Birmingham Unitarian Church First 50 Years 1949-1999

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Foreword

"Forward through the ages," reads the old Unitarian hymn, "in unbroken line...." The Birmingham Unitarian Church stands in a long line of liberal congregations, both Unitarian and Universalist, stretching back hundreds of years.

In the long liberal religious tradition, fifty years may not seem especially noteworthy, nor does a group of religious liberals on the suburban fringe of an industrial Midwestern city appear to be the focal point to view cosmic truth. Yet in the life of a community, fifty years is ample time to share a spiritual journey of self-discovery. And anywhere is a spiritual place when consecrated by generations of seekers sharing the human experience.

Birmingham Unitarian Church is a Baby Boomer. In fact, as with the human Baby Boom, there's a very real bulge in the number of Unitarian fellowships founded in the growing suburbs of America in the years immediately after the Second World War. In many ways BUC is representative of the Unitarian Universalist movement everywhere. Ours is a movement in which the individual seeks his or her own spiritual truth in an environment of religious pluralism, respect and exploration. Birmingham Unitarian Church has demonstrated that quest for fifty years.

Ours is a movement of moral leadership. BUC has the memory of its minister, the Reverend Robert Marshall, along with Unitarian Universalist president Reverend Dana McLean Greely, marching with the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma. And it has the memory of its present minister, the Reverend Douglas Gallager, tying a yellow ribbon around the entire church to symbolize the church as a Welcoming Congregation. In these and literally thousands of individual acts by members of this congregation - as well as others across the continent - the UU tenet of faith that can make a difference in this world is expressed.

Birmingham Unitarian Church people speak through this book. The book was written by BUC people and addresses the joys and sorrows, struggles and foibles, of five decades of the people who have individually and collectively made this church community what it is today. This story speaks honestly and eloquently of fifty years in the life of a church community, and I believe it speaks well for Unitarian Universalists everywhere.

Dr. John A. Buehrens,
President, Unitarian Universalist Association

Acknowledgements

"For God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee," has always been my attitude toward groups, especially the oxymoronic notion of a "writing committee." Yet this book was written by a committee, a diverse crew of dedicated and creative individuals who have - almost -- made me a believer in cooperative writing.

The writing team represents a remarkable cross section of BUC. There are four former board presidents on the team, Marj Taylor, Grace Rising, Ed Sharples, and Pat Schwing, both former president and RE director. We have specialists, including artist Cal Boulter, crusader Annis Pratt, feminist Elaine Williams, social activist Cathie Breidenbach, X generation spokesperson Susie Sherman-Hall, journalists Holly and Garry Gilbert, and Church Administrator Carol Lee. In fact, the only person I've never heard of in connection with the church is me. I represent the contingency of active members' absent other halves.

Heroes abound, not only in the book, but on the team which produced it. Like Marj Taylor who wrote the Religious Education chapter and was on her way out the door to visit her aged mother in Indiana when I mentioned there was no one to write a chapter on the Alliance. Marj unpacked her bags and wrote the chapter. And Cal Boulter, whose summer is his busiest time as he travels from one weekend arts fair to another. Cal found time where there was none. And Annis Pratt, whose husband Henry was seriously ill during the writing, yet she managed to complete her chapter, and she and Henry, provided detailed editing. And Holly and Garry Gilbert, who established the standard for truly professional writing and production. And Carol Lee, my co-author and editor of 30-plus years, who has just informed me that most of the sentences in this paragraph aren't sentences.

Pat Schwing deserves special recognition. While I was earning my reputation as the demanding "editor from hell," Pat was writing her chapter, assisting others, calming me, and smoothing everyone else's ruffled feathers. All were heroes, yet Pat deserves sainthood for holding us together long enough to see this book to completion.

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Birmingham Unitarian Church

First 50 Years
1949-1999

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Chapter One
In the Beginning

by
Al Lee

***"What we call the beginning is often the end.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from."***
T.S. Eliot
Poet and Unitarian

Nineteen-forty-eight. The war was over and America busied itself "beating swords into plow shares," or in Detroit's case, beating tanks into town cars. By 1948, the economy was booming, and everywhere was a sense of urgency and expectation as so many set out to exert their war-won freedoms, pursuing pent-up aspirations and postponed dreams of material and spiritual fulfillment.

"Freedom," to the half dozen couples in Detroit's northern suburbs who would found a new church, was expressed in liberal religious values. These founders were, for the most part, veteran Unitarians, and even the new recruits professed ardent enthusiasm for the credo of guilt-free liberal religion. The BUC founders would later write of the goals they kept constantly before them:

"We want the values and fellowship that religion offers. We want our children to be able to use their natural abilities of selfhood, of curiosity, of wonder and seeking in religion. We want to feel free enough and confident of our place in the group to be able to speak our mind. We want to be able to worship without having to wince over using terms and ideas with which we disagree. We want to feel good in religion. We want to be inspired and led, not scolded and threatened. We do not feel ourselves to be sinners, but people who make mistakes, people who have problems, people who fall short of being what they would like to be."

The founders knew what they wanted, yet they were equally driven by what they didn't want-- a two-hour drive every Sunday. All were members of Detroit's downtown Unitarian-Universalist Church of Our Father (now First UU Church of Detroit). Yet they lived in the far-northern communities of Royal Oak,

Birmingham, and Pontiac. The pilgrimage each Sunday along the traffic-choked Woodward Avenue corridor was too long for families trying to make up lost time.

One can only imagine these northern suburbs people getting together during coffee hour at the Detroit church, grumbling about traffic lights and flat tires, and talking fellowship options. Among them were Albert and Ruth MacCleery. Al was a New Englander and distinguished war veteran, and all agreed he was the most vocal advocate of a new church that would be closer to home for Detroit's far-northern members. Ruth MacCleery, a life-long Methodist, was supportive of her husband's liberal views. Eugene and Emmy Hesz, transplants from war-torn Holland, were active Unitarians and also enthusiastic about a new church. And there were some who were reluctant to break away, like Elaine Parnie, who drove her two children to Our Father without fail. Yet even she would "consider" closer options.

MacCleery had an ally in Patricia McMahon, a young woman motivated by the longest commute, all the way in from Pontiac. McMahon wrote to the American Unitarian Association, forerunner to the U.U.A., and asked about getting in on "The Church of the Larger Fellowship," a church-by-mail program for communities worldwide who did not have a nearby Unitarian church. Patricia got an affirmative answer and suggested a meeting to explore the possibility.

Just 20 years old, Patricia McMahon made getting the new church going her personal cause. She initiated several ad hoc meetings, the first in the home of John and Nancy Cowen in Birmingham. All led up to the first organizational meeting in the fall.

Etched in Sand

For those who prefer a specific date for what we all know was an evolutionary process, September 21, 1948, could be considered the birthing day of the Birmingham Unitarian Church. That was the evening when this small band of suburbanites decided that they would form a church.

The weather was pleasant that evening as they arrived at William and Genevieve Hambley's Birmingham home, one of the few homes spacious enough to host a gathering of yet undetermined size. The Hambleys, formerly of the Milwaukee Unitarian Church, were ardent enthusiasts of the new venture. Al MacCleery had written letters inviting Unitarians, and potential Unitarians, to this meeting. Each note was a personal appeal to join them.

They came mostly by twos. The men wore loose fitting suits, wide ties and fedoras. The women wore bright colored dresses with matching shoes, purses and pill-box hats. The ladies also wore their husbands’ names like medals of valor--Mrs. Ogden Vogt, Mrs. John Cowen, Mrs. Albert MacCleery. It was a proper and prescribed time, a last remnant of the pre-war culture in which formalities mattered a great deal. (Much later, the absence of women's given names in the minutes of early meetings would make it difficult for church historians to discover who some of the less active founding women actually were.)

The September 21st meeting was large by previous standards-- 19 people crowded into the Hambley living room. And after sampling the numerous dishes the women had brought, the meeting began in earnest.

Like all Unitarian meetings before and since, it was not without disagreements. One gentleman, for example, said he was "disappointed and disillusioned" because the group had chosen to use the official Unitarian magazine, *The Christian Register*. He called the publication a "sounding board for crackpots, radicals, capitalist-baiters, and communists." He was respectfully heard; then the meeting continued.

Decisions were made that night. The group agreed to establish a fellowship, to meet at least once a month in volunteers' homes, and to invite ministers from area Unitarian churches to speak.

As a gesture of support, the first minister/guest speaker the next month was the Rev. Tracy Pullman of Church of Our Father. He spoke on how small the liberal religious movement actually was, and how important it was to encourage and grow new congregations.

Indeed, far from resistant to break-away members, Church of Our Father would support and encourage each of the new outlying fellowships, which would spread with suburban sprawl throughout the metropolitan area. Grosse Pointe and Ann Arbor, both seeded by Church of Our Father, would prove supportive, as well.

BUCs Paternity

Of the many who contributed, two extremely different individuals could be called the church's parents. Patricia McMahon spent much of her summer before going to college at University of Michigan enlisting the help of the Unitarian Association and recruiting members for the fellowship which she knew she could not be there

to attend. In 1951, McMahon went to India, where she made a 2,000-mile bare-footed spiritual quest across that country with a group of B'hai monks. She would rejoin the church she helped establish only briefly in 1952, then leave again, presumably on another spiritual pilgrimage.

The other parent was Albert MacCleery. A war veteran and family man, he was a quiet, often understated man of unwavering conviction. The founders would later agree that MacCleery was the one person who provided the leadership necessary to make Birmingham Unitarian Church a reality. When Al MacCleery died in 1968, original member Carlyn Vogt would write his eulogy in the BUC newsletter:

"Because of Albert MacCleery, the Birmingham Unitarian Church came into existence when it did. Within this gentle, unassuming and self-effacing man, there flamed an unquenchable determination that there be a Unitarian church in this community. He actively willed it so, obstinately refused to allow the idea to die because of inertia, discouragement or apathy. He took up the mantle of leadership when all others had declined to assume it. He did what had to be done. It did not come easily to Al MacCleery to speak in public, yet he did it; it was not his bent to function as an administrator-- yet he did it; it was not his natural gift to fire the emotions of people, yet he did it. Because of his singular unstinting care, the concept survived the germination state, grew sturdily, and eventually blossomed into this meaningful institution."

There's an old saying that "a failed idea is an orphan; a successful one has many fathers... and mothers." The Birmingham Church had, and needed, many surrogate parents to come of age.

The initial fellowship, for example, did not have one of the most fundamental services that traditionally draws young parents to Unitarianism: a religious education program. Al MacCleery and Eugene Hesz, first officers of the fellowship, decided to initiate a Sunday school. Yet it was soft-spoken Elaine Parnie, so devoted to religious education at Church of Our Father, who now took charge of the new fellowship's religious education efforts.

Hardly a Red Delicious

The Apple Orchard Nursery School, housed in what was described as "a rather drab building on Adams Road," became the first home of the fellowship's religious education on November 5, 1950. Other early members were less charitable in

describing the Apple Orchard Nursery. The old house converted to a nursery school was characterized by some as "bare and barn-like."

Louise Roberts remembered the Apple Orchard Nursery: "The family that ran the nursery school lived upstairs, but the only kitchen was downstairs, and sometimes, between the verses of a song, we could hear them washing their breakfast dishes."

For the next nine years the church school would be housed in a variety of temporary, shared quarters. That added an element of drudgery to the lesson plan, Roberts said. "We stored our folding chairs, card tables and boxes of song books in the basement, and every Sunday morning we carried them all up and, after church, all back down again. Any child tall enough to carry a chair without banging it on each step was encouraged to come early and stay late. Anything else we needed was carried in cartons from homes. It seemed to take a strong back to be a Unitarian."

Yet Elaine Parnie, with lessons supplied from Boston, brought warm experiences to the drafty old dwelling and difficult circumstances. The first Sunday school expressed another phenomenon of the era, the Baby Boom. Thirty-four children were enrolled from 15 families. For the next ten years, typically more pre-school and elementary children than adults would be in the church.

Adults Meet Weakly

There was more church school than church in yet another respect. The children's program met weekly, but the adults were still meeting one evening a month.

Bob and Gina Dearth, new members from Cleveland, thought it was a waste of time for parents to drop off the children for Sunday school, then find something to do for the intervening two hours before picking them up. They approached W. Ogden Vogt, a recent arrival from Texas. Vogt's father had been a Unitarian minister in Chicago, so he suggested that they might hold weekly meetings using sermons derived from the Unitarian headquarters on Beacon Street in Boston.

Bob Dearth, an energetic and energized advertising executive, took it upon himself to read through many ministers' sermons. He found himself drawn to one, the Rev. A. Powell Davies, minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. While our founders may not have known it, Dr. Davies was a tireless leader of the fellowship movement, recognized for establishing ten suburban fellowships on his own.

Birmingham's fellowship began meeting weekly in the "spacious but drafty" Birmingham Community House. Bob Dearth, armed with Dr. Davies' printed sermons, led the discussions. The Davies sermons were spiritually uplifting, yet liberal and intellectually challenging. They served as a springboard for lively group debates. Davies never stood at a lectern in Birmingham, yet he became the church's unofficial minister. Kathryn Loomis, an early church member, spoke of how much this minister's stimulating ideas meant to the group. "When he later died," Loomis said, "we felt almost as bereaved as members of his own congregation must have felt."

Stimulating ideas and lively discussion became the fellowship's drawing card. Bob Dearth remembers one attendee, Mary Backus, whose late husband and her son were Unitarian ministers. Mrs. Backus would call Dearth precisely two hours after every meeting. The 87-year-old lady gave him a cryptic commentary on the sermon, yet always ended with the message of how much she enjoyed the meeting. Others responded by coming back, and bringing friends, in ever increasing numbers.

Onward Question Soldiers

There's an old joke about a cross between a Seventh Day Adventist and a Unitarian. He goes door-to-door, but he isn't exactly sure why. While Unitarians are not noted for evangelical crusades, the early Birmingham fellowship pioneers came close. Promoting the church to friends and neighbors, taking out a one-inch ad in the local papers, and an aggressive welcoming and follow up all yielded new members. Neighboring ministers from First Church, Grosse Pointe and Ann Arbor helped by participating in a series of public lectures at the Birmingham Community Center. The theme of liberal religion, and "What's a Unitarian?" blatantly sold a humanist theology where every individual was important and every honest religious inquiry was discussed. The church was growing.

Yet it wasn't growing fast enough to do everything that a church needed. Louise Roberts, who joined in 1951, remembers: "The little fellowship had no more than the usual number of committees and activities, but so few people to fill them that many stalwarts carried several major responsibilities." She adds, "Newcomers were put right to work, as my family found out. Our ninth-grade daughter became church pianist on her first Sunday, and two weeks later I found myself teaching third and fourth graders."

Periodic Pulpiteer

The next natural step was to find a spiritual leader. "A member of our fellowship," Bob Dearth recalled, "was married to a former Unitarian minister, Merrill Bates. He agreed to take us into the next step of adulthood by doing a free sermon on occasion. My discussions from borrowed sermons gave way to more formal meetings, and our little church had begun."

Merrill O. Bates, Lincolnesque in appearance and New Englander in manner, had been minister of a Unitarian Church in his home state of New Hampshire and later the Grosse Pointe Unitarian Church. He married Barbara Taubman, of a prominent Detroit business family, and became president of Taubman Brothers Jewelers. Barbara had gotten involved with the fledgling fellowship and urged Merrill to take part.

The Reverend Bates became the church's first part-time, and unpaid, minister. The small congregation was far from able to support a paid minister. At the board meeting of Nov. 1951, for example, Treasurer Lloyd Linton reported fellowship financial status: Bank balance: $54.79. Checks not deposited: $75. Unpaid bills: $75.

The unpaid minister gave the church more than its money's worth. He went well beyond his promised once-a-month sermon. He was first a church member, served as president in 1951-52, and even as minister he was deeply involved with advising the board on strategies to become a full-fledged church. One of Bates' strongest suggestions to the board of trustees was to do whatever it could to establish a women's group. "A women's group is extremely important, he said. "It should be a first priority."

Bates stayed slim jogging between church locations. The adult church was then held in the Birmingham YMCA building, and he conducted the services there almost every week. He also gave the children a short service before their classes, which was a bit difficult, as the children were still at the Apple Orchard, a half-mile away. On Sunday mornings, Bates was seen dashing to the Apple Orchard, his pianist in tow, then back in the nick of time to deliver the adult service at the Y.

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

As early as 1952, founders were debating the possibility of finding a place to call home for their church. The two goals at meetings were "acquire new members and

find a church." After much debate, the founders decided their time was better spent finding new members to fill the pews than building pews to fill. Membership had to be the first priority, a permanent home only a distant dream. So the early church became a moving feast for the mind, from meetings in homes, to the Apple Orchard, to the Birmingham Community Center, to the YMCA. Finally in 1953, they found the Upton School in Royal Oak.

Early member Colleen Barnard recalled, "Finally, adequate space for the classes and a nice all-purpose room with a handsome turquoise velvet curtain as backdrop for a minister. Members took turns bringing the flower arrangements, a practice we continue. It was a grand period."

Upton School meant, for the first time, that all church activities could be held in a single location. The elementary school was such a comfortable facility, in fact, that those on the board who pushed for a church building fund expressed concern that the membership might get too comfortable there. Still, the Royal Oak School Board would not let the group become too complacent. They had a rule that no church could rent space in a public school for more than three years. The building fund began in earnest.

Down Payment on a Lincoln

With the new location came a new minister. The American Unitarian Association offered to pay a portion of a professional minister's salary. Still, the fellowship had only 90 members, with another 15 newcomer probables, not yet enough to provide a full salary. They found the Rev. Russell L. Lincoln, who agreed to be the half-time minister for the Birmingham fellowship, and half time for the Farmington Universalist Church.

Russell Lincoln, a husky man who was anything but Lincolnesque in appearance, possessed his historical namesake's quiet demeanor and a deep intellect. Lincoln's background was heavily skewed toward religious education. He had been associate minister and RE Director at the Church of Our Father.

"Russell was a tremendous RE Director," recalls Alex Mercer, a life-long member of Church of Our Father. "He was great with children and willing to do whatever needed doing. I remember him and me painting classroom walls together."

Lincoln also had been an associate with the laboratory schools for Universalist Churches in New York and had been in charge of the southwestern Unitarian's religious education program at Ardmore, Oklahoma.

Kathryn Loomis remembered: "Lincoln's warm and friendly spirit and his deep interest in the church school were strongly formative influences in building the congregation. He kept our tastes simple, our concern about the teaching of children high.

"We used to marvel that a man who did not believe in a pulpit-centered church could, Sunday after Sunday, give us such food for thought from the pulpit. He spoke with modesty, great sincerity, and on matters of deep import. He brought many of us a long way in our thinking as Unitarians."

With all his strengths at the pulpit, Russell Lincoln was an introverted man who always appeared a little uncomfortable in the counseling side of the job. Julie Candler recalls, "I went to Russell for advice when I was having trouble with my marriage. He quietly suggested that I was trying to do too much in my life. I should get rid of some activities. I took his advice and stopped coming to church."

For others, Lincoln was the reason they came. Ernie Hodas, for example, spent three months looking for the Birmingham Unitarian Church on Coolidge Road in Royal Oak. "There was no church," he recalled, "but there was Upton School, and Russell Lincoln." To Hodas, the church without a church offered a great deal.

"Feeling one's own inner religious approach, as opposed to relying on, or depending on some outer-space ‘being’ or ‘deity’ as explained by Russell Lincoln, did more than any dogmas or traditions could ever do to make me feel very much at home with Unitarians."

In 1954, the church became a church. In May, the fellowship reached critical mass, the 148 members the American Unitarian Association deemed necessary to assume the "church" designation. As part of the process of formalizing a church, a constitution was written and voted into existence in December. The constitution spelled out the mission of the church in a few, well-chosen words:

"The purpose of this society is to further individual freedom of religious beliefs through study, worship, service, work and recreation."

There will be Another U

At the same time that Birmingham Unitarian Church was writing its constitution, Mr. Lincoln was involved with establishing a greater parent church. There was a proposed merger of the Unitarian and Universalist Churches.

The Unitarian Church had a long history, born of reformists in Transylvania in the 1566 (Yes, Dracula also was of Transylvania, a fact which Christian Fundamentalists delight in pointing out). The Universalist Church was born of American Protestant liberalization, first appearing as articles of faith in 1802. Many saw a natural integration of these two quintessentially questioning denominations. The union would take as long as a church to build, yet it would eventually emerge as the Unitarian Universalist Association, a single denomination 175,000 souls strong.

Birmingham Unitarian Church gave its full support to the UU merger, and Rev. Lincoln called it "a wise and natural move." But then, Lincoln knew what a combination of a Unitarian and Universalist Church was like first hand. Detroit's Church of Our Father was originally a Universalist Church. Detroit also had a Unitarian Church, on Woodward and Edmund Place, but in April of 1934 the city widened Woodward and demolished the building. The Unitarians moved in with the Universalists at Church of Our Father, integrating the congregations. This was arguably the first Unitarian Universalist Church in America when Russell Lincoln became RE Director in the mid-1940s.

"Our RE teachers," Alex Mercer said, "would use Universalist and Unitarian educational materials interchangeably, and we never knew which was which. The two religions were that similar."

What the two religions had in common, Lincoln believed, was that they strove to become, what he called, the "Church of the Open Door." Such churches approached his ideal because they had the one common element. Lincoln said, "The common element is the seeking of every human being to find his place in the scheme of things. To deny this element and to permit the admission of only those who think in a certain way, or who have experienced life and meaning in a certain way, is in reality a denial of the deeper meaning of religion itself."

Many who came to BUC at Upton School had no knowledge of either church's history, yet they were to experience it. As Jean Prokopow said, "Like so many, we

had young children and were looking for a church for them, and for ourselves. We'd tried many different denominations.

"So I didn't know I was a Unitarian until I heard Russell Lincoln's sermons and attended some discussion groups that were so intellectually rich that, at times, I thought I was in over my head. This was a community of extremely bright and reflective people who explored ideas. We found our church home."

Upon this Rock...

Meantime, the small congregation in rented school rooms was still looking for a home. Two church members, David and Ruth Spalding, would play vital roles. The Spaldings were both graduate architects, and they felt the time was right to build a church. Ruth Spalding saw an urgency in securing a well-situated property. Oakland County was growing exponentially. The post-war baby boom had inspired an unprecedented building boom, and land along the northern corridor of Detroit was becoming precious.

