

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP

Columbia, Missouri

GLIMPSES INTO OUR PAST
1951 - 1981

Compiled by Ruth Stone, Bonner Mitchell, and Clotilde Moller
March 1981

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Having searched in vain several years for a liberal religious affiliation in Columbia, Philip Stone and the Addison Gulicks decided in 1950 that they would undertake the formation of a Unitarian Church. All three were Unitarians transplanted from Massachusetts, and they missed having a group where liberal religious ideas could be discussed and practiced. Correspondence with the American Unitarian Association (AUA) headquarters in Boston resulted in guidelines for launching a lay-led "fellowship," an organizational idea which had recently been developed by AUA and was meeting with favor across the country by groups too small to support a minister.

Encouraged by a handful of individuals whose names had been provided by the Unitarian "Church of the Larger Fellowship," by the Dean of the Bible College; and by other individuals who felt a need for something like the Unitarian approach, Phil called the first organizational meeting on January 28, 1951. It took place at the Daniel Boone Hotel, with 19 persons present, among whom were Monroe Husbands, AUA Fellowship Consultant, and Ruth Stone, the only original member who is now, and has been continuously, a member of the Fellowship. At a meeting on March 4, 1951, the small group voted to apply for membership in the AUA, and on March 14, 1951, received certification as a Unitarian Fellowship.

Beginning on February 18, 1951, Fellowship meetings were held in Lowry Hall, home of the Missouri Bible College, from whom the Fellowship received much continued encouragement and assistance. (As it turned out, the Bible College remained our home for 19 years, until 1970, when we moved into our new building.*) Phil Stone served as chairman of the Fellowship during the first six years, the first in a succession of 24 chairmen over the first 30 years of the Fellowship. In 1961 the first woman was elected chairman, and she was later followed by three others.

According to the minutes of the Annual Meetings of 1951 and 1952, and correspondence with denominational headquarters in Boston, the immediate concerns of the Fellowship were with increasing the membership; establishing a Sunday school; working toward the financing of professional leadership ("a minister or at least a manager"); and having outstanding speakers, including ministers from nearby Unitarian churches. Publicity had been well-developed.

* By coincidence, as we celebrate our thirtieth anniversary, the Bible College, latterly the Missouri School of Religion, is "celebrating" the end of its tenure in Lowry Hall and 86 years of existence

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 recording 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.

By 1952 members were pressing for the regular inclusion of what was called "opening services" preceding the speaker of the day, and a member of the Fellowship who had been educated as a Methodist minister volunteered to provide this element through 1952. During 1953-55 Dr. Walter Hearn, professor of the history of religion at the Bible College, was paid a small honorarium to perform the "opening service," and he was occasionally also the morning's speaker. The Annual Meeting of 1952 was held on October 23 at the Croft home, with seven members present and a balance of \$80 on hand. Plans for the coming year included the "possibility of establishing a Unitarian chair . . . at the Bible College. It was thought that in so doing a person could be secured who could give the time necessary for leadership in the Unitarian group."

Membership was comprised almost entirely of University personnel during the first few years, and the annual ebb and flow of University faculty was reflected severely in the Unitarian membership. Each year was started with only a handful of carry-over members. It also appears that during these years "communication" with AUA headquarters was touch-and-go, and guidance seems to have been forthcoming mainly in the form of pamphlets. On our part, we apparently needed reminders to remit our annual membership contribution of \$10!

But the "fifties" were years of growth and optimism in the country, and the Fellowship also began to experience notable growth in the mid-'50's, with an increase in non-academic membership. By 1956 the Fellowship, although still deeply desirous of having professional leadership, realized that membership and financing capacity would have to be greatly increased before employment of even a part-time minister could be seriously considered. Nevertheless, dual goals were set (1) "to secure the services of a full-time minister next year or as soon as possible, and (2) to secure a building of our own as soon as membership and financial strength will permit."

In 1957-59 there is evidence that of the two goals, the pursuit of a minister was assigned priority, and the Fellowship had contact with several recommended potential ministers, interviewing at least one of them. An informal comment in the archives implies that the search for a minister was abandoned after the above effort because "we are spoiled by having different good speakers each week and it would take a marvelous minister to replace our local talent." Further effort to secure a minister was to remain dormant until 1978.

Newspaper publicity in the early days and well into the "sixties" was apparently easily come by, and one finds clippings of pictures, of reports on board meetings, list of Sunday school teachers, projected events, and so on. In addition, it is clear that the Fellowship has placed paid advertisement in the newspapers throughout the years to let the larger community know of the existence of an undogmatic religious group. Currently the Fellowship is contributing to the support of the "Cambridge Forum," a weekly UU-sponsored radio hour devoted to discussion of issues and problems of importance today.

