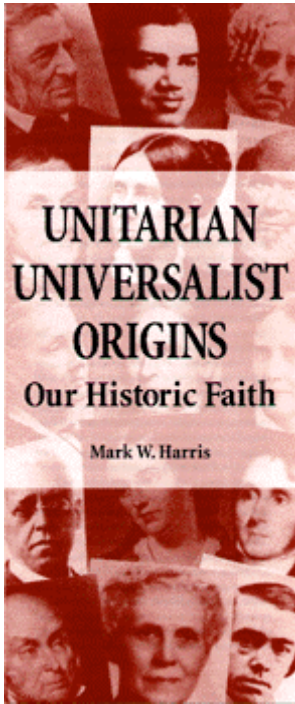


## Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith

*Mark W. Harris*



**Unitarians and Universalists** have always been heretics. We are heretics because we want to choose our faith, not because we desire to be rebellious. “Heresy” in Greek means “choice.” During the first three centuries of the Christian church, believers could choose from a variety of tenets about Jesus. Among these was a belief that Jesus was an entity sent by God on a divine mission. Thus the word “Unitarian” developed, meaning the oneness of God. Another religious choice in the first three centuries of the Common Era (CE) was universal salvation. This was the belief that no person would be condemned by God to eternal damnation in a fiery pit. Thus a Universalist believed that all people will be saved. Christianity lost its element of choice in 325 CE when the Nicene Creed established the Trinity as dogma. For centuries thereafter, people who professed Unitarian or Universalist beliefs were persecuted.

This was true until the sixteenth century when the Protestant Reformation took hold in the remote mountains of Transylvania in eastern Europe. Here the first edict of religious toleration in history was declared in 1568 during the reign of the first and only Unitarian king, John Sigismund. Sigismund’s court preacher, Francis David, had successively converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism to Calvinism and finally to Unitarianism because he could find no biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity. Arguing that people should be allowed to choose among these faiths, he said, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

In sixteenth-century Transylvania, Unitarian congregations were established for the first time in history. These churches continue to preach the Unitarian message in present-day Romania. Like their heretic forebears from ancient times, these liberals could not see how the deification of a human being or the simple recitation of creeds could help them to live better lives. They said that we must follow Jesus, not worship him.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Unitarianism appeared briefly in scattered locations. A Unitarian community in Rakow, Poland, flourished for a time, and a book called *On the Errors of the Trinity* by a Spaniard, Michael Servetus, was circulated throughout Europe. But persecution frequently followed these believers. The Polish Unitarians were completely suppressed, and Michael Servetus was burned at the stake.

Even where the harassment was not so extreme, people still opposed the idea of choice in matters of religious faith. In 1791, scientist and Unitarian minister Joseph Priestley had

his laboratory burned and was hounded out of England. He fled to America where he established American Unitarian churches in the Philadelphia area.

Despite these European connections, Unitarianism as we know it in North America is not a foreign import. In fact, the origins of our faith began with some of the most historic congregations in Puritan New England where each town was required to establish a congregationally independent church that followed Calvinist doctrines. Initially these congregational churches offered no religious choice for their parishioners, but over time the strict doctrines of original sin and predestination began to mellow.

By the mid-1700s a group of evangelicals were calling for the revival of Puritan orthodoxy. They asserted their belief in humanity's eternal bondage to sin. People who opposed the revival, believing in free human will and the loving benevolence of God, eventually became Unitarian. During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, hundreds of these original congregational churches fought over ideas about sin and salvation, and especially over the doctrine of the Trinity. Most of the churches split over these issues. In 1819, Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing delivered a sermon called "Unitarian Christianity" and helped to give the Unitarians a strong platform. Six years later the American Unitarian Association was organized in Boston, Massachusetts.

**Universalism developed in America** in at least three distinct geographical locations. The earliest preachers of the gospel of universal salvation appeared in what were later the Middle Atlantic and Southern states. By 1781, Elhanan Winchester had organized a Philadelphia congregation of Universal Baptists. among its members was Benjamin Rush, the famous physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence.

At about the same time, in the rural, interior sections of New England, a small number of itinerant preachers, among them Caleb Rich, began to disbelieve the strict Calvinist doctrines of eternal punishment. They discovered from their biblical studies the new revelation of God's loving redemption of all. John Murray, an English preacher who immigrated in 1770, helped lead the first Universalist church in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in the battle to separate church and state.

From its beginnings, Universalism challenged its members to reach out and embrace people whom society often marginalized. The Gloucester church included a freed slave among its charter members, and the Universalists became the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry, beginning in 1863 with Olympia Brown.

Universalism was a more evangelical faith than Unitarianism. After officially organizing in 1793, the Universalists spread their faith across the eastern United States and Canada. Hosea Ballou became the denomination's greatest leader during the nineteenth century, and he and his followers, including Nathaniel Stacy, led the way in spreading their faith.

Other preachers followed the advice of Universalist publisher Horace Greeley and went West. One such person was Thomas Starr King, who is credited with defining the difference between Unitarians and Universalists: "Universalists believe that God is too

good to damn people, and the Unitarians believe that people are too good to be damned by God.” The Universalists believed in a God who embraced everyone, and this eventually became central to their belief that lasting truth is found in all religions, and that dignity and worth is innate to all people regardless of sex, color, race, or class.

Growing out of this inclusive theology was a lasting impetus in both denominations to create a more just society. Both Unitarians and Universalists became active participants in many social justice movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker was a prominent abolitionist, defending fugitive slaves and offering support to American abolitionist John Brown.

Other reformers included Universalists such as Charles Spear who called for prison reform, and Clara Barton who went from Civil War “angel of the battlefield” to become the founder of the American Red Cross. Unitarians such as Dorothea Dix fought to “break the chains” of people incarcerated in mental hospitals, and Samuel Gridley Howe started schools for the blind. For the last two centuries, Unitarians and Universalists have been at the forefront of movements working to free people from whatever bonds may oppress them.

**Two thousand years ago** liberals were persecuted for seeking the freedom to make religious choices, but such freedom has become central to both Unitarianism and Universalism. As early as the 1830s, both groups were studying and promulgating texts from world religions other than Christianity. By the beginning of the twentieth century, humanists within both traditions advocated that people could be religious without believing in God. No one person, no one religion, can embrace all religious truths.

By the middle of the twentieth century it became clear that Unitarians and Universalists could have a stronger liberal religious voice if they merged their efforts, and they did so in 1961, forming the Unitarian Universalist Association. Many Unitarian Universalists became active in the civil rights movement. James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister, was murdered in Selma, Alabama, after he and twenty percent of the denomination’s ministers responded to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s call to march for justice.

Today we are determined to continue to work for greater racial and cultural diversity. In 1977, a women and religion resolution was passed by the Association, and since then the denomination has responded to the feminist challenge to change sexist structures and language, especially with the publication of an inclusive hymnal. The denomination has affirmed the rights of bisexuals, gays, lesbians, and transgendered persons, including ordaining and settling gay and lesbian clergy in our congregations, and in 1996, affirmed same-sex marriage.

All these efforts reflect a modern understanding of universal salvation. Unitarian Universalism welcomes all to an expanding circle of understanding and choice in religious faith.

Our history has carried us from liberal Christian views about Jesus and human nature to a rich pluralism that includes theist and atheist, agnostic and humanist, pagan, Christian, Jew, and Buddhist. As our history continues to evolve and unfold, we invite you to join us by choosing our free faith.

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### **For Further Reading**

*We recommend the following books, available from the [UUA Bookstore](http://www.uua.org), 1-800-215-9076.*

*A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* second edition, by John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith* edited by Ernest Cassara. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997.

*The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*  
by Charles A. Howe. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993.

*Challenge of a Liberal Faith* by George N. Marshall. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1988.

*The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion*  
compiled by David B. Parke. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1985.

*The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide* edited by John A. Buehrens. Boston: UUA, 1999.

*A Stream of Light: A Short History of American Unitarianism* edited by Conrad Wright. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1989.

*Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian Universalist Practice* by Conrad Wright. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997.

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# QUOTATIONS FROM UU HISTORY

Compiled by The Rev. Dr. Morris Hudgins

## **Michael Servetus:**

There are three wonderful dispositions of God, in each of which his divinity shines forth; and from this you might very well understand the Trinity. For the Father is the whole substance and the one God from whom these degrees and personations proceed...dispositions of God in various forms of Deity; for the same divinity which is in the Father is communicated to the Son, Jesus Christ, and to our spirits, which are the temples of the living God; for the Son and our sanctified spirits are sharers with us in the Substance of the Father, are its members, pledges, and instruments; although the kind of deity in them is varying and this is why they are called distinct Persons, that is, manifold aspects, diverse forms and kinds, of deity.... (p. 5, Parke)

## **Decree of Religious Toleration—Transylvania by King John Sigismund in 1557, 1563 and 1568:**

His Majesty, our Lord, in what manner he--together with his realm (i.e., the Diet)—legislated in the matter of religion at the previous Diets, in the same manner now, in this Diet, he reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone according to the previous statements and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing which hearing is by the word of God.

## **Francis David's views:**

The Trinity held by the pope of Rome is really a belief in four or five God; one substance, God, three separate persons each of which are Gods, and one man, Christ. God is only one, that Father from who and by whom is everything, who is above everything, who created everything through the word of his wisdom and the breath of his mouth. Outside of this God there is no other God, neither, three, neither four, neither in substance, neither in persons, because the Scripture nowhere teaches anything about a triple God. One is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, God and man, of whom we cannot say either that he is firstborn or that he is the only begotten of God because such a person would not be both God and man. Jesus Christ is God and man but he did not create himself the Father gave him his divinity, the Father had him begotten by the Holy Spirit, the Father sanctified him and sent him into the world. Christ is the Son of God, he was neither purely human nor purely God before the angel announced him to Mary and the shepherds; he was the Son of David in flesh, he was the Son of God in spirit anointed high priest, judge and Lord above everyone else, he is our hope and fulfillment. The Holy Spirit is not self-created God, not a third person in the Trinity, but

the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, a seal of inheritance, life-giving strength, which the Father realizes in us through the Son, to be seen in ourselves and in our actions.

**Faustus Socinus:**

Jesus Christ, our Savior, saved humans not by dying for them but by setting an example for them to follow.

**John Murray:**

Jesus Christ is our Savior, bore all our sins in his own body on the tree. He put all our sins away by the sacrifice of himself. He was the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.

**English Unitarianism as expressed by Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808):**

There is ONE God, one single person, who is God, the sole creator and sovereign lord of all things;

The holy JESUS was a man of the Jewish nation, the servant of this God, highly honored and distinguished by him.

The SPIRIT, or HOLY SPIRIT, was not a person, or intelligent being; but only the extraordinary power or gift of God, imparted first to our Lord Jesus Christ himself in his life-time; and afterwards, to the apostles, and many of the first Christians, to empower them to preach and propagate the gospel with success.

**William Ellery Channing (Baltimore Sermon):**

We believe in the doctrine of God's UNITY, or that there is one God, and one only.

We object to the doctrine of the Trinity, which subverts the unity of God.

Trinity is irrational and unscriptural.

We believe in the unity of Jesus--one mind, one soul, one being, equally distinct from the one God.

Jesus was a mediator between man and God—sent by God to effect a moral or spiritual deliverance of mankind; rescue him from sin and its consequences.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson:**

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that god incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said in this jubilee of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me speaks...Christianity became a Mythos, as the poetic teaching of Greece; and of Egypt, before. He spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that

this daily miracle shines as the character ascends. But the world Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain. . . .(views the views of the church as a “corruption of Christianity;” takes this from Priestley).

**David Parke:**

“In an hour and a half Emerson had in effect demolished what had taken eighteen centuries to build and maintain—the authority of the Christian faith based on the miracles of Jesus.

**Theodore Parker (“The Transient and Permanent in Christianity”):**

To turn away from the disputes of the Catholics and the Protestants, of the Unitarian and the Trinitarian, of old school and new school, and come to the plain words of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity is a simple thing, very simple. It is absolute, pure morality; absolute, pure religion; the love of man; the love of God acting without let or hindrance. The only creed it lays down is the great truth which springs up spontaneous in the holy heart--there is a God... (Requires a divine life, a holy heart; doing the best thing in the best way. Examples: humility, reverence, sobriety gentleness, charity, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith, and active love. Sums up the Christian faith: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. Comes from reason, conscience and faith.)

**Humanism:**

Theme taken from the 19th century which had become the motto of Unitarianism: “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.” Scientific and anti-supernaturalistic. Advocates were John Dietrich in Spokane, Washington (heretic in Reformed Church), and Curtis Reese in Des Moines, Iowa (former Baptist).

Humanism defined liberalism as conscious committal and loyalty to worthwhile causes and goals.

Liberal is not satisfied with material ends.

Not satisfied with freedom alone.

Human personality is of supreme worth.

Institutions are the expression of personality.

Looks to the world as opposed to the nation--the widest possible human comradeship.

The realm of the divine is now up for investigation.

Humanistic liberalism understands spirituality to be man at his best, sane in mind, healthy in body dynamic in personality, honestly facing the hardest facts, conquering and not fleeing from his gravest troubles; committed to the most worthwhile causes, loyal to the best ideals, ever hoping, striving, and achieving. To know one’s self as inherently worthwhile, actually to find fullest expression in the widest human service and consciously to become a co-worker with cosmic processes, is spiritual experience deep and abiding. (Curtis Reese, “The Content of Present-Day Religious Liberalism” given at Harvard Summer School of Theology, 1920)

This was not easy in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Social Gospel message of Skinner and many of the Unitarians and Universalists was confronted head-on by World War I and the evil of mankind. Skinner's utopianism was not popular in this age. He called it a "Time of disillusion." Here is his poem by that title:

The world has grown unutterable old-  
A place of bitter disillusionment.  
Like some sad ruin out of ancient time  
Half buried in obliterating sand,—  
So seems the gallant world of yesteryear  
To one who fellowshipped with wistful dreams.

Fair hopes did blossom for a flaming hour  
And they were radiant. Bright youth went forth  
In high imaginings, and all the world  
Expectant and aglow, went forth with them  
To greet the new age and new inbrothering.

But now the heart of the world is broken and sad,  
The dream is spent--the curtains drawn--and those  
Who strode to martial music, spoke great words  
Befitting those great days, have laid aside  
The mask of Jove-like visage and have shrunk  
To lesser mould to play the cynic's part.  
The candle that so mightily illumined  
Has sputtered and gone out.  
The house where we held rendezvous with hope  
Is dark. The dream is gone. The dreamers go  
In sad dismay to disillusionment.

Does God change masks when the curtains drawn,  
Put off high resolution and descend  
To lower levels to play a lesser part?  
No God! That cannot be. No, God's not through.  
There's hope immense to keep hope strong  
And thrill the dreamer's soul with battle-call.  
God's unsundered! He's God in that.  
God's unsundered! So am I! For dreams  
Outlast the dreamer. And when the great event  
Is chronicled, 'tis vision will prove true--  
The final truth in all events--supreme and ultimate.

Therefore I'll dream.  
I'll light the candle yet again, illumine.  
The dark forsaken house, bring back the folk

Who thrilled at glimpses of a fairer world,  
People the stage with pageantry and bid  
Full panoplied illusion still enact  
The epic of inbrothering.  
I'll summon from out of time's unfathomed store  
Great souls who, in the midst of hopeless days  
Kept faith and knew the loneliness of God.  
Those splendid deaths and yet more splendid lives  
Which rallied their faltering age with valiantness  
And left strong memories to breed strong hopes,  
For such undying fellowship has power  
To swell our shrunken souls to ampler mould,  
And make us truer men.

I still proclaim the "Vision Splendid,"  
'Till it strikes God-fire  
In old and broken hearts, and urges on  
The world to consummate its dream.  
God's unsundered! SO AM I! Therefore  
I will live communicate with hope. I light  
The candle and--I DREAM.

**Last words of sermon by Transylvanian minister, Imre Gellerd to his congregation the day he committed suicide:**

God does not expect you to save the world. Your mandate is limited to one single human being, which may be just yourself—or your neighbor. God never expects more from us than we are capable of doing. Each word of comfort, each act of compassion, is a small bonfire in the thundering nights. But these tiny flickering flames, the simple gestures of loving hearts, will add up and will eventually save the world. Salvation is not something we have to wait for, but we must do something about. Because we can. Because we can, therefore we must.

**The Rev. Dr. Gellerd's biography was told by his daughter, Judit who concludes in the preface to her book, *Prisoner of Liberte*:**

Therefore we must! The words echoed in his mind. He had crawled too long in cages. There had been too few words of comfort in the endless darkness. He had to free himself at last. He had to seek another path to salvation, even if that were a final shortcut. It became his mandate to glimpse his life from the other side, for he wanted to believe that his life ultimately had meaning. His faith was at stake, and he offered his life in exchange.

## **TIMELINE – SELECTED DATES IN UNITARIAN HISTORY**

### ***In the Early Church (Common Era / C.E.)***

325. Council of Nicea adopts doctrine of the Trinity; other views of Jesus, such as that of Arius, are declared heretical. Nicene Creed promulgated to espouse Trinitarianism.

416 In the “Pelagian Controversy” Augustine argues that salvation is from God, not from human free will or effort; doctrine of Original Sin established.

451 Council of Chalcedon adopts doctrine that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine.

544 Justinian condemns the teaching of God’s universal love and salvation, declaring heresy the teachings of Origen (C.E. 200).

### ***In Late Medieval Europe***

c. 1380 John Wyclif’s translation of the Bible into English.

### ***In Reformation Europe***

1510 Francis David born.

1517 The Reformation begins with Martin Luther’s attempts to reform Catholicism.

1531 Michael Servetus (1510-53) publishes *On the Errors of the Trinity*.

1539 Katherine Vogel of Krakow burned at the stake for denying the Trinity.  
Birth of Faustus Socinus, leader of the Polish unitarian (Socinian) movement.

1540-70 Italian Humanists, including Dr. Giorgio Biandrata, leave northern Italy for Switzerland and Poland.

1553 Servetus burned at the stake at the behest of John Calvin.

1558 Dr. Biandrata in Poland from Geneva.

1563 Polish Brethren establish the Polish Minor Reformed Church. Socinus writes *On Jesus Christ the Saviour*. Dr. Biandrata goes to Transylvania from Poland and becomes King John Sigismund’s physician.

1564 The Jesuits enter Poland. Francis David consecrated a Reformed bishop.

1566 Francis David begins open opposition to the Trinity in Transylvania.

1568 David pleads for full religious toleration at the Diet of Torda. He becomes unitarian bishop. Kolozsvar becomes unitarian, and the unitarian Church organizes in Transylvania under King John's Edict of Toleration.

1569 The Polish Socinian community of Rakow is founded.

1571 Rights of the Unitarian Church established in Poland. King John Sigismund dies on 14 March.

1572 Law against religious innovation passed in Transylvania.

1578 Socinus goes to Kolozsvar to visit David at Biandrata's request.

1579 David arrested, tried and convicted of "innovation;" dies in prison on 15 November. Socinus settles in Poland.

1591 Socinianism under attack in Poland.

1598 Socinianism introduced to Holland by Polish Socinians.

1600 "Unitarian" name first used.

1603 Socinus dies in Poland.

1605 Rakovian Catechism published.

1615 John Biddle born in England.

1620 The Pilgrims, English religious dissenters, land found Plymouth Colony.

1637 Transylvanian Accord of Dees limits religious toleration. Unitarians under attack.

1638 Socinians driven from Rakow; the city is destroyed the next year.

1647 John Biddle begins preaching anti-Trinitarian beliefs in England. He publishes his Twofold Catechism 1654, and is banished to the Scully Isles the next year.

1648 The Cambridge Platform is formulated by New England Puritan clergy; through it congregational polity becomes established in "Standing Order" churches.

1658 Socinians banished from Poland and given two years to leave. 1660 Polish Socinian exiles go to Kolozsvar.

1662 English Act of Uniformity passed, resulting in the "Great Ejection" of dissenters.

1689 English Toleration Act passed.

1693 Unitarians lose the school at Kolozsvár.

1716 The Great Church (Unitarian) at Kolozsvár reverts to Roman Catholicism.

1723 Theophilus Lindsey born in England.

1735 Joseph Priestly born in England.

The “Great Awakening” begins an evangelical revival in New England Under Jonathan Edwards. It is condemned by Charles Chauncy as anti-rational 1742.

1742 Beginning of split between Calvinists and Arminians in New England. Reason; free will; original sin; Biblical interpretation among other things become dividing issues.

1742 Last Socinian persecution in Holland.

1774 Lindsey and his wife start Essex Hall Chapel (Unitarian) in London. Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Priestly are in attendance—at its founding on 7 April.

1785 The liturgy at King’s Chapel (Anglican) Boston, is modified to reflect Unitarian belief.

1794 Joseph Priestly migrates to Pennsylvania after being driven out of England because of his Unitarian beliefs. He founds congregations in Philadelphia and Northumberland.

### *In 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

1805 Unitarian Henry Ware elected Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, beginning the “Unitarian Controversy” in New England.

1808 Conservative Calvinists found Andover School of Theology

1811-26 Harvard Divinity School founded as non-creedal theological school.

1819 William Ellery Channing preaches his Baltimore sermon on “Unitarian Christianity,” the introduction of American Unitarianism.

1820 The Dedham (church property) court case is settled in favor of Unitarians. The Berry Street Conference begins.

1821 British and Transylvanian Unitarians come into contact with one another.

1825 The American Unitarian Association formed on 26 May. The British and Foreign Unitarian Association is formed the same day.

1827 Boston (later Unitarian) Sunday School Society formed.

1835 Channing condemns slavery.

1837 Horace Mann begins creating the public school system. William Ellery Channing delivers his sermon on “The Sunday School,” in which he expounds his radical ideas on the nature of children and religious education.

1838 Ralph Waldo Emerson preaches his Divinity School Address condemning “corpse cold” Unitarianism.

1841 Theodore Parker preaches on “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity.”

1844 Meadville Theological School for the west established in Meadville, Pennsylvania.

1852 Western Unitarian Conference formed. Antioch College founded.

1860 The War Between the States begins.

Thomas Starr King becomes minister in San Francisco; takes a major role in keeping California in the Union.

1862 Julia Ward Howe, formerly director of Perkins School for the Blind, writes “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

1865 The National Conference of Unitarian Churches established under Henry Bellows.

1867 The Free Religious Association formed.

1875 Jenkin Lloyd Jones becomes Secretary, Western Unitarian Conference.

1878 Jones begins publishing Unity.

1880 The “Iowa Sisterhood” begins to form.

1885 Jabez T. Sunderland replaces Jones as Secretary of the Western Conference; the “Issue in the West” becomes pronounced.

1886 James Freeman Clarke writes his “Five Points of Unitarianism.”

1889 Unitarians establish a mission in Japan.

1893 World Parliament of Religions.

1898 Samuel A. Eliot (once minister at First Unitarian Society of Denver) named Secretary of the American Unitarian Association.

### *In 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

1905 Pacific School of Religion (now Starr King) organized in Berkeley, California.

1912 The Department of Education formed at the A.U.A in Boston.

1920s-30s “Humanist-Theist Controversy” rages. The Humanist Manifesto published in *The New Humanist*, May 1 933.

1934 The Commission on Appraisal formed.

1937 The New Beacon Series in Religious Education begins publication under Sophia Lyon Fahs as curriculum editor.

1939 WWII begins in Europe. 1940 The Unitarian Service Committee organized.

1947 The Fellowship Movement under Monroe Husbands begins to organize growth.

1949 (-1961) Merger with Universalists initiated; by 1953 many departments of the two churches, including RE and youth (LRY), had merged. In 1959, the merger was approved and the Unitarian Universalist Association was formed in 1961.