Ruth Spalding set out to find property for the growing church. The trustees were supportive, yet had no idea where they might get the money to buy land, if found. Ruth was undaunted, and after several months of searching, found an ideal location, a lightly wooded three-and-a half acres, just north of Lone Pine Road on Woodward Avenue. There was only $ 7,000 in the treasury, yet the trustees made an offer of $21,500 for the land, and, to everyone's amazement, the offer was accepted.

The church's new property was in Bloomfield Hills. Since the church had been officially named the Birmingham Unitarian Church when it was renting space in that city, the dichotomy of name and relocation resulted. There was some discussion about changing the name when the new church was complete, but the desire for continuity outweighed the logic of newcomer logistics. If people were smart enough to find Birmingham Unitarian in an elementary school in Royal Oak, surely they could find it in Bloomfield Hills.

Land without a building, however, is like a canvas without paint; it inspires creation.

Kathryn Loomis, not coincidentally as president of the Birmingham School Board which had undertaken that city's most ambitious building era, was asked to head up the church building committee. "We looked everywhere for pertinent experience

and ideas," Loomis said, "to Frank Lloyd Wright's Unitarian Church in Madison, Wisconsin, to plans for Unitarian churches on Long Island and in Indianapolis."
The committee was methodical in its fact-gathering efforts. Dorothy Rogers, a Quaker and then the church's religious education director, assumed the responsibility for defining church school space. Ruth Spalding was instrumental in the planning, yet she resigned from the committee to avoid a conflict of interest when her husband David was commissioned to draw up the initial plans. Excitement grew, and the building funds began to accrue. Yet it was understood it would be years before ground could be broken.

Building Intangibles

If a church of their own was still some distance away, this was nonetheless a time of building foundations.

During the Upton School years, both the Women's Alliance and the Laymen's League, for men, were founded. The choir began at Upton School. Discussion groups and regular potlucks became traditions. And perhaps one of the greatest lasting institutions of all, the Alliance Rummage Sale, came into being.

The rituals of their lives now were served by the church. Lincoln performed the first child naming ceremony, the Unitarian equivalent to baptism, at Upton School. The first child was the daughter of John and Betsy Bagby. And Lincoln presided at the first BUC wedding. Once again, Kathryn Loomis demonstrated her generosity by providing the first bride. Marcia Ann Loomis, daughter of Kathryn and Peter Loomis, married John Norman Calvin.

The institutions and traditions of a full-fledged church were now in place--Namings, marriages, youth and teen education groups, the Women's Alliance, the men's Laymen's League, dinner-discussions, rummage sales, potlucks and picnics, all enveloped in the music of a choir.

Statement in Stone

Plans for the church building were taking an exciting turn. Church members seemed aware of Winston Churchill's words that "we shape our buildings, and forever after they shape our feelings and thoughts." Everyone wanted the new building to make a statement, a physical expression of an open, inquiring church community.

As part of the quest to achieve "frozen music," as someone once called architecture, the church began inviting experts with unique perspectives on the subject to come and express their views.

A young and highly respected architect named Minoru Yamasaki was asked to speak on his concept of design. He had already distinguished himself in numerous buildings, including designing Wayne State University's unique education building and the campus gem, the McGregor Memorial Conference Center. Later, he would go on to become one of the greatest architects of the era and would design the twin towers of the New York World Trade Center. Yet, even at this early stage in his career, Yamasaki had developed a unique perspective. Born and raised in Seattle, he was an architect when he first visited Japan. In his lecture, he told the church members of the epiphany in Japan which defined his architectural vision.

"Tokyo is a madhouse city," Yamasaki said, "worse than any we have here for traffic, people rushing this way and that, horns tooting and plain everyday noise. To escape this, I ducked into a Japanese temple. Immediately the noise was gone.

"A calmness had been built into the architecture. I went through an archway and came upon a courtyard. Trees were silhouetted against the sky. I walked through another doorway and came upon a pond. The pond was a pleasant surprise. I believe all buildings ought to have pleasant surprises. They warm you up, make you feel good."

Yamasaki's talk entitled "Ponds, Surprises and Courtyards," emphasized the importance of designing in serenity. His words captured the hopes members had for their church, and the building committee asked the trustees to engage Yamasaki. While it meant a sizeable increase in the planned cost of design, the trustees and congregation agreed. Yamasaki was commissioned to design the church.

An unfortunate side effect of the Yamasaki agreement was the loss of two important members. David Spalding had been commissioned to draw up preliminary plans, and handing the contract over to another, no matter how eminently qualified, was painful. David and Ruth accepted the decision with grace, yet soon dropped out of the church.

As it turned out, Yamasaki's drawing had much in common with Spalding's. Both envisioned a "campus-like" environment. As Betty Page, a building committee

member noted, the two plans "had certain similarities necessitated by the shape of the property and the setback lines, and by need of economy."

Outside In

The centerpiece of Yamasaki's concept was a terraced courtyard, with flowering trees to surprise and delight year round. There would be three buildings, all looking into the courtyard. And with no internal hallways to get from one building to another, everyone would have to walk outside and experience the beauty of the courtyard.

While Yamasaki's grand plan included a two-story sanctuary, budget limitations made it inevitable that it could not be built immediately. There would be three phases, the first including four essential buildings -- a social hall with kitchen and foyer, two educational building with five classrooms, and an administration building with an office for the minister, a meeting room (later the Yellow Door) and a diminutive office.

Some might argue against the practicality of Yamasaki's design with almost all outside walls, four separate buildings with six individual furnaces, for a church that was, after all, in the Detroit area, a city geographically north of Windsor, Canada. Yet the aesthetics of a physically open church where virtually all would be in visual contact with a garden-like courtyard was appealing. Yamasaki's concept was enthusiastically received.

Yamasaki himself, however, was not so well received by the city of Birmingham. The city had housing laws which kept out all minorities, including Asian-Americans. So the nationally recognized architect was unable to move into Birmingham.

Charlotte Marshall, a church member and liberal activist, was enraged at Birmingham's discriminatory laws. As the head of the League of Women Voters, she enlisted her next-door neighbor and fellow BUC activist Kathryn Loomis. Together they attacked the housing laws.

Brooks Marshall, then a teenager, recalls his mother's campaign. "Mother was the archetype of the strong, Unitarian woman," Marshall said. "Even though Yamasaki had accepted the restriction and took an apartment in the city of Troy, Mother would not let the issue die. She created so much pressure and bad publicity that the city finally rescinded the discriminatory housing laws."

Other Plans

While building plans were being drawn, Russell Lincoln was making plans of his own.

He had forewarned the church board when he became minister that when the fellowship reached "church size," he would move on. No one believed him at the time, but, true to his word, the founding of the church coincided with Lincoln's resignation. He was anxious to return to his western roots and pursue other spiritual quests.

"Russell Lincoln was an introspective man, and not inherently social," said Hugh Brown. "Some thought the church was just getting too overwhelming for someone who preferred the company of his own thoughts. He was very popular, so, many were a little hurt when he decided to leave. But we understood, and wished him well."

Poet in the Pulpit

No sooner had the much-admired Lincoln announced he would leave than a new minister who would be equally loved arrived. His name was Walter Pedersen, a New Yorker, a Harvard Divinity School graduate, a captivating speaker, and a poet of tremendous sensitivity.

Robert Peters, a member of the ministerial committee, later wrote of Pedersen, "He was gifted with a marvelous wit, and with a precise, telling irony which he used compassionately, but with effect. Never given to cant, never willing to sacrifice his beliefs, he was gifted with a creative speech and unflagging honesty which made it impossible to hear him without carrying away a deepened sense of life's complexity, of its mystery, and of its beauty."

"Pedersen was a poet," Hugh Brown adds. "I never liked poetry, yet his was so good, and his reading of his and other poets’ so sensitive, that I found myself enjoying it. Walt Pedersen broadened our perceptions of the world."

Breaking New Ground

Then came the day the nomadic church members had long anticipated. It was September 21, 1958, ten years from the day when 19 people met in a living room to establish a new church.

At Upton School, Pedersen gave his first sermon as the new minister. Then all drove to the BUCs Birmingham church property. It was one of those rare fall days under a blue sky with sympathetic white clouds. Goldenrod, wild purple asters and sumac turning scarlet added color to the setting. The Rev. Pedersen, and some 200 adults and children, many carrying shovels, were there to break ground for the new church.

Each church member dug at least one shovelful, and four-year-old Doug Howell, who cared not at all about his obviously new trousers and white shirt, distinguished himself by digging so diligently and with such abandon, that someone suggested the church employ the little guy instead of an excavator.

While it had taken fully ten years to break ground, a long measure by any evolutionary yardstick, they had prepared the soil assiduously.

Ten years of carrying folding chairs and boxes of hymnals, preparing dishes for potlucks, driving children to pajama parties and weenie roasts, mulling over interminable details at late evening meetings, squeezing young family budgets for ministerial wages and building funds-- all contributed to this day.

It was a day spaded by commitments, time after time, year after year, coming through for the group in ways that spoke more eloquently than any evangelist, with actions that spoke without words.

Betty Page recalls, "You felt that what you said you'd do, you absolutely had to do because there was no one else to do it, but you felt good that everyone was needed."

"Yes, there was a lot of work, but we created a lot of traditions in those early years," said Miyo O'Neill, with the church since 1953. "We made a lot of friends. It was those traditions and friendships that kept us coming back to renew old acquaintances and welcome new ones."

"To me, the strength of the church was our expression of religious freedom," said Virginia Dickinson. "It was a community of ideas. There were so many thoughtful sermons, guest speakers, and discussions. They helped us think about so much, and employ what we discovered in our lives."

Even to the casual observer watching this community in the open field on that late summer day, it was abundantly evident that the church had already been built --

only brick and mortar awaited formalizing what now was a vital and vigorous Unitarian church.

Chapter Two
Best and Worst of Times

by
Al Lee

"There is a crack in everything God has made."
Ralph Waldo Emerson
Unitarian Minister

The winter of 1958 was one of great expectations. Like children awaiting Christmas, thoughts gravitated to the church construction site. Most families would alter their drive to or from Upton School to pass by the lot and check progress. A typical Michigan winter meant numerous weather delays, numerous drive-bys when nothing appeared to have changed significantly.

The anticipated building took on significance far beyond that of a dwelling place for the church community. Yamasaki had given his design greater symbolic importance. As Yamasaki said, "A building should be a living representation of man's belief in humanity, individual dignity, his belief in the cooperation of men, and through this cooperation, his ability to find greatness." Anticipation grew.

The new minister, Walter Pedersen, provided delightful diversions through the long winter with his dynamic and profoundly intellectual sermons, and by his always up-beat presence. And there were the usual number of fund drives, potlucks, discussion groups, music and meetings at and around Upton School to fill the months. And spring, as it's wont to do, finally arrived.

At the May annual meeting, newly elected Board President Hugh Brown reported building fund contributions were keeping pace with expectations. The church building would be ready in time for fall services. At the same meeting, members were told they could soon decide what kind of flowering trees they were going to plant in front of each of the church doors.

The next Sunday after church, Walter and Rebecca Pedersen also were intent on planting some trees. Robert Peters recounted the afternoon's events:
"Walter was exhilarated that day; his sermon had gone well, and spring was beautiful. That afternoon, with his wife Rebecca, he worked in the yard, clearing

away the debris of winter and preparing the ground for roses and shrubs. The last thing he did was to plant a small flowering crab tree a few feet from his house. He dug the ground with care, set the tree carefully in, packed the soil around it, and watered it. It was late evening, and though fatigued, he was in the best of spirits."

That evening, Walter Pedersen died in his sleep. The congregation had lost more than a one-year minister, they had lost a friend. In his year at BUC, he had become a fully involved member of the church community and the leader everyone anticipated would give the first sermon in the new church.

A person often is remembered not by deeds, but by what he left behind. "Walter left us something important," Louise Roberts said. "In addition to a strong church and our memories of him, he left us Rebecca, who has been a friend and inspiration to us all."

Living Legacy

Rebecca Pedersen remained with the church for the next 35 years. She was a remarkable woman in every respect, a child psychologist who had studied in Vienna, and who, alongside of Walter, had lived in Japan and ministered to needs in that war-ravaged country. After Walter's death, her social leadership continued unabated.

Ed Sharples, a long-time church member, said, "You didn't have to ask Rebecca where she stood on liberal causes. All you had to do was read her car bumper. Every inch of that bumper was covered with message stickers, including one that said, "How dare you presume I’d rather be younger.”

Perhaps her most visible cause was Focus: Hope, a Detroit inner-city project which offered career training for disadvantaged people. The charity had an annual fund raising walkathon down Woodward. Rebecca made the walk without fail for more than 25 years. And even in her last year when she could no longer make the three-mile trek, many BUCers volunteered to walk in her place. "Rebecca," Sharples said, "was our inspiration."

In 1959, the church needed inspiration, and a new minister. A saving grace was that Unitarian churches, unlike most denominations, then were closed for the summer. In fact, member Hugh Brown had even written a song about it.

Sing a song of churches
I'll tell you where to go
The Baptists for immersion
and talk of hell below
The Lutherans for long services
The Shrine for original sin
But to get two months' vacation
Join the Unitarians.

With a summer vacation, BUC trustees had time to find a replacement minister. Since a search committee had so recently been formed to find Walter Pedersen, trustees went back to the same group. They contacted the American Unitarian Association for help as before and ferreted out a candidate whose credentials were remarkably similar to Pedersen's.

Compelling Candidate

The Rev. Lester Mondale was then associated with the Ethical Society of Philadelphia, as Pedersen had been before him. Mondale had been minister of three Unitarian churches, in Massachusetts, Illinois and Kansas. A Harvard graduate, Mondale was well published, having authored *Values in World Religions* and several other books. And he would later be famous in reflected light, as his step-brother, Walter Mondale, would run for President of the United States.

"Lester and his wife came that summer," Miyo O'Neill recalls. "His sermon was brilliant, and when his wife came out to look for places to live, she impressed us as a charming woman. Our trustees offered him the job.

"Then when Mondale showed up in the fall, he surprised everyone by arriving without a wife. And his first sermon, and every one after that, was bland or preachy. We all wondered where he got the sermon and wife he employed as a candidate. A lot of us felt Mondale was not being honest with us from the beginning."

Home Sweet Home

Dissatisfaction with the new minister soon was masked by the ecstasy of a permanent home. The Birmingham Unitarian Church, at Woodward and Lone Pine, opened officially on September 21, 1959, precisely one year from the

groundbreaking. The 200 member families, with more than that number of children, immediately filled the social hall and classrooms to over capacity.

"We have been lucky," Kathryn Loomis said at the building dedication. "All of this has grown out of the dreams of our founders, the service and dedication of our ministers, the study and hard work of countless committees, the financial sacrifices of members, the courage of our trustees, and out of imagination and hope and faith and clear thinking."

Elation in the accomplishment was accompanied by the sobering realization that there was much to do: rooms to furnish and decorate, classrooms to set up, office equipment to obtain somehow, supplies to acquire, and the zillion or so details that arise only after moving into a new home. And all these details had to be addressed with little or no available cash.

Some of Yamasaki's design finishing touches had to be abandoned in light of the fiscal crunch. For example, at the intersection of each walkway, there was to be a canopy dome of gold, with gilded etching. They settled for Plexiglas domes, which increased light in the center court and entryways.

Even with cuts, the new church had run over budget. The original four buildings and essential furniture had added up to $200,000, plus another $40,000 for landscaping. The church was clearly cash-strapped. Yet the members were ingenious in ways of providing for additional needs. Helen Corrigan recalls one such creative solution:

"We needed a piano badly," Corrigan recalls, "and someone said we could have a small grand piano for $250, but we didn't have $250. So I got the idea to have a semi-formal dance and raise the money. Jack and Ellen Hilberry designed and built an enclosure for the live band in the shape of a piano. I was afraid the decoration would cost more than the grand piano itself.

"On the night of the dance, snow fell gently, and the beauty of both the outside and indoors made the dance a huge success. Because the dance created so much comment and good will, the piano was given to us and the profits were used to renovate and refinish it and to add to our small music library."

The new church also seemed to fulfill the belief "if you build it, they will come," for there was a tremendous surge in membership. Young couples were coming and joining with great regularity, and within a very few months membership had

increased by a third, and two services became necessary to accommodate the members on Sunday mornings.

The Young Couples group was representative of the new members. They were mostly in their 20s and 30s, with toddlers and early elementary children, and had much in common. This group of 30 regulars held circle suppers, dances and social events in the church. They were a dynamic new force. Mondale had started the group, and loyalty to his ministry ran high among the families.

A House Divided

Long-term members, the stalwarts of any church community, became increasingly dissatisfied with Mondale. They compared Mondale's sermons and involvement with those of Pedersen and Lincoln and found them wanting. Mondale's sermons did not, as Pedersen's and Lincoln's had, address the political and social issues of the day nor relate them to individual lives.

Yet new members, having no Unitarian model to compare him to, were delighted with Mondale's sermons and warmed to the charm of the man himself. A rift was growing between stalwarts and newcomers.

Mondale could, and did, point to unprecedented membership growth as the proof he was doing a sterling job. In the first year at the permanent location, membership, in fact, had risen from 258 to 359, an impressive first-year increase. Mondale said:

"Our tremendous growth is not `natural growth,' as some are saying. This so-called natural growth could come to a halt in a matter of months were the members to give over to bickering and factions and smallish behavior patterns. What seems like natural growth is the accretion that comes of the magnetism of likeable, interesting, capable people working joyfully together."

The argument would have been more convincing if it were not for a decline in pledges. For, while membership grew, individual member pledges were falling dramatically. Apparently, long-term, more-established members of the church community continued to come to church but were reluctant to make contributions. Some especially active members, like Ernie and Shirley Hodas, remained members yet stopped coming, as they were uncomfortable with both the service and the rising tensions.

Plummeting revenues could not have come at a worse time. The church was deeply in debt with the new mortgage and initial expenses, and a $40,000 loan from Detroit's First Unitarian-Universalist Church was becoming delinquent.

Colleen Barnard, an active member, said, "It's been implied that some of the financial crisis is the fault of a small group withholding its support because it is dissatisfied with the minister. The records show that just as many persons with small pledges diminished or withdrew their support as did persons with large pledges. The drop-off began shortly after Mr. Mondale assumed the ministry. Many persons who have manifested their dissatisfaction in no other way simply have reduced their financial support without further comment."

Throughout the first year and a half of Mondale's ministry, numerous meetings between the minister and board members failed to resolve the growing schism. A spokesman from the UU headquarters in Boston suggested that a questionnaire, sent to all members, might measure the dissatisfaction level. A delegate from the UU said, "If 15 percent of the members are dissatisfied, a minister would be expected to step down."

The board questionnaire revealed that fully 30 percent of those who voted were dissatisfied with Mondale's ministry. The vote, however, failed to encourage Mondale to resign. Mondale's supporters argued that since the church is a democracy, 70 percent satisfied was a pluralistic vote in Mondale's favor. The controversy deepened.

Finally, in November of 1961 a special all-church meeting was convened to air and resolve the factionalism that was paralyzing the church.

The atmosphere in the social hall that night was electric. Members for and against Mondale began a shouting match, and it was only when Bob Dearth rose and invoked Robert's Rules of Order that speakers could be heard. Kathryn Loomis spoke for Mondale's resignation.

She made a strong argument that democracy in government is far different from democracy in a church. "Being a member of a church is not a passive process," Loomis argued. "A church member does something. He takes part in the exercises of the church, in its work, associations, worship. Participation requires more than acquiescence. One must believe in what is being done and must gain satisfaction from it, else he will presently cease to take part."

Loomis expressed the stalwarts' argument in saying that Mondale simply was not meeting the members' intellectual and spiritual needs. "We have in the congregation educated, thoughtful, discriminating persons who themselves do a certain amount of solid reading, and who hope their minister can read and think enough more than they do to provide them, not every Sunday, but frequently at least, with mental stimulation and some inspiration toward more fruitful living." And she ended with the fundamental conclusion that while Mondale was a pleasant and even personable man, he was essentially "in a job that is too difficult for him."

Mondale's defenders believed that the problem was with the founders and board members who disliked Mondale personally and were "out to get him." R. Eugene Bullock, argued, "Our church is being torn apart... by a militant minority. Perhaps Lester Mondale is guilty of not showing due respect for the primacy of economic stratification in our society. Perhaps he has offended too many sacred echelons. Perhaps the sheer weight of his exuberance has occasioned a few flaws in his sermons. Perhaps honest emotion has affected the controlled modulation of his voice at times. Perhaps, after all, Lester is guilty of human frailty."

The newcomer faction, so eloquently represented by Bullock, stood by Mondale to the final vote; then, when it was clear they had lost, they voted again with their feet. Approximately 175 members walked away from the Birmingham Unitarian Church.

Irreconcilable Differences

Yet they didn't walk far. The Young Couples Group, led by Roberta and Philip Levin, met soon after the decision and proposed forming their own Unitarian fellowship. The 30 regular members of their group would be at the core.

Jay Hadda, who left the church, recalls, "Our Young Couples Group was comprised of dynamic, creative people who just felt Mr. Mondale had been ill-treated. The Levins immediately suggested we form a church. The Unitarian Universalist Association told us not to do it, but we were so convinced it was right that we went ahead."

Within weeks of Mondale's dismissal, the Emerson Fellowship began. At the outset, they had well over a hundred members, all from Birmingham Unitarian Church.

"Because there were so many of us," Hadda said, "we were able to have a religious education program and all the other aspects of an established church from the first week."

Dick Norling, who joined Emerson Fellowship after the split, returned to BUC 40 years later. Norling said, “Why it happened, I couldn’t say. Some wanted more eloquent sermons. But Mondale was a calm, practical, and dependable person. Those of us who left did so because we felt Mondale wasn’t given a chance.”

Mondale was invited to join the Emerson Fellowship, but he declined. He left the state and moved on to other ministries. Yet he got in the last word with a book he wrote entitled, *Preachers in Purgatory,* in which he hypothesized that it was a matter of founder control that doomed his ministry. Mondale wrote:

"It was the newness of the church: that all of those in control were members of the hard-working, close-knit fellowship that only recently had achieved a church status..." In their complaints Mondale saw "a fear common to those of any proprietary group when their control is threatened." In Mondale's mind, the split was "nothing more than a struggle of old against new."