Opportunities for sociability were available from the beginning and have increased in kind and frequency over the years. The "coffee hour" is a Sunday "must" when the Fellowship is in session; pot-luck suppers at the church occur monthly; and a picnic traditionally closes the church year. Since the mid-seventies "circle suppers" in members' homes have been another sociability option, and informal activities of considerable variety have been scheduled in recent summers.

In 1959, after relinquishing its immediate effort to obtain a minister, and with a nudge from the Bible College, the Fellowship pursued its goal of next priority, that of finding a building of its own. A special fund was set up for the "expansion and development of the Fellowship." Various church buildings and private houses were inspected, but through 1964 nothing suitable had been found.

Membership expansion and fund development continued, and since suitable quarters had not been found, the present site of the Fellowship was selected in 1965 and an architect engaged. In anticipation, trees and shrubs were planted and cared for, and fund-raising continued. But alas, when we thought we had accumulated enough money to start building, we found that there was a "cost overrun," and we had to ask the architect to redesign a more modest structure than the one originally selected. Finally, in December 1969, a ground-breaking ceremony took place, and in September 1970, the first Sunday service was held in a nearly-complete building. Mortgage papers will be burned with ceremony by 1990!

The 1960's, with a protracted war in Vietnam dividing the country, consciousness of social problems awakened, and the newly merged Unitarian Universalist Association organized a social responsibility section. The local Social Action Committee appears to have come into being in 1963, with the function of "keeping the Fellowship informed on local issues." In 1966 Fellowship by-laws were amended to include an Article IX, which spelled out in detail the structure and procedures for the Social Action Committee. Into the 1970's the Committee was very active, taking public stands on such issues as open housing, equal job opportunities, and jail visitation. To support the Beacon Press, which was being investigated for publishing the Pentagon Papers, the Fellowship bought several volumes of the Papers. The Social Action Committee also assumed responsibility for a month of Sunday service programs during the year. In recent years the function of the Committee has been largely as originally stated. But in 1981, jointly with two other churches, the Committee is also sponsoring a refugee family from Cambodia.

The Fellowship has encouraged several affiliated groups. A Women's Alliance appears to have been attempted in 1956, but there is no evidence of its having thrived. On November 7, 1963 a Women's Federation was formed, with the function of "promoting the work and interest of our local Church and community, and providing occasions for the women of this church to meet for fellowship and the sharing of common concerns. When the Fellowship decided to build, the Federation raised money and collected coupons to procure equipment that would be needed: cooking and eating utensils, 25 chairs, and above all the grand piano which we all enjoy today. In 1974 the Federation took responsibility for developing libraries for both children and adults, which would "Be of unique benefit to UU people." The Federation has been dormant since about 1977. An "Emerson Club" for University students was initiated in 1960 and appears to have been active as late as 1965. They met monthly in the homes of various Fellowship members. The "Singletarians" formed a group in 1978 which continues very active for mutual support, socializing, and education.

A Sunday, or Church, School for children was organized in 1954 and somehow survived in spite of persistent and multiple shortages: of children; of teachers; of teacher-training; of curriculum aids; and of adequate equipment and space in the Bible College. No group in the Fellowship felt a greater need for support and new quarters than did the Religious Education Department. In 1971, already in the new building, there came from the Unitarian Universalist headquarters a carefully prepared curriculum guide entitled HUMAN HERITAGE, which linked biological and cultural concepts to an understanding of life processes. Two years later another excellent program, ABOUT YOUR SEXUALITY, became available for use with young people of junior high school age and their parents. But even with these aids the volunteers in religious education continued to feel the need for professional leadership.

In 1978 a group of "concerned parents" appealed to the Executive Board to consider the employment of a minister, primarily to provide consistent leadership in religious education. With the building yet to be paid for, some were skeptical of our ability to finance a minister; others were satisfied with the nature of the Fellowship and feared that growth and the presence of a minister would alter it adversely. But the "Concerned parents" continued to press their case, and at the Annual Meeting in 1978 the Fellowship voted to test the feasibility of a minister by engaging a minister-on-loan for six weeks in early 1979. There was enthusiastic response, and although members were committed to continuing as a Fellowship with strong lay leadership, they voted to begin an immediate search for a minister and to raise adequate funds to support quality professional leadership. In 1980 Gertrude V. Lindener became the first minister of the Fellowship and the first woman minister to lead a church in Columbia. The variety in Sunday service programs that has characterized the Fellowship from the beginning continues in the equally shared planning by the Sunday service program committee and our minister; religious education is feeling growing pains; pastoral counselling and group development opportunities are becoming available; and college youth are responding to the minister's outreach -- all as we move into our thirty-first year in 1981.