1963 “Free Church in A Changing World” study begins.

1968 Controversies with Black Power and the war in SE Asia dominate church concerns.

1969-77 Demise of LRY; controversy over gay rights, women’s movement, war. The UU World begins publication.

1977-85 YRUU formed; Principles and Purposes adopted; Ministry of RE established.

1985-98 Partner Church Program begun; commitment to diversity, more women ministers; Interdependence...” study begun.

# A TRANSCENDENTALIST CHRONOLOGY

## Summarized from *Transcendentalism In America* by Donald Koster

1833 Frederick Henry Hedge publishes an article in *The Christian Examiner* recognizing claims of Transcendentalism.

1834 Bronson Alcott establishes his Temple School in Boston.

1835 Elizabeth Peabody's "Record of Mr. Alcott's School;" Margaret Fuller's "Conversations."

1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson publishes *Nature*. The Transcendentalist Club is established.

1837 Emerson delivers his "The American Scholar" address to Harvard College seniors, including Henry David Thoreau.

1838 Emerson delivers his famous "Divinity School Address" to Harvard Divinity School graduates.

1839 Elizabeth Peabody opens a Transcendentalist bookshop. Andrews Norton of Harvard attacks Emerson because of his "Divinity School Address."

1840 Margaret Fuller publishes *The Dial*, and is its first editor.

1841 Brook Farm, a utopian experiment made famous by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his *Blithedale Romance*, established by George Ripley.

1842 Emerson delivers "The Transcendentalist."

1843 *The Phalanx* is established; in 1845, *The Harbinger* succeeds it.

1845 Margaret Fuller publishes *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Thoreau moves to Walden Pond.

1849 Thoreau publishes many essays.

1850 Margaret Fuller dies in a shipwreck off the coast of Italy.

1851 Herman Melville publishes *Moby Dick*.

1854 Thoreau publishes *Walden*.

1855 Walt Whitman publishes *Leaves of Grass*.

# **IMPORTANT UNIVERSALIST DATES**

**Compiled by Carl G. Seaburg**

225 A.D. Origen, Christian philosopher and one of the Church Fathers, advocates universal salvation.

553 Emperor Justinian gets the Council of Constantinople to declare Origen's universalism a heresy

1315 The Lollards, a 14<sup>th</sup> century English reform movement, maintain a belief in universal salvation.

1637 Samuel Gorton, pioneer Christian Universalist, is driven out of Massachusetts for his radicalism.

1684 Joseph Gatchell has his tongue pierced with a hot iron for stating that "All men should be saved."

1723 English born George de Benneville undertakes first preaching mission on the European continent.

1741 John Murray, one of the leaders of American Universalism, is born in Allan, England.

1741 de Benneville emigrates to Pennsylvania and starts sharing a Universalist gospel.

1743 Christopher Sower, Universalist Quaker, with de Benneville, prints the first Bible in America translated into German. Passages supporting the universal character of religion are in bold type.

1750 James Rely in England becomes an independent preacher of the doctrine of universal salvation.

1759 Union, a theological treatise on universal salvation, is published in London.

1770 John Murray arrives from England at Good Luck on Barnegat Bay, New Jersey. On September 30, Murray preaches his first sermon in America in the meeting house of farmer Thomas Potter.

1771 Hosea Ballou, later Universalism's prime spokesperson, is born in Richmond, New Hampshire.

1774 John Murray preaches in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

1778 Caleb Rich organizes The General Society to ordain ministers and issue preaching licenses.

1779 Gloucester Universalists organize the first Universalist church in America; call Murray as minister.

1785 The first Universalist convention with delegates from churches is held in Oxford, Massachusetts.

1786 Gloucester Universalists win the right not to be taxed by the state to support the established church.

1787 Elhanan Winchester, American Universalist leader, preaches Universalism in England.

1788 Murray wins right for Universalists to be ordained ministers with authority to perform marriages.

1790 Philadelphia Convention adopts a declaration of faith and a set of principles of social reform.

1793 General Convention of Universalists organized at Oxford, Massachusetts, continues until the merger with the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961.

1803 Winchester Profession of Faith is adopted by Universalists at Winchester, New Hampshire.

1805 Hosea Ballou writes *Treatise on Atonement*, a defense of universal salvation and also the first book published in America openly rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity.

1811 Maria Cook, considered the first woman to preach in Universalist pulpits, begins her work.

1819 The Universalists begin publishing a weekly paper, *The Universalist Magazine*, which became *The Christian Leader*, and has been published continuously since, now part of the *UU World*.

1828 Thomas Whitmore edits *The Universalist Magazine* making it profitable and widely influential.

1839 Sylvanus Cobb begins *The Christian Freeman* and becomes an influential social reformer.

1841 Adin Ballou founds the utopian Hopedale Community in Hopedale, Massachusetts.

1843 A Universalist church is established in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

1852 Tufts College (now University) is founded by Universalists at Medford, Massachusetts.

1854 Edwin H. Chapin addresses urban social problems in his book *Humanity in the City*.

1856 Saint Lawrence University and Theological School founded by Universalists at Canton, New York.

1856 Children's Sunday yearly observance started by the Universalist Church in Chelsea, Massachusetts.

1862 The Universalist Publishing House is established.

1863 Olympia Brown becomes the first woman to be ordained by a denomination.

1869 Women's Centenary Association forms. Later called the Association of Universalist Women, it unites in 1963 with the Alliance of Unitarian Women to become the UU Women's Federation.

1870 - Universalist Mary Livermore on the Lyceum circuit soon becomes the "Queen of the Platform."

1884-6 Richard Eddy publishes his two-volume history, *Universalism in America*.

1889 Joseph H. Jordan is fellowshipped as the first African American Universalist minister.

1889 Young People's Christian Union is formed (later called the Universalist Youth Fellowship).

1890 Universalists begin a mission to Japan.

1891 Orello Cone becomes the foremost Universalist Biblical scholar with his book, *Gospel-Criticism*.

1898 Isaac Morgan Atwood becomes the first General Superintendent of the Universalist Church.

1904 Joseph Fletcher Jordan, third fellowshipped African-American minister, heads the Suffolk (Virginia) Normal Training School for African Americans (later Jordan Neighborhood House).

1913 The General Sunday School Association is organized at Utica, New York.

1917 Universalist Convention adopts a Declaration of Social Principles written by Clarence R. Skinner.

1921 Universalist women acquire Clara Barton homestead and develop it into a camp for diabetic girls. Barton, a nurse and relief worker during and following the Civil War, founded the U.S. Red Cross.

1933 Free Church of America forms with Universalist, Congregationalist and Unitarian participation.

1935 Washington Profession of Faith adopted by Universalist General Convention at Washington, D.C.

1945 The Universalist Service Committee organizes and works in Hungary, Japan, Philippines, etc.

1953 Liberal Religious Youth merges the Universalist and Unitarian youth organizations.

1955 The Council of Liberal Churches organized, merging the departments of publication, religious education, and public relations of the Universalist and Unitarian denominations.

1956 The Commission on Merger forms to examine the feasibility of merging the two denominations.

1961 The Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association officially consolidate and become the Unitarian Universalist Association.

## **Early Unitarian Statements of Faith**

### **Compiled by the Rev. Dr. Morris Hudgins**

Back in the 1600s the Medford church developed this covenant. It can be seen as an early Unitarian Statement of Faith.

Love is the doctrine of this church,  
The quest for truth is its sacrament,  
And service is its prayer.  
To dwell together in peace  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve human need,  
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine --  
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

Although not in such a poetic form (and this is my paraphrase) William Ellery Channing articulated what he called Unitarian Christianity in 1819:

1. The Unity of God
2. The Unity of Jesus (he was fully human)
3. The moral perfection of God, Infinite goodness, Justice and mercy, Concern for human beings
4. The Mediation of Christ; Not an Atonement; Jesus' death to placate an angry God was absurd and unscriptural
5. True Holiness; Love of God; Love of Christ; Benevolence toward one's fellow human beings

### **1935 Commission on Appraisal's list of Agreements, Tensions & Recommendations**

#### **Unitarians Agree:**

1. In affirming the primacy of the free exercise of intelligence in religion, believing that in the long run the safest guide to truth is human intelligence.
2. In affirming the paramount importance of the individual of his own moral convictions and purposes.
3. In affirming that the social implications of religion are indispensable to its vitality and validity, as expressed in terms of concern for social conditions and the struggle to create a just social order.
4. In affirming the importance of the church as the organized expression of religion.
5. In affirming the necessity for worship as a deliberate effort to strengthen the individual's grasp of the highest spiritual values of which he is aware.
6. In affirming the rational nature of the universe.

### **Unitarians Disagree:**

1. As to the expediency of using the traditional vocabulary of religion, within a fellowship which includes many who have rejected the ideas commonly associated with such words
2. as “God”, “prayer”, “communion”, “salvation”, “immortality”.
3. As to the wisdom of maintaining the definitely Christian tradition, and the traditional forms of Christian worship.
4. As to the religious values of purely naturalistic philosophy.
5. As to the adequacy and competency of man to solve his own problems, both individual and social.
6. As to the advisability of direct action by churches in the field of social and political problems.

### **Commission on Appraisal Recommendations:**

1. A call for larger cooperation with other denominations (especially Universalists)
2. Decentralization of administrative practices
3. To increase efforts to discover and train leaders (especially ministers)
4. A periodic effort to formulate the major arguments and disagreements within the denomination. Could a Unitarian say what we stand for without violating our long tradition of resistance to a creed? Yes!
5. Called for renewed emphasis on worship (including support for the experimental spirit in worship)
6. Called for renewed emphasis on education and establish a department of education
7. Called for corporate social action. “Religion that does not express itself through action in human society is not in any real sense religion at all.”

**In 1944 in an effort by A. Powell Davies**, three committees were created by the AUA to prepare for Unitarian Advance after the war. Davies chaired “Committee A,” which sought to explicate the foundations of Unitarian faith. During the course of preparing the committee recommendations, he reported to the AUA Board that if Unitarians were to move forward they must abandon mere sectarianism. “If we are just another Protestant denomination,” he wrote, “then we have no distinction and no justification for larger scale advance. If we are what Channing called ‘the universal church’ ...then we must begin to be that church.”

In 1944, Committee A proposed “A Statement of Unitarian Working principles,” which was adopted by the AUA Board. This statement identified Unitarians as having faith in:

Individual freedom of belief,  
Discipleship to advancing truth,  
The democratic process in human relations,  
Universal brotherhood undivided by nation, race or creed,  
And allegiance to the cause of a united world community.

# STATEMENTS OF THE UNIVERSALIST FAITH

## WINCHESTER CONFESSION 1803

We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of all mankind.

We believe that there is one god, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works, for these things are good and profitable unto men.

[Neither this nor any form of words shall be imposed as a creedal test]

## BOSTON DECLARATION 1899

We believe in:

The Universal Fatherhood of God;

The Spiritual Authority and Leadership of His Son, Jesus Christ;

The Trustworthiness of the Bible as containing a revelation from God;

The Certainty of Just Retribution for Sin;

The Final Harmony of All Souls with God.

[Neither this nor any form of words shall be imposed as a creedal test.]

## WASHINGTON AVOWAL OF FAITH 1935

We are united by a common purpose to do the will of God as Jesus revealed it and to cooperate in establishing the kingdom for which He lived and died.

To that end, we avow our faith in:

God as eternal and All-conquering Love,

The spiritual leadership of Jesus,

The supreme worth of every human personality,

The authority of truth known or to be known,

And in the power of men or goodwill and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil  
and progressively establish the Kingdom of God.

[Neither this nor any form of words shall be imposed as a creedal test.]

# **The Second Radical Reformation: The Unitarian Fellowship Movement**

**By Holley Hewitt Ulbrich; Ulbrich wrote this paper in Spring 2001 for Starr King School for the Ministry's Unitarian Universalist History class.**

Unitarianism is a product of the Radical Reformation of the 16th century. This was a period in European religious history that gave rise to many new movements, which Ernst Troeltsch sorts into three categories: "church, sect, and mystic." The church to Europeans meant the established church (which, ironically, was true of Unitarianism in parts of Massachusetts until the mid-19th century), but is more generally used to describe a structured, institutional church with a church bureaucracy, a defined identity, and something of a "franchise" mentality that attempts to maintain some degree of uniformity and quality control over those who bear its name.

Sects, in contrast, tend to be small, free-wheeling, and innovative. If they last, they tend to evolve into churches, losing some of their initial fire and enthusiasm as they attempt to codify and preserve what they created or discovered. Liston Pope, Dean of Yale Divinity School, observed that "By its very nature, the sect-type organization is valid for one generation only." Troeltsch's third type refers to the individual religious person, who may or may not be attached to a community, but whose religious experience consists largely of direct encounters with the holy with no need for mediation of priest, church, or community.

Unitarianism began life as a sect, evolving over time in the United States into a rather staid New England institution. Ironically, it appears to be the only religious movement that began as a sect, evolved into a church, and then deliberately created a sect-like movement within its own organization as a form of church extension! This paper attempts to describe and evaluate that experiment in church growth and extension as something unique to our faith community.

## **Personal Encounters**

Sometime in the early 1960s, my husband and I, both students, visited the small Unitarian fellowship in Storrs, Connecticut. We were both born and raised in the Congregational church, religious and political liberals, and had been encouraged to check out the Unitarians. There was no semblance of what we would recognize as a church service in the classroom at the high school, just slides and a discussion of Pakistan. We fled back to the Storrs Congregational Church, where our oldest daughter was baptized.

Four or five years later we moved to Clemson, South Carolina, where there was no Congregational church, but there was another small, university-based Unitarian fellowship, meeting at the YMCA with a sprinkling of children in religious education. Our natural affinity with this group in terms of liberal values was offset by my desire for a more clearly religious atmosphere, professional leadership, and a strong religious education program for our two (later three) children. It was not until 24 years later, our three daughters all baptized and confirmed as Lutherans and off to college, that we found our way back to Unitarian Universalism where we belonged. The Clemson fellowship was still lay-led,

diverse, and quarrelsome, but with some 90 members and frequent visiting ministers, it was closer to what we needed, and has since called a minister.

This story illustrates the best and the worst of the fellowship movement. Without the fellowship movement, it is unlikely that the Unitarian Universalist flag would ever have been planted in these two small college communities, and we would never have encountered Unitarian Universalism despite our New England upbringing and our college experience just 90 miles from Boston. But while the fellowship style-small and close-knit communities, strongly intellectual, anti-institutional, ahistorical, anti-ritual, anticlerical-clearly met the needs of a number of intellectual religious liberals, they did not offer much of what we were looking for in a religious community. As our only direct contact with Unitarian Universalism, these two exemplars of fellowship culture and limited size sent us back in to the arms of liberal Christianity for almost 30 years. Similar accounts are offered by new members in my present congregation who are attracted by what this religious community has become, but who had been turned away by what they first encountered ten or fifteen years ago.

### **Beginnings: The Fellowship Movement as Extension**

The fellowship movement began in 1945, something of an outgrowth of the Church of the Larger Fellowship program designed to serve isolated individual Unitarians. The first fellowship to come into existence as part of the movement was in Boulder, Colorado in July 1948. The Fellowship movement owes its inception to three people: Frederick May Eliot, president of the AUA in the 1940s; and two staff members, the Rev. Lon Ray Call and Monroe Husbands. With limited services and support, a reflection of the AUA's precarious financial situation in the 1940s, most of the cost of this extension program fell on the fellowships themselves. Fellowships actually contributed significantly to both the finances and the membership of the AUA in the next few decades.

Lay-led groups were not new either to Unitarianism or to Protestant Christianity in general. House churches were common in Europe during and after the Reformation for the non-established churches, including Methodists, Quakers, Anabaptists, and others. As early as 1793, Joseph Priestley recommended forming lay-led societies in this country for the emerging Unitarian movement. A proposal in 1907 called for the creation of lay-led societies, but in a very top down, "church-in-a-box" fashion, with the intent to grow them to church size, at which point they would follow the normal pattern of building a building and calling a minister. This earlier strategy was not very successful, so this new venture gave far greater autonomy to the local group to manage its own affairs.

While Bartlett, in her enthusiasm for the novelty of the fellowship movement, may overstate her case, it was clear from the outset that the fellowship movement would create groups larger than the isolated individuals and families served by the newly-created Church of the Larger Fellowship, but that they would not be expected or pressured to grow into churches, at least not in every case. Munroe Husbands' definition of a fellowship was "a group from ten to fifty people, having no church building, no salaried leader, functioning much like a church." He was pleased to note that these expectations were wrong as these fledgling congregations rapidly built or acquired buildings and called ordained clergy or

ordained their own lay ministers. This definition was not, of course, the official definition, which Bartlett cites as:

“A Unitarian Fellowship is a resident, adult group of 10 or more religious liberals who have formulated a set of bylaws (including a purpose), have ‘expressed their approval or general sympathy with the purpose of’ the American Unitarian Association, have sent an application to the Secretary of the Association-together with a contribution, and whose contribution has been accepted by the Board of Directors of the American Unitarian Association. So long as a Fellowship shall continue to make an annual contribution, it shall be a member of the Association and be entitled to voting privileges.”

The fellowship movement as a deliberate program of church extension was a product of limited resources and declining membership. [A few fellowships actually formed in the more traditional sectarian fashion as split-offs from established churches, but most were new starts.] As Munroe Husbands observed, the fellowship movement was the only feasible form of extension for smaller communities. Churches, he said, need to be an investment, not a liability, and the AUA’s limited resources only permitted them to invest in building two or three congregations a year, in urban areas, where they could be expected to grow to self-sufficiency fairly rapidly. He also noted that many of these early fellowships survived and prospered because of the cooperation of ministers from nearby churches.

The goals of the fellowship movement were perceived differently by different observers. Bartlett in particular insists that essence of fellowship is the development of lay leadership and lay spiritual understanding through preparing sermons and other efforts at religious leadership. She insists that the measure of a fellowship’s success is not “growing up to be a church,” but rather its ability to serve its members religious needs. For some people, small size and opportunities for lay leadership are essential to meeting those needs. For the larger AUA, however, the fellowship strategy appeared to be a creative response to the challenge of limited resources stretched thinly over enormous extension potential in a country that was growing rapidly and seeing major population shifts away from the traditional northeastern home of the movement. Even Bartlett admits that there was some expectation that fellowships would develop into churches, quoting from a 1958 extension department pamphlet:

“New churches are affiliated with the American Unitarian Association when they have met the minimum requirements: most evolve from the Fellowship program.”

### **Last Days: Change in Strategy**

While the beginning of the fellowship movement is easy to chronicle, the ending, if indeed it can be said to have ended, was slow and gradual. Sometime between the retirement of Munroe Husbands in 1967 and the beginning of the Eugene Pickett administration (1979-1985), the combination of loss of staff leadership and AUA support and the availability of Veatch monies (beginning in the early 1960s) for supporting other

kinds of extension changed the priorities and approaches for church growth and extension. Some new congregations still choose to call themselves fellowships, and there is still an option of organizing lay-led groups that may affiliate with the UTJA when they reach critical size. Currently that critical size is 50 adult members, a number sufficiently high to discourage development of more permanently small lay-led fellowships and to ensure the potential for reaching an adequate size to be financially and programmatically viable. A number of small fellowships (172 with fewer than 60 members) continue to exist, including some from that first ten-year wave, while a larger number of congregations that began as lay-led fellowships have become churches in most senses of the word, whether or not they retained their original names.

#### Outreach Challenges: The West and the South

In 1949, Edwin Broome wrote in the Unitarian magazine *Christian Register* that the West and South, two promising areas for potential church growth, were quite different from the Unitarian “homeland” in New England:

“.. in the West, Unitarianism has retained its sectarian character... [showing an] aggressiveness and a kind of missionary spirit quite absent from New England... [there are] two types of [Unitarian] churches in the South: the pre-Civil War Unitarian Church, and the new churches now being established by the American Unitarian Association department of Church Extension and Maintenance... [in the South there is] a kind of fundamentalism in reverse.., confining itself to a humanism which is in the last analysis just as intolerant as the fundamentalism against which it has rebelled.”

Western independence and frontier spirit offered an ideal framework for the development of small fellowships, and indeed, in the 13 states of the far west, 47 small fellowships survive to this day, or more than a quarter of the total. In the South, the extreme humanist response to fundamentalism also lent itself to the development of fellowships as intellectual debating societies, although those fellowships have showed a greater tendency to evolve into what Bartlett calls fellowship churches.

In the Thomas Jefferson district, which encompasses large parts of the South and is an area of rapid growth, 31 congregations were organized as fellowships between 1948 and 1980, which might reasonably be regarded as the time boundaries of the fellowship movement. Since 1980, another 19 new congregations have birthed in the district, joining only nine pre-1948 congregations (six urban and three small Universalist churches). Thus, more than half the congregations in the district, accounting for some 5,800 members, are a product of the fellowship movement. Florida, which is in a different district, was also a strong source of fellowships, with 15 in the first wave and 12 in the second wave.

The growth of Unitarianism in the west, particularly in Texas, California and Washington, was also largely a product of the fellowship movement. Bartlett identified 30 congregations in California (there were actually 31) founded as fellowships in the first 10 years, of which four had already become churches by 1958. Eighteen more congregations have since been organized as fellowships in California. Texas accounted for 13 of the first wave of fellowships. Since 1958, an additional 12 congregations in Texas have been

organized as fellowships. Washington organized 16 fellowships in the first wave and seven since that time.

### **What Happened to the Fellowships?**

In Bright Galaxies, Bartlett identified 315 fellowships organized during the first 10 years, of which 40 had died and 26 had converted to church status. By 1968, as the fellowship movement began to wane, there were 500 fellowships, 80 of which had become churches.

At the end of the first 10 years, 40 percent of the congregations in the AUA were lay-led fellowships. Where were those 249 fellowships 40 years later? The current UUA directory shows about 20 percent of them no longer on the radar screen, another 30 percent remaining as relatively small congregations (less than 60 members), and the remaining 50 percent of a sufficient size to support a full “fellowship church” program with some of the trappings of permanence. Many of them have called ministers, built buildings, and hired support staff. Some of these congregations have grown quite large.

More than one-third of the 249 first wave fellowships (88) were concentrated in the Southeast and in California, Washington and Texas in the West. In the Thomas Jefferson district, only four of the 31 congregations organized as fellowships between 1948 and 1980 have persisted as small, unministered congregations, with two of them reporting a membership of less than 20. The largest congregation in the district, Eno River in Durham, NC, started life as a lay-led fellowship in 1966. In South Carolina, five of the six congregations organized as fellowships between 1950 and 1977 are now ministered congregations with memberships ranging from 90 to 339. The sixth fellowship in Aiken no longer exists, but the area is served by a nearby Georgia congregation that started as a lay-led fellowship. Prior to the fellowship movement, South Carolina’s only liberal religious presence was the Charleston church dating from 1772 and several small Universalist churches, of which one still survives.

Thus, for the growing southeast, the fellowship movement was the driving thrust that established a liberal religious presence in the heart of the Bible Belt, and the rate of “conversion” from fellowship format to church format has been extremely high, although many elements of that original questioning, small-group oriented, lay leadership kind of fellowship culture remain strong in many of the region’s congregations.

In Florida, 13 of the original 15 fellowships from the first wave remain in existence, but only one is still a small fellowship (Panama City) and the others ranging in size from 60 to 307 members. Among the second group of 12, there are seven small fellowships (60 members or less) and five larger congregations ranging from 68 to 188 members. At this time, nine out of 27 congregations that were organized as fellowships in Florida still fit the original fellowship format.