Kathryn Loomis, clearly a prominent member of what Mondale would have called "the old guard," found his argument missed the fact that BUC had had two popular and accepted ministers in Russell Lincoln and Walter Pedersen before Mondale arrived.

Whatever the reasons, "The Split," as members of both churches would call it forever after, was a low point in Birmingham Unitarian Church's history. As Ernie Hodas said, "We lost a lot of great people. And it hurt our church financially for a long time. Yet I think it says a lot about our community that we got through the split and regained our strength in time."

"Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans," John Lennon would say. The Camelot all had anticipated with the opening of the new church doors had been marred by death of a beloved minister, disenchantment with another, departure of many members, and enduring debt.

A new minister would soon arrive to re-invigorating the community with a theme of "celebrating life." And the church would go on, perhaps wiser, perhaps more realistic in expectations. They had been given a lesson from real life that all chapters do not, necessarily, end well.

Chapter Three

Marshalling Forces

by
Holly and Garry Gilbert

"Here the free spirit of mankind, at length,
Throws its last fetters off; and who shall place
A limit to the giant's unchained strength,
Or curb his swiftness in the forward race?"
William Cullen Bryant
Poet and Unitarian

If the search committee had devised the least likely ministerial candidate for Birmingham Unitarian Church, it would have been Robert F. Marshall.

A used book store owner and part-time preacher, a seminary school drop-out, in fact, a man without any college degree, a big man in ill-fitted suits, so unconscious about his appearance that one church member best described him as "rumpled," all of this was Bob Marshall.

Yet there was more, much more.

From the moment he gave his first sermon as interim minister in the 1962, Bob Marshall captured the intellectual curiosity, the collective conscience, the passion and compassion, and grander purpose of the church community.

"Bob was a man of strong convictions who was champion of the low man on life's totem pole," Nancy Jones, member and long-time newsletter editor, recalled. "He was amazingly well read and filled his sermons with tremendous knowledge backing up his conclusions."

Marshall's conclusions were given with such intellectual passion as to sound more like convictions. Yet his convictions always were open to discussion and debate.

"Often, after his sermons," said David Tankard, former BUC president, "Bob would stand at the pulpit and ask for comments and questions from the

congregation. Marshall's knowledge was so great that few could refute him, and his intellectual confidence so complete that he never downplayed any person's ideas.

"When he didn't know, he'd admit it and vow to do more reading. He was never at all reluctant to admit before the entire congregation when someone bested his argument on a point."

"He was brilliant and a veritable encyclopedia on many subjects," says Patricia Schwing, who was a co-Director of Religious Education while Marshall was minister. Once, while working on a prospectus for the RE program, Pat and co-DRE Ardis Hanish found themselves stuck for a satisfactory definition of the trinity. They sought Marshall's input. "Done," said Marshall — three minutes later he appeared with the copy exactly as requested... in one paragraph."

The 42-year-old, self-styled minister's engaging nature won over BUC members. In many respects, Marshall seemed to personify the Unitarian ideal of inquiry and searching, and of complete tolerance for opposing views. Members felt important with him, and Marshall had an uncanny ability to remember anyone's name after a single meeting, and always greet that person by name forever after.

Preacher with a Purpose

Marshall liked to refer to himself as "just an old country preacher," yet he was anything but. He hardly fit the "spreading the gospel" stereotype. His leadership clearly revolved around social activism, and despite his homey self definition, he was a master of practicing politics from his pulpit and persuading his congregation to follow his lead.

Henry Pratt, a BUC member and professor at Wayne State University, says Marshall was "the classic social gospel minister." This genre of religious leadership, originating in Europe in the nineteenth century, attempted to adapt the church to conditions and challenges of industrial society. Marshall's attempt to adapt the church to modern society — a society torn by issues like racism, segregation, court-ordered school busing, abortion rights and censorship — was welcomed by the Birmingham congregation.

Marshall is overwhelmingly remembered as the kind of leader who was unequivocally adored. "People worshipped at his feet," says Pratt. Even after the initial fascination wore off, even when it became apparent that he was a 'preacher,

not a minister,' and even when his private cache of problems became public, he was enormously well-liked."

Degrees of Dispute

In the beginning, the book dealer's popularity took the pulpit committee by surprise. Essentially, BUC had engaged Marshall as interim minister while the pulpit committee worked with Unitarian Universalist headquarters in Boston on a nationwide search for an ordained minister, preferably one with the kind of Harvard Divinity School credentials, and extensive denominational experience, of earlier ordained ministers.

How could the committee realistically recommend to the membership — a highly-educated membership — that it hire a person with so little formal training?

And how could they not recommend him? He was so overwhelmingly favored by the members that the committee feared considering anyone else who might, in their words, "prove division to our membership." Still recovering from the membership split over Mondale, the last thing anyone wanted was a new separation over a candidate.

Some considered offering Marshall the position with the caveat that he pursue a seminary degree. Yet Marshall, rapidly approaching middle age and a father of five, made it abundantly clear he had no intention of continuing his formal education.

"For me, at my age and stage," he wrote, "a return to the seminary sounds like learning to play checkers when one wants to play chess. It would plainly and simply be degree-chasing, an effort to gain the security of the 'union card.' For all my years of social action involvement, the job security of the union card has not struck me as a primary goal. Rather this opens the way to all kinds of observable abuse."

Marshall was no stranger to academia. He had attended Cornell College in Iowa, the University of Chicago, and the Chicago Theological Seminary. At the seminary in the late 1940s, he may well have set a record for taking classes that ended up with grades of "incomplete."

"Each semester I would start with fresh resolve," he recalled, "but the combination of the sterility of many of the courses, the pressure of my outside activities and

jobs, and the failure of my fellow students to contribute any excitement to these classes, conspired to ruin my resolve."

His theological school records did not reflect the vast majority of his "incompletes" because a friend who worked as a registrar deleted most of these records, leaving only a few incompletes for credibility's sake. While Marshall later said he didn't approve of his friend’s action, at the time he agreed "it was quite a coup."

Bob Marshall was a self-styled student. A voracious reader, he preferred to audit courses in a wide range of subjects of his choosing, without the benefit of credits, nor the cost of registration. At seminaries and universities, Marshall sat "inauspiciously in the back of classrooms." He was there for an audacious reason — not to get a diploma, but an education.

Call Waiting

Marshall's early ministerial experience was based on his remarkable abilities at the pulpit and with people. He first served as assistant minister of the First Congregational Church of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, then as minister of the Monmouth-Balwin Community Methodist Parish in northeastern Iowa.

His background included diverse social activism. He played a role in the founding of the first chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942 in Chicago. Racial equality always drew his involvement, and he was a member of the NAACP, the Urban League, and the ACLU.

Before moving to Ann Arbor, he had spent some time as a staff member of the Educational Department of the UAW-CIO under Victor Reuther. He had managed the UAW bookstore in Detroit and dabbled in labor journalism, union organizing, and even tried running an espresso coffee shop, before opening his used book store in Ann Arbor.

For five years, Marshall attended no church at all. "One Sunday morning in Ann Arbor," he recalls, "my wife Doris got up and said she was going to church. She told me she was going to the First Unitarian Church. She did this for two years before I joined her."

When the Ann Arbor UU minister left, Marshall became involved as a layman, often giving lay sermons. "For the first time I felt I was reaching and communicating with the congregation," he said. Later, he preached frequently at

the Farmington UU Church, and while making a guest appearance at the Horton Unitarian Universalist Church in 1961, he was asked to serve as interim minister.

Marshall again found himself in a quandary. He had been attending classes at the Meadville Theological Seminary, and he had to decide between being a pupil or practitioner. Meadville administrators felt he would have been wiser to spend a year tackling exams instead of taking on a faltering congregation at Horton.

"It is not an exaggeration to suggest that Horton would have folded had I not gone there," Marshall later wrote. "The blunt fact is that I was their last available resource at the time. Instead of another rural church with closed doors, my presence made it possible for them, eleven months later, to call a minister."

Marshall then accepted the interim post at BUC, and his performance put the pulpit committee in a preposterous situation. They did what committees are inclined to do in quandaries. They stalled, extended Marshall's interim status, and dithered for months. The committee was ostensibly waiting for a decision by the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship of Ministers, hoping that even probationary acceptance would make hiring the popular independent more palatable. As interim minister, with his thriving book store in Ann Arbor to fall back on, Marshall was making no compromises. He told the committee:

"If an invitation is extended to me to candidate for the Birmingham pulpit, I would do so on the basis that you know me, who I am and what I am." His application, he contended, would have to include "the warts and all." With a sort of pride in his unconventionality, Marshall referred to himself as "a poor man's theologian."

With only one candidate that the pulpit committee dared to recommend, and with a belated and reluctant ministerial fellowship granted by the Unitarian Universalist Association, Bob Marshall was unanimously offered the ministry and quickly voted in at a special all-church meeting.

Marshall not only was hired by the church, he joined the church. He signed the membership book, pledged ten percent of his meager salary to the church, and rolled up his sleeves, doing whatever the community needed at the time, from teaching a youth class to mopping floors and personally supervising a church grounds’ garden, complete with compost pile, of course.

Stirring the WASPS

Bob Marshall's debut at BUC coincided with troubled times in America. The cold war had become heated during the Cuban Missile Crisis in late 1962, and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was banging his shoe on the table and threatening to bury America. In the southern United States, civil rights workers were being shot, and black children were barred from entering white public schools.

Birmingham Unitarian Church, with its virtually all-white congregation in one of the most upscale, affluent suburbs of Detroit, was an unlikely platform for civil rights activism, yet Marshall believed his new congregation could make a positive contribution. In an interview in November of 1963, Marshall advocated a significant role on race relations and promised, "It is possible to do something intelligent in Birmingham."

Marshall had protested racism and segregation long before it earned a place on the national agenda. He inspired his congregation to follow his lead. He called them to action from the pulpit and was empowered by the fact that he clearly practiced what he preached. In Ann Arbor, for instance, Marshall was the first white merchant to hire black employees, including a black woman who actually ran his bookstore. He was also the first on the city's suburban block to sell a home to a black family. Marshall could authenticate his war on civil rights, in fact, back to the late 1930s, when he was still a teenager.

Socialist in Suburbia

The minister's involvement with the Socialist Party dates to that pre-war era. Marshall became acquainted with Norman Thomas, who became the party's leader in 1926 and led its revival during the Great Depression. When presented with the opportunity to become Thomas' driver, Marshall couldn't resist. It was the beginning of a lifelong habit of putting college on hold.

The activities of the Socialist Party — Norman Thomas ran for president in 1932 — provided ample opportunities for Marshall to embrace liberal convictions. Eventually he became a follower of Michael Harrington, the most prominent socialist in America during the latter half of the twentieth century. Harrington, like Marshall, was heavily involved in civil rights and trade union movements and, in 1965, acted as an adviser to Martin Luther King, Jr.

His best-known contribution to American politics was his 1962 book *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, which came to the attention of President John F. Kennedy and helped shape the Kennedy-Lyndon Johnson War on Poverty.

Marshall's career path paralleled Harrington's. In fact, by 1965 Marshall had also become acquainted with King and deeply committed to his crusade. Marshall marched at home in Birmingham, in Pontiac, and finally, in the Selma to Montgomery freedom march through Alabama that marked a high point of the civil rights movement. Although an entire contingent from the Birmingham-Bloomfield area participated in the Selma walk, Marshall had a profound presence. As usual, the Detroit-area press found him so remarkably quotable that other Michigan marchers were given only brief mentions.

"Alabama and Mississippi get national attention only when they kill whites," Marshall told the Eccentric's Ken Weaver in a front-page story published April 1, 1965. "Otherwise, the brutality against the Negroes of the Black Belt would go unnoticed, as it always has."

For Marshall and BUC members Shelley Appleton and Kevin Connelly, who joined him on the Selma trip, the demonstration had double significance. A northern white UU minister named James Reeb had been viciously beaten and killed by Selma whites. Reeb's death led to a national outcry. The Birmingham (Alabama) Unitarian Church was under siege by segregationists.

"Our BUC tried to help their BUC and to express solidarity by paying for a guard," recalled Appleton at Marshall's memorial service in 1988. Appleton said the three were transported to the line of the march from the sister church and educated on such matters as billy club etiquette.

"When we arrived at the line of the march we spent a couple hours assembling. It was like a family reunion for Bob. He was holding court. Dozens and dozens of delegation leaders and marchers came to greet him, to call his name, hug him, to recall old times — labor leaders, priests, rabbis, college friends — they all swarmed to greet him."

In Appleton's closing thoughts, he commended Marshall for leading the BUC congregation "not to follow him, but to follow as he did, the convictions of our minds and hearts."

In Proximity to Pontiac

Marshall marched, too, during the 1970s in Pontiac, to support court-ordered school desegregation. In 1971, Marshall helped form Concerned Clergy of Greater Pontiac, a group of dozens of area ministers whose mission was to help solve the segregation crisis that was tearing the fabric of Oakland County's largest city.

Race relations in beleaguered Pontiac, an industrial city ringed by wealthy, white suburbs, benefited in other ways from Marshall's attention. BUC held more than three dozen shared Sunday and other services with Newman African Methodist Episcopal Church in Pontiac, about half in each church, during a twenty-year period. From his highly visible pulpit he supported the message of dignity for all humans, of concern for minorities and the economically disadvantaged. Marshall also conceived and developed Project Friendship, an outgrowth of the Newman exchange. Each summer about 60 kids from Birmingham and Pontiac learned and played together at this extraordinary inter-racial day camp.

Marshall's definition of civil rights was broad-minded and included women. He believed strongly in a woman's right to choose abortion and made no apologies about urging his congregation to follow his convictions. But in Marshall there were always the contradictions. In the same year he championed equal rights for women, for example, Marshall told the church board the staff did not need employee benefits because "they're all either married, or well-fixed widows."

Marshall revealed many contradictions, yet he also seemed keenly aware that his liberalism was considerably left of his middle class congregation. He defined the outer limits for himself and for his most vocal liberal associates. Marshall, for example, asked liberal activist Annis Pratt to suggest non-sexist and less traditionally Christian wording to the hymns, but there was a point when he balked.

"I was showing Bob the changes," Pratt said, "and how I'd changed 'brothers' in the song 'Morning, So Fair to See' to 'comrades' and 'brotherhood' to 'comradeship'. I was proud that it was the same number of syllables, and the accents even fell in the right places.

"No can do," Marshall said. I asked, "What do you mean, "No can do?" Marshall explained, "Look at the way the congregation will react to "comrades." We're both members of the Socialist Party, aren't we?"

You, But Not UU

If Marshall imposed outer limits for himself within the congregation, he was without limits in his vocal opposition to the denomination on the vast majority of issues and positions. Marshall, in fact, had suggested withdrawing from the UUA and establishing an independent church, on many occasions. Some held that this was the result of a long-standing grudge. "Marshall," one friend said, "never forgave the hierarchy for making him prove his abilities before he was officially ordained."

But Doug Gallager says that more often than not, Marshall turned out to be doing the right thing. "A prime example is the youth group," says Gallager. "During the early seventies LRY (Liberal Religious Youth), as the continental youth group was known, went to extremes in terms of 'youth empowerment.' Adults were pretty much made irrelevant. Sex, drugs and rock and roll were the order of the day. And adults, by and large, supported it: freedom! The kids were out of control. Years before the denomination realized that and disbanded LRY, Bob (along with Jean Mehlenbacher and others, I'm sure) put his foot down here."

Not only did Marshall put the kibosh on the group in his own church, in 1964 he sent a seven-page missive to LRY leaders and advisors. His observations and conclusions are classic Marshall:

"What puzzles some adults in basic sympathy with LRY, and what apparently alienates or fails to attract many potential LRYers, is one strand within it which I shall term bourgeois nihility." He writes on about the various definitions of the terms and concludes: "There is in our LRY movement a very strong thread of negativism, of nihility, of beatnikism, of un-health."

Sound Byte Bob

Marshall frequently took the time and energy to reach beyond the confines of his church and challenge others to follow their convictions. He was a regular speaker before campus, church, and community groups, lectured at Oakland University and Eastern Michigan University, hosted book conferences, and gave a popular Summer Book Talk, reviewing the work of a major contemporary author each year.

Marshall was as captivating in print as he was in person. Perhaps it was his tremendous talent at defining issues by cutting so definitively to the chase. About

House Bill 1417, which would have mandated prayer in public schools, he said simply, “This is a terrible thing to do to religion.”

When Birmingham police determined it was necessary to confiscate copies of Nikos Kazantzakis’ *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1965, the censorship controversy garnered a great deal of press. Marshall’s quote, of course, stands out. “The cost of literary freedom,” he said, “is that books will be circulated that people won’t like.”

Not surprisingly, he was a popular guest on local television and wrote strong guest opinions and biting letters for many local newspapers.

In a 1976 letter to Phil Meek, then publisher of *The Oakland Press* in Pontiac, Marshall roundly chastised the newspaper for failing to cover the good works of BUC:

"There is no primarily suburban, white church more involved in affairs in Pontiac than ours. We never get recognition in your paper for this. We have exchanged pulpits and congregations with Newman African Methodist Episcopal 19 times now. That’s unusual. We can’t get a nibble on that in *The Oakland Press*. The 20th is coming up soon, when the whole Newman congregation will ‘invade’ Bloomfield Hills... Our many years of Project Friendship in Pontiac Schools, with our busing our suburban white kids into Pontiac summer after summer — get ignored by The Press."

The *Oakland Press* increased its coverage of Marshall and BUC. It’s interesting to note that Marshall’s personal file of newspaper clippings includes a 1979 editorial written by Press Editor Neil Munro that analyzes the separation of religion and politics that is an American tradition. The editorial credits a Marshall sermon as its inspiration.

Rambling sermon titles were a hallmark of Marshall. For example, in April 1966, a Sunday topic was “The Church as Service Station or Community Servant: (Part Two), The Church on Coming or Going.” Another topic: “How to Get from the Comfortable Pew to the Secular City While Avoiding the Suburban Captivity of the Church and Being Honest to God.” Taking a breather, his May 8, 1966 Mother’s Day sermon was “Sex.”

A champion of farming, gardening and especially composting, Marshall often worked those themes into his talks. “I recall that he gave one entire sermon on root

vegetables and the delights of the late-season harvest," says Neil Munro, editorial writer for *The Oakland Press*.

Breaking the Bonds of Verbosity

Marshall's most famous sermon, however, was better known for its length than its title — "From Abraham to Augustine: The Shaping of Western Tradition," a 60-hour, 31-minute marathon talk about the history of religion that he hoped would put him in the record-breakers' Bible, the Guinness record book for the world's longest sermon.

Although the BUC board of trustees was "less than enthusiastic" about the project, Marshall began his Bicentennial Preach-In at 12:01 a.m. Thursday, Jan. 1, 1976, and made his closing remarks at 12:32 p.m. Jan. 3. The effort generated a fair amount of publicity, including front-page treatment in the *Detroit Free Press* and stories by most other area media, and even received some national attention. Some stories urged curious readers to drop in to BUC to see what the event was all about.

Reaction was mixed. A few media and clergy said Marshall was making a mockery of sermonizing and religion. One clergyman said Marshall's three-day effort "was publicity-seeking rather than trying to make God real, hallowed or lifted up" and was an unworthy "spokesman for God." Others credited Marshall with generating favorable religious news. "I got a kick out of it," said a Baptist pastor in Birmingham.

BUC members and supporters took turns staying up through the nights with him, although at one point the audience dwindled to three people. Marshall said he had the most trouble staying awake from 5 to 8 every morning. There were about 40 in attendance at 5 a.m. Friday, 29 hours into the marathon, which was a morale boost for Marshall. The audience began to grow until by noon Saturday, as he neared the 60th hour, he was buoyed by a large congregation that overflowed the worship hall. Many listeners asked questions during the sermon, which stimulated Marshall. He was allowed five-minute breaks every hour and consumed small amounts of food and drink. He also used about five kinds of lozenges and throat sprays. Wife Doris stayed up for most of the Preach-In.

More than 300 listeners clapped and cheered when a timekeeper yelled, "You've made it, Bob!" at 12:28 p.m. Urged to keep going toward his original goal of 1:01 p.m., the weary pastor declined. "I'm satisfied. To go on might be a little immoderate," he told the congregation. Someone started a chorus of "For he's a

jolly good fellow," and Marshall shouted "*Mazel tov*!" — a Yiddish term of celebration.

"The record-breaking Preach-In did produce several surprises. One was the interest of the media, and, happily, the non-kooky way in which the story was covered," wrote Jean Mehlenbacher, director of religious education, in a letter to *The Oakland Press*.

She continued, "In the last few hours especially, the things we as a church care about most deeply — respect for all people as individuals of worth, concern for the quality of life on this earth and a commitment to a stewardship to that earth, were stated eloquently by both Mr. Marshall and members of the congregation in dialogue with him.

"Perhaps we ought not to have been surprised. After all, this is what a sermon is supposed to do. Preaching is Bob Marshall's craft, and he has demonstrated he's pretty good at it! So here's to human beings — long may they be interesting."

Taylor-Made for TV

Others in the church found additional ways of utilizing Marshall's speaking gifts. Marj Taylor, former BUC president, created a television show for the church on a public access channel in 1982. Unitarianism Universalism was getting confused in the public's mind with Unity and other sects such as the Unification Church, and Taylor felt the program could more clearly define the denomination.

"For two years we produced the show," Taylor said. "We had to provide our own BUC crew to do the camera work, sound, lighting, sets, and props, and I was producer and wrote most of the shows. Many BUCers appeared, but our "star" most of the time was Bob Marshall.

"Bob would assume his place and start talking. The amazing thing was he never used a script. I just put in "blah, blah, blah" for his lines. And when the final two-minute warning signal came on, Bob could whip right in to his conclusion and end on the second."

When Bob Marshall once said he'd "rather preach, even, than eat," there was truth in jest. The further Marshall got from the podium, the less comfortable he seemed to be. Most agreed, for example, that he was not an easily approachable person, and many said he was an ineffective counselor.

Unconventional Friendship

With one exception, not many people got close enough to Bob Marshall to say they actually knew him. The one exception was his friend and spiritual ally, Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine.

