

UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST
CHURCH
OF
COLUMBIA

The Reverend William Haney
Minister

2615 Shepard Boulevard
Columbia, MO 65201-6132
(314) 442-5764

THE EXALTATION OF A MIDDLE-AGED CHURCH

17 March 1991

THE FIRST READING

The reading is from a paper presented at the joint meeting of the Unitarian and Universalist Historical Societies, April 30, 1967, during the General Assembly in Denver. The paper was based upon Laile Bartlett's 1964 Ph.D. dissertation, Unitarian Fellowships: A Case Study in Liberal Religious Development.

Here begins the reading.

What first caught my attention, as a sociologist, about the fellowship phenomenon was its striking resemblance, in some particulars, to religious splinter movements, especially those of the reform branch of left-wing Protestantism. Here were the ideal-type sects . . . in the sociology of religion literature: the small, close-knit, lay-led groups, dedicated to immediate first-hand religion. Here were even beginning to emerge the classic signs of protest! Were the fellowships, after all, a Unitarian brand of sect?

Sects originate as dissent groups, their very establishment embodying protest and symbolizing a break with tradition and a parent institution. Yet, . . . the fellowships were formulated by the institution itself, officially, and on the basis of cautious and thoughtful consideration. How could an official department of the denomination be a protest movement?

[In celebrating the beginnings of the fellowship movement] . . . the aims of the fellowship plan could scarcely have been less pretentious: to provide a minimal institutional framework for that category of religious liberals too scattered, too remote, and too isolated for access to Unitarian churches and services. The only requirement: "ten or more persons" "in general sympathy with" the purposes of the American Unitarian Association. Nothing else. No building or property. No financial agreement or obligations. No minister.

It was not the first time Unitarians had supported the principle of small, lay-led groups. In 1793, [the English] clergyman-scientist Joseph Priestley recommended that "the rational dissenters and especially the Unitarians" organize societies for [the laity] only, to that purpose drafting a small volume, published in Birmingham, England, for the use of Unitarian societies "without a learned ministry."

In the period of westward denomination expansion in America, chronicled by Charles Lyttle, the Iowa Unitarian Conference organized a Society of Lay Leaders, and the Illinois Conference embarked on a program of informal home societies, "the Sunday circle -- a little church cradled in a home parlor." In 1895, the Rev. Jabez Sunderland of Ann Arbor, Michigan, asked prophetically: "Is there not some way of bringing these vast numbers of [religious] liberals who must exist in dreary and barren isolation into helpful touch with each other and with the organized liberal forces of the country?"

The [American Unitarian] Association made its first concerted attempt to sponsor lay societies for religious liberals on a denomination-wide basis in 1907.

The . . . program is a sequel to that effort, its official beginnings, recorded in the minutes of the Board of Trustees of the American Unitarian Association on March 14, 1945: the decision "to revive in some form the plan for organizing lay centers in communities where there is no Unitarian church," and the appointment of a study committee for the purpose.

Notable contributions were made in the preliminary stages by two committee members: the Rev. Lon Ray Call, . . . whose experience with and insight into lay group operation provided guidelines for the proposed program, and Roland Burbank, . . . whose insistence on flexibility at all stages of planning, "not only in the organizing, but in the functioning of lay groups". . . .

The new plan provided an organized framework within which the Unitarian Association was to establish, aid, and safeguard a system of autonomous, free-wheeling liberal religious groups. The essence of the venture -- the full significance of which even the committee did not appreciate -- was a breath-taking leap of faith which left local fellowship members completely free and responsible for: their own beliefs, orientation, procedures, personnel, and programs, even while operating under Unitarian auspices and label and with the blessing of the denomination.

In May of 1948, the "fellowship unit" program, as it was initially termed, began operation with an office at 25 Beacon Street [in Boston], and executive director, lay[person] Munroe Husbands....

As the [fellowship] operation gained momentum, other religious bodies looked to the Unitarian program with interest. Not the larger institutions with churches in every town and at every cross-roads, but the smaller ones at the liberal end of the [religious] spectrum: the Ethical Culture movement and the Friends issued pamphlets which drew on the fellowship materials and experience. A liberal-wing journal of British Unitarianism commented favorably on the American "innovation," and English experiments with the fellowship concept were reported.