In California, the current UUA and district directories shows that 10 of the original 31 fellowships have disappeared from the radar screen, while 12 report more than 100 members. Only three fellowships from this group report less than 40 members. In the second wave, another 19 congregations have been organized as fellowships in the state; six have more than 100 members, while eleven remain small fellowships with 40 members or fewer. Thus California, fertile ground for development of fellowships, has only 13 fellowships that retain the original vision.

In Texas, of the original 13 fellowships, only two have disappeared, and none has grown to over 100 members, although six have 60 or more members. Dallas (56 members) and Houston (76 members) both have “second wave” fellowships coexisting with large ministered congregations, while another 10 “second wave” fellowships range in size from 12 to 26 members. With 17 congregations that are fellowships in terms of both name and size, under 60 members, and none of the original group growing past 100 members, Texas appears to have the highest “survival” rate of the fellowship concept of size and structure.

In Washington, five of the original 16 fellowships have disappeared and only three remain “fellowship size.” The remaining eight survivors range in size from 97 members upwards. Of the seven new units organized since the first wave, only three remain in the fellowship size range of 60 members or fewer. Washington now has six small fellowships out of 23 congregations established in that form.

### **Fellowship Culture and Unitarian Universalism: Conflicting Views**

Broome in 1949 was optimistic, not just about the Fellowship as a growth strategy, but also about its capacity to restore what he considered an essential element of Unitarianism:

“American Unitarianism will be stronger the more it preserves its sectarian aspects, and weaker only when it seeks to follow as a kind of pale reflection of normal American Protestantism.”

Other observers of the character of fellowships have echoed Broome in both positive and negative ways. There is no doubt that sects bear the same relationship to the Unitarian (Universalist) religious movements that the sects have borne to the established churches from the time of the Reformation, both Magisterial and Radical. But to have a sect within the body of the larger movement created some unique challenges and opportunities. Bartlett, writing early in the now half-century history of the fellowship movement, was almost unreservedly enthusiastic about some of the contributions that fellowships made to the larger movement, including a stronger notion of shared ministry, the idea of talkback or conversation following the sermon, and the recognition of the importance of small groups either by themselves or within the larger congregation. She quotes approvingly from a sermon by her husband Josiah R. Bartlett’s sermon:

“..the confrontation of our churches by our fellowship has already taken us a step or two toward the right solution [of a new kind of minister]. Our basic premise is...that each of us is a channel for the divine, and that all we do in our relationship one with another may be regarded as a process of sharing... the job or leadership is as a bearer of resources which enable the individual religious liberals to achieve a satisfactory relatedness: to themselves, their fellows, their universe... [the minister functions] as bearer of resources: prophet, administrator, teacher, counselor, etc. The point ... is to raise the question of how many of these roles he must fulfill, how many can be fulfilled by lay persons, or generally, what gradation of leadership is desirable or feasible in groups varying in size from the smallest to the largest”

Some of the drawbacks to the fellowship movement were noted by Bartlett herself. She recognized some of the leadership problems, the domination of a small group by a few, difficult individuals, the unwillingness to share leadership, the casual and sometimes foolish acquisition of “backdoor” ministers, lay or ordained, without adequate thought and planning. She recognized the evolving fellowship brand of Unitarianism with strong anti-clerical, anti-institutional, ahistorical, anti-ritual, heavily humanist and rational orientation that was often opposed to growth and to the loss of intimacy and genuine religious diversity that might come with developing into a church. At the same time, she noted the challenges of adequate space and the need for a religious education program that could only be sustained by a larger group and with more of a commitment to structure and planning in finances and program.

Finally, Bartlett puts her finger on some of the unique and largely positive contributions made by fellowships to the larger culture of the Unitarian Universalist movement. Talkback originated in fellowships. Fellowships have been more open, more experimental. Fellowships have strongly encouraged the development of lay leaders; some of them have become ministers or denominational leaders, others have carried a firmer notion of shared leadership between the minister and the laity into other congregations when they relocated. In her overall evaluation, she argues that the fellowship movement succeeded in what it tried to do in terms of geographic expansion and number of people reached, bringing liberal religion to a new and different audience and forcing the Unitarians to reflect on themselves in many areas.

With another 40 years to reflect, the evaluation of the fellowship movement is more mixed. In a sermon delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sonoma County on March 24, 1994, the late Rev. Dan O’Neal offered a retrospective on the movement. He quotes an unnamed official in the denomination’s Extension Department about his evaluation of the Fellowship movement. His answer:

“I never would have done it. If it hadn’t been for the Fellowship movement, we could have had a million members by now. It killed us. It aimed at smallness. I think Fellowships ought to die and the movement should be dead. I sometimes tell these dysfunctional Fellowships I encounter that they should just go out of existence and start over again. The movement just killed us. For over 40 years, we’ve been tied up in small, anti-clerical, rational families. I’ve got statistics which show that congregations which start out with less than 30 members will likely will not grow. Half of those that start off with 30 to 40 members will grow. All groups that start off with 50 or more members will grow. Nowadays, groups can still organize as fellowships but we don’t support them from this department. The districts support them. We’re trying to get the Board to up the minimum membership requirements so these small groups can’t be recognized.”

Expressed in the language of marketing, Unitarianism was clearly plagued by “rogue franchises,” local organizations bearing the name of the larger movement but not representing its values, its history, its diversity in a fashion that would enable the average visitor to give Unitarian Universalism a reasonable evaluation as a potential religious

home. In smaller communities, where a small, lay-led, inbred, highly humanist, anti-ritual, anti-clerical lay led fellowship is often the only representation of Unitarian Universalism, the marketing impact of fellowship culture on the larger movement can be highly negative.

Not all of O'Neal's responses were as negative. Here is a perspective from another unnamed minister quoted by O'Neal:

“..the denomination is healthier because of the movement. These Fellowship people brought a lot of energy with them. Lots of people would never have joined an existing Unitarian church. For all the negativity, there was a theological vitality that came out of it all. The recovery of the pagan movement, for instance, and the contributions of feminism came out of that negativity. And although much of it was just instinctual bashing and lashing out, there was much that needed to be criticized. If you really believe in the Protestant principle, every single aspect of religion is in danger of becoming idolatrous and needs to be challenged. If all we had had were our traditional churches, there wouldn't have been the diversity or openness of our denomination. It's possible to indulge in pure negativity, but if it is transformed into redemptive or restorative energy, it is eventually positive. Anyway, we didn't have the money to start an extension program back then. It was either the Fellowship program or nothing.”

O'Neal identifies three areas of tension between fellowship culture and church culture that surfaced in many of his interviews. One, of course, was anti-clericism, an old strain in Protestantism to which the fellowship movement gave new life. Fellowships were often hostile environments for visiting clergy and antipathetic to calling clergy when they reached a size that could no longer be adequately served solely by lay volunteers. A second is the almost exclusive focus on the intellectual to the exclusion of emotional or aesthetic or contemplative aspects of worship. Small fellowships often described their Sunday morning gatherings as programs rather than worship, sometimes even as lectures or discussions. The third area of tension was the nature and degree of clear distinction between the secular and the sacred, not in an integrative way but by denial of the existence of a meaningful sphere of the sacred. All of these drawbacks he attributes in part to their failure to acknowledge the historical context of the movement of which they claimed as their own. O'Neal suggests that the following statement be emblazoned on the doorway of Fellowships as a corrective:

“Whoever would build permanently must build on the past, he must take the foundation which is given him in the institutions and ideas of the Church, whose offspring he is. He must graft himself on the old stock, and know that he bears not the root, but the root him. It is easy, I say, to deny; a small modicum of talent is required to assail and repudiate existing beliefs. But the true reformer accepts existing beliefs, and unfolds the truth that is in them into new and nobler forms of faith.”

## **Transitions**

Ministers who presided over the transition of fellowships to ministered congregations report experiences that are challenging, sometimes harrowing, sometimes enriching. My own congregation is blessed with two such ministers. Rev. Ralph Stutzman, now retired, was the first minister of the Huntington (NY) congregation. Rev. Cynthia Prescott interned in a congregation that had much earlier transitioned from fellowship to ministered congregation and has been for more than three years the first (extension) minister to a fellowship that had been lay-led for 44 years. In addition, Dan O’Neal (himself the first minister to a fellowship) interviewed several such ministers as background for his sermon on fellowships.

Stutzman served the Huntington congregation for 18 years. He was able to work with a demand for strong lay leadership and shared ministry in some innovative ways that made the transition work to the satisfaction of most of those involved, with the congregation growing to 350 members by the time he left. Stutzman recognizes that fellowships have “chewed up” a lot of their first ministers. It is a challenging assignment; the minister must be willing to share the work of the ministry and build on the existing leadership. On balance, his evaluation of the fellowship movement in retrospect is positive. He does not worry about a few “rogue franchises” embarrassing the movement as a whole, and feels that the fellowship experiment has reached a number of people who might not have found Unitarian Universalism otherwise and has encouraged experimentation with worship, programming and organizational structure.

Prescott also finds generally positive values in the fellowship movement, although she shares Stutzman’s concern about the effect on some ministers who are the first minister to a lay-led fellowship because of the challenges of the transition. These challenges include sharing authority, tensions over forms and styles of worship, and relations with the district and the larger movement. She also observes from the two congregations she has worked with closely and others with whom she has had briefer encounters that the fellowship part of a congregation’s history shapes the community’s story and way of being in the world in a more or less permanent fashion, although it may be somewhat attenuated by the immigration of people from more traditional congregations and the departure of some of the more determined advocates of a fellowship style of community.

O’Neal, whose own entire experience was as the first regular called minister of a lay-led fellowship, found similar observations in his interviews. Ministers reported being ignored or shunned, having to choose their words carefully, constantly having their authority questioned, and resistance to any ritualized worship forms. Nothing was accepted without examination. While the experience of leading a fellowship through such a transition can be very hard on ministers, who often report frustration, weariness, and burnout, these same aspects of fellowship culture also account for much of the vibrancy, active participation and creativity of fellowships as worship communities.

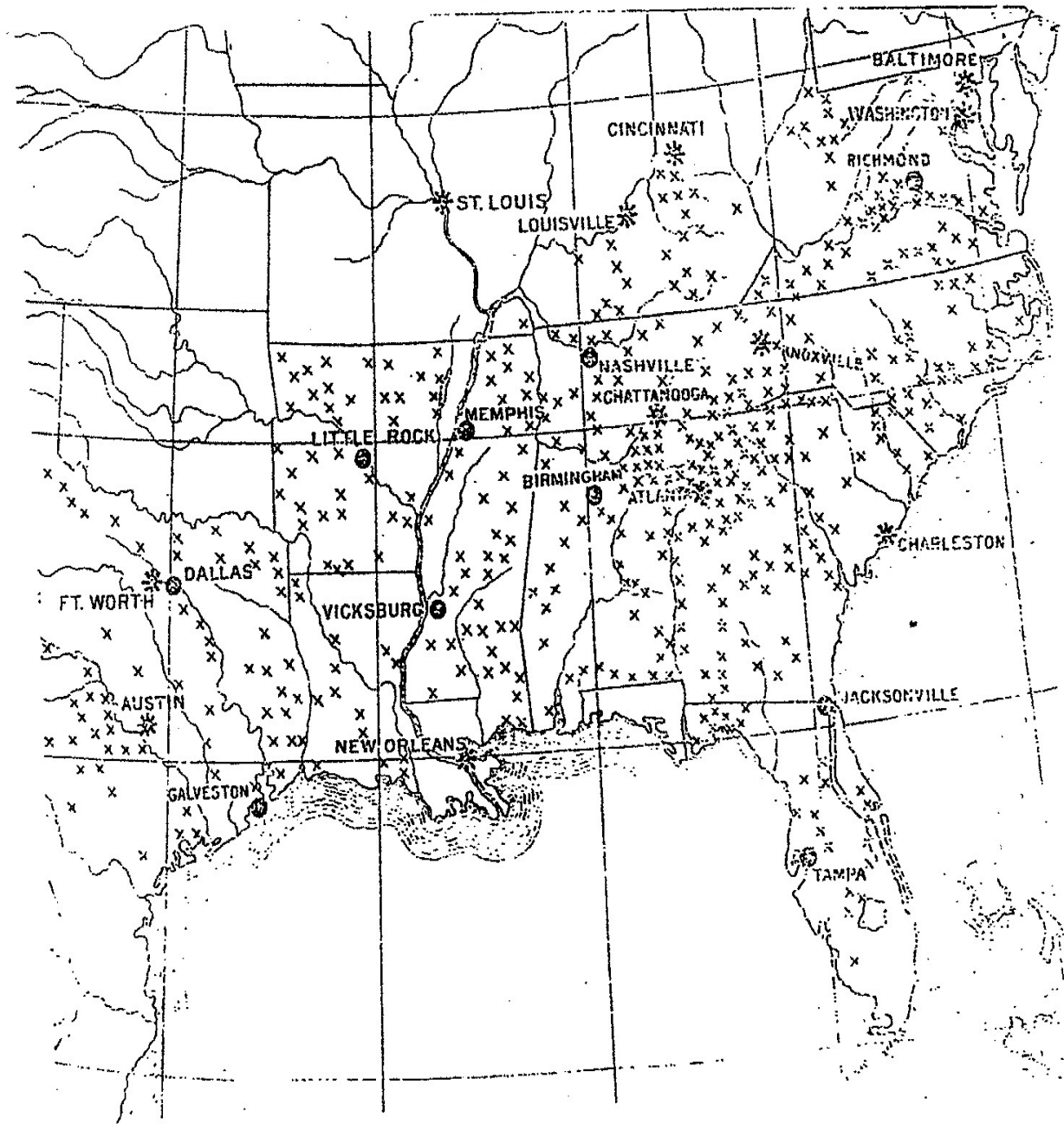
## **Conclusion**

The Fellowship movement in Unitarianism, which had a solid twenty-year run before dwindling into oblivion over the next 10 to 15 years, was a unique experiment in growth strategy. Most centralized bureaucracies plant franchises only with a significant degree of both investment and control from the top. The fellowship movement did neither.

It provided almost no financial resources, offered limited training and advice, and exerted virtually no control over these numerous small, lay-led groups of Unitarians throughout the country. While there have been fellowships whose anti-clerical, ahistorical, anti-worship, strongly humanist/intellectual ambience may have discouraged potential members, these fellowships and others made Unitarianism available to countless parts of the country that could not have had that experience in any other way, given the limited resources available at the denominational level.

At least half of the fellowships--more than 60 percent of the survivors--have evolved into full-fledged congregations, most of them with ministers and/or buildings and religious education programs, contributing both money and human resources to their districts and the UUA. They have infused vitality into a religious movement that needed to transcend its regional parochialism. At the same time, there has been a real cost to this method of expansion. Many people became Unitarians without any sense of the movement's history, traditions, and purpose. Fellowships became the representative of Unitarianism in places that might otherwise have been potential locales for the development for a more mainstream representation of the tradition. Ministers who undertook the challenging transition of some of these fellowships to congregations that were more fully integrated into Unitarian Universalism went through some trying and sometimes even harrowing experiences. Forty years after Laile Bartlett's chronicling of the beginnings of the fellowship movement, her bright galaxies burn even more brightly in some communities, are dimmer in others, and have turned into black holes in still others. As an experiment in church extension the fellowship movement has ended, but its influence will be felt in Unitarian Universalism for many decades to come.

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Map of the Southeastern United States showing, for 1893, existing Unitarian churches (\*), proposed churches (●), and preaching points (X).

From the *January 1893 Southern Unitarian*. Copied in Cory, 1970.

**"COUSINS TWICE REMOVED"**  
**UNITARIANS AND UNIVERSALISTS IN THE SOUTH**

Charles A. Howe

*A longer version of this paper was presented to the History Section at the Collegium Conference, Craigville, MA, October 15, 1995; a shorter version appeared in Unitarian Universalism: Selected Essays 1996, published by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association; (minor revisions by the author, February 2000).*

Southern Unitarians and Universalists have through most of their history been "cousins twice removed," not by generational separation, as this phrase usually implies, but by virtue of being "cousins" separated both from each other and from their northern co-religionists. This paper will consider the nature of these two "removals" by exploring the history of Unitarianism, Universalism, and, more recently, Unitarian Universalism in the southern part of the United States. The exploration will be limited to those eleven states which at one time comprised the Confederate States of America; that is, Virginia (except for that part which became West Virginia), North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas and Texas.(1)

It should be noted at the outset that up until the beginning of the Unitarian fellowship movement in the late 1940s there were relatively few churches of either denomination in these states; at no time up until then did the Southern churches constitute more than a small minority in either denomination. As Mitchell Howard has observed, "the record of liberal religion in the Southeast . . . is not one of continuity. Quite the

contrary, it is a record of false starts made with high hopes, fadeouts into sketchiness, periodic resuscitation attempts, and, throughout, the overwhelming, admonitory sense of marginality. . . Always a minority nationally, we have been a tiny minority in the Southeast, not infrequently an endangered species of religionist."(2) It has been only during the last fifty years that the South has played a significant role in the evolution of religious liberalism.(3)

#### The Ante-bellum Period

Prior to the Civil War there had been only six Unitarian churches established in the region: at Richmond, Charleston, Savannah, Augusta, Mobile, and New Orleans, plus a weak "auxiliary" society at Nashville. The membership of the Richmond and New Orleans churches included both Unitarians and Universalists, hence they can properly be identified as "Unitarian Universalist" during this period. By the time the war broke out, only the Richmond, Charleston and New Orleans churches were functioning. The Augusta church, never well established, had ceased to function in the 1840s, and northern anti-slavery ministers had been largely responsible for the demise of the Savannah and Mobile churches. Theodore Clapp, the minister at New Orleans, had supported slavery, while Samuel Gilman in Charleston avoided the subject. In the decade before the war the issue of slavery effectively estranged the

Unitarian churches in the South from those in the North. This period of Unitarian history in the region has been fairly well chronicled.<sup>(4)</sup>

In contrast, ante-bellum Universalism proves difficult to study. Not only were there many more churches, but the surviving records are scanty and often confusing. Moreover, the roots of Southern Universalism are complex and intertwined, grounded in the Dunkard tradition, in free-thinking farm families, and in the toil of itinerant missionaries. Some southern Universalists were affiliated with no church at all, either because they were anti-institutionalists or because there was no church close enough to attend. In fact, the Alabama state convention made provision for such isolated individuals; it specified that, in addition to authorizing five delegates from each church, five people could attend as delegates from any county in which no church was located. With the exception of the churches in Richmond and New Orleans which were shared with the Unitarians, all the churches were small, usually with memberships of between ten and twenty five. So, too, were the state conventions. A typical report, this one from a meeting of the Alabama convention in 1860, stated that four clergy and twenty five laymen were present, while the Georgia convention claimed an average attendance of four clergy and fifteen laymen for its annual meetings from 1839 until 1860; the high point was reached in 1857, when 27 individuals, including three clergy, were present. Except in scattered places, and then often only temporarily, Universalism failed to flourish in the ante-bellum South, hampered by poor organization and communications, individualism, a lack of preachers, a hostile theological climate, and isolation from the mainstream of the Universalist movement. The isolation was not only geographic,

Universalists, like their Unitarian "cousins," were also separated from their northern co-religionists by sharply differing attitudes over slavery and its abolition.(5)

### The Civil War and Its Aftermath

The Civil War had devastating effects on both Unitarianism and Universalism in the South. The church in Charleston barely survived, as did the church in New Orleans. Of the approximately 40 Universalist churches in existence at the start of the war, apparently only the one in Camp Hill, Alabama, was still functioning at its end. The rest of the Unitarian and Universalist churches in the Confederate states, including the one in Richmond, were casualties; so, too, were the Universalist state conventions.(6) The rebuilding process following the end of hostilities went slowly. Not only had the South been impoverished, but southern Unitarians and Universalists continued to feel themselves alienated from their northern co-religionists. At the huge Universalist Centennial Convention, held in Gloucester in 1870, not a single delegate from the South was in attendance.(7)

The two decades following the war proved to be a time of recovery for the Unitarian churches in Charleston and New Orleans (the latter was becoming increasingly Unitarian in its identity), and in 1882 a church was organized in Atlanta (in 1918 it was to merge with the Universalist congregation to form the forerunner of the present UU Congregation of

Atlanta). Otherwise, there appears to have been little Unitarian activity in the South prior to 1885.(8)

**During this same period Universalism was making a modest comeback in several states.** The Alabama convention was reestablished in 1870, and by 1886 there were "twelve parishes, eleven churches, nine edifices, and eight resident preachers in the State," though it was noted that "[n]one of the parishes are strong, either numerically or financially, and several of the church edifices are owned in common with other sects." The state convention was reorganized in Georgia in 1869, and by 1886 there were "12 parishes, 8 churches, 2 Sunday-schools, 8 church edifices--the value of the Universalists' interest in which amounts to \$4,450--and 11 resident preachers." In South Carolina, where much of the movement had started, the state convention was never reestablished. Texas, however, had become an active missionary field, with thirteen resident preachers plus two licensed lay preachers. Six parishes had been organized, with 163 church members and three Sunday schools with 175 members. In North Carolina it was reported that "very little work has been attempted in the way of reorganization, though there are several preaching stations which are being frequently visited. The organized parishes are 3, with 190 families; churches, 3, with 156 members; 1 Sunday-school of 60 members; and 3 church edifices valued at \$1,000." Elsewhere in the South, apparently little Universalist activity was taking place, although in Florida a strong new church was established at Tarpon Springs in 1885. By then the losses caused by the war had been recouped, at least numerically, but the numbers were small. At that time there were only about 40

Universalist churches in the eleven state region, only a tiny fraction of the denomination as a whole.(9)

## Efforts at Growth

Most of the Unitarian expansion and extension efforts during the sixty years between 1885 and the end of the Second World War were directed westward from Boston and Chicago, not southward. Nevertheless, in 1885 the AUA, as part of a regionalization program, appointed the Reverend George L. Chaney as Southern Superintendent. By then he and his wife, Caroline, were already doing missionary work in the South and had played a significant part in the establishment of the church in Atlanta. By the time Chaney resigned his position in 1896 Unitarian churches had been organized in Richmond, Virginia; Chattanooga, Tennessee; and Fort Worth and Austin, Texas, with others proposed for Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee; Birmingham, Alabama; Dallas and Galveston, Texas; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Jacksonville and Tampa, Florida. Later churches were planned for Asheville and Highlands, North Carolina; and Greenville, South Carolina. Because of the AUA's limited resources, after 1890 much of the "southern work" was supported by the National Alliance of Unitarian Women, who in the early part of the twentieth century established a chapel and school at Shelter Neck, North Carolina. By 1931, however, the National Alliance and the AUA had for all practical purposes abandoned extension efforts in the South, and many of the

churches they had organized, or attempted to organize, had gone out of existence. By then the school at Shelter Neck had been discontinued and title to the property was being transferred to the Universalist state convention. One significant accomplishment was the establishment in 1943 of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church in Charlottesville, Virginia. Not surprisingly, the most fruitful efforts were made in those states and urban areas where the religious and social climate was at least relatively hospitable to liberal views. The overall gains for the sixty year period were modest--an increase in the number of Unitarian churches in the South from three to fifteen out of a denominational total of some 350. Thus up until the end of the Second World War, Unitarianism had made only minor inroads in the South.(10, 11)

