

Short History of the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Walt Peck, February 2022

We, dear members and friends of the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca, are facing a tremendously important decision for the future of our liberal religious organization. After the loss of our beloved settled minister and the uncertainties of the pandemic, we are left wondering how we should approach our future together. Questions abound. How and when can we return to meeting together? Shall we seek a new full-time minister? And, if so, what can we afford and expect to find in the highly competitive marketplace for ministerial leadership? And what are the alternatives we might pursue?

Given the momentous nature of our upcoming decisions, the members of the Board of Trustees thought it wise that we include as many of our community members as possible in our process. To do so, we need to more fully examine what it is we are about. What really matters? What are we trying to accomplish? But to do this, we need to bring folks up to speed on two matters: what is our financial situation and what is our history? We will be sharing our financial situation soon. In the meantime, here is a short overview of lessons from our history that may be helpful as we move forward. These are gleaned from the book by Carol Kammen on our church's first eighty years and from other sources in the historical record which I have personally examined.

- 1) Theological and political disputes within the congregation have not often led to organizational dissension, with the possible exception of debates during and around the Vietnam era. Yes, our theology has changed deeply from the times when we were consciously Christian to today, but that transformation has not led to notable internal conflict.
- 2) We have had both long and short pastorates, with only two really notable long-term pastorates, from 1942-1959 (Ralph Helverson) and 1971-1996 (Jack Taylor). That said, some short pastorates were periods of growth and excitement; the first pastorate of Dick Gilbert in the 1960's and Margaret Weis's recent service come immediately to mind.
- 3) Our relationship with the AUA before 1961 and the UUA since has only rarely been close. We were founded as a 'missionary' enterprise by the AUA in the middle of the nineteenth century in order to create a Unitarian presence in a growing University town. Despite this, denominational support was weaker than one would hope. Since World War II, we have had few significant interactions with the UUA. Even when Ithaca hosted the General Assembly in 1977, our congregation's involvement was surprisingly thin.

- 4) The UUA is a congregational-polity denomination. In other words, we, as a congregation, are organizationally autonomous, with the UUA taking neither administrative nor financial responsibility for us.
- 5) Especially in the last 70 years, the religious education program has prompted most of our expansions of the physical plant, including a major renovation to what we now call the parlor and the purchase of what we now call the Parish House in the late 1950's. The RE program also prompted the major expansion that tied the Parish House and main building together in the early nineties, as well as the purchase of the Annex in the early 2000's.
- 6) Money has always been a challenge. This was true even years ago when expenses were far more limited.
- 7) Prior to the last fifty years or so, there were very few staff on the payroll. Volunteers, though still important today, played an even bigger role in keeping the church up and running in the past. In particular, women volunteers have played an outsized role in everything from running the Sunday School to raising funds to keeping the church building clean.
- 8) Our congregation has always had a large number of so-called 'come-outers', people who were raised in traditions other than Unitarian. This includes several ministers, including Ralph Helverson and Jack Taylor. In earlier times, though not so much today, Cornell faculty were predominant in the membership and leadership of the church.
- 9) Congregational dissension has come and gone in waves over time. Yes, we have had periods of conflict, but we have also had periods that seem to have been relatively peaceful. During periods of expansion in churchgoing in society as a whole, notably the post-WW II years, our congregation has thrived, both numerically and financially, even in spite of division over ministerial leadership. This was particularly true for us in the early 1960's.
- 10) Ministerial leadership has often been the source of contention. And finding a new minister can be tricky. Some of our most successful pastors have come from the most unlikely places; for example, Ralph Helverson was a Methodist grad student at Cornell who served the small chapel in Forest Home before we hired him. On the other hand, some new ministers whose backgrounds should have portended great success did not work out. For example, a search team in the early sixties was looking for, and found, a scholarly minister. He was let go very soon afterward for being too dry. A new search team looking for his replacement sought someone young and energetic, which they found; and then let go soon after. He seems to have been too energetic.

11) Some of the most influential persons in the congregation have not been ministers. Frank Eldridge was our beloved organist for 47 years. Our Religious Education Program thrived under the leadership of RE Director Lois Ecklund for 29 years. Mark Pedersen was our rock in the office for 22 years. Sandy Soule kept our physical plant in shape for decades. J.O. Mahoney's generous bequest of his estate enabled us to complete the massive renovation of the early 1990's. And we should not forget Anna Botsford Comstock, a woman of great renown and accomplishment, whose image graces the stained glass on the south wall of the sanctuary.

I hope this summary was not too tedious and it is my hope that this background helps provide a framework for our decision-making. And if this piques your interest, please read Carol Kammen's recently released book! It is a wonderful read and is available after Sunday Services in the Parlor and from Michelle in the office. Or talk to me... I have much more that I can share.

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