But in no instance, except that of American Universalism, did other movements accept the fellowship principle in toto or incor-

porate it into their structures. The Universalists adopted the fellowship plan in its entirety, issuing a handbook . . . in July 1959. Three years later, the eight Universalist "circles" became part of the consolidated denomination.

In no other case could the religious organization tolerate the extraordinary freedoms and autonomy granted the fellowships under the Unitarian plan. To do so would make necessary the sacrifice of an element deemed essential to each of the respective bodies [that adopted the fellowship principle]: [first,] a doctrinal requirement ([such as] the prophethood of Baha-u-llah, for Bahai; [or] non-theism for American Humanists); [second,] required disciplines (such as the silent meeting [required by the Friends]); [third,] group inspection by approved authorities ([as] required by the Friends); or [fourth] a waiting period to demonstrate [the] authenticity [of the group] ([such as with the] British Unitarians, Friends, Ethical Culture, et al).

In this is a distinctive element of the Unitarian plan. I know of no religious body which grants its member units comparable freedom and independence. "How can you be sure," representatives of the Friends General Conference asked in a meeting with Unitarian extension staff, "that groups will be in fact Unitarian? And how could we be sure if we adopted your plan, that they would be bona fide Friends?" The answer is that they cannot. There is no way to guarantee the result. That is the gamble, the gamble the [American] Unitarian Association was willing to take and [had] built into its program

And so to return to the question with which we began: what are the fellowships and what is their meaning for our movement?

They are poles apart, in content and theology from the pietistic, ascetic, Bible-based, Christocentric literalism of splinter-group Protestantism. They are almost the counterpart of the sect-member type . . . [of] the economically "deprived" and the socially "disinherited."

But they stand in the historic tradition of religious dissent, that of the idealistic, indignant, egalitarian group facing up to an institution lulled by comfortable complacency and dulled by too easy success. Capturing the evanescent qualities of spontaneity and relatedness, the group is part of the credo: with its rewarding environment of first-hand religion, it is theirs, to share and nurture, theirs free of the burden of traditional symbols and practices, rituals and roles.

Here ends the reading.

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THE SECOND READING

The reading is taken from the manuscript, "Glimpses Into Our Past," compiled in 1981 by members of this church; Ruth Stone, Bonner Mitchell and Clotilde Moller.

Here begins the reading.

Having searched in vain several years for a liberal religious affiliation in Columbia, Philip Stone and [Mr. and Mrs.] Addison Gulick 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 30, 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 In 1961 the first woman was elected [as chairperson]

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.

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 [Unitarian] 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

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."

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LITANY OF HISTORY

FIRST VOICE:

February 4, 1951

A business meeting of the Columbia Unitarian Fellowship was held at 7 P.M., Sunday, February 4, with 14 members present. Officers were elected as follows:

Dr. Philip Stone, chairman
Mrs. Kessie Brown, vice chairman
Dean H. O. Croft, treasurer
Mrs. W. B. Phelps, secretary

A report was made by the steering committee on their meeting of January 30, and there was discussion of plans for obtaining outside speakers, and of possible means of financing such speakers. Meeting dates were set for Feb. 18, Mar. 4 and 18, April 1, 15 and 29, and May 13 and 27. Dean Seth Slaughter of the Bible College to be the first speaker. Other names proposed for future meetings were Dr. Hudson, Dean Bent, Dr. Keyfitz, Dean Mott, Dr. Hearn, and the Unitarian ministers in Kansas City, St. Louis and Iowa City. The meeting adjourned after some further discussion of the general purposes and aims of the group.

Respectfully submitted, Elisabeth T. Phelps, Secretary.

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SECOND VOICE:

February 18, 1951

A short business meeting was held after the Sunday worship service on Feb. 18, at which Dr. Stone, chairman, appointed the following committees:

PROGRAM

Dr. Betz, chairman
Dr. H. H. London
Dr. Frank Oldham
Mr. Anson Lovellette
Dr. Harry E. Brown

MEMBERSHIP

Mrs. Philip Stone

Members of Fellowship
MUSIC
Mrs. W. B. Phelps
Mrs. Jesse Brown
PROJECT
Mrs. Leonard Haseman

It was decided to set the time of the regular meetings for 10:45 A.M. instead of 9:30 A.M. as originally planned. A suggestion was made that members rotate in caring for children during the meeting hour until a regular Sunday School can be organized.