Beginning in 1891 the Universalists mounted a significant extension effort in the region led by Quillen Shinn, the renowned "grasshopper missionary" who operated under the sponsorship of both the Universalist General Convention and the Young Peoples Christian Union. During a sixteen year period, right up until the time of his death, Shinn started some forty churches, most of them in the South. While most of his work was done in small towns and rural areas, he planted, or attempted to plant, Universalism in such key cities as Durham, Atlanta, Jacksonville, Montgomery, Mobile, Birmingham, Nashville, Chattanooga, Little Rock, Houston, and Columbia, South Carolina. Shinn also helped to establish two missionary churches with African American constituencies in Virginia at Norfolk and Suffolk and one in the mountains of North Carolina at Pigeon

River. While most of the churches Shinn organized were short-lived because of lack of funds or ongoing ministerial leadership, some of his efforts nevertheless bore fruit. By 1920 things were going well enough in the region for F. B. Bishop to be appointed Southern Superintendent for the denomination, with headquarters in Montgomery. (12)

In the early 1900s the Women's National Missionary Association, perhaps not to be outdone by their Unitarian "cousins," began subsidizing extension work in Eastern North Carolina, with the result that between 1908 and 1923 the number of Universalist churches in the state had increased from five to twenty. However, after that a decline set in, not only in North Carolina, but in the South as a whole, brought on by the depression, a loss of denominational support, a decreasing theological relevance, and a migration away from the rural areas and small towns where most of the churches were located. By 1945 the number of Universalist churches reported for the eleven southern states had declined to 26, including the merged churches in Atlanta and St. Petersburg. Thus at the end of the Second World War, Southern Universalism, like Southern Unitarianism, remained but a small part of its own denomination and a relatively insignificant part of institutional religion in the South.(13)

### The Pre-Merger Period, 1945-1961

The period between the end of the war and merger with the Universalists was a time of rapid growth for the Unitarian movement as a whole, including the South. Much of this growth was the result of the denomination's fellowship movement, initiated in 1948 under the leadership of Monroe Husbands, who

traveled tirelessly around the continent starting new lay-led groups, mostly in places where no Unitarian church existed. Altogether well over three hundred such fellowships were organized during only a dozen years, and while some failed to survive, most of them apparently did. A total of 80 such fellowships were reported for the eleven Southern states in 1961, the year that merger was legally accomplished, and in addition at least a dozen had already achieved church status. It was a remarkable achievement, given that in 1945 only 15 Unitarian and three federated UU societies were reported for these states, and it represented the first real breakthrough in establishing Unitarianism as a significant religious force in the region. Texas and Florida provided the most fertile ground, but fellowships were established in all eleven states. In addition, a half dozen churches were organized directly. One important factor contributing to the expansion of Unitarianism in the South was doubtless the southward migration of northerners, including a significant number of Unitarians, and the liberalization of the region's culture which accompanied this shift. But for whatever reason, the spread of Unitarianism throughout the South during this period was indeed a phenomenal and heartening development.(14)

Meanwhile, though some revitalization of Universalism was taking place elsewhere in the country, the decline in the South continued for the reasons previously given. Moreover, the new "emergent Universalism" and social activism being promoted by some of the younger

ministers appear to have had limited appeal in the rural, small town South. The federated churches in Atlanta and St. Petersburg were growing, the church in Little Rock, dormant since 1930, was reestablished as a vigorous UU fellowship, the church in Tarpon Springs, Florida, underwent renewal under the leadership of Clinton Lee Scott, the churches at Camp Hill, Alabama; Ellisville, Mississippi; and Red Hill and Outlaw's Bridge, North Carolina, remained reasonably healthy despite their small town or rural locations, but most of the others were barely hanging on and at least five more had gone out of existence.(15)

It was during this period that the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America entered into the process of increasing cooperation which led to merger and the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association. In the South, however, the cultural and theological gulf between the two denominations remained wide. Urban, humanistic Unitarians and small town, Christian Universalists seemed to have little common ground on which to meet. Moreover, seeds of separation had been widely sown at the turn of the century by Quillen Shinn, who had an abiding suspicion of all things Unitarian and some of the fruits of that sowing doubtless survived. Even in Atlanta, where practical considerations had dictated a merger, the alliance was for long an uneasy one, with the Unitarians and Universalists at one time sitting on opposite sides of the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. (16)

It should be remembered, however, that there were times and places over the years when common ground had been found: in ante-bellum

Richmond and New Orleans; in Charleston, where in 1869 the remnant of a Universalist congregation lent the Unitarian church its assets to enable it to survive; in Florida, where the State Conference of Liberal Churches was organized in 1926; in Chattanooga in the 1930s, where a Universalist summer institute welcomed all Southern religious liberals regardless of denominational affiliation; at Shelter Neck in 1932, where the Unitarians deeded over their property to the North Carolina convention for use as a camp and conference center; in Liberal Religious Youth, created in 1953 through the merger of the Unitarian and Universalist continental youth organizations, with Mary Vann Wilkins of the Red Hill church chosen as one of its first presidents. But on the whole, the gulf showed little sign of narrowing.(17)

### The Unitarian Universalist Merger, 1961

When the Unitarian-Universalist merger was finalized in 1961 it brought together two denominations of different traditions, different cultures, and unequal size, and nowhere were these differences more marked than in the South. At the time of merger there were roughly 600 Unitarian societies (about 250 of them fellowships) with a total adult membership of approximately 107,000, and 300 Universalist societies (about 10 of them fellowships) with a membership of 40,000-- ratios of two to one and five to two. In the eleven Southern states, however, the relative differences were much greater: 113 societies reported versus 21 and approximately 11,200 members compared to 1,600--ratios of five to one and seven to

one. Moreover, Southern Unitarianism was experiencing a time of rapid growth, Southern Universalism one of slow decline. These disparities, plus the cultural and theological differences already cited, offered little if any basis for uniting. Had the rest of the country been like the South, it seems unlikely that merger would ever have occurred.(18)

#### Four Southern Churches: A Study in Contrasts

The differences between urban Unitarian-tradition churches and small town or rural Universalist-tradition churches can be illustrated by a comparison of four such congregations--those in Charleston, South Carolina and New Orleans, Louisiana with the those in Red Hill, North Carolina and Camp Hill Alabama. All four have roots extending well back before the Civil War. [These descriptions were written in 1994.]

##### *The Unitarian Church of Charleston*

The Unitarian Church of Charleston has been located in the heart of the city since its beginning. Its historic building's present architecture dates from 1854, when an earlier structure, built in the 18th century, was extensively remodeled along Gothic lines. The building, with its fan tracery in the sanctuary ceiling, is considered an architectural gem and attracts many visitors. The church presently has roughly 200 members and operates on a budget of approximately \$100,000. The membership, which has increased markedly in recent years, is basically white and middle class, slowly moving toward racial diversity through the addition of a few African American and Asian Americans members. Over half of the present

members have joined in the last five years, but there are a significant number who have belonged to the church for over a quarter of a century. The congregation is theologically diverse, and with a recent influx of young families there are now roughly 40 children and youth in the church school. Attendance at Sunday services averages 130 to 140. Jacqueline Collins has been the minister since 1989; the paid staff also includes a director of religious education, a director of music, and a church administrator.

The church was originally organized in 1772 as an Independent Congregational Church but was chartered as the Unitarian Church of Charleston in 1839. Samuel Gilman, a Harvard graduate and composer of his school's alma mater, "Fair Harvard," served as its minister from 1819 until his death in 1856; it was he who, with the strong support of his gifted wife Caroline, was responsible for firmly establishing the church's Unitarian identity and its place in the city's culture. Unlike the anti-slavery ministers whose outspoken views led to the closing of the Unitarian churches in Savannah and Mobile, Gilman remained silent on the issue. At the beginning of the Civil War the organ, communion plate, library, records and other church furnishings were moved to Columbia for safekeeping, and the building was boarded up. Ironically, when General Sherman's army marched through Columbia in 1865, the church's property there was destroyed. The church, its building intact, reopened at the end of the war, helped by the previously mentioned loan from the then dormant Universalist society. In 1886 an earthquake seriously damaged the building; contributions from Unitarians throughout the country provided the funds for its repair. Throughout the post-Civil War period of the 19th century and the first half

of the 20th the church appears to have been a small, stable, respected and respectable Charlestonian institution.

In the last half of this century, however, the church, at least until recently, went through difficult times as a succession of ministers (there were seven between 1950 and 1987) struggled with problems of liturgy, building maintenance and social change. Membership reached a low ebb in 1974, and attendance at Sunday services had reportedly dropped to an average of twenty five. The turbulent years of the civil rights struggle were particularly difficult as the all-white congregation, basically southern and conservative in its racial views, resisted what were seen as northern, liberal responses by its ministers.

The interim ministry of David Scheyer from 1987 until 1989 appears to have been a turning point for the congregation. A careful assessment of the church's needs was carried out, the liturgy simplified, the cross replaced by a chalice. In 1989 the church installed Collins as its first woman minister. In the ensuing five years the membership has grown significantly, the church school has been revived, social service programs initiated, and persisting racial issues carefully addressed. In the process the church has earned the reputation of being an open, welcoming religious community, accepting its past, but facing the future.(19)

### *The First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans*

The First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans (its name was changed from "First Unitarian" in the late 1980s) has recently moved from a site on Jefferson Avenue in the uptown area of the city where it had been located since 1902, to a residential section on South Claiborne Street. The

change was precipitated by a need for more space, and the congregation now occupies a large and relatively modern church building which it is purchasing from a UCC (formerly E&R) congregation. The church presently has about 300 members (it has been growing rapidly) and an operating budget of around \$100,000. The membership is predominantly white, middle class, with a small number of African Americans. About half the members are native Louisianians; about a third are gay and lesbian. Theologically the congregation is very mixed, ranging from atheistic humanists to liberal Christians; politically it is very liberal, conservative tending to join the other UU congregation in the city, the Community Church of New Orleans. There is a large church school with approximately a hundred children and youth. Average attendance at Sunday services is about 130, and a Wednesday evening service is also held, followed by dinner and adult education programs. The minister since 1988 has been Suzanne Meyer, a native Texan; other paid staff members are a director of religious education, a music director, and a church administrator. Albert D'Orlando is the church's minister emeritus.

The church dates back to 1833 when a split occurred in the First Presbyterian Church in the City and Parish of New Orleans, which had been served since its founding a decade earlier by Theodore Clapp, a New Englander and graduate of Andover Theological Seminary. Soon after he was installed Clapp concluded that neither eternal punishment nor the doctrine of the Trinity were scriptural and rejected both. In 1832 the local presbytery convicted him of heresy and suspended him until he showed "signs of repentance," but the following year the congregation, by a margin of 86 to 25, voted to retain him as its minister and reorganized itself as

the First Congregational Church in New Orleans. Twenty years later, in 1853, the church renewed its charter as the First Congregational Unitarian Church. Clapp, who was at least as much of a Universalist as a Unitarian, refused to affiliate with either denomination, though both claimed him, and when a new building was erected in 1855 it was called the Church of the Messiah to avoid a sectarian name. Clapp defended slavery, though he was dedicated to free expression and at one time allowed an abolitionist to speak from his pulpit. When he resigned in 1856, he left behind a viable and vital congregation.

The church remained open during the Civil War under strong lay leadership, the three northern ministers who followed Clapp in quick succession all having left before the war broke out. From 1866 until 1881 the church struggled along under the guidance of numerous ministers, at one point finding itself \$25,000 in debt. The Universalist members agreed to pay off the indebtedness if the church was renamed "The First Universalist Parish of New Orleans," but the proposal was dropped when money was found elsewhere. It was not until the ministry of Charles Allen (1881-1889) that the church was to revive and reclaim a leadership role in the affairs of the city. The church went into another decline during the Great Depression of the 1930s, but recovered during the '40s under the ministries of Thaddeus Clark and Alfred Hobart.

During the long tenure of D'Orlando (1950-1981) the church entered a new phase. D'Orlando was a social activist who worked hard for racial integration and later spoke out repeatedly against the war in Southeast Asia. His work for integration led to a split in the church, with part of the membership leaving to form the Community Church; later, his stand on the

war in Southeast Asia led to a major controversy within the congregation over freedom of the pulpit. By the time D'Orlando retired the church was firmly established as a center of social action and concern. He was followed by Michael McGee, who served from 1982 until 1988.

During the past six years the church, under the leadership of Meyer, has carried on the tradition for social concern, much of it through ecumenical organizations, while at the same time nurturing the worship and spiritual life of its members. In spite of its great diversity there is apparently a common sense of mission, based as much on religious convictions as on social concern.(20)

#### *The First Universalist Church of Sampson County at Red Hill*

The Red Hill Universalist Church is located out in the country on US Highway 421, several miles south of the town of Clinton in Sampson County in southeastern North Carolina. The present church building, an attractive red brick structure erected in 1954, is set back from the road in a grove of pine trees. There is a small, one-story parsonage on the north side of the church and a cemetery in the rear. The church operates on a budget of about \$20,000 and has an all-white membership of around sixty. Church services are held twice a month with an average attendance of 25 to 35, the small church school meets weekly, and adult education classes are held on the Sundays when there is no service. Vernon Chandler has been the church's part-time minister since 1990; he preaches twice a month. His chief employment is as a counselor in the South Carolina correctional system.

Universalism was first introduced into Sampson County in 1827, and a society was organized at Red Hill in 1835. It was short-lived, but in 1846 John C. Burruss, an itinerant missionary, established another society with sixteen members. A meeting house was erected in 1856, and a few years later a church was organized in connection with the society. However, the society and church failed to survive the Civil War.

In the winter of 1884-85 another itinerant missionary, D. B. Clayton, organized both a church and a Sunday school at Red Hill. A plaque in the vestibule lists the names of the ninety six men and women who were charter members, many of them from families still active in the church. The Winchester Profession was adopted as the church's standard of belief, along with a covenant and bylaws specifying that new members were to be admitted by vote of the congregation. Those being baptized had their choice of sprinkling or immersion, with the latter taking place in the nearby Six Runs River. Preaching services were held whenever a minister was available. Over the years the church at Red Hill spawned churches at Clinton, Oak Grove and Hopewell; all three in time died out as their isolated locations, modern transportation and population migration rendered them obsolete.

Over the years Red Hill Universalists have earned the reputation of being a fun-loving lot. As one old-timer put it, "If the Baptists had allowed fiddle playing and dancing there might not have been any Universalists here in the first place." The story is told of a dancing party hosted by a Universalist that some Baptists slipped away to attend. During the proceedings a practical joker (he was a Universalist) went out into the yard, caught a gander, climbed up on the roof and dropped it down the chimney. When

the gander, with feathers singed and blackened by soot, jumped out of the fireplace and went flapping around the room with loud squawks, the Baptists, fearing their sins had found them out and the devil was in their midst, dashed out the door as fast as they could go!

Over the 110 years of its existence the Red Hill church has been served by some twenty ministers, varying widely in age, experience, theology and style. Most of them were shared with one or two other congregations. With the exception of one young non-theistic minister who was told that his services were no longer wanted, this basically theistic congregation has apparently been open to and enjoyed them all. One high point came in 1974 with the ordination of Darrell Berger--the first in the church's history. There were visiting dignitaries, a dinner and a dance on Saturday night, and the ordination service and a lunch on Sunday. As one pillar of the church put it, "We had a wing-ding."

Among the traditions of the church are an annual "Homecoming Sunday," an "Ingathering" weekend with much food and many home-made items to be auctioned off, a candlelighting service before Christmas, "protracted meetings" or revival series, Children's Day, a Men's Breakfast at which the men of the church serve the women, and a summer picnic. The preface of the history of the church, now in process of being written by its members, states that "we have tried to show how a group of (southern liberal) religious thinkers calling themselves Universalists has grown to become part of the Unitarian Universalist Association." Further on the church is described as "a tremendous source of strength, comfort, and inspiration" over the years, "an oasis of liberality in a desert of orthodoxy." One hopes the oasis will continue to hold back the desert.(21)

### *The First Universalist Church of Camp Hill*

The Universalist church in Camp Hill, Alabama, is located in the center of town on Senator Claude Pepper Drive, in close proximity to the Baptist and Methodist churches. Its building, erected in 1907, is attractive and well maintained and, like its two neighbors, built of the red brick indigenous to the area. Camp Hill is a small town of perhaps 2,000 people, located in Tallapoosa County in the east central part of the state. Once thriving, it is now economically depressed. The saw mill and the cotton gin have been closed down, and the Central of Georgia Railway no longer runs through town. The largest nearby towns are Auburn and Opelika, which lie about 25 or 30 miles to the southeast. The 1994 UUA Directory lists the church as operating on an annual budget of \$8, 520, with ten members and three church school children. Joan Armstrong, its quarter-time minister who also serves a UU congregation in Marietta, Georgia, thinks that the membership was under-reported and is actually about 25. Services are held once a month, when Armstrong comes over for the weekend, and are followed by lunch; average attendance is around 25. On other Sundays lay-led adult education programs are held. The Methodist church has preaching twice a month and the Baptist every Sunday, with prayer meetings on Wednesday night. The schedules are arranged so that the Universalists and Methodists can share the same organist, and a number of Methodists attend the monthly services at the Universalist church.

The church, started informally by the Slaughter and Harper families in 1845, was organized two years later by C.F.R. Shehane as part of his circuit as an itinerant preacher. It was easily the most flourishing of the

Universalist churches in the South before the Civil War and for many years thereafter, with a membership at one time of 250. When a constitution and bylaws were drawn up in 1870, the following covenant was adopted:

Cherishing these truths, we covenant and promise that we will earnestly use the various aids to Christian culture and try to grow in the graces of the Christian life; that we will faithfully walk with this Church in Love and in Spirit for mutual help; and that seeking to be negligent in no duty, we will prayerfully endeavor to apply[?] the doctrine of God our Savior in all things: remembering that the one purpose of Christ is to make us like himself.

As Dorothy Moore, a member of the Slaughter family and a present-day member of the church, puts it, this covenant “still holds the basic principles [of the church] today.”

For many years Camp Hill was the site of the Southern Industrial Institute, a coeducational residential school organized by Universalists to provide practical education for poor white youth from the rural South. Established in 1898, it continued in Universalist hands until after the Second World War and had close ties to the local church throughout its history. In 1955 the school added a military program and was renamed the Lyman Ward Military Academy in honor of the minister who founded it and led it for half a century.

One notable Universalist brought up in the church was Mary Slaughter, who served the denomination in many ways throughout her life. She was so well known as a Universalist field worker that after she married Clinton Lee Scott in 1930, he became widely known as “Mary Slaughter’s husband.” The wedding took place in the Camp Hill church with Ward and John van Schaick, editor of the Christian Leader, co-officiating. Harold

Scott, Clint's brother, who was minister of the church at that time, served as best man. Mary Slaughter Scott served on the UCA Board of Trustees and, during the 1950s, on one of the joint committees laying the groundwork for the Unitarian-Universalist merger. In this capacity the woman from Camp Hill proved at least a match for Frederick May Eliot, the Brahmin from Boston and AUA President. At one point in the negotiations the usually reserved Eliot cried out in exasperation, "Mrs. Scott, you are a very stubborn woman!"

Despite the cultural changes going on throughout the South, the Camp Hill church managed to fend off for some time the decline that most of the Universalist churches in the region were experiencing. At the time of the merger in 1961 its reported membership was still as high as 95, with 50 children in the church school. But in time, with the saw mill and the cotton gin closing and the trains no longer running, the inevitable decline took place. After Leonard Prater's tenure as minister ended in the late 1980s (he had been there since 1962), the church was served on a part-time basis by Rhett Baird. By then the world in which the church had flourished had long since vanished. When Armstrong began her monthly visits in 1992, the church found itself struggling for survival in a vastly different world. Its future remains uncertain, but not without hope. The beautiful building is still there, well cared for; the faithful still congregate on Sunday mornings; over 100 people attended the 1994 "Homecoming." The cotton gin may never reopen and the trains will never run through town again, but perhaps the First Universalist Church of Camp Hill will find ways to live on and to bring new meaning to a new and different world.(22)

### After Merger: Unitarian Universalism in the South

In the third of a century since merger, Unitarian Universalism in the South has shown significant growth, becoming an increasingly important part of the denomination. The number of active societies reported for the eleven state area has risen from 131 to 183, and the number of adult members from about 13,000 to roughly 21,000--this latter increase in spite of a more stringent process for reporting membership which has tended to lower the figures. By contrast, the figures for the denomination as a whole for this period have remained almost constant, indicating that the gains in the South are largely responsible for offsetting losses in other regions. Most of the societies in existence in the South at the time of merger have survived, and while a distinction is no longer made between churches and fellowships, many of the latter have grown to a size that would have formerly qualified them for church status. Much of the gain has undoubtedly been due to the southward shift of population and the accompanying liberalization of the region's culture.(23)

Given their cultural and theological differences, the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism in the region has been difficult and to a certain extent remains unaccomplished.(24) However, over the years a genuine effort has been made; most of the Unitarian-tradition societies now identify themselves as "Unitarian Universalist" and in recent years, especially, there has been a growing appreciation of the Universalist tradition and its values. In general, the Universalist-tradition churches

have responded to the merger in one of two ways. Those in Eastern North Carolina and the Tarpon Springs church in Florida have been for the most part accepting and cooperative. The Universalist Convention of North Carolina, for example, has for many years opened its membership to all UU societies in the eastern part of the state, with the result that the convention serves in some ways as a UU cluster group. Differences remain, but on the whole those from the two traditions are working well together, with a significant number of those from Universalist-tradition churches participating in district affairs and gaining recognition for their contributions.(25) On the other hand, Universalist churches from other parts of the South have tended to remain aloof from denominational involvement (the church in Louisville, Mississippi went so far as to disaffiliate), but recently there is evidence that this dissociation is breaking down. (26)

Of the 18 non-federated Universalist churches reported in the South at the time of merger, at least seven have gone out of existence and the future of others remains uncertain. While Unitarian Universalism flourishes in the cities and retirement communities of the South, the presence of this small Universalist remnant of "country cousins" serves as a challenge both for inclusivity and for perseverance in unreceptive environments.(27)

Certainly southern Unitarians and Universalists are no longer "cousins twice removed" to the extent that they once were. With the population shifts and cultural changes (including racial attitudes) that have taken place during the last half century, they have become at least "kissing cousins" with each other and with their "Yankee kinfolk." In fact, in many cases these days, they are warmly embracing!

Unitarianism, Universalism and Unitarian Universalism in the South, though thus far limited in scope and influence, has had a fascinating history, one which richly deserves further study by Unitarian Universalists not only for its human interest (in that it is rich), but also as a potential source of wisdom, guidance, inspiration and self-understanding.

## References and Endnotes

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3. Up until the middle of the 20th century the southern churches at no time constituted more than roughly seven per cent of the total in either denomination. See 1945 AUA Directory; 1947 UCA Directory; Miller, Russell E., The Larger Hope: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770-1870 (Boston: UUA, 1979), pp. 165, 740-779; A Stream of Light, Conrad Wright, editor (Boston: UUA, 1975), p. 66.
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8. Gibson, op. cit.; Gohdes, op. cit.; Brooks, Charles C., "Unitarian Universalism: The First Hundred Years in Atlanta," in Unitarian Universalists in Atlanta (Centennial Issue, 1882-1982).
9. Eddy, op. cit., pp. 365-401; DeWolf-Hurt, Mary Louise, "Unitarian Universalism in Florida: A Sketch of Beginnings and Efforts at Beginnings," January, 1995, p. 5. See also Cory, Earl Wallace, "Unitarians and Universalists of the Southeastern United States During the Nineteenth

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11. A significant number of isolated Unitarians in the South were able to maintain contact with the denomination through the Post Office Mission, which carried on an extensive program of literature distribution and correspondence for several decades around the turn of the century. See DeWolf-Hurt, op. cit., pp. 7-8 and Map in Addendum (from The Southern Unitarian, January 1896); Cooke, George Willis, Unitarianism in America (Boston: AUA, 1910), pp. 290-291.