Rabbi Wine was himself a unique individual. He was a humanistic, atheistic rabbi, and the founder of the Birmingham Temple. Their 20-year friendship spanned nearly all of Marshall's affiliation with BUC and was one that Wine cherished. They shared ideals, goals and philosophies, as well, Wine says, as well as some philosophical differences. But the bond between them was easily strong enough to endure the occasional ideological disparity. "We never played games with each other," Wine says.

They not only embraced their convictions on an intellectual level, they were dogged in their efforts to work them in the real world. "We were always planning, doing things," Wine says. And the rabbi isn't referring to the occasional potluck or prayer meeting. Among the Marshall/Wine collaborations was the 1969 Conference on Humanistic Ethics, a gathering in which the two hoped merely to "bring all the humanists in the world together." Joan Baez, Paul Goodman, and Albert Ellis were the keynotes at the event, which drew, Wine remembers, about 500 or so.

The friends also shared their respective pulpits, annually, at least. Wine, in fact, still speaks at BUC. "Bob would come (to Birmingham Temple) and speak every year, and people in the congregation really liked him, and I was comfortable in Unitarian church. I felt it was a place where my convictions were articulated."

Wine, anti-establishment himself, felt that one of Marshall's strengths was that he was not a graduate of divinity school. "Thank goodness he was never ruined by the seminary," Wine said. "They make you so pious, you become clerical and develop those clergy tones." Marshall never had any of that. He was, instead, "wonderfully open and warm."

While some saw Marshall as spiritual, Wine knew his friend better than that. "Bob couldn't be bothered with spirituality," he says. "He was a doer, not a seeker. There was not a mystical bone in Bob's body-- a poetic side maybe, but certainly not mystical."

Some called Marshall distant, others deep, yet Rabbi Wine saw him as a thoroughly honest man. “There was nothing devious about Bob Marshall,” Wine said. “He told you exactly what he thought and felt. Some people set out to please, and for Bob that wasn’t the way he did his life. He was often reflective and open to changing his mind. Yes, he had very strong convictions, but he was not dogmatic. He had a great deal of integrity.”

Where Words Failed

Marshall, even his closest friend would admit, was not without problems. Some of his "problems" were little idiosyncrasies that most found endearing. He was, for example, largely oblivious to his personal appearance. Miyo O'Neill, Marshall's secretary for many years, remembers his overcoat. "The coat was so wrinkled and soiled that once I just took it off his rack, got it cleaned and pressed, and put it back in the same place. Bob didn't notice the difference."
For many, Marshall’s imperfections were humanizing, if not inspirational. Marshall, for example, could not sing on key, yet that didn’t stop him from singing with gusto during services.

Lee Phillips, a BUC teenager at the time, said: “Hearing Bob Marshall’s voice booming through the speakers when he was singing taught me that while we may not be the best, or even very good, at something— you do your best and have fun without shame. That’s one thing he represented to me. He did things, right and wrong. He decided and seemed to do them with determination and no shame for what he decided.”

Far less “endearing problems” were apparent in Marshall’s personal life. His long marriage ended, and a second marriage to a church member was soon troubled by yet another relationship with a church member in the final years of his life. Most believed that his personal life was victim to his passion for the pulpit. Marshall’s ultimate mistress was the church itself. In fact, when he and Doris decided to divorce, Marshall made it a church issue.

“He came to me with a two-page letter for the newsletter explaining the divorce,” says Curt Vail, then church president. When Vail asked Marshall how Doris would present her side, the estranged husband suggested she provide her own explanation. Ultimately the drama received just a two-paragraph mention. “And we all got through it together,” Vail said.

In all of this, and more, Bob Marshall was clearly an intricately complex man. Getting close to Bob Marshall may have been difficult. But most of his contemporaries seem to feel that being close to his works was ample compensation.

"I was never so terrified in my life as I was when we went to a gathering at Seaholm High School to support Baldwin House," says Annis Pratt. "We were surrounded by hate." In the midst of this terrifying crowd, angry over the prospect of low-income senior housing, Bob Marshall knew exactly what to do. "He got up and made just the 'right' social action speech," says Pratt. "It was absolutely incredible."

"I didn't really get to know him as a personal friend," says James Windell, who attended the church in the early eighties, "but what I remember about him was that he was bright, an intellectual minister. He was a big man, physically imposing. "When Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed, it seemed natural that we went to BUC to deal with what most of us felt was a personal loss. We had a memorial service, and people held hands and sang "We Shall Overcome."

Rabbi Wine admits his friend was not a one-on-one minister. "Bob was a group counselor," Wine says, "and he was excellent at it. And for whatever deficits he may have had personally, there was more than sufficient compensation."

Last Words

Marshall retired after 22 years, and within four years, he died. Felled by a rare, aggressive cancer, he died a short time after being diagnosed.

The number of people who wished to attend Marshall's memorial service was so great that BUC couldn't accommodate them. A second service had to be held in First Church in Detroit. And the guest list read like a Who's Who in Mid-American Social Action.

His passing merited no fewer than a dozen obituaries. Like the congregation who had followed him for more than two decades, the headlines heralded his works:

"The Rev. Robert Marshall, 67, rights activist" — *Detroit Free Press;* "Record-Breaking Pastor, Robert Marshall, Dead at 67" — *Royal Oak Tribune;* "Rev. Robert F. Marshall, 67, Minister, Race Relations Leader" — *The Oakland Press*. Marshall would have enjoyed the press coverage, yet just as likely would have

dashed off several letters to the editors about the incorrect emphasis on one aspect of his career or another.

Since Marshall was an ultimate master of coming up with the last word, it may be best to let him have it. With all the billions of words Bob Marshall expended, he often said that if he could preach only one sermon, it would consist of only one word-- "Live!"

Chapter Four

A Brief Chapter

by
Carol Lee

"When one door closes, another opens. But we often look so long and so regretfully at the closed door that we cannot see the one that has opened for us."
Alexander Graham Bell
Inventor and Unitarian

Jo Bartlett arrived in his 1956 Chrysler, a car which seemed to personify the man himself. The car had more than 300,000 miles on the odometer; and Bartlett, at 71 years old, had logged every one of those miles himself. The car was a classic, with many coats of polish from its exaggerated tail fins to its chrome encrusted bumpers. Bartlett, with his silver hair, trim and well-groomed presence, was equally polished. And it was Jo's only car, yet despite its age, it was as sharp and powerful as the owner himself. Jo delighted in the car's functionality, its ability to serve well.

The Reverend Dr. Josiah Bartlett came to serve as BUCs interim minister in the fall of 1984. He had been hired for one year, but would end up serving two. Many who saw the elderly man arrive in the quaint old car may have expected a caretaker -- someone to fill a parking space while a permanent minister was found. They soon learned otherwise. Jo Bartlett, as he saw the assignment, was there to shake up a community that needed to move on, one probably in denial over the departure of a beloved minister. Jo wouldn't stay long, but he definitely would leave tread marks where he passed through.

Bartlett understood the role of interim minister – in fact, he wrote the book on the subject, and he was the founder and first practitioner of the Unitarian Universalist Interim Ministers' program.

Bartlett came to BUC as interim after a long career that included serving as a permanent Unitarian Universalist minister in four churches before retiring in 1949, then serving as dean of the Starr King School of Ministry until 1968, when he officially retired again.

That's when Bartlett found his true calling. He saw an interim minister as a kind of emergency-room doctor, who could rush in and apply knowledge and treatment to get the patient church well enough to receive a new permanent minister. Bartlett had tested his approach on ten interim positions before BUC, and would go on to 14 more afterward.

Just do it

Jo arrived with his wife, Laile, a professor of sociology and published author. Together they joined in the church like long-term members. Laile became active in the Alliance, and Jo joined the choir. They also were regular discussion group participants and could be expected to show up at virtually any church party or potluck. Jo was a Unitarian who also happened to be the minister.

Called an "institutional innovator" by the UUA, Bartlett wasted no time proving that title. On the first day, he began reorganizing the office space and ordering changes with all of the assumed authority of an army general.

Jo could be a task master, literally and figuratively. In his minister's report for the two years he served BUC, he would simply provide two columns: "Tasks to Do -- Tasks Done." He was a man who would have agreed that "life is a series of tasks which must be performed" and, in Jo's case, performed with great dispatch.

As one might suspect, Bartlett's officiousness upset a lot of people in the process. Elinor Coale, then church secretary, recalls, "Once there was some glitch in RE's part of a service. Jo came in the office infuriated. He kept saying `Heads will roll for this.' Of course, Jo had no authority over RE, but that didn't matter. 'Heads will roll,' he insisted. That was Jo Bartlett."

Yet Bartlett also delighted most members with his charm, accessibility, and his sermons that were well-polished, if not well-worn. If Jo was brusque, it was the impatience of an elder sage who felt his extensive experience was proof enough that he knew what was right for the church.

Jo's Done List

Given his actions, few questioned Barlett's genuine concern for the church's wellbeing. For example, he felt that BUC lacked a decent visual symbol, so he sponsored a contest to design a distinctive flaming-chalice logo. BUC member and artist Matt Champlin came up with the winning design, which would replace the

nondescript fir tree on the newsletter masthead and grace BUCs letterhead for years to come. And Bartlett even commissioned a banner to carry in marches so BUC's presence was seen as well as felt.

Bartlett also tied up many of the loose ends from Bob Marshall's long, generally free-form administration.

Marshall, for example, had never taken anyone off the membership rolls or newsletter mailing list. So the church had an on-paper membership of more than 600, even though only about two-thirds of them were attending or making pledges. Bartlett dug into the list and ordered it to conform to reality. "Before Jo arrived we used to mail out more than 1,400 newsletters a week," said Nancy Jones, former newsletter editor. "After the purge we were mailing about 700."

Spurred on by a bequest from the estate of former members Clark and Nan Hallock, Jo launched an endowment fund for the long-term financial security of the church. Jo personally encouraged members to make memorial and other donations to the fund and to remember BUC in their wills.

Bartlett saw his task as bringing people together. That's why he enlisted the help of Valerie Snook and Fred Straky to re-establish a singles' group in the church, and enlisted a number of others to get a Dinners For Eight round-robin group going. And Bartlett championed all-church weekend retreats and pushed to produce the first updated church directory in three years so it would be easier to keep in touch with one another.

And Jo was a care-giver. He established the Care Ring, a group of caring BUCers who mailed cards to the ill, made phone calls of encouragement, and visited shut ins.

Jo Be Nimble

Bartlett's responsiveness to member concerns surprised members with his swift action. For example, while his Sunday services met the expectations of the majority of those attending BUC, some said that they missed the social action emphasis of Bob Marshall's sermons. So Jo inaugurated the Social Issues Forum. Sunday morning visitors were startled to see the congregation separate into two streams at 9:30 a.m. One group went into the worship hall to hear Bartlett's sermon, while the other went into the pavilion to participate in the Social Issues Forum. The first forum was a frank discussion on AIDS, followed by many forums on subjects

that included waste management policy, political changes in the Soviet Union, problems in Michigan's educational system, Fair Housing, and BUC involvement in community outreach.

When ministerial candidate Doug Gallager came, Bartlett was there to give him senior ministerial advice. Bartlett described the congregation as “a healthy, vital church in its adolescent stage.” He believed that the task for the next ministry would be to move BUC into institutional and religious maturity. Bartlett said, “The greatest temptation I see ahead for BUC is to let the present facilities and habits, which are good, become a barrier to something great!”

After two years Jo Bartlett packed up his 1956 Chrysler and left, as decisively as he had arrived.

After serving many more churches, Bartlett died in 1997, but not before giving his final insights in a personal letter to all who knew him. Told he had only weeks to live, Jo wrote that he was leaving this world "...with the deep satisfaction of my work completed -- no gnawing ‘might have beens’ or guilt that, in any but forgivable ways, I've let people down... My occupation by nature is the best seat in the theatre of life, affording me limitless opportunity to be of use to others and challenge my powers."

Some chapters are brief, but memorable. Jo Bartlett's two-year stay was just such a chapter in the church’s history. A life-long Dante scholar, as he left BUC, Jo imparted his favorite thought from the 13th Century thinker:

"In the part of the book of my memory before which is little that can be read, there is a rubric, saying, ‘*Incipit vita nova’* -- translated, ‘The new life begins."

Chapter Five
A New Order

by
Grace Rising

"Very early, I knew that the only
object in life was to grow."
Margaret Fuller
Transcendentalist and Unitarian

At the end of the service on a cold January morning in 1996, the Rev. Dr. Douglas Gallager invited the congregation to leave their chairs in the drafty social hall and follow him into the new sanctuary. As the parishioners walked the scant thirty yards, they sensed a far greater journey.

They were leaving the social hall, a nondescript, blank-check of a room that in its nebulousness had served so many functions, witnessed scenes of camaraderie and convivial chaos for four decades. They walked past the new gallery hall, where fine art was displayed below track lighting and above tasteful carpeting. They passed through a spacious outer room they knew as "the pavilion," though 40 years earlier it had been designed for the purpose of this day as an entryway. They entered the modern sanctuary and were immediately enveloped in a sense that this was a church, a dedicated spiritual place of intentional order.

As Gallager led his congregation in the closing hymn in the new sanctuary, Cal Boulter recalled, "sound filled the space with subtle overtones never before heard from the familiar anthem. Some wept. Some were visibly moved." Most sensed the relief of closure, the awareness of a serenity that comes only in the calm of maturity.

A Long Walk

The walk from the social hall to the sanctuary, in a real sense, had taken ten years.

The first step came when a young Doug Gallager was hired as BUC's new minister. That first step preordained thousands of small, almost indiscernible steps thereafter. Ten years moved the congregation through subtle changes in services,

traditions, governance, administration and the physical environment itself, with Doug Gallager leading every step of the way -- leading to what Gallager would call "institutional and religious maturity."

The trip was taken, in Doug Gallager's words, "at the speed of church," so unobtrusively that few where cognizant of distances traveled. For Gallager was a new kind of leader. A quiet, seemingly unassuming man, he rarely spoke above his New England calm, and even more rarely ventured an absolute opinion. Gallager preferred quietly building consensus to confrontation.

If Marshall stirred up tidal waves to achieve his goals, Gallager would use steady erosion of his opposition in a tenacious stream of commitment to his ideas. Gallager, in fact, expressed a leadership style described three thousand years ago by Taoist Tao Te Ching:

"Of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will all say, 'We did this ourselves.'"

Yet during his candidating process in February 1986, few would have considered Gallager's direction possible. Even though an interim minister was in place, the long shadow of minister emeritus Bob Marshall lingered, as did the man himself.

There was no mistake that Marshall's style was the antithesis of Doug Gallager's. Where Marshall was grandiloquent, Gallager was plain spoken. Where Marshall was passionate, Gallager reserved. Where Marshall was the country preacher, Gallager was the quintessential professional. Where Marshall was a high-profile crusader, Gallager was an introvert who preferred to let the spotlight fall on others.

While opposites in most ways, Gallager established a genuine friendship with Bob Marshall and believed Marshall had retired in anticipation of a different kind of church evolving. Marshall, Gallager said, knew that a change in eras in liberal churches was at hand. "Bob was very supportive of me," Gallager said. "He knew a transition was needed. He knew that change was inevitable and got behind it."

Another distinct difference was that Gallager arrived with the impeccable credentials and portfolio Marshall had never acquired. Gallager was ordained at the Unitarian Church of Los Alamos, New Mexico, in 1971, after becoming the youngest person, at age 24, to be awarded the Doctor of Ministry degree from Meadville Theological School at the University of Chicago. Following his five

years in Los Alamos, Gallager spent ten years as minister of the Towson Unitarian Universalist Church near Baltimore, Maryland.

And he arrived with an exceptionally charming credential in his finance Celia Thurston. They would begin their married life together at BUC. Celia was a chaplain, who worked at hospitals to comfort those in their darkest hours. Both ministers, they understood that any day can be a work day, beginning early and ending late. Celia said, “There is a ‘consciousness to the calling’ that never goes away."

Electing to Change

Despite the dramatic contrast to BUC's popular hero, or perhaps because of it, the congregation voted to offer Gallager the BUC pulpit. And Gallager, with characteristic reason, recalled, "Deciding to accept a ministry has rational and non-rational elements. BUC fit and felt right for me. I hoped that the congregation would be patient enough for growing into a different church over the years.”

The "different church" alluded to began immediately with a different kind of sermon. Bob Marshall's sermons had been intellectually challenging, thought-provoking, and, often, simply provoking. Gallager's were deceptively pedestrian. He told stories from his own life as well as those of anonymous friends and associates, of people in current headlines, and from Unitarian Universalist history. He challenged the assumptions and beliefs underlying the choices people make, providing ideas that most can understand and employ.

One was fire, the other a simmering thoughtfulness. Garry Gilbert, a new member, said: "Doug is obviously well-read, current in world affairs and, in every sermon, delivers one or two points that I find myself weighing well into the next week."

Reflections in the next week, but not in the service itself. For the traditional pulpit editorials and talk back after sermons were quietly eliminated. Gallager sought order. The chaos of spontaneous responses, often not pertinent to the sermon's message, debates in the pews, all distracted and disrupted the symmetry of his service.

Where the Bodies Aren't Buried

Following an immensely popular 22-year minister, Gallager expected to deal with comparisons, but he was not quite as prepared for some of the other legacies Marshall left behind-- like the corpses in his desk drawer.

"Doug called me into his office one day," said Church Administrator Carol Lee, "and asked who the three people were in his drawer. There in the bottom drawer of what had been Marshall's desk were three boxes of ash remains. Each box had a name and date of death, yet none of them had been church members."

Marshall was known for not always following up on administrative details, but to overlook three human beings seemed excessively forgetful, even for him. After months of trying to find next of kin without success, Gallager gave his three office mates proper burials under the living tree in the children's area of the church grounds.

Other remnants of the Marshall years were equally surprising to Gallager. Marshall had been as accepting as a Salvation Army tambourine, especially when it came to those who wanted to rent church space. Some of the groups were truly bizarre, like a Hawaiian spiritual healer who promised to "cure cancer and teach the hula."

And there were the U.F.O. devotees. That proved confusing, as BUC's sixth and seventh graders called themselves U.F.O., for Unitarian Friendship Organization. One Sunday morning new minister Doug Gallager answered the church office phone.

"Is the UFO group meeting there tonight?"

"I think they're going sledding today," Gallager said. "They may be coming back here afterward, I don't know."

"Sledding? Hmm. Can anyone come, or do you have to be a member?"

"I think anyone can come," Gallager answered.

"Hmmm. Thank you." It's not recorded if this believer in extra-terrestrial visitors actually showed up at the sixth and seventh graders' sledding party.

A New Spirit

While a wry sense of humor is a fundamental part of Gallager's personality and podium style, the bizarre renters did not strike him as amusing. They were too easily confused with church sanctioned functions, and reflected poorly on Unitarian spirituality. He established a review process for all future rental requests.

Gallager was far more concerned with the spiritual than his predecessor. As member Allan Kurche said, “Doug has moved BUC to a more spiritual focus as opposed to the intellectual. He seems to have given permission for people to have a faith or a belief in a greater power. His speaking about our Judeo-Christian heritage has helped me connect with something greater than myself.”

Unlike many BUCers who came from other denominations, Gallager was raised in the Unitarian church. In one of his sermons he said, “In the church of my youth I learned the way that religious liberals handle the question of the divinity of Jesus. I was told that Jesus was the son of God in the same way that each of us is a child of God, that we have within us the potential to live good and noble lives, with the kind of values Jesus taught. I still believe that. While we are all flawed in ways large and small, we all recognize in people that kind of life, to whatever degree they are able to live it—a life of generosity.”

In speaking about the “Religious State of the Congregation,” Gallager has said, “Ours is a pluralistic congregation. The ‘cutting edge’ differs from person to person. Some center on rationality, some on spirituality; some have a theistic thrust and some have an atheistic center. What unites us is our basic humanistic affirmation and the principles of our movement. This makes for excitement and growth in an atmosphere of freedom and respect."

Gallager incorporated the full range of spirituality, in one way by establishing different types, and times, of services. He initiated Family Chapel in 1988 and encouraged it to evolve over the years into an intergenerational gathering. Children’s Time during Sunday morning services replaced chapel in the 1990s, and Vespers, Wednesday evening worship services, were offered.

And he brought a vastly increased concern and focus on counseling and pastoral care.

Giving a Damn

Within months of his arrival, Gallager established a Lay Ministry Group, six or so church members who helped with church members dealing with life's crises. Dorothy Prier, a psychiatric social worker, became the longest-standing member of the Lay Ministry Group, later renamed Pastoral Care Associates.

"Doug schedules a training workshop each year for prospective pastoral associates," Prier said. "The model is focused on caring -- not curing. We are to listen, offer support, not solve problems. While we occasionally do offer services like a ride or a hot meal, we are really there to be ‘someone to give a damn’ about the individual."

The personal caring side of the church, largely neglected in the Marshall years, now came to the fore. Gallager was there for the members with hospital visits, individual counseling, and as a comfort for the dying. From Gallager's concern for the individuals of the church, he worked with his Lay Ministry Group to establish periodic peer support groups, such as "You and Your Aging Parent," and "Life Transitions."

UU and Us

Another immediate break from the past was in the church's relationship with the Unitarian Universalist Association. Marshall had kept himself at arm's length, while Gallager embraced the denomination.

Gallager has been actively involved in numerous areas of the denomination. He was a part of the Conference on Liberal Religion, which is an ecumenical group of liberal-thinking clergy. He served as Good Offices Minister of the UU Ministers’ Association for both the UUA and the UU District of Michigan. In these roles he ministered to other ministers and congregations who were having difficulties. He also served on the Midwest Regional Subcommittee of the UUA Ministerial Fellowship Committee and was president of the Michigan UUMA.

In 1989, Gallager was appointed to the CENTER (Continuing Education Network for Training, Education and Renewal) committee of the UU Ministers' Association. His involvement there included organizing a training program for retirement planning, developing a handbook for intern supervisors, as well as organizing a church professionals’ day for the district conference.