Dr. Stone reported that the minister of the St. Louis church would be unable to speak to us on a Sunday, but would be happy to come for a mid-week meeting after Mar. 18. The program committee will secure a local speaker for the next meeting on Mar. 4.

Respectfully submitted, Elisabeth T. Phelps, Secretary.

THIRD VOICE:

March 4, 1951

A brief business meeting was held following the meeting on Sunday, Mar. 4, at which the members voted to accept the by-laws and become a member of the American Unitarian Association. The secretary was instructed to send in the necessary information, together with \$10 as our initial contribution to the Association.

Mrs. Haseman, chairman of the Projects committee, suggested ideas for helping with the Church World Service plan.

Respectfully submitted, Elisabeth T. Phelps, Secretary.

FOURTH VOICE:

From the American Unitarian Association:

The Board of Directors of The American Unitarian Association Welcomes The Unitarian Fellowship of Columbia, Missouri, as a member organization of the Association. The Fellowship will be entitled to have one voting delegate at all meetings of the Association. Voted March 14, 1951, Boston, Massachusetts.

Signed, Fredrick May Eliot, President
Dana McLean Greeley, Secretary

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THE THIRD READING

The third reading is a continuation of the "Glimpses Into Our Past" manuscript.

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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 1959, after [reluctantly] 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 [was made available at a very moderate price by a Mr. Ross to] . . . the Fellowship . . . in 1965 and an architect [was] 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!

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THE BURNING OF THE MORTGAGE

On December 18, 1970, Arthur McArthur, President, and Clotilde Moller, Secretary, signed a First Mortgage Note for \$60,000 with Boone National Savings and Loan Association, at the rate of 7.5% per annum, with payments to begin on February 1, 1971. Part of our celebration is the burning of the mortgage. The symbol of fire has significance for us. Our flaming chalice is lit for each service as a symbol of enlightenment, of hope and encouragement. Fire is also a symbol of consummation. It is a symbol of cleansing. The burning of the mortgage is a symbol of cleansing ourselves of prior obligations. The burning of the mortgage is a symbol of the consummation of others who had worked so hard to obtain and maintain. We here present shall witness the burning of the now retired mortgage, to be burned by Arthur McArthur and Clotilde Moller.

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Today, we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of this religious institution. Today we honor our past in order to better grasp our future. We celebrate the rich legacy we have received. In celebrating our legacy, we remember and recall the deeds and aspirations of our founders and those who diligently followed their example. We are honored and privileged to have with us Ruth Stone, a surviving founder of this church. Ruth, you embody the spirit of this institution. Everyone here today gratefully gives thanks for your strength and courage in keeping it alive and well these forty years.

It has been a long, and sometimes, hard task to keep alive and well a liberal religious presence in mid-Missouri. But the founders persevered, and those who followed took up their honored tasks and commitments. My ministry here is testament to their commitments. This building we meet in is another testament of their tasks and commitments. Today is a new beginning for a middle-aged church.

Middle-age seems to be fraught with all sorts of mystique these days. There is particularly for men the crisis of middle-age. However, for us, as a middle-aged institution, there seems to be no crisis with which we need to deal. We have the pleasure of inheriting a deliberate and intentional pathway toward our future. We are certainly not like the person who tried to find guidance in life by praying and then randomly pointing a finger in the Bible. Whatever was pointed to, that was the answer to the prayer. The person was having financial problems with a new enterprise just starting. So, first a prayer, then opening the Bible, the finger points randomly on the page. It fell on "Chapter 11."

The history of this church is intimately tied up with the recent history of the Unitarian Universalist movement. As the readings indicate, the founding of this institution, initially as a Fellowship, was a vital part of the Unitarian tradition. That tradition, as Laile Bartlett indicated, was based upon a dedication "to immediate first-hand religion." The program took the tenets of Martin Luther's "priesthood of all believers" seriously enough to let it happen;

to establish, aid, and safeguard a system of autonomous, free-wheeling liberal religious groups. The essence of the venture -- the full significance of which even the [study] committee did not appreciate -- was a breath-taking leap of faith which left local fellowship members completely free and responsible for: their own beliefs, orientation, procedures, personnel, and programs, even while operating under Unitarian auspices and label and with the blessing of the denomination.