12. Miller, op. cit. 1985, pp. 341-371;

13. Miller, op. cit. 1985, pp. 388-395; A History of Universalism in North Carolina, Williams, John Enoch, Chair, History Committee (Universalist Convention of North Carolina, Inc., 1966?), pp. 96-148; 1947 UCA Directory; Manual, "Merger and Alternatives" (Wellesley Hills, Mass.: Joint Commission on Merger, 1958).

14. A Stream of Light, pp. 146-147; 1945 AUA Directory; 1961-62 UUA Directory.

15. 1947 UCA Directory; 1961-62 UUA Directory.

16. Karnan, Robert W., "Atlanta's Legacy: Tireless Ministers, 'A Few Courageous Members,'" in Unitarian Universalists in Atlanta.

17. Miller, op. cit. 1979, pp. 749-750; Miller, op. cit. 1985, pp. 348, 352, 392; DeWolf-Hurt, op. cit., p. 8; 1961-62 UUA Directory, p. 51.

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22. Miller, op. cit. 1979, pp. 767-768; Miller, op. cit. 1985, pp. 264-273, 348; Howe, Charles A., "He Lives Tomorrow: Clinton Lee Scott, Revitalizer of Universalism," Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, Vol. XXI - Part II (1989); Scott, Clinton Lee, Some Things Remembered (Boston: Church of the Larger Fellowship, 1976); telephone interview with Joan Armstrong, October 20, 1994; Moore, Dorothy, a handwritten account of the First Universalist Church of Camp Hill, 1994?; handwritten copy of 1870 covenant supplied by Moore.
23. The 1994 UUA Directory reports 1,037 societies with 149,592 adult members; the 1961-62 UUA Directory reports 1,008 societies with 151,557 adult members. It is generally agreed that the current membership figures are more accurate and that there has actually been some gain in total membership.
24. For example, at one point in the 1960s an LRY meeting at Shelter Neck was disrupted when some parents from Universalist-tradition churches removed their teen agers after learning that a few African American youth from Unitarian-tradition churches were attending.

25. In recent years Susan Simmons of Outlaw's Bridge and Regina Burton of Red Hill have served on the Thomas Jefferson District board; Burton and Phebe Harper of Kinston have received the district's "Unsung UU" Award; and at the 1995 district meeting Margaret Sutton of Outlaw's Bridge was given the Distinguished Service Award.

26. Following merger, some of the southern Universalist churches joined the short-lived Committee for Continuing (Christian) Universalist Churches (Miller, op. cit. 1985, p. 664). As evidence of the current breaking down of barriers, The Universalist Herald, a monthly periodical published in Canon, Georgia, since 1847, which had strongly opposed merger, has recently adopted a much more pro-UUA editorial policy (Balkan, William H., "The Herald Comes of Age," Universalist Herald, Vol. 147, No. 6, September-October 1995). In addition, an increasing number of ministers in UUA fellowship have been serving these churches, among them, Joan Armstrong, Rhett Baird and Daniel Weck.

27. 1961-62 UUA Directory; 1994 UUA Directory.

Excerpt from

**SHELTER NECK'S UNITARIAN SCHOOL,**  
a thesis paper by Eunice Milton Benton, 1994

**Chapter I**

**SOUTHERN WORK: UNITARIANISM IN THE SOUTH**  
**AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY**

*Rev. Mr. Chaney said there was no doubt in his mind that the greatest work done for church extension in the next ten or fifteen years will be owing to the work done by the women in the last ten years, and they are bound to do more; to do what the A.U.A. cannot do.*

National Alliance Minutes -

1891

The late nineteenth-century South, imbued with religious fervor though it may have been, had never embraced Unitarianism. “Overall, liberal churches made little impact on nineteenth century religious life in the Southeast,” concludes Earl Wallace Cory. His 1970 dissertation about nineteenth-century Southern Unitarians and Universalists declares that the efforts of both denominations--they would not merge until 1961--were “only modestly successful” in the region.

Throughout the better part of the century the only Southern Unitarian churches of any size and stability were in the cities of Charleston, New Orleans and Louisville, with a congregation in Richmond intermittently active. Both the Charleston and New Orleans congregations, still the oldest continually functioning Unitarian churches in the South, had been established by 1817. Begun as Presbyterian groups, both these Southern coastal city congregations were sustained through the mid-century years by long-term ministers, the

Reverend Samuel Gilman in Charleston and the Reverend Theodore Clapp in New Orleans. In Louisville Bostonian clergyman George Chapman, who had come “at the solicitation of a few earnest and liberal-minded people to whom the principles of Unitarianism had long been dear,” was the minister who helped establish that church in the 1830s. As early as 1833 a congregation had been started in Richmond, but declined into inactivity during the Civil War years and was not revived until the 1890s. Short-lived congregations had also existed in the course of the century in Augusta and Savannah, Georgia, and in Mobile, Alabama.

In addition, a number of unsettled Unitarian ministers, some of whom had been converted from other faiths, roamed the rural South in the latter part of the century. Joseph G. Dukes, in eastern North Carolina, and Jonathan Christopher Gibson, in northwest Florida, were among these. The National Alliance of Unitarian Women would become the primary support for the Reverend Dukes, whose missionary ministry would plant a chapel and school at Shelter Neck, North Carolina.

The Unitarianism that came to the South in the nineteenth century had arisen out of the Reformation and acquired its name for its preference of viewing God as one Being instead of a Trinity. The American denomination had its roots in Massachusetts, where it had been founded in the young American republic by a group of Boston clergy who had moved away from the more orthodox, Calvinist-centered belief system of New England Congregationalists. In its nineteenth-century form, Unitarianism was, primarily, a reaction against Calvinism’s belief that human beings were depraved and threatened with hell. Late nineteenth-century Unitarians considered themselves “liberal Christians,” but Christians nonetheless, and were frequently surprised and offended when more orthodox and conservative religious groups attacked them. “The central idea of Unitarianism was shared by those who bore this name, whether in the North or the South,” points out Cory. “[They] embraced both a denial of the dogma of the Trinity and an emphasis on the unity of God.”

Cory also cites another common theme in the faith and its conflict with orthodox Christianity: “Reason increasingly became a hallmark of Unitarianism . . . Those holding the orthodox theology doubted the role of reason, because they considered man’s nature corrupt and dominated by the power of evil.” While in urban Boston Unitarianism was the establishment denomination, the region below Mason Dixon line did not its “reasonable.” Most late nineteenth-century Southerners viewed Unitarianism not only as unorthodox but “Northern” as well.

Young as an American denomination, the Unitarian Church and its liberal religious precepts were confined almost entirely to New England for most of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s and 1890s, however, the Boston-based denomination stepped up efforts to spread the Unitarian message in the South. Its primary goal in the region was to foster churches in the larger cities. Although the last two decades of the century would witness more Unitarian activity in the South than ever before, in the mid-1890s the denomination would reassess its goals and resources and rein in its extension efforts, virtually abandoning some projects and precipitating the resignation of its recently established Southern Superintendent. The National Alliance of Unitarian Women would be called upon to rescue the pioneer work and to nurture those fragile patches in the South where Unitarianism had taken root.

Even though the denomination clearly wanted to promote itself, Unitarians’ outreach activities were less proselytizing than those of more evangelical faiths, and their projects tended to have prominent educational and social aspects. Particularly in the South, the denomination believed that education would lay a foundation for the acceptance of Unitarianism, and that, as Cory asserts, “liberal religion would thrive if the educational level of the southern communities was raised. “ In the period immediately after the Civil War, many individual Unitarians supported schools in the South for formerly enslaved African Americans. Later both individual Unitarians and Unitarian organizations aided

educational ventures for southern white children.

Historian Cooke explains the Unitarian perspective about reform work:

The belief of Unitarians in the innate goodness of man and in his progress towards a higher moral life, together with their desire to make religion practical in its character and to have it deal with the actual facts of human life, has made it obligatory that they should give the encouragement of their support to whatever promised to further the cause of justice, liberty, and purity. Their attitude towards reforms, however, has been qualified by their love of individual freedom. They have a dread of ecclesiastical restriction and despotism over individual convictions. And yet, with all this insistence upon personal liberty, no body of men and women has ever been more devoted to the furthering of practical reforms than those connected with Unitarian churches.

As early as 1868, in fact, the American Unitarian Association had become involved in reform in the South, focusing especially on the needs of recently enfranchised African Americans. In an agreement that year with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Unitarians furnished \$4000, to be used primarily in educational work. In his *Unitarianism in America* Cooke lists individual Unitarians who “engaged in the work of educating the negroes” during the years immediately following the Civil War: “Rev. Henry F. Edes in Georgia, Rev. James Thurston in North Carolina, Miss M. Louisa Shaw in Florida, Miss Bottume on Ladies’ Island, and Miss Sally Holley and Miss Caroline F. Putnam in Virginia.” During its first eight years the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama received \$5000 annually from Unitarians, and leaders at the Hampton Institute in Virginia observed at the turn of the century that “the Unitarian denomination has had a very important part in the work of Hampton.” Mary Hemenway, a Unitarian woman of some means, was the largest single donor to Hampton and also contributed generous sums for other Southern educational work. The Calhoun, Alabama, “Colored School and Settlement,” the first settlement school in the South, which two former Hampton teachers had founded, was

supported “mostly by Unitarians.” In early 1886 the American Unitarian Association established a bureau of information about Southern schools; headed by Hampton Institute’s former treasurer, General J. B. F. Marshall, the bureau screened Southern educational ventures worthy of support and contributions for Unitarians interested in them.

In late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century issues of *The Christian Register*, the major Unitarian periodical of the time, articles about Southern schools abound. Frequently found are letters from the leaders of Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes, as well as stories about the Alabama schools at Calhoun, Snow Hill, and Camp Hill. Northern Unitarians frequently exhibited a preference for backing African American institutions, however, about which a contributor to the *The Register*, writing after a trip to Camp Hill, complained: “Pure devotion has been invested in this school by its principal and his admirable helpers. Bitterness has often been expressed because northern people will give for Negroes but have no sympathy with the needy white children of the South.” In eastern North Carolina, however, a circuit missionary venture, supported jointly by the American Unitarian Association and the National Alliance of Unitarian Women, would found the Carolina Industrial School, an institution for rural white children.

Unitarians valued education and held reason and rational thinking in high esteem; indeed, observes Cooke, “it has often been assumed that Unitarianism attracts only intellectual persons.” Unitarian Horace Mann had been the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education and was later president of Antioch College in Ohio, an institution promoted as “the Harvard of the West” and supported largely by Unitarians. Harvard Divinity School was almost exclusively Unitarian for the first half of the nineteenth century, although in later years it opened up its doors to other denominations under the presidency of Charles W. Eliot. The Proctor Academy, established in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1848, was a Unitarian preparatory school, and the Hackley School, another Unitarian-supported New England preparatory school, was founded in 1900 at the

urging of Samuel A. Eliot, son of Charles W. Eliot and then President of the A.U.A.

Closer to the Carolina Industrial School's site, in Wilmington, North Carolina, a Unitarian woman who had distinguished herself with the Unitarian-supported Sanitary Commission during the Civil War would devote the balance of her life to establishing schools which would become the foundation for the Wilmington public school system. Amy Morris Bradley would be known as "Wilmington's School Marm." There is, however, no indication of any interaction between Amy Bradley and the women who taught at Shelter Neck, though the latter small community is only about forty miles north of Wilmington. The two educational efforts by Unitarian women in North Carolina sprang from separate eras and motivations and had no connection. While Amy Bradley's work received support from the American Unitarian Association, it was substantially finished by the time the A.U.A. and the National Alliance became involved in North Carolina. Bradley died in 1904.

Only as recently as 1825 had the American Unitarian Association been founded, and, "Up to the year 1865 the Unitarians had not been efficiently organized, and they had developed very imperfectly what has been called denominational consciousness, or the capacity for co-operative efforts." Yet, aided by the circulation of denominational tracts and periodicals, Unitarianism spread westward to the larger cities of Kansas, Illinois, Wisconsin, and California. Given the disturbance of the Civil War and its attendant issues, however, Unitarians directed little or no effort toward the South.

Appomattox ushered in a new era for the country, and for Unitarianism. Writes Cooke:

The war had an inspiring influence upon Unitarians, awakening them to a consciousness of their strength, and drawing them together to work for common purposes as nothing else had ever done. . . . Whatever its effect on other religious bodies, the war gave to Unitarians new faith, courage, and enthusiasm. For the first

time they became conscious of their opportunity, and united in a determined purpose to meet its demands with fidelity to their convictions and loyalty to the call of humanity.

In the spring of 1865, with victory for the Union assured, Northern Unitarian leaders for the first time called for the raising of a significant sum of money (\$100,000) and “a convention . . . to consider the interests of our cause and to institute measures for its good.” Although the resolution of theological issues between conservative Christian and the more “radical” transcendental elements consumed a good deal of the movement’s energy over the next decade, the period between 1865 and 1880 saw a “denominational awakening” and the instigation of an annual National Conference.

In 1885 the establishment by the A.U.A. of “sectional” superintendents, one of which was the Southern Superintendent, set the stage for Unitarian expansion in the South. The influence of the first Southern Superintendent and his wife, the Reverend George L. Chaney and Caroline E. Chaney, profoundly changed the demography of Unitarianism below the Mason Dixon line. By the early 1880s the Reverend Chaney was already doing missionary work in the South and in 1882 was the catalyst for the beginnings of a congregation in Atlanta. Chaney was Southern Superintendent until 1896. During his years in the South the number of Southern cities claiming Unitarian churches increased dramatically. The early 1890s saw the revival of the Richmond congregation as well as the founding of new churches in Chattanooga, Memphis, St. Louis, Austin, San Antonio and Galveston, and the beginnings of more formative groups in Greenville, South Carolina; Jacksonville and Tampa in Florida; Nashville, Tennessee; Asheville and Highlands in North Carolina; and Birmingham, Alabama.

Chaney’s influence not only established new congregations but connected them to each other at meetings of the Southern Unitarian Conference, founded in 1884, and through *The Southern Unitarian*, a monthly journal published, beginning in 1893, for five years.

Although tracts and periodicals printed in Boston also circulated, *The Southern Unitarian* encouraged the young Southern congregations. The Southern Conference met almost annually for many of those years: in Atlanta in 1887, 1888, and 1894; in Charleston in 1885 and 1892; in Chattanooga in 1889 and 1891; in New Orleans in 1893; and in Memphis in 1897.

While her minister husband was Southern Superintendent, Caroline E. Chaney served on the Board of the National Alliance of Unitarian and Other Christian Women as Vice-President for the Southern States, first elected in the re-organized National Alliance's first annual meeting in September, 1891. Her voice in the board meetings and her reports at annual conferences were stirring as she championed the causes of fledgling southern churches and isolated missionaries and implored the Alliance's support for them, once exclaiming that she "wished that words might be given her to express the needs of the South."

The influence of the Chaney's and Mrs. Chaney's position with the National Alliance undoubtedly drew the women's organization into the major role it would play in Unitarian extension in the southeast. The Reverend Chaney, speaking in 1891 at the first annual meeting of the freshly reconstituted National Alliance, urged the women to continue their missionary projects: "Rev. Mr. Chaney said there was no doubt in his mind that the greatest work done for church extension in the next ten or fifteen years will be owing to the work done by the women in the last ten years, and they are bound to do more; to do what the A.U.A. cannot do."

By the 1890s the National Alliance of Unitarian and Other Christian Women was a busy and dynamic organization, yet, at only ten years old, still a relatively young one. As Jessie E. Donahue has observed, the American Unitarian Association was fifty-three and the National Conference thirteen years old before a Unitarian women's association organized. While Unitarians had been among the first to support women in education, the

ministry, and other professions, no woman appeared as a delegate at the first two National Conferences of the denomination. By the third, in 1868, however, thirty-seven women were delegates, a result undoubtedly inspired by a resolution the previous year suggesting to the member churches the appropriateness of such representation. The denomination had ordained its first woman minister, Celia C. Burleigh, in 1871, only a year after delegates elected Lucretia Crocker the first woman board member for the A.U.A.

The organization of Unitarian church women formally began in 1880 as the Women's Auxiliary Conference. The first stirrings of Unitarian women, led by Fanny B. Ames, occurred in concert with the meeting of the 1878 National Conference, which appointed a committee of ten women to prepare a plan for an auxiliary organization which would be run by women. "Women had been listeners at all meetings of these organizations [the A.U.A. and the National Conference]," writes Sara Comins in a later history of the Unitarian women's movement. "Strong personalities had effected reforms in society outside the church, . . . suddenly . . . a spark of enthusiastic determination animated these women, led by Mrs. Ames," she continues.

Growing momentum led to a formal organizational meeting in 1880 at Saratoga, New York, which created the "Women's Auxiliary Conference." (The Auxiliary could claim among its founding members some of the activist women of the day--Julia Ward Howe, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Peabody, Dorothea Dix, Kate Gannett Wells, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, and Fanny B. Ames, among others.) The understood intent of the new organization was to involve women in the work of the American Unitarian Association and the National Conference and, thus, the name "auxiliary" was fitting. The Auxiliary's meetings were planned to coincide with those of the National Conference, to which it made reports and to which it was subsidiary. The male-led American Unitarian Association received and managed all the monies raised by the women's organization. By 1890, however, enough women were ready for change to support the adoption of a new

constitution and a new name: “The National Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women.” The move caused some alarm:

The change made then in its handling of funds created a near panic. . . . Hitherto it had been deemed imprudent and inadvisable for the women’s organization to maintain an independent treasury. For a separate executive body of Unitarian women to disburse its own money was regarded as dangerously revolutionary and the change was accomplished in 1890 only after long and heated debate in the denominational press and among ministers, laymen and the Auxiliary members themselves.

In September 1890 the newly constituted Alliance--its shortened name the one by which it became known--pointed toward the turn of the century with a new structure and new officers, most of whom would shepherd the refocused association through the next decade: Emily A. Fifield was Recording Secretary; Mrs. Robert H. Davis, Corresponding Secretary; Miss Flora L. Close, Treasurer, and, in the chair as President was Mrs. Ward B. Dix. A bevy of Vice-Presidents and Directors represented the various regions and clusters of Alliance branches. Through the last decade of the nineteenth century and into the first several of the twentieth, the Executive Board of the National Alliance would meet monthly, its minutes dutifully recorded in Mrs. Fifield’s neat handwriting, at the headquarters of the American Unitarian Association at 25 Beacon Street in Boston.

The minutes of the Alliance monthly board meetings are a rich source of information and reveal the remarkable level of commitment of its executive officers. The organization’s leaders were as involved in its operations and promotion as the management of any modern corporation. Its officers were almost constantly on the road, and its secretaries generated reams of written records. These women leaders, who clearly believed in the value of face-to-face contact, made frequent excursions into the South, an area which few nineteenth-century Bostonians had visited. In May 1895, for example, “the secretary

[probably Mrs. Davis] gave a detailed account of her visit of Baltimore where she had . . . attended all the meetings of the Southern Conference. She had met . . . some of the ministers doing the 'circuit service' in which the Alliance is much interested."

To finance its expanding work, the Alliance published, in denominational periodicals and circular letters to its branches, an "appeals list" to request support for its causes. Its Appeals Committee acted as a clearinghouse for the many solicitations and reported regularly to the board.

Of all the Alliance projects in those years, none was more successful than the "Post Office Mission." Well suited to the times, the Post Office Mission's purpose was to spread the message of Unitarianism by means of the United States mail. Comins notes, "It was not a new thing for the stronger churches to send . . . religious literature to the new and struggling churches. . . But the Post Office Mission was to extend a knowledge of Unitarianism to those who applied for it in answer to advertisements in magazines and newspapers."

As a result of the Post Office Mission new Unitarian groups in the South and West frequently emerged. How to support those in the hinterlands who had heard the message but had no preacher or congregation around whom to develop their new-found faith became the challenge of the women's organization. In the effort to support struggling new congregations, especially those in the South, the National Alliance and its branches played a substantial role. An 1892 announcement from the Alliance board reminds the women of the special needs of less-established churches: "Every small society should understand that though large and influential churches might be able to dispense with the National Alliance branch, a small society finds in it the very heart of strength and courage, and the more isolated the society the more it is needed."

Northern Unitarians also often played a paternalistic role for Southern Unitarians, especially when the financial base of a Southern church needed undergirding. Fledgling

churches in the South looked North to the denomination's headquarters for sustenance while they gained a footing and often openly and specifically solicited Northern help. In 1893 the Alliance branch in Atlanta requested any "articles left over from fairs in the North" which they declared would "come to most excellent use" in Atlanta. An 1893 letter from a member of the Chattanooga Alliance branch sounded a plaintive cry for assistance:

I write you in the hope that you may use your influence in our behalf in one of the most difficult periods we have had to endure since our organization. All Souls Church, organized in 1889 . . . has until this year kept steadily increasing in strength, numerically and financially, and has secured very satisfactory recognition in the community. It is one of the outposts of the Unitarian work and has been frequently gladdened by kind remembrances from Northern churches and individuals. Naturally, the stress of great financial or other disturbances falls most heavily on new communities, and ours is poor. Even the comparatively rich are poor now, because their investments are in manufactories which are lying idle or in real estate which is unproductive. There is a mortgage on our church building, due January 1, which we are anxious to pay off. In ordinary times there would be no difficulty; now we are obliged to cry to our Northern friends, "Come over, and help."

As the Alliance women attempted to coordinate their missionary efforts with those of the male-led American Unitarian Association some subtle conflicts arose, most of them over areas of responsibility. An 1896 explanation about an A.U.A. communique is illustrative:

"The attention of the board was called to the perplexity of many of the secretaries of the Branches over an enclosure of circulars sent to them recently from 25 Beacon St., Boston. The board desires to assure the Branches that the circular touching Post Office Mission work is simply the proposed plan of the treasurer of the American Unitarian Association for a wider effort at church extension. It in no way affects

the present or future work of the Post Office Mission of the Alliance, which will be carried on as heretofore.

In general, courtesy and respect prevailed, and much harmony was achieved by the creation of the Committee of Conference, composed of members of both organizations and whose purpose was “to maintain careful communications . . . in order that all field work may be done in the closest sympathy and co-operation, the general plan being to have the Association stand ready to take charge of all movements which the Alliance has created from the small beginnings of Post-office Mission circles, and brought to the maturity of preaching stations or pastors in a preaching circuit.” In 1909, Alliance President Emma Low would note that the Committee on Conference had “been especially helpful in the Southern Missionary work,” and, indeed the committee would prove an excellent support for the joint ventures, as would the attitude of A.U.A. President Samuel A. Eliot.

Eliot’s 1900-1927 term of leadership at the A.U.A. overlapped the years of Southern missionary work and The Carolina Industrial School. His willingness to work with the women of the Alliance was evident to them, and his appreciation of learning and education unquestionably aided the work in the South. “His enthusiastic backing of the schools [at Shelter Neck and Swansboro] seems to have had two personal motivations, over and above the obligation of his office to foster them: his commitment to missions and his envy of the handyman,” notes his son-in-law biographer. Eliot would be present at the 1900 dedication of the chapel at Shelter Neck and would later serve as Board President of the Carolina Industrial School upon its incorporation in 1911. In appealing for financial aid for the North Carolina schools his arguments to prospective contributors were that such investments would net a return “in better citizenship, higher standards of living, happier and more useful lives.”