Gallager felt a responsibility to the denomination that went well beyond representation and dues paying. He felt a large and thriving church had a responsibility to assist the Unitarian Universalist movement in developing the best possible ministers. So BUC became a teaching church by employing intern ministers. Thus far, Gallager has mentored three interns-- Penny Hackett Evans was the first in 1989, followed by Justin Osterman in 1997 and Howard Dana in 1998.

Gallager's G Words

Of all the new ideas Gallager brought with him to BUC, two overarching issues repeated themselves in his sermons, committee discussions, and even casual conversations-- growth and governance.

Growth was upper case in Doug Gallager's lexicon. He already had proven himself a growth-inspiring minister. During ten years at his previous church, for example, his congregation had grown steadily in Sunday attendance, membership, pledges and R.E. enrollments. Gallager was intent on doing the same for BUC.

Yet defining even a baseline for growth at BUC was difficult. For the all-inclusive Bob Marshall had resisted taking anyone off church mailing lists or striking their names from the roles even if they had long ago departed the congregation. Only after a culling of the names was it clear that the church had remained fairly constant in membership for a decade, and may well have actually been losing members.

Gallager worked quickly to promote growth. He involved more people, some who had marginally attended and others new to the church. In 1988 he initiated the New U, a four-part series in which established BUCers introduce people new to the church to BUC. It was an immediate success at integrating new people into congregational life.

Goodbye Vacation

A year-round church, with full services 12 months a year, was an intentional step to increase growth. The UU tradition was to close churches all summer. Sarah Smith Redmond, BUC president, said, “Doug presented studies that show couples shop for a church in the summer, especially in August. Not being open put UU churches at a disadvantage.”

The year-round church was not as drastic a change for BUC as it might have been elsewhere, for there had long been a tradition of lay-led summer services. In the 1980s Bob Bowen moved to BUC from Rockford, Illinois, and could not believe the church was closed for summer. So he established a Summer Service Worship committee.

Elaine Morse, who planned and executed the vast majority of the summer services, recalled, “Fifty or more people gathered faithfully in the pavilion, which was a perfect setting for more intimate gatherings.” Morse’s summer success was largely due to the sensitivity of her presentations. Along with Nancy Nordlie, for example, she did a summer presentation of “trees” that was so spectacular that it was brought back by popular request for a regular Sunday service.

Gallager’s year-round church was accepted, but not by everyone. “Some old timers,” Morse said, “still have trouble with the idea of a church meeting in the summer, but our summer programs did show there were a significant number of people who wanted ongoing nourishment and sustenance from meetings.”

No matter how extensive the efforts to draw in new members, there was a physical limit to BUC growth. There's an old New England saying that "an acorn cannot reach its potential to become a mighty oak confined to a flower pot." BUCs container was full. Two Sunday services were required to serve the current congregation in the social hall, and RE and others had long complained of cramped quarters throughout the church. A larger vessel was essential if Gallager's growth objectives had any chance of bearing fruit.

No Sanctuary

The logical conclusion was to fulfill the church founders’ original vision and build the sanctuary. Yamasaki had designed a sanctuary, yet financing for the small congregation had placed it out of reach. Members revisited the sanctuary-building idea in the late 60s, but the inability to obtain a mortgage, plus uncertainties caused by Vietnam, inflation and tax increases, stopped it again. In 1972, the pavilion was built, and in 1980, the commons, foyer, and office space were added, but still pockets were not deep enough for a sanctuary.

By the time Doug Gallager came along, there was only waning interest in the notion of building a sanctuary. An aging church and membership focused on more immediate needs of repairing the roof and multiple failing furnaces. Worse, the concept did not have the support of BUCs minister emeritus. Curt Vail, former

board president, remembered Bob Marshall, saying, "A sanctuary! You'll build one over my dead body."

Bob Marshall died in January of 1988. The courtyard he so loved was completely replanted and named the Marshall Memorial. A grand ceremony was held, and a marble plaque commemorated his passing. Gallager recalls Marshall's sudden death. "I had come to rely on Bob's insights and expertise," he said, "but more, we had become friends. I miss him on both levels."

Despite obvious need for space, Gallager did not launch a pulpit campaign for a sanctuary, nor champion the cause of new bricks and mortar. Gallager was a consensus leader and, first and foremost, wanted to determine how the congregation felt, and what support existed for growth.

Consensus Campaign

Tom Warth, board member in charge of Long Range Planning, was skeptical about arguments for a sanctuary. "Doug quoted numbers from the UUA that if your sanctuary is 70 percent full on a Sunday morning, you need a larger sanctuary or new people will not come. I really didn't believe that. But we didn't have any real clear planning vision of our own, so we went to the members."

In September of 1988, Warth sponsored an all-member weekend retreat. He invited the Rev. Dr. Tom Chulak, a Chicago minister formerly of the UUA Extension Department, who spoke on the importance of planning. Discussions covered everything from facilities to rentals, religious education to community outreach. “It was a fun experience,” Warth said, "and a tremendous start for the planning process."

Warth and his Long-Range Planning team next spent three months interviewing constituent groups in the church and did a mailing to all members requesting input. The consensus was clear. Warth said, "Everyone wanted a building."

A mission statement was developed, which redefined the church's purpose -- "to provide an environment for Unitarian Universalists and like-minded people to grow and prosper ethically, spiritually, intellectually, emotionally and socially. And, to encourage members to contribute their time, talent and resources to the betterment of the society and the world in which they live."

The mission statement was rapidly followed by a needs assessment committee, which determined that the lack of space inhibited the ability for the church to grow. Committee chair Keith Brown concluded, in fact, that "every group, every department and every interest wanted more space."

Celia Thurston also spoke for growth, saying, “Building a religious community is an act of both leading and following. Following shows respect for that which has been and for the values within the existing community. Leading points to the transcendent. We can yet be more than what we are.”

While supportive and involved, Gallager was not especially visible, or vocal, in the sanctuary debate. Instead, he focused on "a need for organizational growth." His hope was that BUC, as a congregation, could create a space with which the members could identify.

Camille Harris, Ministerial Relations Committee member, recalled, “In the process leading up to the decision to expand, it seemed clear to me that Doug wished the decision to be as consensual as possible.”

The tide was rising in favor of a sanctuary, not a deluge of support, but, steadily rising waters. To the argument posed by many that the church had not grown in a decade, and was not growing, the sanctuary advocates coined a phrase from a then popular movie and said, "If we build it, they will come."

In January of 1992 the church board acted, forming a Building Committee and a Capital Finance Committee to determine if funding was possible. The board also authorized seed money to hire an architect and financial consultant. Four months later at the all-church annual meeting in May, members were asked to approve what was already well underway. The question put before the church was: "Should BUC continue the process of exploring facilities expansion by the appointment of a Capital Finance Committee and a Facilities Options Committee?"

"I wasn't sure how I felt about the sanctuary," said Betty Page, whose late husband Steven Page had been the architect on the two earlier church addition projects. "There were many problems around the church that hadn't been adequately addressed. But, most of all, I didn't like the indirect way the sanctuary project was handled."

A few long-term members left the church over the issue. Yet despite lingering concerns, enthusiasm for more space grew. Gallager's belief in growth carried the

day. Ground was broken in March, 1995, with a ceremony which gave special recognition of founding members and past presidents.

If any doubt remained, the architectural models for the new sanctuary washed it away. It was designed to be built in the same space that Yamasaki intended for a sanctuary in his 1957 renderings. Yet the design expressed the "new space" of a 1990s community. The exterior was a two-story s-curved wall with a copper facade. The interior carried the same visual theme, with an s-curved wall and side windows which bathed the room in natural light. And, there would be more classroom space, better access for the handicapped, an added kitchen for RE, and even a dressing room for brides.

In January, 1996, the construction was complete, and the brief trek from social hall to sanctuary, which had taken 40 years, was led by Doug Gallager.

If You Build It, They Will Come

True to Gallager's predictions, the more gracious facilities did draw new members. In the first year after the sanctuary was complete, membership rose by 12 percent. On dedication Sunday alone, 44 people were moved to sign the membership book. Growth continued, reaching 607 certified members by 1998.

Even more important, the new arrivals tended to be young families, with energy and enthusiasm, reminiscent of the founding members nearly a half century earlier. And the building fund drive itself had a residual benefit of energized long-term members, stimulating enthusiasm for the esthetically elegant new home. The house Doug Gallager built on faith was fulfilled in fact.

Managing Maturity

Other roads were yet to be traversed. One goal Gallager spoke of in the year he arrived was to establish a new church governance more appropriate for a mature institution.

In that first year, Gallager suggested a Committee on Committees, a "middle management" addition to facilitate involvement and improve committee functioning. By 1992 there was a Council and an All-Committee Night. The idea was cross pollination, but it never fully germinated, as so many people were on several different committees that a meeting of all committees on the same night was impossible.

By then, the board had approved the committee structure of rotating members so there was continuity on committees. Standing committees were developed including Stewardship, Endowment, and Membership. Gallager was a believer in shared intellect. He said, “When you see something created in a committee, it is more than just the individuals.”

By 1995, Gallager's goal of having a 12-month Canvass Committee had been reached, and progress had been made on developing an Adult Programs Committee, which was accomplished the next year. Gallager’s belief that, “Church programs and their development are a way to minister to individuals through groups” was coming to fruition.

With Gallager's attention to administrative detail, church staff developed along the lines of an efficient business. What had been a loose ship during the Marshall years became a well-oiled machine under Gallager's management. Under the new structure, the minister served as a C.E.O., a church administrator was in charge of daily operations, and employee rights and responsibilities were more clearly delineated.

Freedom in Harness

While in many respects the church has become far more structured, looking at the changes through another perspective, it actually is more an expression of members themselves. Gallager’s consensus leadership draws out, and draws on, creative individuals and ideas. His role is thus not to make the decisions, but to make sure the best decisions are made by members of the community.

That was the case with the Memorial Glen in the Capek Woods. To many, the most meaningful change in the facilities came about as an outgrowth of members’ desires for a spiritual place of meditation and remembrance.

In the early 1980s, Ron and Arlene Fredrick, long-term members, made a capital donation to dredge and landscape the natural pond in front of the church. It was in honor of Ron’s grandfather, Norbert Capek, who was the founder of the Unitarian movement in Czechoslovakia, and a 20th Century martyr for liberal religious freedom. The wetland area was named Capek Woods.

The sanctuary construction, however, had disrupted the grounds, and the Fredricks again made a significant contribution to restore the property to its pristine state.

Again progressing "at the speed of church" nothing was done with the money or property for several months.

Want it? Do it

"As is so often the case in a community, when you want something done, you have to be willing to get involved yourself," Arlene Fredrick said, "so I got a list of everyone who was interested in gardening and natural habitats, and began calling. We soon had a committee of interested people."

For an entire winter, the Memorial Glen Committee met unfailingly every two weeks. "Doug and Celia attended the meetings," Arlene said. "They were wonderfully supportive, and had sensitive insights about how the woods might serve a spiritual purpose. There were a lot of discussions of the philosophy of a memorial glen, lots of personal emotions, and tears."

Early on, Ron Fredrick, who had initiated the project to honor his grandfather, was promoted to a position that required most of his time in New York City.

Arlene, diminutive and quietly efficient, was left to make it happen. In addition to leading the committee, she conducted a fund raising campaign, accumulating $50,000 for the glen, and participated in every step from planning to planting. Yet Arlene, characteristically, gave credit to others, especially stressing Keith Brown's architectural contribution. "Keith was tremendous," Arlene said.

Silent Walk in the Woods

On June 14, 1998, the Memorial Glen in the Capek Woods was virtually complete. Doug Gallager led the congregation into the woods for a dedication ceremony. Like the walk to the sanctuary, this was a spiritual trek for the congregation.

Members took one of several paths leading into the woods. Most followed the one from the woods' lower level. To the left were the tall windows of the sanctuary looking out on the woods, behind them Capek pond, alive with small living creatures. Before them was a clearing that appeared natural, yet was carefully planted in rhododendron, redbud, a shady American yellow wood and dogwood, among the native trees. Plantings in and around the woods were carefully selected to symbolize continuous seasons, with alternating blooms, colors and textures in light and shade.

They might not have been aware of the symbolism so meticulously designed into the woods, yet the effect is expressed without conscious knowledge. The first, outer circle, the propylaeum, is bedded with a gentle grass floor, and four portal boulders representing compass points lead to the inner, memorial circle. These interlocking circles suggest many religious symbols.

The congregation gathered in the memorial circle. A sense of natural and profound order, timeless beauty, and a deep silence enveloped all. Doug Gallager spoke in his invocation of this as a spiritual place of remembrance and memorialization. He reminded all that such a place once existed in the church at the foot of the Living Tree, a massive wild cherry which stood in the midst of the children's playground. Ashes had been spread and memorials said for many years at the foot of the tree. When the Living Tree fell to age, the wood was made into chips that formed the path through the Memorial Glen.

Gallager took a chalice of sawdust from the Living Tree and spread it before all in dedication. Asking for a moment of meditation, Gallager requested, in the silence, individuals speak out the names of those departed.

Rebecca Pedersen… Brad Glass… Stan Connelly… Steven Page… Julie Howard… Dorothy Modrack…

"As one by one loved ones and friends spoke the familiar names of those we could remember standing among us so recently," Carol Lee remembers, "we were overwhelmed with the moment. I knew my close friend standing next to me couldn't overcome her emotions to speak her late husband's name, so I fought my own closed throat to whisper his name, 'Burt Jones.' It was a profoundly spiritual moment."

The Memorial Glen and Capek Woods, like most aspects of the church, would continue to evolve. Modest granite inscriptions, with the names and life dates, would be added around the inner circle. Additional plantings were added, and a perpetual care committee to maintain them was formed.

Arlene Fredrick reflects on the four long years it took from concept to completion. "Never in my life have I been involved with anything as meaningful," she said, adding: "Nothing has been more rewarding and gratifying."

Two Paths Diverged

So it had been a long walk from Bob Marshall's social hall and vegetable garden out back to Doug Gallager's sanctuary looking out on the ordered grace of Memorial Glen and Capek Woods.

Some would forever look back with longing at the free-form days past, as those in maturity reflect on former youthful energies and excesses. Yet most have grown with the changes. They have found comfort in a more measured, and mature, community, accomplishing more with cooperation and careful execution, and encompassing more people in a spiritually diverse culture.

In all of the steps taken, Gallager has held to his personal vision with unwavering tenacity. He convinces with facts, steering instead of directing. As member Sue Boyce, who worked with Doug on the RE Search Committee, said, "He has a spine of steel when he has an idea of the way something needs to be done."

Camille Harris said, "Doug's commitment to expand our facilities, membership, and programming have revealed to me the enabling nature of his leadership style. I admire Doug's ever deepening willingness to step forward, to witness our liberal faith, to encourage each of us, in turn, and to resist the temptation, if it is one for him, to do it for us."

Doug Gallager may never receive full credit for his many leadership accomplishments at BUC. Because of his inconspicuous manner, most members will say "We did it." And perhaps they will be right, for to the Rev. Gallager, leadership is not about drawing attention to yourself, but drawing out the best in others.

Chapter Six

As We Art

by
Patricia Schwing

"We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled.
The trick is knowing how to tip ourselves over
and let the beautiful stuff out."
Ray Bradbury
Author and Unitarian-Universalist

Many came for liberal religion, and came back because they were liberated by music, dance, poetry and art.

For individuals unable or unwilling to seek spiritual fulfillment in traditional doctrines, the arts at Birmingham Unitarian Church flourish as expressions of shared, yet profoundly experiential spirituality.

"Artists feel at home at BUC," said John Glick, world-renowned potter. "An appreciation and enthusiasm for the creative process is alive in the church. Art displays, performance events, children's arts, fabulous music are integrated seamlessly into the fabric of our church life."

Norman Stewart, a master printer and dealer, suggests that the environment itself may play a role in the church's expressions of art. "Yamasaki's design," Stewart said, "carefully allows for movement of people in space which in turn allows for the subtle, delicate connection between space, and one's spiritual appreciation."

Whatever the reason, the full range of arts has evolved and flourished during the first 50 years of the church. And most agree it began, and is sustained, by music.

From BUC's earliest years, there has been music. There was singing from hymnals, and sounds from a portable electric organ carried from one temporary meeting place to the next. When BUC moved to a semi-stable home at Upton School in 1955, many felt it was time to establish a choir.

Social Songsters

Like the fellowship itself, choir took form in members' homes. Bob Carpenter, the first choir director, who had come from the congregation, and 15 others began to rehearse at one another's homes. The choir met for rehearsals on Thursday nights to prepare for the following Sunday.

"I remember the first time I went," Shirley Schlorff, a former soloist, recalls. "About 9:30 p.m. we were finished practicing, and I got on my coat to go home. Someone said, 'Where are you going?' Then a case of beer was brought out into the middle of the room, and the fun singing began."

Janet Patterson, an original choir member who would continue for the next 45 years, said, "Barber shop and college songs filled the air into the wee hours even though it was a week night, and folks had to go to work or get children off to school the next morning."

A distinctive community developed independent of the larger church, with music as its common language.

Music people loved parties. Their picnics and potlucks soon established their own lore, such as the potluck when everyone brought "just desserts." Entire families were enveloped. Betty Page, a long-time choir member, said, "Our family, along with several others, would come to Sunday service with a picnic lunch in the trunk of the car, for an afternoon of softball and swimming for the kids. It was one big happy family in the truest sense of the word."

One cannot possibly recall choir parties without remembering the very long tradition of annual holiday gatherings at the home of Priscilla and Grant Chave. Grant, a quiet, unassuming man, took these occasions to change personalities as he gleefully conducted a vigorous rendition of “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” “Harmonizing and vibrato never were more creative,” recalled Barbara Woolf.

If the choir lacked anything in those early days, it was a tenor. The minister, Russell Lincoln, filled that role and during services would leap from the podium to the choir to sing his tenor part, then dash back to the pulpit.

Membership grew, and to Lincoln's delight, a few new members were tenors. Talent seemed to come up in the congregation like cream to the top. When Bob Carpenter moved away, for example, Dick Meier, a music teacher, took over. He

not only directed, but served as pianist, often playing the prelude, and accompanying and directing the choir, simultaneously.

And in one instance, instead of talent coming to the church, the church literally came to the talent. Bill Casey lived in a small white house on the corner of Woodward and Lone Pine. In 1959, he and his children watched the church being built in the field behind their house. And when BUC opened in its permanent home, Bill was hired to be the choir's director.

"Bill was a fabulous musician and educator," Shirley Schlorff recalled. "He started the church on its path of exceptional music." In the year Casey directed, the choir gave four major concerts, complete with orchestra. "Bill brought in ringers," Schlorff said, "professional musicians to augment the choir."

Voices Raised

The choir was not just a choir, but a Unitarian choir, which meant that some disagreements were inevitable amidst free-thinking members.

In the early 60s, for example, the church was defining itself in music away from the praising hymns of Judeo-Christian churches. A vigorous debate arose over ending songs with "Amen." Amens were dropped temporarily, until a vocal faction protested and got them reinstated. To that, many said, "Amen."

The character of the choir was formed by the self-defined characters in the choir. Bertha Siefert, for example, was typically non-typical. Bertha, lamed by polio, let nothing stop her. She had studied in Leipzig before World War II and was destined to become a concert pianist until the war intervened. She became a teacher at Cranbrook and the church's accompanist.

Every Sunday morning, rain or snow, Bertha walked a full mile to the church. On especially cold mornings she warmed up her numb hands and fingers by rehearsing for 15 minutes still wearing stout woolen gloves. When the gloves came off, her piano warmed the hearts of the congregation.

Musicians of a Feather

Lou Holtz, football coaching legend, always said, "Don't worry about recruiting. Win the games and recruiting will take care of itself." It is the same with church music. Outstanding presentations on Sunday mornings or an evening concert

proved to be the best possible recruiter. Several members of the Detroit Symphony joined the church, including Dave Kriehbel, Bob Pangborn, Peggy Tundo, Cathy Compton and Vickie King. These professionals gave freely of their talents, helping out on countless occasions.

Once seeded, the church would grow its own talent. Alice Boyce, for example, a pianist for the church in the early 1960s, bathed her son Dan in the church music. He would grow up to become the church's longest tenured and respected choir director.

A Grand Pianist

And some of the most remarkable young talent sprang up from the outside like wild flowers in an open field. Cynthia Raim was just such an unexpected delight. Her music teacher at Cass Tech, Marilyn Jones, brought her to BUC.

Cynthia Raim was just 16 years old when she first appeared at BUC in the 1960s. She was not a church member, and her family was of limited means, yet her talent at the piano seemed to be without limit. Cynthia won the privilege of competing in the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. Determined to attend, she set out to earn the rather substantial trip money. BUC choir members provided her travel support, and went much further in sponsoring Cynthia in a recital to earn her first grand piano.

Cynthia, now a concert musician, said, “There is no doubt in my mind that the support and love I received from the people in this church made the difference in my being able to study at Curtiss Institute and ultimately becoming a professional artist. I will always have wonderful memories of everyone there and consider BUC to be my extended family.”

Kindred Drummers

Voltaire once said that "all the arts are brothers; each one is a light to the others." The bright light of BUC's music program was reflected in expressions of art and dance.

The first art displays were the products of the children's summer art workshop led by Peggy Powell, followed by shows of several members’ works, a collectors' show in oil and graphics, and a remarkable one-woman show of Carolyn Hall's fabric hangings.

Bob Marshall attempted to harmonize his sermons with the music presented and arts displayed. In the spring of 1965, for example, Marshall asked Cyril Miles to display a one-woman show in the social hall of her large black and white collages, which he felt tied in especially well with his Lenten talks on biblical history. The immense pieces were powerful expressionistic allegories from the book of Genesis.

No aesthetic detail was left out. Miyo O'Neill, then church secretary and a talented floral designer, recalled: "Bob would tell me what he planned to say and ask for a floral design that related to his message."

The combination of floral displays, gallery-quality art, and elegant music was artfully choreographed. The total effect would have reached an aesthetic crescendo except for one bad note. Bob Marshall couldn’t sing, and that became a mutual joke between Bob and the choir for many years.

In 1966, the social hall became an art gallery. To preserve the walls, the Art Committee installed moldings to the fifteen-foot ceiling, and long rods were employed to suspend the full range of paintings, sketches, water colors and photographic arts.

Let it be a Dance We Do

Dance also came alive at BUC during the same period. Many of the women of the church had small children, so member and dancer Carol Halsted created a class for the moms, complete with sitters, as a "Mothers' Morning Out."

