

# **Our Very Own "Priesthood of All Believers"**

**By Steve Scott**

## **Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia, Missouri Lay-Led Worship Service - April 28, 2013**

In 1948 the American Unitarian Association launched an audacious program to organize lay-led fellowships for scattered religious liberals distant from Unitarian churches. The only requirement to form a fellowship was 10 or more persons in general sympathy with the purposes of the AUA. Nothing else. No building or property. No financial agreement or obligations. No minister. The program neatly exemplified the Unitarian principle of the priesthood of all believers.

The fellowship program continued until 1961, six years after the Unitarians and Universalists merged, and I say it was audacious because with the exception of a similar program started by the Universalists before the merger, no other religious organizations would tolerate the extraordinary freedom and autonomy granted to fellowships. Other religious groups focused on top-down organization of new churches to ensure doctrinal purity. Some asked how the Unitarians could guarantee that the fellowships would, in fact, be Unitarian. They couldn't, and that was the gamble the AUA took.

It was a gamble that paid off. Many UUs credit the fellowship program with saving our movement from extinction. Today about 40 percent of the fellowships spawned by the program survive in some form, and they constitute about 30 percent of the UUA's congregations.

We are among that 30 percent. Our fellowship was started with the assistance of Monroe Husbands, who headed the AUA fellowship program and was present at the first meeting of our predecessors on Jan. 30, 1951. The group received its AUA certification as a Unitarian Fellowship on March 14, 1951, and was left completely free and responsible for its own beliefs, procedures, personnel and programs, even while operating under the Unitarian label and auspices.

Like the other successful fellowships that grew out of the fellowship program, our forebears embraced the priesthood of all believers and demonstrated that the work of the church is the work of the people. They threw themselves into organizing regular Sunday services with the resources they had at hand. For 19 years, before moving here in 1970, they met in Lowry Hall, then home of the Missouri Bible College, later known as the Missouri School of Religion.

According to a history of our church written in 1981, "From the beginning, the Sunday morning programs were the most important part of the total program. In the absence of a minister, they were planned by a program committee, and because of the predominance of University faculty in the membership, the talks tended to be educational rather than exhortative or inspirational. Occasional talks by visiting ministers or taped recordings of sermons by A. Powell Davies, the well-loved minister of All Soul's Church in Washington, D.C., helped to satisfy those who desired a more religiously oriented service. Adding variety to Sunday mornings were discussion forums and programs in which the entire group participated. Two continuing features of the Sunday service have been the question period after each talk and the inclusion of music, whether recorded or live."

In the early 1950s, according to one of our founders, Philip Stone, the fellowship toyed with the idea of calling a minister and interviewed at least three prospective ministers. The members' consensus was that they were spoiled by having different good speakers each week, and it would take a marvelous minister to replace the local talent. Philip added that Dr. Herbert Tyson, a minister on the faculty of the Missouri Bible College, agreed to speak at a Sunday service once a month, which appeared to satisfy those wanting a more religious orientation.

Here is a sampling of programs from the early years:

Jan. 30, 1951, the first fellowship meeting: Lawrence Hepple spoke on "Sight, Hindsight and Foresight."

Sometime in 1952, date unknown, Journalism Dean Frank Luther Mott made the Bible come alive by presenting a drama of the story of Job. Parenthetically, Philip Stone noted that, of course, Dean Mott had the opinion that the Bible was just good literature and nothing else.

April 14, 1957: Experiences with the American Friends Service Committee, presented by Martha Biehle.

April 28, 1957: A forum on "Controversial Religious Problems"

May 5, 1957: A forum on "Unity in Diversity"

March 9, 1958: "The Religious Left," presented by Dr. Joseph Warner, psychologist at the Fulton State Hospital.

In the 1960s, with the Vietnam War dividing the country, the UUA organized a social responsibility section, and our fellowship formed its own social action committee. Among other

things, the committee assumed responsibility for a month of Sunday services. The records don't tell us how long that practice continued.

While there was a strong minority sentiment to continue as a fellowship with lay leadership, in 1978 the congregation voted to test the feasibility of having a minister by engaging a minister-on-loan for six weeks in early 1979. The response to this test was enthusiastic, leading to the call in 1980 of our first Minister, now Minister-Emerita, the Rev. Gertrude Lindener-Stawski. The variety in Sunday services continued with shared planning by the minister and the Sunday Service Program Committee. The next year, to accommodate those who liked the discussion format, what is now the Forum Discussion Group was started.

So as you can see, we have a long and rich history of lay leadership and lay-led services, and that tradition continues today. We have at least one lay-led worship service every month from September through May, and until this year all our Summer services were lay-led.

As we transition to a year-round program church, the Worship Associates are planning a bit of a change this coming Summer – Rev. Molly will be leading about two services each month. But that leaves a number of Sundays when you will have an opportunity to lead a worship service.

All you need to do to participate in our very own priesthood of all believers is sign up on the poster in the Greeting Area, or talk with any member of the Worship Associates. We need your help to continue the audacious experiment in liberal religion.