That is precisely what was done by the founders of this church.

There was an enormous risk involved. The risk was widespread. It was a risk for both the American Unitarian Association, and the Columbia Fellowship. For the AUA, the risk was in the failure of the completely autonomous groups to freely associate with the Unitarian cause and principles. Once each group got started under the auspices of the AUA, they were completely on their own. Perhaps too much so. Some of the criticism against the program was a sense of being cut off from much needed resources. That was the risk for the local group, the Columbia Fellowship included. They were on their own in mining Sunday service resources. The tensions between desiring lectures and needing worship services in Sunday services became apparent in many, if not all, of the Fellowships at one time or another. Some Fellowships became very creative in developing Sunday services. There were numerous attempts at innovative rituals and services, in various kinds of spaces. Finally, each Fellowship came upon the same problem; the need for a permanent home in order to maintain a meaningful liberal religious presence in the larger community. The key to the permanent home was in establishing a religious community. In the words of Jacob Trapp;

[a religious community] in which people walk and work . . . willingly and with one another, and with a reverential sense of what may be created and shared, and enriched between person and person. The individual consciousness in the community is heightened by participation. The person is strengthened and developed by responsibility. Within the community we find also, in a real and personal way, aid, comfort, guidance and support. We draw near to the God who is our refuge.

It is to the credit of the founders that the Columbia Fellowship maintained its relationship with the American Unitarian Association. There was a strong tie to the liberal religious movement. There was an abiding commitment of the founders to the Unitarian tradition. This commitment kept the vision alive. From the very outset, the intention was to have a minister and a building. Those goals had to be delayed, and they were still fulfilled. In the meantime, space was borrowed for nineteen years from the Bible College. In the meantime, the congregation was lay-led.

Mark Mosher DeWolfe, Unitarian Universalist minister who died recently of AIDS, said a few years ago about lay-led societies;

Our lay-led congregations by necessity embody, some better than others, our traditional principle of the priesthood of all believers. Whether chosen out of principle, because of negative experience or perceived lack of resources, their choice to take on the full responsibility of a religious community gives one kind of institutional form to the idea that you don't have to have an ordained leader to have a religious society. . . . The lay-led congregation demonstrates that the work of the church is the work of the people.

The priesthood of all believers is the context in which all of us conduct our ministries, lay and ordained. Unitarian Universalists have traditionally affirmed the priesthood of all believers because of at least four aspects of our religious value system.

-- We believe the holy is present to everyone, and requires no human conduit to come into the lives of worshippers; therefore we eschew the theurgic [or divine intervention] image of priest as vehicle for God.

-- We believe religion is best served in covenanted communities of freely gathered individuals, democratically governed; therefore we reject the episcopal image of priest as monarch of the church.

-- We believe the people of the religious community have a responsibility to care for each other; therefore it is not the duty of the ordained leader alone to bring comfort to the suffering.

-- We believe religious people have a responsibility to speak and act in the world for compassion and justice; therefore we reject the idea that the ordained leader alone should be an activist.

Our rich tradition is one of participation and responsibility. Our founders pursued their course within the principle of the priesthood of all believers.

The series of readings, and the Litany of History, revealed the early efforts in the formation of this institution forty years ago. The hopes were high. The aims and goals were far reaching. In more time than the founders would have wanted, those aims and goals have been achieved. We are the keepers of the flame of their passion and igniting. And we continue to rekindle that flame each week that we meet here in this space made sacred by their sacrifices and hard works. We

. . . tend and feed and fan
That inward fire, whose small precious flame,
Kindles or quenches, creates
The noble or ignoble persons we are

We are enobled by the touch of our founders' spirit. We are enlightened by the torch of their vision. In rekindling the chalice this morning,

In the flame of this Chalice we see the light of [their] faith, the glow of [their] hope, the warmth of [their] service. May we grow in [their] faith, [their] hope, and [their] service, as we kindle our own lights from its spark.

They are the givers; we are the receivers. They have given us much. We must carry on the flame of a free religion for those who will come after us. This is our covenant. We must give to those who will follow in our footsteps. We are part of a larger body of tradition. We are inheritors, stewards and grantors of that tradition. We must give as fully as those who came before us. This we shall do.

Amen.