By the late 60s, the church had its own resident dance company. "Dance Alive!" was born as a result of a Tuesday afternoon modern dance class led by Becky Malm. “Modern dance has much in common with Unitarianism," Malm says, explaining:

"Like our religion, modern dance is difficult to explain and tends to be described in terms of what it is *not*. What it *is* includes shared traits with UUism, such as freedom and diversity of individual thought and practice, iconoclasm, innovation, and a general tendency toward liberalism. We not only bend our bodies, but our minds.”

By 1970, Betty Appleton was teaching dance to the church's children, from four-years-old to mid-teens. "The arts are for everyone," Appleton believed, and she

proceeded to bring the experience of artistic movement to the larger congregation. She developed a Sunday service with the children, outside on the grass. It was a Flower Communion service, and before the service concluded, the entire congregation had joined in the dance.

The flower dance service was so successful that Bob Marshall asked Appleton to plan and present two dance services a year. Members long remembered Appleton's dance service to the theme of *Fiddler On the Roof*, in which Bob Marshall's remarks also addressed this classic story of community hardship.

The congregation was on its feet at the end of the performance, to applaud, and because Appleton got them up to dance. "I believe in participation," she said. "Everyone can experience the joy of movement." All learned, first hand, the meaning of Nietzche's comment, "I should only believe in a God that would know how to dance."

Marshall's desire to incorporate the arts into his sermons especially impacted the musical program, which had become a primary component in every service. Shirley Schlorff said, "Bob's requests took me to the vocal music section of the Detroit Public Library often. Imagine trying to match a solo to a typical Marshall theme like "Dialectic Materialism and Its Influence on Contemporary Unitarian Thought."

Yet coordination was a two-way street. Often Marshall would take a musical program that the dance or choir had come up with and develop a sermon to explore the theme. That was the case in *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Man of La Mancha* and *The Hobbit*, three immensely popular Sunday services.

More Mindful of Music

Musical events of the 1970s were many and mind expanding. Doralene Davis, a soprano who had sung with the nationally renowned Robert Wagner and Robert Shaw Chorales, and had been Choir Director in the Oak Park schools, became BUC's Music Director. Knowing that good tenors are not always available, she came equipped with her own, tenor-husband, Jim Davis.

Among the many creative performances Doralene Davis coordinated was one that people spoke of for years afterward, a musical extravaganza with a Dark Ages theme.

"The Renaissance Dinner was a delight," said Bob Schlorff. "Stephen Page and Jim Davis, wearing tights and free-flowing shirts, entered with a roasted pig on a board. Costumes were borrowed from Meadowbrook Theater and Wayne State University. John King's hound completed the scene. The dog had to sit 'below the salt,' or half way down the table due to his lowly station, which was customary for this period."

A Woolf in the Door

Some came, and stayed, at the church for the music program. Barbara Woolf, for example, became the church's pianist, a position she would hold for many years. With perfect pitch, and an ability to play by ear and to transpose difficult melodies to comfortable keys, she became indispensable. Doug Gallager said, "Barbara is a gem in every way. She's gifted in the subtleties of worship and music and the flow which make services magical."

Others made their contributions for several years, then moved on to other challenges. Gretchen Woods, for example, was a graduate musician who became a church soloist. That experience, and Bob Marshall's spiritual coaching, planted a new seed. Gretchen Woods went on to become an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister.

"Let us make a joyful noise together," said Brenda McDonald to the children of the church in 1976. Thus the Children's Choir was born. The church "darlings" performed several times each year to the delight of all. And, McDonald, the church's first Children's Choir Director, displayed special patience in bringing music into hundreds of young lives.

Discordance in Context

Yet all was not always serene in this garden of musical expression. Bob Marshall may have been tone deaf, but he had an especially good ear for the nuances of language.

When the UUA passed a resolution on the use of "inclusive language," essentially eliminating gender bias, Marshall seized the opportunity to change BUC "hymns" to include "hers," as well.

All of Marshall's bold convictions taken into consideration, it's this one that seems comparatively innocuous that either riles or regales the most people.

Those who remember the good fight fondly prefer to call it “The War of the Singers.” Others, who were particularly incensed over the matter, feel the episode is undeserving of any title.

Inspired by the UUA resolution, the BUC Women and Religion group, with Bob Marshall at their side, went into action to eliminate gender-specific references, which were nearly universally male, from the BUC hymnals.

Annis Pratt, a BUC member and Women's Studies professor, recalls, “They came to me to help with the meters because I’m a poet. It wasn’t that hard. We only had to do 30 songs because they were the only ones Bob enjoyed using.”

In addition, Marshall wanted the choral anthems to conform to the non-sexist language, and that’s when the trouble began. The dissenting opinion was that the music was sacred and should not be altered — and that had nothing whatsoever to do with women’s rights.

"Bob and I went head to head over this," said Choir Director Dan Boyce. "For a few minutes we were both threatening to resign. These were early days, when the issues of being politically correct were surfacing. Today we automatically take out our pencils to make changes as appropriate. But back then, it was a hard fight before we finally resolved the issue.”

Penciling out and writing in the new words wasn’t enough. Choir members continued to sing the xed-out words. Conflict reached a new level when Women and Religion advanced with bottles of white out. In one well-executed raid the feminists captured all hymnals, then gathered around a huge table, whiting out the old and inking in the new.

Yet within a church of self-styled independents, the War of the Singers was never finally won by any faction. "Some sing the new words, and some the old,” Pratt says. “And if you pay close attention to ‘Joy to the World’ during the Christmas Eve service,” Pratt says, “you’ll still hear some singing ‘let earth receive her queen or king.”

Irritating the Eye of the Beholder

Art exhibits proposed for the church fostered equally passionate debates among the visual arts enthusiasts.

By the mid-70s, an Art Committee was re-established to define "ground rules for acceptability, insuring excellence. Artists will be asked to submit slides, which the committee will adjudicate to be appropriate."

Al and Mickey Ratcliffe, co-chairs of the Art Committee, expected controversy even when the BUC arts group agreed. Al said, "It was not surprising that a Unitarian group would weigh in differently than the general population regarding what is truly art." And while some art was controversial, the congregation largely accepted the committee's choices with approval.

Dance Not Bedeviled

Dance, however, seemed to come to the foreground with remarkably little controversy. In the early 1980s, BUC's Dance Alive! group performed not only for the church, but also for other religious and community organizations, often portraying feminist aspects of women's experience. Adding the dimension of dance to the worship experience opened up yet another avenue to spirituality.

The troupe was awarded two grants from the Michigan Council for the Arts, allowing performances for audiences not customarily exposed to dance, such as the Jewish Association for Retarded Citizens, Children's Village, and even the female inmates of the Oakland County jail. The women's jail performance was sans Grant Drutchas, the one male dancer in the troop. Grant was stopped at the door by the guards. Evidently, a male dancer was considered inappropriate for this all-female captive audience.

While BUC's Dance Alive was taking to the road in America, the BUC choir was raising its voice in Europe.

Continental Choir

The choir would have many music tours to Europe over the years. The first one in 1988, to Germany, Prague and the Netherlands, was particularly memorable.

Kurt Weber from Millrath, Germany, instigated and planned the first Euro-tour. A member of BUC's bass section, Weber had sung in the Millrath Madrigal Choir for many years prior to moving to the U.S. The Millrath folks housed the group and performed several joint concerts with the BUC choir. Weber arranged the rental of a bus for a tour behind the Iron Curtain to Prague. Machine-gun toting guards at the crossing intimidated the group from the start. Ted Rittinger

commented, “Once into Czechoslovakia, the drab stark landscape and buildings spoke volumes. This solemn atmosphere pervaded everything, especially the people.”

Prior to the trip Weber had attempted to contact Dusan Kafka, minister of the Prague Unitarian Church, but was unsure whether or not the message had arrived. En route to the Unitaria House, as their church is called, he and Kafka connected. Within three hours everyone in their congregation had been assembled for a concert, which was warmly received. BUC member Helen Spangler had grown up speaking Czech so was able to address the group in their native tongue, an emotionally felt moment.

Unitarian martyr, the Rev. Norbert Capek, who founded Unitarianism in Czechoslovakia, was represented by his sister, Bohbana Haspl. Capek’s grandson, Ron Fredrick, past president of BUC, has dedicated time and resources to his grandfather’s memory, so having his aunt, also a Unitarian minister, present was most meaningful to the choir.

One of the truly poignant moments came following the concert. An older woman approached Tony Hardesty and Marcia Femrite. Holding Tony’s hands in hers, the Czech woman looking tentatively into Tony’s eyes began to hum the Brahms Lullaby. Tony and Marcia joined in. These women could not speak one another’s language, but the universal language of music made a connection far greater than words.

Another emotional high point of the European trips was at Dachau, the Nazi concentration camp where Unitarian martyr Rev. Norbert Capek died. Alke Prem, wife of the President of the German Unitarian Association, had invited the choir to sing at a memorial service in honor of Capek on the 45th anniversary of his death. The service was held in front of the black wrought iron sculpture inscribed with Capek’s date of imprisonment and death.

Tears flowed and voices fought cracks as the choir sang familiar words which are sung each year at BUC’s Flower Communion, modeled after the first Flower Communion initiated by the Rev. Capek in Prague. “Mother Spirit, Father Spirit where are you? Dreams eternal, fears infernal haunt my heart. What to give you, what to call you, Oh, my God?”

From Carol McCarus’ journal following the Prague experience. “I left Prague with museums unentered, with Smetana and Mozart unheard, with the buildings

in *Amadeus* unseen. I left unfinished, but feeling a strong sense of survival of a people having indomitable spirit. Nietzsche said, ‘Music is first of all motion, then emotion.’ I have gone a little deeper into my soul as the memories linger.”

Less Vocal; No Less Visible

Global tours, parties, and a penchant for showmanship made it inevitable the music group would take center stage, or upstage less vocal groups. The painters, potters, and poets never became as unified or visible a group as the choir. This may well have been simply an expression of the differences in arts. Music and dance are group activities, where sharing is quintessentially important. Few painters, however, get together to collectively share a canvas. Yet all the arts have been quietly present and clearly involved at BUC.

When the church was planning to build a new sanctuary in 1995, for example, Cal Boulter, long time chair of the Art Committee, was asked to participate in the design process. "Considerable thought was given to the tradition of displaying art," Boulter said. "We decided our exhibits would best serve as an adjunct experience of worship and celebration if they were incorporated in the pathway from the foyer entrance to the pavilion.”

This was the birth of "The Gallery," a corridor leading to the sanctuary, where art is carefully lighted and tastefully displayed. With the gallery, and foyer area, there was now enough appropriate space for truly inspirational art exhibits and shows.

The social hall, which until 1996 housed all services, also served as a tabloid for arts. A popular quilt exhibit became an annual holiday tradition.

The Women and Religion members brought huge ladders and manufactured special hanging devices to secure the fragile quilts. Calligrapher Jan Andrews was always present for the hanging. She recalled: “The glory of these displays was not only the beauty, but a feeling of security, warmth, joy and comfort wrapping the congregation on cold winter mornings.”

And in the gallery, foyer, social hall and sanctuary, BUCers have been inspired by works of member artists, including Calvin Boulter's master photographs, Norman Stewart's screens, Carolyn Vosburg Hall's quilts, John Glick's pottery, Ann Van Veen’s paintings, and those of many others who have shared their masterpieces with the congregation.

Filling the Bowl

And at times, art and humanitarian values merge. The Empty Bowls program in 1998, for example, was such an event. Conceived and executed by art teacher Carol Glass and potter John Glick, every member of the church, child and adult alike, was invited to shape a clay bowl. Glick fired them all. At a later luncheon, members made a contribution and selected a bowl at random. They ate from their bowl and took it home as a reminder. The Empty Bowl contributions filled bowls in community soup kitchens and contributed to charities to feed the larger community's hungry people.

BUCs Cup Runneth Over

The breadth and depth of artistic involvement and expression at BUC has fostered a culture that is artistically cultured. Dick Schwing, Art Committee member, said, "It's amazing to see how our artists have committed so much time and energy to our church. It has raised appreciation of the many artistic forms and has helped build the community itself."

In the last analysis, while no two Unitarians may agree on any definition of traditional spirituality, all seem to agree at Birmingham Unitarian Church that the universal, and ageless, are accessible through the arts. Expression of the arts allows for a depth of sensual and spiritual experiences, opening us up to questions within us.

Surrounded by art and dance, with no small measure of poetics from the pulpit, and music filling the sanctuary, Sunday mornings take on a spiritual quality, always ending the service with lyrics written by former BUC member Phyllis Bertke to the strains of Beethoven's 9th Symphony:

Let us stand in celebration
of life's boundless mystery,
Then in peace, with love, and courage,
May our hearts and minds be free.

Chapter Seven

Looking Toward Tomorrow

by
Marj Taylor

"Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence."
Abigail Adams
Author, wife of US President, and Unitarian

Seventeen unlit candles. They stood on the long table where the altar would be in other churches. Seventeen 13-year-old boys and girls sat in the front row of the sanctuary. A community of family and friends were behind them. The girls somehow looked older, like young adult women. The boys, in all sizes at that age, were more eclectic in dress, some in suits, some casual, with a couple of shirts not quite tucked in all the way. One by one, each rose to the platform, lit a candle, and spoke to the congregation about his or her faith.

When it was Karen Spangler's turn, she said, "Everything is alive, everything-- the earth, people, animals; it's all living in a way that is so intense and beautiful we can scarcely comprehend it. That's what religion is about for me, a feeling you're part of something larger, grander and universally important."

This was the ROPE (Rites Of Passage Experience) class of 1999. Each young person had prepared for this day for a full year, studying Unitarian Universalist traditions, and developing his or her own personal theology. They had worked together, traveled together, and now with each other's support, were individually stepping into adulthood.

"The purpose of this rite of passage program," Patricia Schwing said, "is to wrap these youngsters in feelings of acceptance and caring and, at the same time, help them solidify friendships with one another, and to learn enough about Unitarian Universalism to be able to articulate for themselves the values we cherish."

Schwing, co-director of Religious Education in 1981, initiated the ROPE program. Like the Jewish bar mitzvah, or rites of adulthood in Native American, African and

Asian cultures, the idea is to guide young persons through the confusing passage of puberty and welcome them on the other side into the adult community.
This is a difficult time for all young people, a time when they are vulnerable to rebellion, anxiety, and doubt. Establishing a religious identity can be an even greater challenge for Unitarian youth, who have no catechism to recite or dogma to profess. Their faith requires them to think for themselves.

The high point of the ROPE journey for most participants is the group trip, planned by them with a little assist from their church advisors. Most of the trips have been to Boston, where the Unitarian roots are deepest. Almost always they result in great adventure. Judy Amir remembers the first trip when the ROPE group stayed overnight at the Arlington Street Church in Boston. They slept on the floor in sleeping bags and bemoaned the lack of showers, a necessity for fastidious young teens. But ingenuity triumphed. When Amir entered the church kitchen the next morning, there sat Billy Rittinger in the large commercial kitchen sink, calmly taking a bath.

On the day of the 1999 ROPE ceremony, Daniel Boyce, BUC's choir director, sat at the end of the second row. His son, Stephen, was lighting a candle. Dan thought about his own religious education experiences at BUC. Dan had attended church school from the time he was seven in 1961 until his high school graduation. "I was a mischievous kid," Dan admitted. "My mother played the piano and sang in the choir, so we always went to church early. That gave me plenty of time to get into trouble. I was always dressed up in a suit with a white shirt and a little bow tie. I sure hated those starchy white shirts!"

Apple for the Teachers

Long before the starched shirts, in fact before Dan Boyce was conceived, the church school was started in 1951 by the members of newly formed Birmingham Unitarian Fellowship, who wanted to pass on their Unitarian principles to their children. Space was rented at the Apple Orchard Nursery School, located on Adams Road, south of Maple, where Farmer Jack's grocery store now stands. One of the members of the fellowship, Elaine Parnie, volunteered to take on the job as Religious Education Director.

Parnie and her volunteer helpers would unload the materials from her car each Sunday, carrying them up the steps to the classroom. Twenty-five children were enrolled the first year, and soon there were 55, most in preschool and grades k-3.

Bob Dearth organized a discussion group for the fifteen or so parents who brought their children to Apple Orchard each Sunday. They met with others of the fellowship at the YMCA on Lincoln Road in Birmingham while the kids were several miles away.

Having two meeting places put a strain on the small fellowship, so the Board began a search for a place that would accommodate both groups. The solution was to rent rooms at the Upton School in Royal Oak, where the entire group moved, under the leadership of the new minister, the Reverend Russell Lincoln. Several people were not happy with the selection of Lincoln as the first paid minister and left the fellowship, including Elaine Parnie.

Running a church school without a designated director and on a limited budget proved a challenging task for the RE Committee, who took it on with much energy and little experience. Church members donated books and classroom supplies.

The baby-boomers were filling the classrooms. The church school now included the upper grades and, in 1955, a newly formed senior high group. The enrollment continued to grow until, in 1957, when it stood at 325, with an average Sunday attendance of 160 children. The 23 teachers met the challenge. One of these volunteers recalled, "We had no lesson plans, no teacher workshops ... each of us just taught the things that we knew best."

Curricula Vital

Yet curriculum was rapidly becoming of vital importance to BUC parents. Each year lessons were added, tested, reviewed, and then fine-tuned. On occasion a group of teachers might meet in a circle and ask the question "What are we going to teach?" thus sharing their skills and knowledge.

Little help was available from Boston at that time. The young congregation struggled to develop a significant body of lesson plans and eventually purchased UU prepared curricula."

To outsiders, it might seem odd that a congregation without a creed should pour so much energy into educating its children, yet it was precisely because of a lack of dogma that Unitarian Universalist children needed more understanding of humanistic values. Church school students glean wisdom from the world's religious and humanistic teachings to aid them in making moral and ethical decisions.

Bible stories are a part of this emphasis. Students also examine the deeds of courageous women and men who have fought for justice and equality, which will help them in confronting the injustices of their own society. Spiritually, the young people are taught to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature and to search out the transcendent mysteries of life.

The RE committee soon realized that they were in over their heads and appointed Jean Rosewig, and later Kay Elliott, to serve as RE Directors. These women each received a $320 stipend, but no salary.

Moving Up Town

The church school moved to new quarters at the Upton Elementary School. The school provided enough rooms to accommodate the new church and its expanding church school; but not without headaches.

Kay Elliott, in her annual report, said, "At present we are using 13 classrooms, each of which has to be left with every desk chair right where it was found. Last week a representative of the school board called to say we had taken five pencils, four erasers, two boxes of silver stars and a bunch of paper the previous Sunday."

A few months later, the new minister, the Reverend Walter B. Pedersen, commented on the tension that was developing: "It has been extraordinarily difficult to be as hospitable as we should be in rented quarters. It has been difficult for the Sunday school staff to conduct creative classes in an atmosphere of having to please a fussy landlord: we cannot serve juice to the children except surreptitiously; we cannot use the blackboard, nor move chairs from their frozen and sometimes nonfunctional and illogical positions."

More Room, More Students, Less Space

In 1959, BUC moved into its own new building at Woodward and Lone Pine. However, this created new problems for the church school. Student enrollment shot up to nearly 400. Classroom space was at a premium. Classes ran in double sessions using every bit of available space-- the minister's study, the secretary's cubicle, and even the hallways. Dan Boyce recalled that his fourth grade Sunday school class met in the furnace room.

The basic furnishings of the new rooms were supplemented by the members of the congregation, who made generous gifts such as maps, a rock and mineral collection, storage cabinets, nursery equipment, many children's books, and several pianos. The Women's Alliance gave a room divider for "Building B" and 60 Brunswick chairs.

The Religious Education Committee took on a new look as well. It was reorganized to allow for greater participation. And there were now training workshops for teachers, conferences, and parent orientations.

Children's Minister

When Bob Marshall arrived as minister in 1963, he brought a great love of children and enthusiasm for the youth education. Once during a sermon, for example, a baby began crying, much to the consternation of the mother, who attempted to graciously leave the room. Bob said, "Stay here. I'm just an old country preacher and I never mind hearing a baby."

During his first ten years, Bob Marshall attended every meeting of the Religious Education Committee. He also held "firesides" for the Sunday school teachers so that they could participate in the adult discussions that they had missed on Sunday mornings. Tony Hardesty, an R. E. director during this time period, noted that these firesides were popular and helped recruit Sunday school teachers. Finally, Bob and Doris even offered their home as a meeting place for the kindergarten class, which helped alleviate the overcrowded church facilities.

But Bob Marshall's greatest contribution to BUC's religious education was his Minister's Group, composed of 10-12 teenagers who met with him for an hour each week. He plied them with provocative questions, which resulted in heated discussions, much to his delight. At about age 17 these young people participated in a public Affirmation Service during which time they would share their views on religion, and in particular, Unitarian Universalism. As befitting a former bookstore owner, Bob gave a book to each of his seniors upon their completion of his course, a book that he had personally selected for the student to fuel his or her intellectual curiosity.

Many BUCers recall that Kevin Appleton, Grant Drutchas, and Cathy Schwing, the first three of Bob's "graduates," brought tears to the eyes of their audience as they affirmed their faith. Church members soon realized that Affirmation Sunday, like

the ROPE Sunday in later years, should not be attended without an ample supply of Kleenex.

In addition to the usual classroom lessons, numerous activities were available for the church school students. There was a Christmas festival, an intergenerational festival, bake sales, a junior choir, and class art projects. One year the intermediate class staged the battle of Jericho on the church lawn with much shouting and laughter.

Paying for a Pro

With all this activity taking place, it became obvious that a paid professional should be hired to run the RE program. Patricia Kridler was chosen for this responsibility. Kridler, an accredited Director of Religious Education (DRE) from Minneapolis, had recently moved to the area with her husband. Kridler was a tall, good natured woman, who had a special way of talking to the children. Her intelligence and dedication earned her the respect of the adults. Even though Pat served only a year, she was to return as interim DRE in 1980-82 and again in 1998-99.