In the mid-1890s reduced income at the American Unitarian Association obliged its

leaders to rein in its missionary efforts in a move referenced in the Alliance minutes as the A.U.A.'s "retrenchment." In October 1893 Mrs. Chaney, "about to leave for her winter work," lamented the situation for the South, noting, "The American Unitarian Association has decreased its appropriations twenty-five percent, and this deficiency must be met in some way. . . Without money many interesting openings . . . cannot be followed up." In the wake of the cutbacks the Alliance was drawn in and became even more involved in the Southern work. It seems clear that the Chaney's influence persuaded the women to deepen their commitment to the region and whose plan provided a structure by which the work could be carried on. The 1893 January minutes document Reverend Chaney's persuasive powers:

Rev. Mr. Chaney, being in the building, was invited to tell the board something about the Southern work. . . The American Unitarian Association thinks it can only support men who can start churches in centres of population. Considering its present resources, Mr. Chaney agreed with this policy. [Southern rural missionary] work would not at once result in churches. . . . Mr. Chaney appealed to the Alliance, saying, "The truth is, the women have made a great constituency in the South, even if they have not heard of it, through many letters." He was coming across the result of the work at every turn; and he hoped that, if it approved, the Alliance would encourage [southern missionary work] by helping. . .

A published report from the January 1895 Alliance board meeting explains how the "southern circuits," which were supported almost solely by the Alliance by the end of the century, came under its protection:

Rev. Mr. Chaney, the Southern superintendent for the American Unitarian Association, was received by the board, and gave a most interesting account of the Southern field. Mr. Chaney enlarged upon the proposition he had before made of sending resident ministers on missionary "circuits" in their own sections. This the

ministers will willingly do if traveling expenses can be assured. Mr. Chaney has formulated a plan for such circuits which would cover a large part of the Southern States. The [Alliance] Branch of the First Parish, Dorchester, has already appropriated \$200 for one such “circuit”; and it is hoped that other single Branches, or two or more uniting to send one man, may enable Mr. Chaney to fully carry out his wishes. . . .If any Branch desires it, direct communication can be established between it and the person engaged in the proposed circuit work.

A section of the board minutes of those months further clarified where the circuit work would be done and Mrs. Chaney’s role in the effort:

The [Appeals] committee again recommends church extension work in the South by means of traveling circuits, to be distributed among various ministers on payment of their traveling and other necessary expenses, estimated at \$200 a year. It is thought that such work will be very valuable in arousing new interest in our faith. If any Branch is willing to appropriate money for such preaching, Mrs. Chaney will receive it, making quarterly remittances to the preacher, and receiving regular reports through Mr. Chaney. Correspondence can also be carried on between those especially interested at the various points and the Branches aiding the work. Such correspondence may result in the formation of Alliance Branches, even if no church is formed... These circuits embrace various points in Virginia . . . in Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee under Rev. H. A. Westall, central station Asheville, N. C.; in North And South Carolina under Rev. H. A. Whitman, central station Charleston, S. C.; in Georgia under Rev. W. R. Cole, central station Atlanta, Ga.; in Florida under Rev. J. C. Gibson, central station Edwards, F.; in Louisiana under Rev. W. C. Pierce, central station New Orleans, La.; in Tennessee under Rev. S. R. Free, central station Chattanooga, Tenn.; in Texas under Rev. Emily Wheelock, central station Austin, Tex.; . . . The circuit of East Tennessee, in care of Rev. H. A. Westall, has already been taken by one of the Alliance Branches. It will include, as visiting points, Knoxville, Tenn., Greenville, SC, Western NC, etc.

In the spring of 1896, because of reduced funds available for the support of work in

the South, Reverend Chaney resigned as Southern Superintendent. At the Alliance board meeting in September Mrs. Chaney submitted her resignation as Vice-President for the Southern States. Both departures were mourned by the Alliance women, the March minutes noting, “among Unitarians throughout the South is heard the expression of great sorrow at the resignation of the Southern Superintendent. . . .”

Mrs. Chaney’s successor, Mrs. Anna Moss of St. Louis, made an emotional speech at the opening of the 1897 Southern Conference, noting “Mrs. Chaney’s absence . . . is not only a great loss to our Cause, but a personal sorrow to each. . . On the other hand, our recognition of her service would be unworthy, did we not gather new courage.” Mrs. Moss was also able to announce the Alliance’s proposal for supporting the Southern Unitarian effort after the Chaney’s departure, an overture which, Mrs. Moss said, “needs but to be understood by us. . . in that cordiality never refused by a Southerner to a sincere proffer of friendship.” The plan, which had been worked out under the leadership of Mrs. Abby A. Peterson, an Alliance Director, assigned a “strong branch in the north” to each of the young Alliance Branches in the southern areas. The Alliance Minutes record the plan and Mrs. Peterson’s leadership in its operation:

Mrs. Peterson reported that, concurring with Mrs. Chaney in her request that the southern branches so soon to be left without a superintendent should each be put into communication with a strong branch at the north, she had suggested the matter to the Suffolk [County, Massachusetts] branches and made arrangements as follows: That Church of the Unity, Boston should take Richmond; Roxbury, Asheville; New South, Highlands; Bullfinch Place, Charleston; First Parish, Greenville; [unreadable name], Atlanta; Church of Disciples, Memphis; Chelsea, New Orleans; Jamaica Plain, Austin; Brighton, San Antonio. Circuit work in Florida through Mr. Gibson was undertaken by the Arlington St. Branch.

Noting that “there are now fourteen churches in the Southern Conference and

fifteen Alliance Branches,” the National Alliance of Unitarian Women at the end of the century was thoroughly involved in the South, taking up, as the Chaney’s had hoped, where the American Unitarian Association had bowed out. Mrs. Abby A. Peterson, who had been elected to the Alliance Board in 1895 as a Director from the strongest district in the Alliance, would, with the branches in her Suffolk County constituency, become directly involved with the southern work in the wake of the Chaney’s departure. Mrs. Peterson’s experience would propel her into the chairmanship of the soon to-be-created Southern Work Committee, in which capacity she would, in the early 1900s, recommend that a chapel be built at Shelter Neck, North Carolina. Her--and the Alliance’s--involvement with the Shelter Neck community would be extensive and would continue for more than twenty years.

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONFERENCE

Completed in 1996 by Marty Robinson

## *INTRODUCTION*

*For many years the records of the Southwest District were housed with the District Executive, then they were sent to Texas Tech. University in Lubbock, TX for permanent storage. By 1993, it was recognized that little was known of the past history of the District. Two slim pages of notes were found in a file containing some information about the early years of the District, but these pages ended abruptly in the mid-60's. Thanks to the excellent memories of Jan Mattinson, Polly Holway, Doe Lockwood and Marge Ackley, all of Oklahoma, the early years of the Southwest Summer Institute were recalled. The Institute had been the bonding influence for the District prior to the Annual Meetings. And special thanks to Ruth Clark, first paid Director of Religious Education in the District (at First Unitarian Church in Dallas, TX) whose invaluable notes of her early years in the service of religious education are the basis for many of the comments about that important aspect of the growth of this vital, prospering District.*

The history of the Southwest District reflects the size and diversity of the area. The first lonely band of Unitarians began in New Orleans in 1833, and another congregation began in Memphis in 1894. By 1899, there were six, widely-spaced congregations struggling to spread the word of liberal religion in an area broader than the distance between Boston and Washington. New Orleans and Memphis had added Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Dallas, and Houston to the rolls.

The first annual meeting of the Conference was held in Dallas on January 29, 1939 and a set of bylaws was enacted. "It was moved and seconded that the name of this Conference shall be known as the Southwest Regional Conference of Unitarian Churches." There have been two changes in the name since then, the latest was in 1962 to conform with the bylaws of the newly united denomination: THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONFERENCE.

Stories of the early years of the Conference reflect that the Summer Institute was the bonding force in the area. Begun in 1940, at the Lake Murray State Park, south of Ardmore, Oklahoma, it was the "brain child" of Dr. John Petrie, then minister of the First Unitarian Church of Memphis, the Institute (or "Ardmore" as it was known for many years) flourished under the direction of Reverend A.E. von Stilli of Oklahoma City. During the time of the Second World War and gas rationing, the Institute became an opportunity for Unitarians throughout the District to meet at a central point. The stated purpose of the Institute was: "to provide instruction by outstanding personalities for church school teachers and young people; to provide a common meeting ground for religious liberals of all ages, and to bring the widely separated churches of the Conference together in the spirit of fellowship and unity; and, to provide an ideal and an inexpensive outing for the entire family combining rustic comfort, excellent food, complete relaxation and relief from the

monotony of routine life.” The cabin settings at Ardmore were, indeed, “rustic” since there was no electricity in the cabins in the early days and plumbing was widely dispersed and primitive. The “excellent” food was provided by a member of the Tulsa church, Jack Sherwood, who bought, transported, and cooked all meals for the 160+ persons who came to Ardmore. Singing over the meals and at Sunset Talks by the lake was led by the Rev. Chris Moore (of Chicago Children’s Choir fame) who made even Unitarians sound professional! Marge Ackley tells the story of a night when a late night discussion on the lawn was being led by James Luther Adams on “The Meaning of Grace”. Suddenly, someone appeared out of the darkness, and stepped, fully clothed, into the water. The Rev. Horace Westwood from Houston had arrived and introduced himself -- with a splash.

During the 1950’s, Unitarianism was growing throughout the district, led by the inspiration of Revs. Robert Raible of Dallas, Frank Holmes in Oklahoma City, Richard Gibbs, and Horace Westwood. Lay leaders also contributed their times and talents to the development of the organization: Ken and Claire White in Dallas, Frank Faux in Memphis, Lou and Roy Pope in San Antonio. Every person who held office in the district, or who helped at the Institute during the summer has added his or her thread to this rich tapestry which makes up the Southwest.

By 1947, increased attendance at the Summer Institute meant looking for a larger site, and a move was made to Petit Jean Park in Arkansas. The Institute stayed in Arkansas for three years, but left because persons of color were not permitted to use their state parks. The Institute moved back to Lake Murray using the Lodge, with some new cabins (and the old ones that had been improved), and a camp ground for the hardy. An experiment with having two sessions was made during the early 70’s. Each session had a different emphasis, one week with a semi-structured “Program” and the other “Family” oriented. These were not popular because they failed to provide the fellowship, the reunion and/or community spirit, that made SWUUSI such a happy experience. In 1978, a committee was appointed by the SWUUC President, Bob Deininger, to find a larger facility that would allow more people to meet together in a single session and preserve the variety of outdoor activities as an important element of the whole “Institute”. Upon their recommendation, in 1979, the Summer Institute moved to Lake Texoma State Park. Every year, in the first week of August, four to six hundred UU’s of all ages, from all over the District, come to learn, teach, share, relax and play together.

The programming of the Summer Institute has continued to increase over the years for both adults and children. Each year, a Theme speaker, someone who is well noted in Unitarian Universalist circles, is chosen by the Program Director of the Institute. SWUUSI has been privileged to hear James Luther Adams, Clarke D. Wells, Forrester Church, Kenneth Patton, Leon Hopper, Paul Carnes, Roy Phillips, Judith Walker Riggs, David Rankin, Terry Sweetser, Carl Schofield, Dan Aldridge, and many others. The theme of the Institute is carried out in morning and afternoon workshops which vary from the intellectual to the experiential, puzzling, practical, and pure pleasure. In addition to the workshops, there are worship services each morning, sunset talks on the lawn, a ministers’ panel, women’s meetings, a choir, social activities throughout the week, special programs and activities for teenagers and young adult groups and a week-long, full program of activities for the younger children.

In addition to the spirit of fellowship engendered by the Summer Institute, the Southwest Conference has been blessed with the guidance of excellent District Executives. For 23 years, the Rev. Russell Lockwood served the Southwest District (and, at times, the Mountain Desert District as well). He routinely visited over the vast area encouraging growth, soothing “troubled waters” in times of crisis, and acting as a conduit of information between Boston and the Southwest. Rev. Lockwood made it clear to new ministers in the district that they were expected to participate actively in District Conferences and the Summer Institute. As a result, we have a close bond between the clergy and the laity in this District that is not true in other parts of the continent.

Upon the retirement of Rev. Lockwood, the Southwestern Conference was honored to have the Rev. Dwight Brown return as District Executive in 1988. He had previously served as minister of the First Unitarian Church in Dallas, TX. Under Rev. Brown, the district established its first Leadership Experience, a training program for lay leaders. He also encouraged all societies to engage in long—range planning. While he was District Executive, SWUUC finally established a District Office and hired secretarial help for the District Executive.

Following Rev. Brown’s resignation in 1992, Dr. James Brown was selected as District Executive, the first lay person and first African-American to hold that position.

The growth of the District has not been achieved only with an emphasis on activities for adults. In an area which has experienced a boom in population growth in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the Unitarian Universalist churches have felt the greatest “growing pains” in the area of Church School attendance. And, because of the training and help of the early leaders in the field of religious education in this area, our churches have been able to respond with programming and teacher training.

By 1954, all of the Unitarian Churches in the Southwest had established church schools, but there was not much assistance from the American Unitarian Association. There were only two national religious educators who traveled around the United States, the Rev. Edna Bruner and Frances Wood. They came bringing with them the current curriculum materials developed by the Unitarian Association, mostly the works of Sophia Lyon Fahs. Ruth Clark, the first paid religious educator in the district, would alert all surrounding churches that the trainers were coming, and weekend conferences would result. Ruth, herself, traveled to churches and fellowships upon request, giving workshops and training teachers. Ruth was employed by First Church, Dallas. All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, soon hired Sally Campbell as Director of Religious Education there and the two remained the only paid religious educators for many years.

In an effort to increase communication between the lay persons who were involved with church schools, Ruth Clark approached the Rev. Clifton Hoffman, who was at that time the Southern Unitarian Conference Executive, for money to hold a conference for training and instruction of teachers. This was in the year 1954. The conference was held in February at Camp Carter, a YMCA camp in Fort Worth, Texas. Over the years the conference has evolved into more than merely a time for instruction and communication among those adults involved with religious education; the conference now has added the dimension of training teenagers in skills of leadership development.

In 1993 the District Board approved the hiring of a part-time Religious Education Program Consultant which has greatly aided the paid religious educators in the various

churches and the volunteers who handle programs in the smaller congregations. The Consultant conducts workshops at all District meetings, for groups of churches, and makes her self available to RE teachers at all times. She also circulates the extensive library of curricula owned by the District when needed by local societies.

The 1990's have seen rapid growth of the established congregations in the Southwest and also the rise of many –new societies as the bigger cities expand into the suburbs. The District Board has wisely encouraged the emphasis on growth through the Extension Committee, setting aside monies to aid new congregations, and establishing a Chalice Lighter Fund which allows UU's from all over the Southwest to help a society build or buy a building or call its first minister.

From the modest beginning of 6 churches of some 690 members in 1899, the Southwest now encompasses over 70 societies with over 8000 members. The district is recognized by the Unitarian Universalist Association as one of the most vital and growing areas of the continent. In the 1980's, the largest UU congregation was All Souls Unitarian Church of Tulsa, OK under the leadership of the Rev. John B. Wolf. The Rev. John Buehrens, former minister of First Unitarian of Dallas, TX became President of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1993. General Assemblies have been held in Dallas and Ft. Worth, TX and in Little Rock, AR. As the energy of the Southwest increases, more of its members are becoming active on the continental level within the UUA organization.

The Southwest District recognizes that the Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist movement have great relevance to society today, and it is committed to promote and to encourage the development of its liberating, inclusive societies.

**DRAFT – do not change – used by permission**

## **UUA DISTRICT SERVICES STAFF GROUP**

**Created by the Transitions Taskforce to provide an introduction of District Staff to the new UUA president.**

**Taskforce members: Sue Sinnamon (convener), Joan VanBecelaere, Doug Zelinski, Tom Chulak, Cilla Raughley, and Harlan Limpert**

### **HARLAN'S INTRODUCTION**

The members of the district staff team are proud to be serving the cause of Unitarian Universalism. It is our highest allegiance, followed by our commitment to the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, which we call the UUA, and then followed by our love for and commitment to the staff group presently called District Services.

(Note: District Services will soon become part of the new “Congregational Growth & Vitality” staff group which will also include Congregational Stewardship Services, Growth Services, and Services to Large Congregations. The term “District Services” will be used throughout this document since the new configuration won't become effective until July 1, 2009.)

Without exception, members of the district staff see their jobs as *ministry*. Whether ordained or not, they see their roles as leaders, consultants, advocates, and educators in our community of congregations as the particular expression of their ministry to our larger faith. It is their source of joy and satisfaction.

It is our hope that this brief overview, this “primer” on District Services, will give the next president of the UUA a clearer understanding of our history, our current status, and our hopes and dreams for the future as we continue to serve our faith with passion, commitment, and love.

### **THE DISTRICTS**

Districts are localized bodies of the UUA established to decentralize certain responsibilities.

#### **Formal Relationship**

The UUA is an association of more than one thousand congregations that voluntarily combine a portion of their resources in pursuit of common goals. To do this, they have legally incorporated and govern their affairs via an annual General Assembly of congregational delegates. At the same time, they have empowered a UUA Board of Trustees to set goals and to collect and expend resources on their behalf. Similarly, they

have divided themselves into 19 Districts also able to legally incorporate with boards of trustees that set goals and collect and expend resources within their own boundaries.

The General Assembly determined that the district components of their Association are to be semi-autonomous – though they are distinct entities, their bylaws are not to conflict with the UUA bylaws and they are granted autonomy “to the extent consistent with the promotion of the welfare and interests of the Association as a whole and of its member congregations” (UUA By-laws Article III). Likewise, the autonomy of the UUA Board is influenced greatly by the districts, whose elected representatives comprise the majority of its trustees.

Collectively then, the member congregations, the UUA Board, and the 19 district boards are the UUA. The national and District Services staffs work for the entire Association and are accountable to the UUA president, who is accountable to the UUA Board of Trustees. In addition, through a co-employment arrangement, the District Services staff members also work for the districts that employ them and are accountable to their respective district boards as well.

The General Assembly authorizes the UUA Board to assign each member congregation to a district. These assignments set the geographic boundaries of the districts. A congregation may change its district membership upon approval of the UUA Board and, as a result, potentially change the boundary between districts. By definition, a congregation cannot be a member of a district without being a member of the UUA. However, no rule speaks to the reverse situation.

Districts are granted certain abilities and considerations by the General Assembly and the UUA Board. (See sidebar 1.) The UUA By-laws and Rules related to the formation of districts can be found in Appendix A.

Sidebar 1

Granted to the Districts by the General Assembly are the abilities to:

1. Elect one representative to the UUA Board of Trustees
2. Submit items for the General Assembly agenda
3. Propose amendments to By-laws, Rules, or Business Resolutions
4. Propose and comment on Congregational Study/Action Issues
5. Determine how vacancies of their national board trustee positions will be filled
6. Be consulted when the national body deliberates termination of a congregation’s UUA membership

Granted by the UUA Board are the abilities to:

1. Be consulted when determining a congregation’s membership status (new, active, or inactive)
2. Be recipients of the assets of a dissolved congregation

Coordinated with the UUA Board are the abilities to:

1. Jointly secure and share funds for programming (APF and Incentive Grants)
2. Co-employ staff (district executive and program consultant)

## **Mission Relationship**

Although each district has its own stated purpose or mission statement, all are to be congruent with the UUA statement of purpose, which affirms the following:

The UUA exists in order to

1. Serve the needs of the member congregations
2. Organize new congregations
3. Extend and Strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions
4. Implement its Principles  
In reviewing the mission statements of each District, in addition to the above, the Districts add a fifth affirmation:
5. Connect congregations to each other and the UUA

By serving these five mission components while situated between the national and local levels of the Association, districts become the major medium through which congregations relate to one another and encounter the UUA. Encouraging and supporting these encounters is one of the primary roles of the District Services portion of the UUA staff.

## **Boundaries**

Before consolidation in 1961, the American Unitarian Association was organized into nine multi-state regions referred to as councils, conferences, or regions. At that time the Universalist Church of America was organized into 16 state conventions and one multi-state convention, with all but two located east of the Mississippi River. Upon consolidation, the Interim Committee on Regional Organization recommended the creation of 21 districts that would be smaller than the Unitarian regions but larger than the Universalist conventions. They were to contain 40 to 70 geographically contiguous congregations.

Preliminary boundary lines were suggested with the understanding that congregations along those lines could choose which district to join. Rather than enforcing strict boundaries, the UUA let border congregations self-select and a process that was expected to take many years was accomplished in less than three. Since 1961, some districts have merged and some have split. (See document on districting.)

## **Governance**

The Carver model of governance has significantly influenced district boards. Thirteen boards are in or moving towards formalized Policy Governance. Five other district boards consider themselves “policy” boards. They focus on mission/vision and policy while leaving most of the operational details to their district executives or executive teams. One district retains a “working board” model of governance where trustees make operational decisions and even carry out the tasks of implementation.

As the UUA and district boards continue their movement away from patriarchy, their partnering with congregations appears to be supported by the policy governance model. Consistent with this model, the UUA Board acknowledged the following sources of authority and accountability in April, 2009.

1. Our member congregations
2. Current and future generations of Unitarian Universalists
3. The heritage, traditions, and ideals of Unitarian Universalism
4. The vision of Beloved Community
5. The Spirit of life, love, and the holy

During the same meeting, the UUA Board adopted the following Shared Vision and Ends Statements.

Grounded in our covenantal tradition, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association will inspire people to lead lives of humility and purpose, connection and service, thereby transforming themselves and the world.

- 1 Congregations that unlock the power that transforms lives
- 2 Congregations that live in covenant with other congregations in our Association
- 3 Congregations that move toward sustainability, wholeness, and reconciliation
- 4 These are all at equal priority and are to be achieved within a justifiable cost.

In the near future, district boards will need to consider the impact of these UUA Board ends on their own visions, missions, and goals.

### **Resources and Partnerships**

A partnership exists between the District Services team and the larger Association that is both cumbersome and, ironically, a model of cooperation and teamwork. The 35 district executives and program consultants are co-employed, meaning that districts and District Services share both their costs and the responsibilities of their supervision. Annual objectives and performance evaluations are created in partnership between the district boards and the director for District Services. The District Services staff group is the only one of the 12 UUA staff groups that has this arrangement.

There are presently 19 co-employed district executives and 16 co-employed program consultants. The general rule is that co-employed positions are full time. Their salaries and benefits totaled \$2.8 million in 2009. Of that, the National Office contributed \$1.6 million and the districts contributed \$1.2 million – nearly a 50/50 sharing of costs.

Additionally, there are personnel employed and compensated solely by the districts. The number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) varies from district to district, ranges from 1 to 4.5 FTEs. Typical positions include an administrator, a youth and young adult coordinator, and a web site manager. By funding these additional 31 FTEs districts have almost doubled the available staff working in the districts. Districts also tap into the expertise of their lay and professional leadership to build consultancy teams that help do the work of the Association.

Fundraising is another expression of how districts and the national office work together to fulfill the mission of Unitarian Universalism. Last year, just over \$7 million was raised through the national Annual Program Fund to support the UUA. But an additional \$2.9 million was raised through the *district* Fair Share donations and \$637,000 through Chalice Lighters donations, which exclusively support congregations individually or in clusters. In sum, the staff and infrastructure of the districts help generate \$10,493,546 toward the support of our faith.

## **Congregations**

Districts naturally reflect the characteristics of their member congregations. The average number of congregations in a district is 54, but ranges from a low of 33 to a high of 76. These congregations can be spread over an area as small as eastern Massachusetts (Massachusetts Bay District) to as large as a five-state region stretching from Mexico to Canada (Mountain Desert District). Beyond numbers and geographic size, the character of the districts also varies widely. Ninety-three percent of congregations in the Massachusetts Bay District were incorporated before 1870 compared to 75 percent of congregations incorporated after 1955 in the Florida District. The percentage of lay-led congregations in a district can range from 4 percent to 46 percent, and the number of small congregations from 21 percent to 82 percent. Three Districts have nine emerging congregations and six districts have none. Some districts report growth rates around 5 percent while others are declining. In some instances, growth in a district reflects not new Unitarian Universalists but mostly UUs that have moved there from other districts.

Districts also face different challenges. In some, it is the struggle of congregations transitioning from a majority of secular humanists to a majority of religious humanists and theists. For others the challenge is stubborn individualism that isolates the congregations. Additional challenges include large seasonal influxes of tourists, rapidly changing community demographics, and the difficulty of attracting quality professional leadership to small congregations. It is clear that although the needs are similar in most districts, the degree and prioritization of those needs is different.

For more information about district and congregational characteristics refer to Appendix X, Nancy Bowens' report, and Appendix XX, Mary Higgins and Karen Brammer's document, and Appendix XXX, Tom Chulak's chart.

## **Regionalization**

Several times during the last century and a half, Unitarian and Universalist national bodies have attempted, unsuccessfully, to establish multi-district service centers throughout the continent. The attempts have failed, usually for lack of congregational buy-in and funding. However, the work of the Congregations Come First Team has helped inspire new regionalization efforts. Regionalization is well underway and has arisen when practicality has coincided with committed district staff. There are now five regional district staff groups. They formed organically, through the efforts of district staff who saw the practical advantages of collaborating. Once this development was underway, the national office provided critical resources to sustain these regional efforts.

District boards have voluntarily, but cautiously, embraced these regional groups to share resources, expertise, knowledge, and even some personnel to better serve the needs of congregations. The caution reflects congregations' and Districts' ever-present concern over service delivery becoming too centralized within the UUA. Thus far, these regional groups are not formalized within the UUA structure but, in some cases, group members are bound together by covenants of cooperation. All district staff members now associate with one of the five regional groups.

In general, geographically smaller regions share program consultants and offer joint conferences and programs. Where regions are geographically large, resources and knowledge are frequently shared but sharing consultants is more difficult and joint programs are more often web-based.

Some districts are exploring various inter-district and regional options for sharing administrative functions such as bookkeeping and website development. To date, there are dozens of efforts that tap into the energy and creativity that these regional collaborations are generating. See Appendix A, "District Partnerships and Integration through Regionalization," for more information about the emerging regional groups and the innovative partnering underway.

## **THE DISTRICT SERVICES STAFF GROUP**

With 35 co-employed positions, the director for district services, and his associate, the District Services staff group is the largest in the UUA and represents roughly 20 percent of all UUA staff. The District Services staff group is led by the director, who reports to the executive vice president and is a member of the Leadership Council. Only one of the current District Staff is headquartered in Boston; the rest are dispersed across the country. Some work out of a central office where staff, supplies, and equipment are located and others work from home-based offices where district resources are accessible primarily over the Internet.

Face-to-face contact among staff members, even for those working out of a central office, is usually sporadic and limited to when they attend the same congregational events. Email, phone calls, and increasingly, video conferencing are the order of the day. The staff meet together as an entire group only twice a year, once in late November at what is affectionately referred to as the Big Complex Meeting (BCM) and again, briefly, during General Assembly (although that time together is in jeopardy as the Association responds to tightening fiscal circumstances). In spite of this geographic separation, district staff prize their collegial relationships with one another. This collegiality is fostered by the BCM, collaborative task forces, and a fruitful list-serve; is bound by the District Staff Code of Ethics; and is sealed by a shared sense of ministering to our congregations.

## **The District Services Staff and Its Relationship with the National Staff**

Whether staff members work out of the national office or are co-employed by a district, they all work for the UUA and are staff colleagues. District Services staff members depend on their colleagues in Boston and are very appreciative of the partnership that exists with the national staff. They rely on the administrative and technical support always present behind the scenes and look to the national staff for programs and specialized services that cannot be provided on a smaller scale. District staff members are sensitive to the national staff's challenges in crafting continent-wide responses to congregational need and they strive to support those responses through their work out in the districts.

Many aspects of UUA programming and services are implemented through the combined efforts of the national and district staffs. In efforts ranging from responsible stewardship to fruitful ministerial settlements, the district and national Staffs often collaborate as they meet the general needs of the congregations and the specific needs of individual congregations.

The geographic dispersion of district staff is sometimes a challenge for creating an integrated team. But the national and district staff groups work to include each other in decision making and communications as appropriate. In addition, with the advent of new technologies, the district staff members are now able to participate in Boston-based weekly chapel, all-staff meetings, and special announcements. This technology also enables select members of the national staff to connect with district staff on monthly conference calls rather than only once a year during BCM. The district staff look forward to better technologies and more opportunities to connect with colleagues in Boston and around the country.

## **The Theology of District Services**

True to congregational roots, Unitarian Universalists hold fast to the primacy of an individual's encounters with the divine. UUs are both free to and called to make meaning of these encounters. And they are accountable for behavior consistent with the meaning they make. UUs also assert that a "community of autonomous churches" provides the best mechanism for individuals to explore the meaning, freedom, responsibility, and accountability intrinsic to the UU faith journey.

Presently, the District Services staff group is a significant agent of contact between congregations and between congregations and the larger Association of congregations we call the UUA. In its boundary-spanning role, the district staff group works regularly with various groups across the structure of the Association so it becomes organizationally multilingual and can represent the needs of one group in the language and context of another. To congregations, it serves to help make the national office more real, and to the national office, it helps make the congregations more real. As such, it is a major embodiment of the "community of congregations" component of UU theology. The District Services staff model congregational programming that provides opportunities to explore the six community-building duties they owe one another: care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation, and relief (Cambridge Platform).

Sidebar

The Cambridge Platform of 1648, the foundational document of the New England system of congregational polity, includes six major means by which congregations participate in the “communion” of independent churches.

I. mutual care: considering “one another’s welfare”

II. consultation: when a church has “occasion to require the judgment and counsel of other churches”

III. admonition: when any public offense be found in a church, “which they do not discern or are slow in removing or healing”

IV. participation: members of one church visiting another are admitted and ministerial services are loaned by one church to another to take the place of an absent or sick minister

V. recommendation: when a member of one church moves to the region of another church she/he is committed “to the fellowship of their covenant”

VI. relief and succor: support for “the necessities of poorer churches”

In this way, the District Services staff serves as a model for the true community of congregations. It is the ministry of this staff group to transform more than 1,000 individual congregations into that true community of autonomous congregations – a community that self-organizes to manifest and extend liberal religious values in the wider world.

### **The Work of District Services**

Sidebar

The UUA Leadership Council has recently reworked the staff’s purpose, which is as follows.

The mission of both the national and district UUA staff members is to:

1. Support the health and vitality of UU congregations as they minister in their communities
2. Open the doors of Unitarian Universalism to people who yearn for liberal religious community.
3. Be a respected voice for liberal religious values.

District Services staff, or their designated adjunct consultants, work with a congregation only after being invited by either the president or minister and with the full knowledge of both. Before a consultation, the staff works with the congregation’s leadership to clarify needs and define expected outcomes. Response strategies are customized to the congregation’s size, history, personality, staffing structure, fiscal situation, and more. While consulting, district staff remain mindful of the complementary needs of ministers, religious educators, administrative staff, the UUA, and other UU organizations. In many cases covenants and good officers help guide the interactions between the district staff and these groups.

Though district staff work is tailored to the specific needs of individual congregations, overall, their efforts align with four major strategies for advancing congregational growth and vitality:

#### **District Staff ensure transformational leadership training for congregations.**

Congregations self-identify leadership development as their greatest need and, increasingly, District Services staff are identifying the complementary need for adult faith development and spiritual deepening. Effective congregational leadership has deep roots in the foundation of faith. District staff members are continuously seeking new ways of presenting trainings and developing new program models to meet these and other needs of our congregations and leaders. The results of these experiments are shared among all district staff. In November 2008, district staff identified the most pressing leadership training needs common across the

country. This list provides some insight into the collective condition of our congregations. The needs -- often hidden in the question “Why aren’t we growing?” -- are identified as

1. Adult lay theological education and spiritual deepening
2. Quality worship
3. Stewardship and volunteering as spiritual practice
4. Healthy congregations and systems theory
5. Governance and its supporting infrastructure
6. Creating welcoming, multigenerational, multicultural communities

Last year district staff designed, delivered, or arranged for more than 300 training events, with the goal of having attendees become leaders within their own ranks. More information about training needs and innovative programs now underway to address them can be found in Appendix B, “The Achievements and Challenges of District Services at a Congregational Level,” and Appendix C, “Explorations and Innovations.”

**District Staff leverage congregational transitions or turmoil to maximize positive structural change.** Transition and turmoil force change upon congregations. When this happens, they look to district staff to help them leverage that change for the good. During the past year, staff provided consults for the exits, start-ups, and congregational integration of 100 full-time ministers, 68 part-time ministers, and 126 religious educators. Additional consults deal with budget short-falls, declining membership, building concerns, and conflict. Many congregational conflicts are avoided, mediated, or transformed into growth opportunities by district staff counsel.

**District staff help facilitate the implementation and success of national staff programming.**

District staff partner with the national staff to coordinate and encourage congregational participation in most UUA programming. Some examples include the Annual Program Fund, Association Sunday, building an appreciation and demand for ARAOMC training, the Diversity of Ministry initiative, the dissemination of Tapestry of Faith, the Consultation on Ministry To and With Youth, and the shifting of youth programming back into the congregations.

**District staff build and foster relationships that harness the power of community.**

District staff still value the call of the Cambridge Platform: that congregations and their lay leaders, ministers, and staff will rely on one another for care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation, and relief. Another main benefit of the recent regionalization efforts is that district staff have experienced, with one another, five of the six aspects of the Cambridge Platform. (They have not yet ventured into admonition of one another. . . .) The use of new and emerging technologies has made this regionalization easier. And this effort has allowed staff to assess and rehearse these technologies before introducing them to congregational clusters.

However, meaningful clustering at the congregational level remains a significant goal. Some districts have grouped congregations into healthy, functioning, sustainable clusters. Other districts still work to overcome the fierce individualism of congregations and clergy.

At the all-important personal level, district staff annually cultivates meaningful dialogue with many, if not most, ministers, religious education professionals, and congregational presidents. They also encourage community through greetings and condolences extended on behalf of the district. These are given, in person, to congregations dozens of times a year: for ordinations, installations, anniversaries, new buildings or additions, and occasions of loss and grief. Finally, staff provide some measure of support to the district-wide chapters and clusters of the UUMA and LREDA. For greater detail on the work of the District Services staff group, See Appendix D, “Key Roles of District Staff Members,” and Appendix E, “Tasks Commonly Performed by District Staff Members.”

## **THE FUTURE**

### **Challenges (in no particular order)**

District Services has identified the following challenges for the future and embraces them as opportunities to expand Unitarian Universalism.

**Faith Incarnation** - How can we incarnate our faith, encourage civic and religious leadership as a spiritual practice, and make a difference in the world.?

**Leadership Development** – How can we provide, support, and encourage systems of lay leadership development rooted in a faith incarnate and centered on best practices and cutting-edge knowledge?

**Boundary Spanning** - How can the unique boundary spanning roles played by district staff best be leveraged in support of a more effective organization?

**Youth and Young Adults** - How can we best support our congregations in engaging youth and young adults in daily congregational life?

**Ministerial Formation** - How can we identify and create structures to support ministerial development?

**Generosity** - How can we create a culture of generosity?

**Growth Strategies** - How can we find and implement better strategies for growing our membership? Specific strategies targeted at national and district staff appear in Appendix X, “UU Plan for Congregation Growth.”

**Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, and Multiculturalism** – How can we help all levels of the Association develop an anti-Racist and anti-oppressive world view and develop our multicultural competencies?

**Deepening Spirituality** - How can we best support our members deepening their faith, their sense of UU Identity, and their connection to one another?

**Collaboration** - How can we continue to build and enhance relationships across congregational boundaries?

**Technology Opportunities** - How can we advance our use of technology to expand services, build networks, work across geographic distances, lower costs, and be good stewards of our environment?

A thorough examination of district differences and the resulting challenges is available in the “Report of the Congregations Come First (CCF) Team” (January 26, 2008). This report takes an “eagle’s eye” view of the system as it focuses on questions of service delivery and funding. Also included in that report is a brief history of “The Development of District Services and Prior System Studies.” See Appendix XXX for the report.

## **Assessment**

District staff recently created and distributed a survey designed for the purpose of soliciting direct feedback from ministers and congregational board members into the expectations and performance of the district and its staff. It will help inform future program planning and provide helpful feedback to those serving congregations. Results of the survey will be available to district staff by late summer. See Appendix XXXXX for a copy of the assessment.

## **Innovations**

**Congregational Connections** – Since the 1961 consolidation the biggest innovation is the congregations’ growing sense that they are in association with one another. Increasingly they understand the need to combine efforts to achieve larger aims. Turning away from isolation and toward cooperation with their neighbors and with the UUA, they are exploring what it means to be partners in ministering to the community and the world. As this interdependence strengthens, district staff encourage congregations to share their in-house expertise with each other, thus becoming another way to foster growth and vitality throughout the Association.

**Collaborative Spirit** - Another innovation is the strong and effective collaborative spirit that has arisen among district staff. This spirit reflects the influence of BCM, regionalization, and Harlan Limpert’s vision-driven leadership. One example of this spirit is the willingness of district staff to form cross-district task forces, based on individual interests, to solve challenges common to all districts. For example, one task force generated the assessment tool mentioned in the previous section. Another is creating a common online virtual library to share and store electronic leadership development resources.

**Customized Programming** – Districts, individually and in collaboration with one another, are creating programs that address the emerging and sometimes unique needs of the congregations in their service areas. UUA resources, other UUA affiliates, and community connections contribute expertise and resources during the creation of these programs. Examples include the following:

- In September 2008 Mountain Desert launched **Living Into Covenant**, a ministerial formation project funded by the Panel on Theological Education.
- **No More Turning Away** (NMTA) is a collaborative effort in Central Midwest, initiated by the religious educators in a number of congregations, to simultaneously understand and work to end homelessness together.

- An ambitious inter-district effort between Pacific Central District and Pacific Southwest District has created the **UU Legislative Ministry of California**.
- Mid-South **Unlimited Potential' Program (UP!)** is a unique enrichment program for very small congregations in Mid-South.
- Massachusetts Bay and Ballou Channing developed a program of basic leadership skills training called "**Leadership Arts and Crafts**."
- Metro New York / Joseph Priestley / Ohio Meadville / St. Lawrence have joined to create the **UU Leadership Team Institute (UULTI)**. A week-long leadership experience for congregational teams focused on congregational development.

**Technological Revolution** – The final innovation is the use of technology. Cooperating with each other and with national staff, district staff members are now regularly hosting webinars and video conference calls and using Google Groups, Google Documents, Facebook, virtual libraries, and podcasts. One example best illustrates the benefits of the new technology. During 2008, 1,663 people attended 328 cyber-events, held over the Internet rather than at a physical meeting location. This saved hundreds of hours of travel, significantly reduced our carbon footprint, and made the events more widely available and more heavily attended.

## **Into the Future**

A discussion of the future of District Services begins with the following observations garnered from reflections on its past.

**Holy Conversation** - The conversation about the need for and purpose of districts and District Services is an ongoing holy conversation that explores our theology of congregational mutuality and accountability. It needs to continue at all levels.

**More Emphasis on Creating New Congregations** - Before consolidation, one of the primary purposes of districting was to create new congregations and spread the faith. We need to explore the balance between serving the needs of congregations and establishing new ones.

**Emerging Era of Shared Ministry** - Collective mutuality among clustered congregations rarely existed anytime in our Unitarian and Universalist past, nor did it exist in the past of most free religious organizations or denominations. However, associational relationships based on paternalism and congregational relationships based on individualism are now giving way to an emerging sense of shared ministry.

**Reason to Be Hopeful** - From our vantage point situated between the congregations and the UUA as a whole, it appears that in spite of the challenges facing us, our Associational infrastructure has never been stronger. In addition, given the right circumstances and resources, positive structural change appears to happen organically. We need to recognize and build on our strengths and cultivate positive changes that occur from the bottom up.

Increasingly, district staff members feel their work to be that of collaborative ministry. They expect this feeling to grow as they work and share with congregational leaders, with one another, and with the national staff. Where do they hope this will all lead? During the BCM last November, district staff members collectively identified their three wishes for the future. This is where their hearts, minds, and energies are headed.

1. More and healthier congregations that lay claim to the saving message of Unitarian Universalism and proclaim that message to every culture and generation through thought, word, and deed.
2. The renewal and deepening of the covenant of mutual support between and among the congregations, districts, regions, and the national staff.
3. Better coordination throughout the UUA so that all congregations, no matter the district or the region, get equal and ready access to the resources that advance the best practices in spreading the faith of Unitarian Universalism.

# Making Sure There Is a There There

An Essex Conversations Paper by Judith A. Frediani

*There is no there there.*

—Gertrude Stein, describing Oakland, California

A page of editorial cartoons in the magazine, *The Nation*, caught my eye a few years ago. The collection of images was entitled, “Oxymorons.” An oxymoron is, of course, an apparent contradiction in terms, such as “jumbo shrimp” or “deafening silence.” Not surprisingly, these oxymoronic cartoons betrayed a certain editorial bias: The first sketch depicted “military intelligence”; the second, “political integrity”; the third, “people’s government.” The fourth was “religious education,” and it depicted a young man whose head was open at the top like a trash receptacle. On his out-stretched hand stood a cleric pouring garbage—banana peels, apple cores, tin cans—into the young man’s skull. I bristled at this image. Surely, I thought, this indictment is directed at orthodox religions with dogmatic religious instruction; surely, our liberal religious education practices are exempt from such a characterization. If anything, we are more often accused of not pouring anything into the heads of our children and youth, that is, not giving them specific theological answers or beliefs. Surely, liberal religious education is not an oxymoron?

There is an inherent contradiction in religious education. The word religion is most likely derived from the Latin *religare*, “to bind tightly” from *ligare*, “to bind.” Education, on the other hand, is from the Latin *duca*, “to take or to lead.” To educate is to take or lead away. Thus, the apparent paradox of religious education: simultaneously to bind together and lead out. It poses a pedagogical dilemma for religious educators: how to “teach” Unitarian Universalism without “stamping our minds” on others, particularly defenseless children. This is not a semantic issue, but a philosophic one. What is the nature and purpose of liberal religious education as we enter the twenty-first century? In what ways should it bind us together, and in what ways should it lead us out or liberate us?

One image that helps us with this seeming contradiction is the familiar metaphor of roots and wings. In her hauntingly beautiful song, “Spirit of Life,” Unitarian Universalist songwriter and activist Carolyn McDade writes, “Roots hold me close; wings set me free.” The roots refer to the religious community that binds us gently together, companions and comforts us in our life journeys, and assures us that we are not alone. Psychologist and faith educator Sharon Parks calls this a “holding community” Wings represent the free intellectual inquiry of liberal religion, the freedom to discover and be who we truly are, and the liberation of the human spirit. Liberal religious education is not an oxymoron, but it is a paradox that we continue to trip over and that continues to challenge us to bring our hearts, minds, and spirits to make meaning of life. And meaning making is the essential purpose of religious education.

Of course, to make meaning of our lives in religious community, we have to show up. I am often asked what to tell parents when they ask, “Why should we go to church? We are so busy and our kids are so busy.” The simple answer is, “Because you’re so busy.” We should go to church precisely because of soccer practice and violin lessons and hockey and gymnastics; precisely because more of us are working longer hours, traveling more, and commuting farther; precisely because our lives are compartmentalized, structured, task-filled, and goal-focused;

because the pressures that drive us and the busyness that fills our days act, as a centrifugal force that pulls us away from family, friends, and other human connection, and distracts us from our deep human need to reflect, renew, commit, and make meaning of our lives. The competition for our time is very real, but we are not really too busy. A recent study on how people use their leisure time confirms that people who do more do even more. People who work more also spend more time with their families and have more sex.

Let's accept busyness as a given and, in a paradigm shift see it as a well-disguised gift—an opportunity to identify the essential purpose of the religious community. People have many needs—intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual—but the faith community must keep uppermost in its mind the religious gifts that are no other institution's primary responsibility or intent. The potential for meaning making is so great, and our time together so short, that we must constantly ask ourselves, What religious needs can we serve that secular schools, challenging careers, loving families, and political and social organizations do not fully satisfy? Helping people develop spiritually and act religiously is our unique responsibility. Facilitating this religious growth and learning is what we as liberal religious educators can uniquely offer. Together, making meaning of life and living a life of meaning constitute the there we must make sure is there.

There are many ways to make sure there is a there in our congregational life. I will address three which together offer opportunities unique to liberal religious education: lifespan religious growth and learning in an intergenerational community, ethical and spiritual grounding in social justice, and a liberating pedagogy. These visions for the twenty-first century are not new; they are the not-fully-realized visions we have held for a generation or more.

### **Lifespan Religious Education**

“There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning,” wrote Thornton Wilder in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. We call it lifespan religious education, a term that evokes an image of a seamless continuum, of a graceful bridge spanning the river of life from shore to shore, from birth to death. And yes, we hope that bridge is love, the beloved community.

Since the Religious Education Futures Committee report of 1981, I and most religious educators have been preaching and teaching the gospel of lifespan religious growth and learning throughout our Association. The rhetoric of “lifespan religious education” permeates our publications, brochures, and mission statements. Yet I am struck with the almost utter failure of the concept to be realized in our denomination. We offer not a solid span that can be safely crossed, but a series of bobbing rafts that, allow travelers, if they are sufficiently adventurous or persistent, to leap from one to another. Whoops! Sometimes there is no raft at all for your age group. Welcoming children into the first ten minutes of adult worship, having the youth group clean up after the potluck, and publishing an adult education brochure do not collectively constitute lifespan religious education. Even congregations that have rafts for each age group too often are programming for each age group, inadvertently maintaining discrete, segregated communities within the community, missing an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of truly intergenerational life.

What would a congregation engaged in lifespan religious growth and learning look like? It would be the ultimate committee of the whole: a community in which everyone is seen as teacher and learner; in which every age and stage of life is equally valued and equally supported

by whatever tangible and intangible resources the community has to offer. In which every age and stage of life is allowed to contribute whatever tangible and intangible resources it has to offer; a community in which no decision is made about the life of the community—whether in the areas of worship, physical plant, fundraising, budgeting, social action, the arts, education, or any other—without consideration of its impact on and opportunities for every member of the community.

If this vision seems ambitious, it is no more than a restatement of the goals espoused throughout our ranks. But as a religious organization we are culturally and institutionally resistant to realizing those ideals. Part of our resistance is the persistence of nineteenth-century understandings of what a church is, what worship is, and what education is. To the extent that church is Sunday morning worship-centered, and worship is pulpit-centered, and education is classroom-centered, much of the life of the congregation will be characterized by parallel play. If all members were content to play in their traditional spaces—adults in the living room, children in the (basement) playroom—we wouldn't be asking ourselves, Where are the young adults? Why can't we keep a youth group going? Why don't our eleven-year-olds want to come to church? Why do our elders feel isolated?