Of the many people associated with the religious education program during the early years of BUC, the name most frequently mentioned is Jean Mehlenbacher. Jean is described by those who knew her as not only possessing a sparkle in her eyes, but "sparkling all over." She was witty, down to earth, someone who could listen to the smallest child or troubled adult and offer them help and understanding. Jean also had a way with words. When she and her husband, Skip, retired from BUC and moved to Grand Marais, Jean wrote her own column, "Granola Serial," for the town's newspaper.

As the RE director, Jean said she wanted the children to "think for themselves, to look at and test their values, to listen to others, and to have courage to explore their own feelings and experiences with their peers."

One Sunday morning when the third grade children were learning the meaning of the word "responsibility," Jean came into the room with a jar of red paint, which accidentally slipped from her hand and crashed to the floor. Bits of glass and red globs were everywhere. Without missing a beat, Jean used this disaster as an impromptu lesson. "I made a big mess," she said. "It is my responsibility to clean it up." Then to the wide-eyed children, "And it's your responsibility to stay out of it."

"Responsibility" is one of the key words in the education of UU children. They are taught that they have the freedom to choose for themselves, but that this freedom carries with it a sense of responsibility.

The RE program continued growing under Mehlenbacher's leadership, with 400 students registered and about 185 in regular Sunday attendance.

Lots of Warm Fuzzies

The church embraced the children in every conceivable way. Receptionists welcomed children at the door each Sunday, directing newcomers to their rooms. An agenda of the church school activities was placed in each week's church bulletin. Children were often included in parts of the adult services. Smiley-faced birthday cards were mailed to youngsters on their birthdays. Material was sent home to parents so they could share in the lessons. District-wide teacher training workshops were held at BUC. And over one-hundred church members were involved in some way with RE-- teaching in the Sunday School, acting as youth advisors, serving on the RE Committee.

Jean Mehlenbacher was on excellent terms with Bob Marshall, who soon came to look on her as his 'associate minister' and would introduce her as such at ministers' meetings around the state.

Because of Jean's strong influence, the Board of Trustees agreed to changes in the RE program that would substantially enlarge its scope and status, voting to spend more money for implementation. The "RE desk" was moved from the church office to the north section of the Yellow Door room, allowing for some degree of privacy. Church members then voted to expand BUC's physical plant to include a "real" RE office, which would be larger than the minister's office.

Enter Dynamic Duo

The first persons to occupy the new RE office were Ardis Hanish and Pat Schwing, who were hired in 1977 as Co-Directors of Religious Education when the Mehlenbachers departed. This proved to be a highly successful partnership in spite of, or perhaps because of, their dramatically different personalities. Hanish was calm, easy-going, and infinitely patient. Her favorite pastime was rocking the babies in the nursery. Schwing was all energy - quick thinking and fast talking, always on the go somewhere - the perfect one to keep up with the active teenagers.

Together they formed a magic combination. Their first action when they moved in to the new office together was to place their desks facing each other so that they would always be in constant communication.

The A&P (Ardis and Pat) years ushered in a new era of creative energy. A sharing circle, or rug time, opened most class meetings, along with a collection of Sunday school money. Family services were continued at Christmas and Easter. Youth Sunday grew in scope as the young people discussed life's passages and their own experiences.

An ice cream social was held in July, featuring Dick Schwing on the accordion. October saw a Halloween potluck, complete with costumes. Priscilla Chave appeared as the "cookie lady" at the Christmas tree trimming party. In the spring the children planted a tree at a family service and joined Gretchen Woods and her guitar in singing "I Want to Live."

Hanish and Schwing also conducted several adult worship services, one of which asked members of the congregation to recall their own religious journeys. Rebecca Pedersen called this a "Tom Sawyer." You do the planning and get other people to do the work, was how she explained it. This success in recruiting volunteers was evident in the large number of adults and young teens who now offered their time and talents in the RE Department.

Watching BUC children grow and mature over the years served as a reward for the Sunday school teachers. Hanish remembers a special moment: "One morning when I was in the nursery, Hollett Hillman took a couple of unstable steps to me. I hadn't known he was walking, so I mentioned it to his father when he came in. Obviously, the boy had taken his first steps that day. The father got a very strange expression on his face and said, 'Don't tell Chris (Hollett's mother). So I didn't-- at least not then."

But even the best volunteer teachers sometimes ran into problems. Abe Amir, for example, remembers two high-spirited boys in his fourth grade class. Their parents would drop them off at the door, and before Abe could turn around, the little rascals had climbed out the window. Their favorite spot to run was in front of the windows of the worship hall. After Abe had chased them around the building for several Sundays, he vowed that he would "never teach again." However, Abe did continue to serve the RE department in other capacities, and the two boys obligingly grew up.

The curriculum taught at BUC often resurfaced in other venues. Program graduates called home to tell parents that universities were using the same materials in sex education they had already experienced at BUC.

Sex without Snickers

This controversial, but important, course, "About Your Sexuality," was introduced in the mid '70s. Leaders were trained for adult groups, 11th and 12th graders, and 9th and 10th graders. Abe and Judy Amir, both experienced RE teachers and parents themselves, became the coordinators and eventually served as district-wide trainers. Some years later the course gained public attention, causing raised eyebrows, when parts of it were presented out of context on national television. However, students continued to regard "About Your Sexuality" as essential to their understanding of what it means to be human.

Adults were also offered opportunities for religious education. Bob Marshall conducted an adult minister's group, which studied UU history. Outside speakers were brought in for evening programs, such as the one on "Dealing with the Death of a Child." Communication workshops were offered for parents on how to hold meaningful conversations with their teenagers. Senior high students were helped with career guidance when several BUC members came to the classroom to discuss their various occupations.

Outreach for Small Hands

By the 1980s the baby boom was over, and church school enrollment was lower; but enthusiasm was still high. Children were encouraged to be active in community service. In 1981 the younger students made their first of several visits to a nearby nursing home, bringing homemade gifts and cards. They were told not to be surprised if they were "hugged." One little boy took this idea to heart. After he delivered his card to an elderly woman, he whispered, "You can hug me if you want to." Needless to say, they shared a hug.

Older students raised money for their own activities with bake-offs, souper lunches, and car washes. But they still remembered others. The Youth Council voted to divide their ingathering collections, with 50 percent of it going to BUC and 50 percent going to the Humane Society.

New Voice – Same Message

When Bob Marshall retired, the Reverend Josiah Bartlett arrived as the interim minister. Bartlett was a kindly gentleman, a past dean of Starr King School of Ministry, and a retired minister, himself. As a staunch supporter of religious education, Bartlett saw to it that the program continued to flourish and helped by personally leading several workshops. That October the R.E. Committee sponsored an All-Church Retreat at Camp Nahelu in north Oakland County. Based on the theme "Peace," the retreat was an intergenerational weekend experience with workshops, study groups, activities, and fun for all ages.

"I must be crazy to be out here freezing in this lumpy bed," grumbled one of the adults, shivering in the cool night air. But the happy faces of the children the next day made up for any discomfort suffered by the older generation. In fact, the retreat was so successful it was repeated the following year.

Director Shift Doesn't Skip a Beat

Pat Schwing was now BUC's 3/4-time Director of Religious Education. The other 1/4 of the position went to Susie Safford. The Hanish family had moved to Grand Marais, following in the footsteps of the Mehlenbachers. Hanish continued working with young people in a new job with 4-H. Schwing stayed on as RE director for several more years to reach a total of nine, making her the longest serving DRE at BUC. Finally, she retired to take a full-time position in the community. However, her volunteer activities still continued at BUC, and from 1995 to 1997 she served as president of the board of trustees.

Susie Safford, a spunky and pert young woman, kept the RE program going while a search committee was sent out to find a new full time director. Susie was known for her sense of humor. One time when she was working with Pat Schwing, she came into the office to find that Pat had rearranged all the furniture. Susie, in her pixie prankster mode, enlisted the help of several other people, and the next day they all arrived early to move the furniture back to the original places. Then, hiding her smile, Susie watched Pat's stunned reaction when she entered the door.

In the meantime, the Religious Education Task Force, which was studying and assessing the religious needs of the church, recommended that BUC hire a Minister of Religious Education. Jan Rugh was called and began her ministry in January 1987. A short time later Jan was married and became the Reverend Jan Evans-Tiller.

The following year, complaints began coming to the Board-- at first only a few, but soon there were many. Teachers were dissatisfied with Jan's lack of support. Needed curriculum had not been ordered or was missing. Some RE traditions, such as the ice cream social, Evans-Tiller eliminated. "Jan seems more interested in her duties as a minister than in supervising the religious education program," was how one long time member expressed it.

The Board of Trustees held special meetings with Evans-Tiller. They met to apprise her of the complaints and to give her a chance to rectify the situation. She said that her style of leadership was that of a "facilitator" rather than an "administrator."

Even members who no longer had children in church programs came forward to express their concerns. After repeated meetings and a visit from a UUA consultant, Evans-Tiller resigned. A difficult experience, yet it did serve to underscore just how vitally important religious education leadership was to BUC members.

Rebecca Bottoms, an RE Committee member, stepped up as temporary RE director, to serve until an interim director could be found, a professional director strong enough to embrace the entire youth program.

Second Coming

Patricia Kridler, the church's first professional RE director who was now living in Chicago, was called. She accepted the challenge. The Rev. Doug Gallager, who had never met her before, was thoroughly impressed. He said, "In the few short weeks since Pat's arrival I've come to see that she brings with her not only the ability to maintain our program, but the sensitivity and vision which will enable her to help make it even better. We are, I believe, in very capable-- and caring hands."

Kridler's contract, which began on April Fools' Day, was for 15 months, but she agreed to remain an extra year. Weekly church school attendance increased, except, as Pat noted, for some "recalcitrant 6th graders." "Racial Justice" and "Stereotypes, Sexuality, and Gender" were two of the new programs field tested. Finally, a greater emphasis was placed on family chapel, offered between the two regular church services.

After two years of searching, the ideal RE candidate appeared. Her name was Dori Davenport, a journalist by early training, who had turned to Unitarian religious education work in Wisconsin. Dori was an attractive young woman with long blonde hair and an engaging smile. When she started her new job in the fall of 1991, Dori said, "I am so impressed with the dedication and commitment of the many people who work so hard to make BUC's church school such an outstanding program."

Davenport's RE program focused on UU heritage and the application of UU values to everyday life. From the time of Henry David Thoreau, Unitarians have valued nature and have been involved in protecting the environment, the "interdependent web of which we are a part."

Although BUC's pond is no Walden, it served the same purpose. Sunday school teacher Annis Pratt started a pond journal with her class of three and four year-olds. As the children explored, Annis recorded their discoveries.

"The children loved watching tadpoles swimming in and out of the bits of ice on early spring mornings," Annis said, "or finding a mother duck on her nest, carefully camouflaged in the reeds. This natural ecological setting in front of the building is a fine illustration of how the church is a part of nature."

Tadpoles Get Bigger Bowl

In 1996 the congregation moved into its new sanctuary, and the growing church school occupied the added classrooms on the lower level, with a private entrance and an elevator to assist handicapped children. Special events in the RE program that year included UNICEF Day, the Candy Cane Walk, Teacher/Church orientation Day, Art-Services-and-Talent Auction, Bake-Off, the Ice Cream Social, and Sunday morning family chapel.

The older children sold House Pins, with the profit going to the South Oakland Shelter, and sponsored a year-round food collection for the Lighthouse. They also raised money for their own activities by working at the Silent Auction at the Rummage Sale.

Dori Davenport, who loved to cook, honored her teachers with a Teacher Appreciation Dinner, preparing most of the food herself. At the end of the church year in 1998, Davenport resigned as DRE to step up to district level position in Chicago. She had served the children admirably for seven years.

Not You Again

Again, it was Patricia Kridler who filled in as Interim Director of Religious Education. Some people referred to this as the "Third Coming." Kridler was not, however, a caretaker, but by nature, an initiator. This time back, her most significant contribution was creating Wonderful Wednesdays, a program for all ages that began with a family dinner, followed by a vesper service, and then a series of workshops. Even though she claimed she could cook only lasagna, Kridler insisted the dinners be elegantly served on real table cloths, not plastic ones.

Choice Clear as Mudd

Meanwhile, the RE Search Committee made a remarkable discovery-- the best things are often found "in your own backyard." Stan Mudd, a long-time member, professional social worker, and active RE volunteer, said he would apply for the RE Director opening. Mudd had worn all the hats in RE. Teacher, advisor, RE Committee member, Search Committee, DRE Advisory Committee -- he had been there, done that. Mudd had proven his dedication to the children, and would make a seamless transition into the critically important, RE Director position.

Children's Church

From the seed planted in the Apple Orchard, Birmingham Unitarian Church's Religious Education program has germinated and flourished. The church provided rich soil for growth. Parents, dedicated volunteers, and professionals nurtured each year's crop of human potential.

The Christian Bible says, "The children shall lead them." In a real sense, that has been the case at BUC, a community that had a religious education program before it had adult services. The Rev. Russell Lincoln, BUC's first paid minister, who had been a religious education director for many years, best expressed this child-centered church. Lincoln wrote:

"We seek a church that seeks to develop the religion a child has, to share with him and her the experience of the human race, to guide each child into the fulfillment of abilities of one's hands, minds and spirits. We seek a religion that is attempting to conserve the values of the wandering, the curious, and the restless."

Chapter Eight

Youth: Stretching the Rope

by
Susan Sherman-Hall

"When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic,
hold hands, and stick together."
Robert Fulghum
Essayist and U.U. Minister

"I was fifteen years old when my parents joined the BUC fellowship in 1953," Brooks Marshall remembers. "There were only a few of us teenagers, and only one pretty girl my age. Don't remember any teen activities, as I spent most of my time at the Apple Orchard in a futile attempt to get to know that girl."

Teenagers are distracted. They are distracted by radical physical changes, confusing desires, complexions that won't clear, and limbs that won't stop growing in ungainly ways. They are distracted more by the stirring needs to differentiate themselves from their parents and, at the same time, be accepted into the parents' adult society. Simultaneously they are trying to assert themselves among their peers, which is distracting. Any differences -- race, size, income, or religion– add to the difficulties and distractions. Put them together in a cauldron of sensitized emotions, and one begins to appreciate the distractive nature of youth.

From the beginning BUC members have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to overcome the distractions and enfranchise their young adults. During half a century, BUC youth programs have evolved -- and at times devolved -- in attempts to embrace and encourage young adults through this most difficult transition. National and local programming, parents, and advisors kept BUCs youth in a perpetual cycle of change in an attempt to find something that worked --- something that worked for the youth and their parents, giving the former room to experiment without too much stress on the latter.

In the beginning there were not many teens to cope with. The post-World War II baby boom was in full swing and easily evidenced by an overflowing nursery of infants and toddlers. The few teenagers were put to work tending to the younger

children. But children grow, like weeds, some say, and by 1957 BUC's first teen program, Uniteens, came alive.

Before the BUC Uniteens could get used to their name, the church hired Russell Lincoln, minister of the Farmington Universalist Church, as its part-time minister. The two churches decided to combine their youth groups, making way for a slight name change to "Farbetweens." Then Lincoln came full-time to BUC, and the youth groups split and reclaimed their former names. There would be many more name changes ahead.

Lincoln was a youth-centered minister. He had been an RE director and volunteered to be youth advisor at BUC. "We affectionately called him "Mr. X," said Carol Williams, president of the Uniteens in 1957. "He backed us up on every single thing we attempted. We couldn't have had a more wonderful advisor."

Liberal Religious Youth

The BUC Uniteens established many traditions, including bake sales, social outings, and even an annual Youth Sunday. Taking some growth steps, the group decided to connect with the national unified youth movement supported financially by the still separate religious movements, Unitarians and the Universalists, called Liberal Religious Youth, or LRY.

As the national movements were beginning to merge, following their youth, few would have thought that their acronym, LRY, would become associated with more than just free-thinking youth.

The LRY was a product of the baby boomer age, and the difficulties it incurred may well have been a byproduct of the turbulent late 60s. There was war that tore young men apart in the rice paddies of Vietnam and separated American youth from their parents on opposite sides of the issue, assassinations of beloved leaders, student protests ending in bloodshed. A vice president resigned, and a nerdy looking, but loveable doctor, Benjamin Spock, preached the gospel of parental permissiveness. How much of this directly connects to the problems of the youth of that era, of course, is speculation.

Whatever the reason, LRY would take the blame for widespread youth rebellion. Sexual promiscuousness, smoking, drinking, profanities and even theft were all laid on the "let them do their own thing" philosophy of LRY.

BUC's new minister saw LRY as deeply troubled. The Rev. Bob Marshall began a several-year battle with the national LRY. In a highly emotional letter, Marshall confided to fellow minister John Brigham, "My concerns have been heightened because this morning I received a long-distance call from a distraught parent. Two youths, both on the upper fringes of LRY, and at this writing nominally graduated from it, were arrested last night for assault. It was not just simple assault, but quite a horrible episode. If they are tried in adult court, it could mean not just reform school but the state penitentiary."

Marshall was frustrated over some of the youth-chosen advisors. "With several of the adults," Marshall wrote, "one has to keep 'holding them up,' or they slip-back into 'don't destroy teen-age experiments, don't talk back to teenagers,' this sort of junk. I'm so sick of 20, 22 and 28-year-old single people who are doing most of the LRY work as a method of continuing to work out their own problems of parental relationship. I always feel I'm fighting the 'official' line from LRY headquarters. My problem is with the damned adults who seem either completely insensitive or downright destructive."

One way to dilute LRYs influence was to create alternative young-adult groups. In 1966, with Marshall's enthusiastic support, the church began a Student Council. Meeting during both services and counting among its contributions the forming of a student library with educational, religious, and entertaining books and magazines, they elected officers and adopted a constitution. The Student Council also acted as a forum for youth expression to the congregation by presenting complaints and suggestions in an organized fashion. This very organized group divided into branches, and then committees, almost a microcosm of the board and committee structure of the larger congregation.

Steve Marshall, Student Council President that first year and eldest son of minister Bob Marshall, recalled, "…the most important thing about the Council's existence is that it was run by the students, providing an excellent opportunity for self-expression, management experience, and service to the church."

Meanwhile, LRY was focusing attention on district issues and away from BUC. In 1967 three of the four youth officers of the Michigan-Ohio-Indiana District were from BUC. At a time when BUC needed its best to lead the group at home, they were being siphoned off to district positions. Because of this and complaints by the youth and their young advisors that the adults wouldn't take them seriously, LRY was spinning out of control. Finger pointing was in full swing between the youth and the congregation, the minister, and the national youth program.

Unitarian Friendship Organization

That same year a new group was formed to reach the junior-high-aged youth. The Unitarian Friendship Organization, UFO, began meeting on Sunday evenings. Adults hoped not only to give the pre-high schoolers some group experiences but to influence these impressionable teens before they reached the troubled LRY years. With luck the leaders could prevent the rampant problems from continuing into the next generations of BUC teens. So UFO took a fun-loving approach that could be shared by the youth and the adults.

"One of the activities the group sponsored was a 'Laugh-In'," said advisor Tony Hardesty. "It was a take-off on the popular television show, an all-day rally hosting junior highers from nearby UU churches. Each group came with costumes, skits and jokes, making for a wonderful time and much hilarity!"

Into the 1970s, LRY was still rebelling, yet losing influence on many young people who saw them as lacking an agenda. Many LRY members had graduated or lost interest in the direction the group was taking. At the same time, some graduates continued hanging around, reluctant to cut the umbilical cord and face the next phase of life.

LRY officers tried to rebuild but didn't get much support from the troubled and disenchanted teens who made up the core membership. LRY president Valerie Moon said in 1970, "The young people are motivated not by what they can do for the group, but what the group can do for them. And it can do nothing if they play an apathetic role."

In response, and in the continued theme of trial and error, a number of different groups formed and dissolved in the early 1970s. An ecology group, ECOING, started and became an affiliate of the Boy Scouts of America. The group spread wood chips on the muddy areas of the playground, printed "Ecotips" in the newsletter, and promoted the idea of using coffee mugs instead of foam cups during the coffee hour.

After the Eco group experiment lost momentum, yet another group formed separately from LRY for teens who just didn't want to be a part of the "lost generation." BUC teens Grant Drutchas, Kevin Appleton and Cathy Schwing organized the Service Group in 1973. Completing ten projects for the church that year, Cathy credits RE Director Jean Mehlenbacher for their success: "Jean wanted us to be a part of the church. She had infinite patience and was the best listener in

the world. She knew we wanted to be involved but were looking for more wholesome activities, and she was quick to sit down and brainstorm with us to find worthwhile projects we could accomplish and take pride in. This small group kept us involved in church, and eventually led to the creation of GUSH, Great Unnamed Senior Highers."

Goodbye LRY

With new groups ready to provide a fresh start, LRY further lost influence. Public acknowledgement of serious legal and ethical problems within LRY suggested that the group was incapable of self-control and completely out of parent control. Drugs were rampant at church functions and conferences. Sexual behavior was becoming a public spectacle, and even theft became a problem. Despite Marshall's own daughter, Joy, making a last-ditch effort to hold things together, the minister and the church community exerted parental authority and disbanded LRY.

Hello GUSH

A few former LRYers joined with the Service Group to form GUSH, the Great Unnamed Senior Highers, in 1975. Like the Service Group, the young people said they wanted to have fun and contribute to the larger community. GUSH members participated in the Focus:HOPE walk and joined UFO and the church choir to put on a Spaghetti Supper and Hootenanny, which was attended by more than 260 people.

"When we formed GUSH," said Lee Phillips, "we were conscious that the previous senior high group had been kicked out, and the reasons varied and were ominous. We felt we had to be careful and to do one thing for the church for every one we wanted to do for ourselves. We worked hard for the church because we knew we had to prove ourselves."

In 1978 GUSH re-named itself the Great *Unitarian* Senior Highers. Now grown to almost 30 members, the group was healthy and thriving. Their calendar balanced outreach and fundraising with social activities.

Bob and the Bible

At about this same time, another incorporating effort was underway. Bob Marshall provided an intense program for high schoolers in Bible studies. The three-year program, called Minister's Group, required each participant to have his or her own

copy of the Bible and to come an hour before GUSH for the class.

Understanding the Bible and Biblical history gave those who came to Bob's class a strong religious sense of Christian and Jewish teachings. With no notes, Marshall challenged the youth who attended, making them stretch intellectually, while giving them an opportunity for a one-on-one relationship with their minister. At the end of the three-year cycle, students were offered the chance to present a graduation speech at a Sunday service, similar to the Confirmation or Bar and Bat Mitzvah rite of passage services in other religions.