These questions suggest that we have a strong, institutionalized middle-age bias, and it is therefore not surprising that we best serve that age group. I am often surprised that people are surprised when a child says something profound (“From the mouth of babes!”) or a youth demonstrates skilled leadership (“He'll be running for president one day!”), or an elder does anything (“Seventy-eight and still...”). Ageism, and the patronizing attitudes it produces, work against lifespan religious growth and learning and the development of the beloved community. When we remember that the gifts of wisdom, love, and service are human capacities found in people of all ages, we will restructure our institutions to change the way we relate to each other religiously. We have examples of the possibilities in our congregation today. Youth and young adults are teaching older adults new ways to worship; participants in Cakes for the Queen of Heaven programs are finding that seventeen- and seventy-four-year-old women have much in common and much to teach each other; children, youth, and adults are actively engaged together in social action projects. We can learn from these and many other models. And we can learn from our religious educators who are particularly aware that people of all ages are more alike than different. We can resist our tendencies to compartmentalize people by age and instead nurture the connections among all ages in what may be the last presence of multigenerational life—the religious community.

But genuine respect for all ages and truly intergenerational communities are countercultural prospects that will require institutional transformation to be fully realized. To the extent that religious education is synonymous with kids; religious educator is associated with childcare; and children, youth; and those that serve them are marginalized, we are not achieving the depth and vitality we could as a faith community and a teaching and learning community. Yet creating this lifespan bridge is one of the most valuable gifts a religious community can offer.

### **Ethical and Spiritual Grounding in Social Justice**

On Racial Justice Day at General Assembly in Charlotte, we all broke into small groups to discuss the morning's program. A young woman in my circle was just graduating from high school and about to attend a prestigious university. She was bright and liberal and born and

raised Unitarian Universalist. And she was angry. She had been listening to Mark Morrison-Reed and Bill Jones describe their experiences with racism in society and within the UUA. And she was shocked. She said she had been taught that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had basically eliminated racism—that it was ancient history, that we had moved beyond it. She said she was angry because she felt she had been lied to. Why, she asked, didn't my church tell me about the reality of racism?

At the 1984 Unitarian Universalist National Workshop on Social Justice, the Revs. Richard S. Gilbert and Roberta Nelson spoke on the theme, "Religious Education and Social Action: Branches of the Same Tree." The "Compleat" Church, Gilbert wrote, links religious education and social action. "It is a linkage that should not be necessary to make—it seems self-evident." In his address and in many other works, he has described a doctrine of the church as a prophetic, learning, caring, and celebrating community, one that is "insufficient, inadequate, unless all parts are complete and healthy." Gilbert and the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York, continue to model this vision.

In her remarks, Roberta Nelson emphasized that social justice is "caught" not "taught." When we model the risks and rewards of justice seeking, and when people of all ages are engaged together in social action, we make meaning of our lives. Nelson quotes Viktor Frankl: "We are doomed to failure if our goal is to find meaning in being happy. Happiness is the side effect of fulfilling the search for meaning." "The work of meaning-making is hard," writes Nelson. "Part of the quest for meaning for me is to put that which I value, prize and cherish into action."

A primary goal of religious education is to build community. Education breaks down the dichotomy between self and others, developing the human capacity to feel identity with and empathy for all other people, increasing our ability to draw from and contribute to ever-widening circles of human communities. As we learn about others, our sense of interdependence, of responsibility to and connectedness with others, grows. When we feel that our welfare is linked to the welfare of the world and that taking care of self is really taking care of community, we are moved to act. Unless and until the world knows perfect justice, education with integrity—religious education that makes meaning—must not only inspire but also equip us to change the world. Rooted in ethical community, we are freed to live ethically.

Unitarian Universalism, including our religious education practices, has a long and strong history of justice seeking. We have used our classrooms and pulpits, our sanctuaries and General Assemblies, our finances and talents, our music and arts, our political and organizing skills, our energies, and our lives to promote a more just world. We should pause to acknowledge our heritage and appreciate our efforts. But we cannot pause too long, because we are increasingly aware of how much could be done. If we can resist our cultural tendency to compartmentalize our religious life into worship, religious education, and social justice boxes; if we can engage all ages in the praxis of reflection and action, we could insure that religious education and social action are indeed two branches of the same tree and that social justice is inseparable from meaning making in our faith. In doing so, we would raise children who are much better equipped than we were to engage in and contribute to their multicultural world. In the process, we ourselves would be transformed into a more diverse multicultural denomination, not because of what we preach, but because of what we do.

## **A Liberating Pedagogy**

In *Fashion Me a People*, Maria Harris wrote, “The very word ‘curriculum’ conjures up images of boxes piled on top of each other in out-of-the-way places, packed with dull workbooks for children to fill out endlessly in Sunday School.” As a person responsible for developing some of those boxes (piled on top of each other in my office), I agree. When we hear the word *curriculum*, our minds do an automatic word association with *classroom*—the classroom of our childhood. Those classrooms grew out of the nineteenth-century pedagogy that sought to prepare a labor force for an emerging industrial society and to “Americanize” an increasingly diverse population. That legacy is so strong in our larger culture that it intrudes on our lifespan religious education programs despite our strong history of progressive educational philosophy and practice; despite the voices of Channing, Folsom, Dewey, Knowles, Freire, hooks, and others we have listened to; and despite the many creative, engaging, and experiential religious education programs throughout our denomination, We need to expand our understanding of curriculum beyond the books, boxes, and classrooms in order to fully realize the transforming power available to us as liberal religious communities.

Maria Harris contends that the curriculum is “the entire course of the church’s life,” the mobilizing of the creative and educative process of the entire religious community. I take that as a warning. All churches teach the same three curricula, Harris continues, referring to Elliot Eisner’s model in *The Educational Imagination*. The explicit curriculum is what we actually present with conscious intent. The implicit curriculum includes the patterns of organization, the procedures, and the attitudes that frame the explicit curriculum. The implicit can reinforce or contradict the explicit curriculum. The null curriculum is a paradox; it is what is not said and not done, but it is not neutral. Silence can be deafening, and destructive.

If we explicitly state in our church literature that we value our youth, but have a \$200 youth budget, no adults to work with youth, or no willingness to hold a district youth conference in our building, one might conclude from Harris’s analysis that the implicit curriculum contradicts and undermines the explicit curriculum. Both “curricula” teach. This view of curriculum is a powerful reminder that we need to pay attention to what the entire community is teaching the entire community. Using this understanding as a new lens would not only help us see our counter-productive practices more clearly, it would necessarily enlist the entire congregation in creating lifespan learning.

If implemented, the-church-is-the-curriculum philosophy would be transforming, but it is not the only useful concept of curriculum. When directors of religious education ask me if we have a curriculum to address racism or to explore Buddhism, I can’t say, “Why no, your church is the curriculum!” Bigger than a box, but smaller than the entire course of the church (Would you want to be the director of the entire course of the church?) is curriculum as “planned learning opportunities for intentional outcomes”; in other words, creating experiences that give people an opportunity to learn something worth learning. Those experiences need not be bound by a classroom, by age group, or by any form of pedagogy, although they can be. The outcomes, too, need not be limited to traditional cognitive goals and measurable objectives, and hopefully, are not. In fact, we can be proud of our history of eclectic, progressive approaches to education while also recognizing how we are culture-bound in ways that work against our goals.

Curriculum includes intent and process as well as content. “The medium is the message,” said Marshall McLuhan. Point taken, but it is not strictly true. The medium is a message; content is a message; action is a message; and silence or inaction is a message. In implementing programs that facilitate lifespan religious growth and learning, we need to attend to each of these

components. Because we value the worth of each individual, we strive to treat each other with love and respect. This not only models our religious Principles, but it nurtures a sense of self-respect and self-acceptance that is the basis of love for others. Because we value the use of reason and intellect, we provide factual and conceptual information and encourage critical inquiry. Because our sense of right and wrong is central to the meaning we make of our lives, we act. We articulate our values, we witness them, and we try to live them. And because we don't know everything and can't control everything, we make room for mystery, for awe and wonder, for oneness with a universe greater than the human constellation, for the unknowable and unexplainable. We try to nurture a spiritually meaningful life, that is, a life examined, mysterious, and dedicated—a life examined by the dual standards of reason and morality, a life open to the mystery within and between human spirits, a life dedicated to purposes greater than the interests of the individual. My hope is that we do not lose any dimension of our heritage—spirituals intellectual, or ethical—because together they define what a liberal religious education offers; together they put a there there.

### **Realizing Our Visions**

Abraham Maslow said that “we grow forward when the delights of growth and the anxieties of safety are greater than the anxieties of growth and the delights of safety.” To thrive and not merely survive in the twenty-first century, we need to grow forward with our strengths as a liberal religious community, offering lifespan religious growth and learning in an intergenerational community, educating for social action, and providing the freedom to search for truth and meaning. Unitarian Universalism has undergone significant transformation in the past, and we face an opportunity to grow forward again by transforming those aspects of our institutional culture that clip our wings.

We need to expand our concept of religious education, and we need to change our relationship with our religious educators. Too often, directors and ministers of religious education learn the gospel of lifespan religious education only to return to institutions uncommitted to putting the concept into practice. Religious educators educate for social justice in the classroom only to see the implicit church curriculum contradict the explicit—in the ways children, youth, and those who serve them are treated; in the level of institutional resources committed to social action. Religious educators—important facilitators of meaning making in the faith community—are too often excluded from, or severely underrepresented on, the committees, boards, and task forces that make decisions, set priorities, and allocate resources for our religious life. Those engaged in religious education need to be at all the tables, be included in educational opportunities, and be welcomed in partnership with parish ministers if we are to be the beloved communities that offer, in James Luther Adams's words, intimacy (community) and ultimacy (meaning) throughout the life span; if we are to make sure there is a there there for all ages.

## While we're on the subject of change— How about a new model for Sunday School?

*An article by Neil MacQueen introducing the Workshop Rotation Model*

*This is a revised version of the article which appeared in the September 1997 Presbyterian Outlook, an independent weekly serving the Presbyterian Church. Permission is granted to freely reprint or quote from this article provided the website information -rotation.org- and author's name stays with article.*

Is Sunday School in a time warp or what? Few things have changed so little and are ailing so much in our denomination. There are places where Sunday School is already starting to die out without so much as an amendment or mention in the *Presbyterian Layman* (magazine).

- Note to denomination builders: Presbyterians do a lousy job of evangelizing on street corners.
- Note to the Mission Division: Our kids are a mission field too.
- Memo to Denominational Staff: the next generation of contributions won't come from kids we bore now.
- Aside to the Changing Church/Worship Movement: what if the church had never lost the young people you're now trying to attract back to the church?
- Large sign with blinking lights to traditional curriculum publishers: *The Emperor has no clothes.*

Since 1990, a growing number of churches across our denomination -and now in most major denominations, have been experimenting with a new way of doing Sunday School called ***The Workshop Rotation Model***. You may not have heard about it because it's in direct competition with the vested curriculum interests of many publishers. (It is now estimated that somewhere between 5000 and 7000 churches do the Rotation Model in the US and Canada.) "We weren't trying to invent a new model, we were just trying to solve our problems," said Melissa Hansche, D.C.E. at the Presbyterian Church of Barrington, the church in the Chicago Presbytery where the model got its start. What problems is she talking about?

- Bored kids and teachers
- Declining attendance
- Lack of Bible literacy
- Drab and uninviting classrooms
- Sedentary teaching
- Expensive curriculum (that's not half used)
- Poor teacher preparation
- Trouble recruiting teachers
- (your problem here)

The decline in Sunday School is one of the worst kept secrets in the Church. Some say "it's a sign of the times." Others of us wonder out loud whether the traditional model EVER worked. (Memo to Research Services: Where are all those kids we had in our Sunday Schools back in the so-called "good old days" of the 50's and 60's? They're at home reading the Sunday paper or out on the soccer fields.) "Like a lot of other churches in our Presbytery, we knew we had to do something and soon." said Hansche. "And we knew that looking for yet another 'new and improved' curriculum wasn't the answer either. Been there, done that."

**Here's the Workshop Rotation Model in a nutshell:** Teach major Bible stories and concepts through kid-friendly multimedia workshops: an Art workshop, Drama, Music, Games, A-V, Puppets, Storytelling, Computers, and any other educational media you can get your hands

on. Teach the same Bible story in all of the workshops for four or five weeks rotating the kids to a different workshop each week. And here comes the extremely teacher friendly part: Have the same teacher in each workshop for all five weeks teaching the same lesson week after week to the different classes coming in. The results, says Linda Beckham, D.C.E. at Tampa's Palma Ceia Church are astounding. "The kids love it, the teachers love it, and we can't ever imagine going back to the old way."

**Here's why it works:** The Workshop Rotation Model concentrates on the major stories of the Bible over and over again. It eschews the popular but educationally unsound new lesson each week lectionary approach to curriculum currently in fashion among curriculum writers. The model's philosophy recognizes that kids not only love repetition, but they need it to develop a lasting memory and understanding of content. The multi-intelligences approach in the model isn't a fad or merely kid-friendly, it is calculated to take advantage of our student's God-given thirst for multi-modal learning. Traditional designs have long attempted to teach through multimedia, but their frenetic lessons with six or more different steps, a game, a craft, Bible study and music all in 45 minutes left our teachers breathless. And few had the gifts to teach in each mode properly.

The model also emphasizes teacher repetition. By the second week of the rotation, the teacher is already improving the original lesson plan for the next class. No more "if I only would have...." in the parking lot after class. No more Saturday night planning. No more recruitment hassles, --teachers are happy to sign up for five week rotations. And because the teacher is assigned to teach in the creative mode they are comfortable with, the teaching and learning experience are enriched. No more lectures and music cassettes still in their cellophane wrappers, no more overused worksheets, or fumbling popsicle stick Jesus' crafts.

The Model also buries the beige and boring classroom in a blizzard of creative kid-oriented design. It says we're teaching kids, not cons, and we want them to come back. In Barrington, the A-V room has theater seats and a popcorn machine. In Park Ridge Illinois, part of the Bible Skills and Games workshop is built like an ancient synagogue. The Palatine Illinois church holds one of their workshops in a large "Scripture Tent," with floor cushions instead of folding chairs. Many of those who visit Workshop churches say the design looks and feels a lot like Vacation Bible School, only more permanent. And why not? VBS is one of the most successful educational models the Church has ever created.

There is no need to buy curriculum, prompting one denominational publisher to describe it as "the third rail for curriculum publishers." Instead, in a fit of connectionalism, educators are calling each other and saying "I'll trade you my Moses rotation for your Ruth, and do you have any good art projects for the Prodigal Son?" Churches are gleaning from each other. They're digging into their stockpiles of creative materials and hitting their resource centers. In-house "design teams" composed of a minister, elders and C.E. leaders provide the educational and theological backbone. Together they help shape the simple but creative lesson plans and then count on the teacher to improve on them each week. Unlike earlier models which fell by the weight of their planning, this model is proving easier to implement and maintain. Because each workshop uses essentially the same lesson plan for about five weeks in a row, every week isn't a production. *(Ok, it is a production. But it's a happy production. And you can now buy published Rotation curriculum. Though I don't know why you would when you can find over 2000 free rotation lessons at rotation.org).*

A website for the Rotation Model ---[www.rotation.org](http://www.rotation.org)-- features the model manual, complete rotation lesson plans, a resource directory and a creative ideas area for each workshop,

all of which can be printed out for free. "All along one of the strengths of this model has been the willingness of churches to share with each other. We believe that the grassroots sharing of resources and lesson materials is a vivid manifestation of the connectional nature we have professed for so long," says Hansche.

The growing success of the model underscores several important issues in the education debate. First, the model demonstrates a viable alternative to "one size fits all" curriculum design. It is not more of the same by another name. Second, the existence of many small churches using the model challenges a commonly held belief that small congregations are curriculum dependent. Third, the model seriously addresses the underlying problems of Sunday School and offers practical solutions. Finally, the model's co-operative impulse in combination for the first time with a truly connectional medium — the Internet, is pioneering a new way of resourcing each other that is, surprise! -- less expensive. This emerging resource paradigm represents a potential challenge to the very foundation of the curriculum publishing establishment.

At a time of navel gazing, finger pointing, and great challenges within our denomination, it is prophetic that a couple of hundred churches didn't need Arthur Anderson Consulting to tell them what worked, what didn't and what needed to be done.

For more information about the Workshop Rotation Model, visit the official Rotation website, [www.rotation.org](http://www.rotation.org). You can also read the official **Workshop Rotation book** published by Geneva Press. A free extended excerpt of that book can be found at [www.rotation.org/manual.htm](http://www.rotation.org/manual.htm)

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Neil MacQueen is a Presbyterian minister. It was while serving as the Associate Minister at the Presbyterian Church of Barrington Illinois that he and others in the Chicago area developed the Workshop Rotation Model. Neil and his family now live in Columbus Ohio where he develops software for Christian education, and is the volunteer webmaster for [rotation.org](http://rotation.org).

**(Note by Susan Smith: The rotation model can be used in small congregations and as a one-room schoolhouse model by changing the room each week or by having a large room equipped in a variety of ways. Also, it can draw from a larger pool of volunteers by asking specialists in a field like art to participate with an experienced lead teacher.)**

## **The Religious Education Fruits of Montessori Methods**

(This document is a compilation from several others)

### The Montessori Educational Philosophy

Children pass through sensitive periods of development early in life. Dr. Montessori described the child's mind between the time of birth and six years of age as the "absorbent mind". It is during this stage that a child has a tremendous ability to learn and assimilate from the world around him, without conscious effort. During this time, children are particularly receptive to certain external stimuli. A Montessori teacher recognizes and takes advantage of these highly perceptive stages through the introduction of materials and activities, which are specially

designed to stimulate the intellect.

Encouraged to focus her attention on one particular quality, the child works at her own optimum level – in an environment where beauty and orderliness are emphasized and appreciated. A spontaneous love of "work" is revealed as the child is given the freedom (within boundaries) to make her own choices.

Montessori teachers are trained facilitators in the classroom, always ready to assist and direct. Their purpose is to stimulate the child's enthusiasm for learning and to guide it, without interfering with the child's natural desire to teach himself and become independent. Each child works through his individual cycle of activities, and learns to truly understand according to his own unique needs and capabilities.

Everything in a Montessori classroom has a specific use or purpose. There is nothing in the prepared environment that the child cannot see or touch. All of the furniture and equipment is scaled down to the child's size and is within easy reach.

A quality Montessori classroom has a busy, productive atmosphere where joy and respect abound. Within such an enriched environment, freedom, responsibility, and social and intellectual development spontaneously flourish!

### The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is an approach to the religious formation of children. It is rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. Children gather in an "atrium," a room prepared for them, which contains simple yet beautiful materials that they use.

You may be wondering how these materials help the religious life of children? If an adult hears a beautiful passage from the Bible, the adult might take a Bible, find the passage, and read it slowly again and again. He or she may think deeply about the words and perhaps speak to God in a thankful or hopeful prayer. But a little child, too young to read, needs another way. In an atrium the child can ponder a biblical passage or a prayer from the liturgy by taking the material for that text and working with it - placing wood figures of sheep in a sheepfold of the Good Shepherd, setting sculpted apostles around a Last Supper table, or preparing a small altar with the furnishings used for the Eucharist. Older children who do read often copy parables from the Bible, lay in order written prayers from the rite of baptism, or label a long time line showing the history of the kingdom of God.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is the result of a long period of careful observation of children by Sofia Cavalletti and her Montessori collaborator, Gianna Gobbi, in Rome. It began quite by accident, without warning or planning, the way God so often comes into our lives. In 1954 Sofia was a Hebrew and Scripture scholar, comfortable in her role in the academic world, when a mother asked her to give some religious instruction to her son. At first Sofia refused, saying she knew nothing about children. But the mother persisted and eventually Sofia consented. That experience with a 7 year-old changed her whole life. She saw in that child, and in numerous other children since, a way of being in the presence of God that is both unique to the child and a gift to the adult who stops long enough to notice.

Perhaps it is because Sofia went before the child with no preconceived ideas of what should happen that the child responded with such joy. Certainly her background in Scripture made it possible for her to talk about God in a way that opened and enthused the child as well as Sofia herself. From that day to the present time Sofia and Gianna remind us constantly to look to

the child to watch for that sign of a deeply religious life - joy - and to always ask the question: "What face of God is the child telling us he or she needs to see?"

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The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and other models based upon it usually begin with the teacher introducing the story for the day in a very simple manner using some visual aid such as shaped figures or a felt board. Montessori's technique of asking "Wondering Questions" is employed to allow a space for the children to theologize about the meaning of the story for them and for the church as they understand it. A wondering question is open-ended and offers the greatest possible space for the respondents, eg. "I wonder who The Good Shepherd Is." The key to facilitating the discussion is to allow enough silence to let children think, asking the question enough times to allow everyone to speak and to let thoughts deepen and ripen and allowing respectful discussion between children.

Later, children are allowed to use the resources of the atrium freely. They may process the days story through play at the storytelling area or return to a previous story (materials for all previous stories are on hand). They may process the story at the art or dramatic play area. They may choose to spend time at the prayer altar of the atrium. If the teacher finds that a child has lost focus (using a figure from a story as an airplane perhaps), that story is repeated or the elements of the area are described.

### SpiritPlay

A UU curriculum based on these principles and adapted from Jerome Berryman's Godly Play has been created. Many UU congregations use this program. UU congregations that are deeply grounded in our Christian heritage sometimes use The Catechesis of The Good Shepherd as well. More information about Spirit Play is available at [www.spiritplay.net](http://www.spiritplay.net).

## **Thomas Groome – Action-Reflection, Shared Praxis Model Religious Education Methodology**

The Shared Praxis methodology developed by Thomas Groome is an action-reflection methodology, grounded in the experience and social setting of the individual or community. Shared Praxis is the foundational theory used in many UUA curricula and is highly adaptable to various educational content including leadership issues.

1. It begins with the presentation of a FOCUS element by the facilitator. This can be a story, a reading, or a shared experience. It may be an activity in which the group or congregation has just participated such as a worship service, a meeting or a social justice project.
2. Then, each participant has an opportunity to NAME THEIR OWN KNOWING regarding the session's subject as presented in the FOCUS. Each person draws on their own experience of the subject -- their own personal story. This stage often takes the form of a check-in and may be guided by some minimal structure. Almost always, there is no cross talk or discussion until each participant has had an opportunity to speak. Alternatively, participants might draw or write their responses and then respond or the technique of "Open Space" may be used. [Open space asks participants to physically move to indicate their answer to a question. The participant may place himself or herself along a continuum line or in a designated location to express a preference or opinion or experience.]
3. The facilitator then introduces questions to encourage CRITICAL REFLECTION on each participant's experience. These questions are meant to begin a discussion and may elicit questioning within the group.
4. After the subject has been engaged more deeply from the participants' own experiences, the facilitator introduces a teaching element illustrating the intersection between the subject and the COMMUNITY STORY AND VISION. The facilitator may offer facts, historical accounts, articles of faith such as our Principles and Purposes statement, readings from authorities, etc. This section may take the form of an illustrative exercise, a film clip, a skit, a scientific experiment or some other creative or participatory experience.
5. The next step is DIALOGUE AND DIALECTIC during which the participants reflect on the meaning of their learning. The similarities and differences between their individual experiences and the didactic material presented by the facilitator may be the subject of discussion. The participants may offer advice, encouragement, correction and support to one another.
6. This exploration leads to a DECISION by the group and/or individuals that reflects the implications of this learning for their lives. It might be in the form of a resolution or plan for change or a commitment to continue best practices. After a process of shared reflection, the group is propelled toward again shared action once again.

Since Shared Praxis methodology is circular, it can be repeated several times during the same learning experience. At the end of each circuit, the group is engaged in a shared action that will be the focus of the next round of reflection.