Lisa Sherman, UFO and GUSH officer in the mid-80s, remembers the class and Marshall, whose unstructured style was sometimes difficult to track. "Although at times I didn't have quite the attention span I should have, this was a very good way to be introduced to the Bible as a historical document, and not the word of God," Sherman said. "I learned that the Bible had lessons for life that are beneficial to everyone, even though some do not warrant the literal interpretation utilized by many fundamentalist groups."

Three-Letter Word

About the same time, BUC began offering the AYS (About Your Sexuality) curriculum to its middle and high schoolers. Developed cooperatively with the Congregational Church in the early 1970s, the course deals with values clarification, communication skills, and decision making, in addition to teaching the fundamentals of sexuality.

For most who went through AYS, it was one of the most memorable, empowering, and cherished parts of growing up at BUC. Matt Sharples reflects: "I remember the excitement surrounding the opening of the Commons Room, to be used for the youth, and the interesting discussions we had within its four walls. It was there I learned about, but didn't experience, sex. My Catholic and Protestant friends always thought it was both cool and scary that I had a worthwhile and intensive course on sex education at my church."

Health Returns

Youth Sunday began to become second only in attendance to the annual appearance of popular guest speaker Rabbi Sherwin Wine. The adults and the kids were laughing together again. Youth Sunday crowds delighted in humorous youth skits and readings, generally mimicking the adult congregation or their own

popular culture silliness.

The teens learned to use humor to diffuse differences. For example, one youth skit was a re-interpretation of the Ten Commandments to mend fences with Bob Marshall, who had severely chided several teens earlier that year for disrupting services. Ana Whitmer and Rob Zieger portrayed a unisex God who proclaimed an 11th Commandment, "Thou shalt not walk in front of the Worship Hall windows while service is in session."

Things were good at BUC. Continentally, LRY was hanging by a thread. Their leaders continued to debate youth autonomy for the next a decade. Finally, everyone agreed that it was time for a continental change that would reunite the churches who still had LRY groups with those who had created their own successful youth programs. And, in a very Unitarian Universalist plan, they decided to let the UU youth decide the details.

Like a miniature General Assembly, delegates descended on the Carleton College campus in Minnesota in August 1981 for a week of workshops, worship, singing, and debate over creating a new UUA national youth program.

And beyond the serious business, there was time for fun. All experienced a UU youth game called "foofing." Foofing is when one is attacked by one's friends in a playful way where they collectively get the person on the ground, then blow on his or her stomach, making a sound that could be offensive in other situations. Professional foofers could be very creative. There were whipped cream and cherry foofs, even chocolate syrup foofs. But there were also rules in the foof game that were very strict about an individual's right to "just say no" to a foof, as well.

Common Ground made a huge impact on those who attended and the groups they shared the vision with at home. The youth came back feeling a greater sense of empowerment from the adults, who were convinced that the new program, Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, YRUU, would succeed. With reasonable safeguards included and constant communication a strong tenet, BUC was ready to expand and reinvigorate its youth programming even more.

The effects that the Common Ground Conference had on not just the delegates but on GUSH and BUC were evident immediately. Returning with a passion for change and encouraged to do something important, the group launched a tremendous membership push by calling everyone high school aged, whether they had been coming to church or not. Armed with cassette tapes of songs they'd

learned at Common Ground, GUSH started having worship time at their gatherings.

In 1982, GUSH President David Amir couldn't hold the enthusiasm in. In a personal note he wrote a heartfelt message to the congregation. "This has been a year of rebirth for GUSH and the best year ever, productively. We have grown tremendously, and there have been more friendships made than ever before, many of them are very close."

Nineteen-eighty-two was not only a banner year for GUSH, but the year the UUA adopted the continental YRUU program for youth aged 14 to 20. Its annual gathering is called the Continental Conference, or "Con Con."

Elissa Trumbull, a member of the YRUU Youth Council, explained the exhilaration of helping decide the future of the youth movement: "Serving on Youth Council made me see the bigger world with wonderful people willing to exchange ideas. To share input and then see our ideas come to fruition was the ultimate payoff."

Con Con produced spiritual experiences as well. In 1984 Con Con was held at The Mountain, a UU conference center in North Carolina. Laura Lee remembers:

"The last night of the conference was one of celebration. We were laughing and enjoying ourselves at the annual talent show, when someone came in to say that a brother of one of the girls had been taken to the hospital. He was in a coma, and they were not sure if he would live.

"Someone told the story of 'Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes,' explaining that in Japan they believe that if you fold a thousand paper cranes, your wish will come true. We decided to work together folding paper cranes to wish for our friend's brother. We folded cranes all night. They weren't all lovely. Some were lopsided, beakless, or had one wing longer than the other, but we kept folding. One person kept count—10...50...250...700… Early the next morning we reached 999 paper cranes; then we took a large piece of construction paper to fold the thousandth.

"There was a moment of silence; then we sang together as the sun came up. Then word came from the office: Our friend's brother had just come out of his coma, and he would live. Maybe the timing of the thousandth crane and the recovery was a coincidence. But for me, it will always be the summer I learned to believe in

miracles-- and to fold paper cranes."

More to Learn

Back at BUC, the 13 year olds were about to begin their own, unique learning process. The Rites of Passage Experience class, ROPE, was the latest of the new youth programs. ROPE was designed to ease the junior high school children into the high school programs. This class would differ from other youth groups in that it was a Sunday morning class. Adult advisors would stay the group the entire year.

Seminars in values and decision making, ten weeks of UUism study, ten weeks of sexuality study, formed the core. And one payoff for a year's worth of effort was a trip to Boston, financed by ROPE fundraising activities. Culminating the year was ROPE Sunday service in June. ROPE promoted a lasting bond between group members and between the youth and the church.

Some ROPE graduates would express that connection by signing the membership book as full members of the church and beginning to take on the responsibilities of pledging and participating in the church's service work in the community.

The Pendulum Swings Again

Nineteen-eighty-six marked the end of a BUC era. Pat Schwing retired as RE Director, and the church hired an MRE, Minister of Religious Education, Jan Evans-Tiller. It rapidly became clear that she had no interest in the teens, and, in fact, argued that older children were not covered by her RE contract. The youth group attitudes turned somber, and recruiting advisors became difficult.

By 1989, the church, seeing no reasonable solution, asked Evans-Tiller to resign. BUC once again turned to their first professional DRE, who had served one year in 1970, Pat Kridler, to put things back on track while they searched for a permanent RE Director. Youthful Dori Davenport brought great enthusiasm for all ages, especially youth, when she began her tenure as DRE in 1991.

Life's Painful Lessons

In 1992, GUSH and the congregation were stunned when a spring GUSH graduate, Brad Glass, died in an automobile accident his first month in college. Brad was one of the brightest and admired among his peers, and the experience touched them

deeply. Most remembered a poem he had given at Youth Sunday. Brad had written:

Religion is many things to many people.
To some, it is something to live for.
To me, it is something to live with.
For others religion provides the roads and rules.
To me it provides the opportunities to travel the untroden path
And opportunities to be free.
It provides a safe environment for friendship and learning.
Whenever I learn something new or overcome something old,
I am practicing my religion.
Religion impregnates the mind with ideas.
Religion is the womb where opinion is conceived.
It is the nurturer of morals.

To honor Brad's memory and his thoughtful, gentle nature, the group voted to engrave his poem on a permanent plaque that would hang in the Commons room for all future youth to see. And the RE Committee paid their respects as well by erecting a Peace Pole on the church grounds in memory of Brad Glass.

The loss of a young person is especially painful, as it is the loss of hope, of potential unrealized, and of dreams forever unfulfilled. For most of the youth, it was a first experience in coming to grips with mortality, and it served to challenge with the most profound questions that spirituality and religion attempts to address.

Rejuvenated Youth

By the mid-1990s, GUSH and the youth programs had regained their brilliance. Cooperation and participation were back up, and the youth were starting to get more involved as members of the congregation. GUSH began to attract greater numbers, which caused a new problem of how to be intimate when the group is large. They had to find ways to be smaller. Borrowing from a district and national conference strategy, GUSH re-organized itself into permanent small groups that met at every meeting to "check-in" with each other.

Everyone, even advisors, was in a "touch group," designed to include everyone and encourage intimate discussion of what issues they are facing at school, home, or work. The bonding that occurs can make the meetings go later, but no one seems to mind. For it has helped each work with his or her distractions honestly and within safe parameters.

Mutual Trust Pays Dividends

By the late 1990s the GUSHers at BUC were no longer looking inwardly, but outwardly to those who gave them their wings and encouraged their first solo flight, their advisors. In 1997, GUSH nominated Tom Cranston as UUA Outstanding Advisor of the Year, the first time the award was given. Tom was chosen, and several GUSH kids made the trip to General Assembly in Indianapolis to present Tom his award.

The youth were rewarded, too. That same year Denominational Affairs Chair Judy Amir recommended a policy that the BUC annual delegation to the General Assembly would have a third, or at least two, of the spots allocated to young people.

Another milestone, and yet another name change. Reflecting discussions within the larger congregation about better identifying the church in the community, GUSH decided to upgrade its name. Although BUC was originally a Unitarian church, it had been a UU community since the two denominations had joined in 1962. GUSH youth felt that the name needed to reflect both "Us." GUSH became GUUSH, with a pronunciation change to "goosh." It now sounded more like something being squished than a play on a word for exuberance. Still, GUUSH now respectfully acknowledges both Unitarian and Universalist heritages.

Bridging the Gaps

In the late 1990's, youth programming at BUC had become a well-oiled machine. Recruiting, training, overlapping veteran and new advisors, and maintaining balanced calendars of fun and outreach activities resulted in consistent youth attendance in high numbers.

When it came time to prepare Youth Sunday, however, this record attendance brought a new problem: So many kids wanted to take part that the service got too long. One facet that had been a fixture of the program was the "senior speeches," giving each graduating senior a chance to reflect on his or her youth experience at BUC and share with the congregation future plans.

So BUC created the Senior Bridging Ceremony, a special program, apart from Youth Sunday, to honor and feature only the seniors, just as ROPE had a dedicated service for the passage into high school.

At Senior Bridging, the young adults shared, and so did adults. Everyone was touched by a song Rod Schnaar wrote and sang to his daughter Sara and to all the seniors. The event was made more special in that young people could invite past advisors and other adults who had touched their lives at BUC. Parents and advisors, who usually only got to say "Great job," and "What are you doing to do next?" could socialize, reflect, and share with the youth they had nurtured into young adults.

With so many BUCers crossing the bridge to college, concern arose that there was no UU presence on local campuses. In response, Carol Glass, along with Rochester's Paint Creek Congregation minister Carol Huston, established a Campus Ministry program at Oakland University, which had plenty of other religions with programs to attend, but no Unitarian Universalist. This program was soon added at Wayne State University and planned to expand to other Michigan schools.

Passing the Torch

Of all the stories encompassed in the 50-year journey of the church, youth is unique in that the participants stay only a few brief years, then move on. As Unitarian minister James Russell Lowell put it, "If youth be a defect, it is one that we outgrow only too soon." BUC has attempted to make those ever-so-brief teen years ones of reflection and expression, of transitioning beyond the distractions to genuine adult independence of thought and spirit.

Not all made the journey, not all accepted the challenges in their parental church, yet for those who continued, the trip seems to have been worthwhile.

Eric Carlson, son of long-time member Jean Carlson, said, "Yes, it was worthwhile. It was the best interaction between adults and youth I've ever experienced. Young people were respected by the congregation."

And Matt Sharples, son of past presidents Ed and Diane Sharples, reflects years after he graduated from GUSH:

"It's impossible for me to imagine growing up without BUC in my life. My experiences were invaluable. I learned to embrace challenges, to trust other people with my emotions, to develop my talents while enjoying others, and to express my opinions while valuing others. BUC was, and is, a nurturing place."

Chapter Nine

Reaching Out

by
Annis Pratt

"There is no higher religion than human service. To work for the common good is the greatest creed."
Albert Schweitzer
Physician, Musician, Unitarian

Unitarian Universalist children learn to say grace with the words: "May we have eyes that see, ears that hear, hearts that love, and hands that are willing to serve." For 50 years, BUC adults and children alike have expressed in social action that simple affirmation.

An entire book would be necessary to encompass the full range of BUC members' social and political activities, from marching for civil rights, to taking unpopular stands on abortion and open housing, opening the fellowship to gays and lesbians, staffing soup kitchens, building and rebuilding inner-city homes, sponsoring cross-racial youth experiences, to individually and collectively offering "hands that are willing to serve."

As far back as the late 1950s members of the BUC Service Committee were lending hands. Their first project was helping the patients in a mental institution, the Pontiac State Hospital. In 1958 the committee sponsored "pie days," when they brought and served homemade pies and beverages to 200 patients.

"We used to visit the hospital regularly," remembered long-time member Shirley Schlorff. "Sometimes we danced with the patients to the music of a live band, but often we simply sat and chatted with them. One volunteer I remember liked doing the patients' nails. One time she remarked to a woman how strong her nails were and asked how she kept them so strong. 'Oh,' the patient said, 'I use them to clean the toilets.' That ended the enthusiasm for doing patients' nails."

Louise Phillips Militzer remembered another such visit. "One Sunday morning someone called the church asking for a button to be sewn on a shirt, so Ed Howard, Betty Appleton, Neil Munro and I, out of curiosity more than service,

went to a state hospital aftercare house and did that chore." This answered the question -- How many BUCers does it take to sew on a button?

White Gloves Come Off

The decidedly hopeful 1950s were followed by the turbulent 60s. Louise Phillips Militzer joined BUC because she was looking for a “comfortable” church for herself, her husband, and three youngsters. As she was looking, the world seemed to be coming apart-- assassinations, civil rights violence, gender discrimination, scandals, environmental degradation, and the Vietnam War.

"BUC didn't provide the comfort I sought," she said," but it did give me plenty of role models with the courage to meet the challenges head on. You could get a crick in your neck looking up at Kathryn Loomis reforming the school board; Shelley Appleton marching with Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma, Alabama; Rebecca Pedersen and Stan Connelly leading the inner-city revival program, Focus:HOPE; John King watching the courts for corruption. The comfort was in realizing that such heroic individuals could, and did, make a difference."

Lorraine Jeffe joined in 1961 and saw in BUC "a safe place for challenging times, where differences are respected, where values are shared, and where there have always been concerns about the injustices of racial, religious, and ethnic prejudice."

Like many, Jeffe came with a cause. Lorraine was dedicated to the Pro-Choice Movement. And at BUC, holding an opinion gave you the opportunity to hold a rally. Jeffe remembers one at the church organized by the UU Women's Federation of Michigan, which was attended by 250 people and "crawling with press, state senators, and the Oakland county prosecutor Tom Plunkett."

Bob Marshall was a consistent and active supporter of women's right to abortion, not only giving his annual "Mother's Day" sermons supporting it, but training other ministers through the Michigan Clergy for Problem Pregnancy. It was illegal for women to get abortions, yet many BUC members helped women obtain them. BUC would continue to support abortion rights well into the 90s through generous financial support of established community organizations and by sending representatives to their boards.

Field Hands

Bob Marshall, an outspoken advocate of the disenfranchised, was also concerned about the plight of migrant farm workers. Former BUC member Maria Runk remembers first meeting Bob at a Farm Workers' Rally, even before she knew about BUC. "Bob always gave stirring speeches at these events," said Runk, "and would always be the first to plunk down a big bill on the collection plate. That's what I admired about Bob; he never would ask you to commit to anything he wouldn't commit to himself."

Runk and others helped Bob support the workers through BUC by encouraging members to boycott grapes and lettuce, sponsoring food drives, and allowing the workers to hold rallies at the church and to sell things at BUCs bookshop. "Bob would even let some of them come into the rummage sale early and pick out the things they needed, at no charge," said Runk.

Stand and Deliver

During the sixties, BUC took public positions through its Social Justice Committee, which "organized and spark plugged" successful public meetings on suburban housing and integration and stood up for a Los Angeles police officer who had been suspended for civil rights activities just before the Watts riots in Los Angeles.

BUC people raised money in memory of Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian killed in the civil rights movement, collected food for the Mississippi Freedom workers, shipped clothes, books and magazines to a free library in Selma, and raised money for our Alabama sister church to hire a bomb patrol for Saturday evenings.

"The first thing that kept me involved here," Becky Malm recounts, "was the opportunity to participate in the civil rights movement through the lively Social Justice Committee we had then -- though sometimes it seemed like the whole church was a social action organization."

Ann Sheldon described the mid-sixties as a time when "BUC members and affiliates moved out in many directions-- some of them pretty radical for the times. Some went to march in Selma; some helped our sister church in Birmingham, Alabama. We were actively involved with Pontiac area ministers and several conflict resolution efforts related to the Pontiac school desegregation

case. A majority of the leadership in local fair-housing efforts came from our ranks, as did efforts to change the practices of the Birmingham schools."

Race has been a special issue because BUC is quintessentially an all-white church in an affluent suburban community. On Sunday mornings BUC members looked about themselves at a sea of white faces and were deeply troubled about walking their talk while living in such a profoundly segregated area. So they found ways to act.

Starting Close to Home

While BUC was situated in an affluent community, just to the north was Pontiac, a decidedly disadvantaged city. In 1966 BUCers developed a partnership with the Newman African Methodist Episcopal Church there to set up Project Friendship, a summer day camp where black and white children could spend three weeks together fostering racial understanding and friendship.

Betty Page, who was involved with Project Friendship almost from the beginning, believed that the strength of the program was the way church members from both Newman and BUC, including professional educators and psychologists, established a program where children and parents interacted.

"I think the white kids need it more than the black kids," Page said at the time. "The black people are exposed to white people a lot more in this day and age. It's the white kids and parents in the Birmingham-Bloomfield area who need the contact to understand blacks and throw away the prejudices we grew up with."

BUC and Newman adults met each year in March to start planning for the camp. Every summer for three weeks, from 1966 to 1987, BUC children joined black kids as campers, and BUC teenagers such as Glen Hardesty and Ned Sharples served with black teens as junior counselors. There were swimming lessons in the morning and a variety of activities, from tie-dying to puppetry, yoga, cooking, pottery, needlework, outdoor sports and photography.

The success of the 20-year partnership led to its undoing. More and more children from the very bottom of the poverty scale were attracted to the program, and gradually BUC and Newman kids and adults began losing interest. As U.S. Senator Daniel P. Moynihan once remarked, "You can mix classes of the same race, or races of the same class, but it is almost impossible to keep people different in both race

and class working together." Although BUCs involvement dwindled, Outreach continued to financially support the Pontiac project for several more years.

Burn, Baby, Burn

During and after the terrible violence and destruction of the Detroit riots in the summer of 1967, BUC members raised money to get displaced Detroiters into "Homes by Christmas," for ACLU investigations of complaints of civil liberties violations in handling arrests, and for the West Central Organization to set up a cooperative food store.

Also that year members of the Social Justice Committee attended an emergency meeting in Detroit called by the UUA's National Commission on Religion and Race. There the UUs experienced a black rebellion, when a black caucus formed to come up with recommendations was at odds with those of the "official" UUA Commission. Ann Sheldon summed up BUCs response to these challenges:

"We were actively moving from white suburbs to the black community, not just talking about brotherhood. As a people and as a church we were demonstrating day by day, year after year. We were working with black people as partners, and we were ready to follow their lead. That's still a really visionary way to work!"

Out of Helplessness, Hope

Race riots across America's cities raised consciousness of problems which had smoldered long before they flashed into flame. Stan Connelly had been a general in the US Army when he was ordered into Cleveland to quell race riots. The experience haunted him, and when General Connelly retired and moved to Birmingham, Michigan, he looked for an inner city program that might work to avoid another racial insurrection. He found it in Focus: HOPE.

Focus: HOPE was established after the 1967 Detroit Riots. Father William Cunningham, a Catholic priest, was the inspirational founder. The idea was to create a skilled mechanics' training program for at-risk city dwellers. Stan Connelly embraced the organization and was largely responsible for obtaining a multi-million-dollar defense industry contract for Focus: HOPE.

Connelly and Rebecca Pedersen, the widow of BUCs first full-time minister, helped organize an annual ten-mile walk down Woodward Avenue to raise funds for Focus: HOPE. Friends and neighbors pledged so much a mile for each marcher.

Rebecca Pedersen was a tenacious walker. She did not miss a single Focus:HOPE walk from its inception. She made her final walk in a wheelchair with Rev. Doug Gallager pushing her. And in the last year of her life, when she could not even manage a wheelchair, fifty BUCers walked in her name. Rebecca wrote a note to the congregation, saying she had "walked on their legs."

Dissension in the Ranks

Not all efforts were as clear and conscionable as Focus:HOPE. There's a saying that if you bring any three Unitarians together, you're likely to get four opinions, or more. Agreement is rarely universal. And that's the way it was at BUC over some of the most challenging issues of the turbulent '60s, chief among them, the Vietnam War.

Bob Marshall supported the war. His support sprang from his adherence to his Socialist Party's opposition to Communism for its betrayal of democratic principles.

Like many Unitarian churches at that time, BUC was split on the issue. Bob Marshall and some important leaders, as Becky Malm puts it, "vociferously supported U.S. government policy in Vietnam for quite a long time. Others of us were even more active in the peace and anti-war movement, so we had some very lively disagreements around here for a while; but in the long run we kept our respect for each other and always maintained dialog and an open forum."

At one point things heated up so much at a potluck dinner that, as Louise Phillips Militzer remembered, "letters of apology were sent after discussion turned to argument."

Although they had sharp disagreements, and occasional hurt feelings, over Vietnam as over other social issues, BUC members sought consensus to take controversial actions while, at the same time, maintaining a church community. And there was lots of action. It ranged from positions taken by the Social Justice Committee formally representing BUC, to much more numerous individual acts or public positions, to hands-on volunteer efforts by a perennial plethora of BUC committees.

Left Wing and a Prayer

The Social Justice Committee itself was dissolved because of deep differences in the congregation over whether a single group had the right to speak for the entire church membership. Bob Marshall may have assured its demise with a letter to the board in which he expressed concern for dwindling interest in the committee. Marshall concluded that church members backed away because of pressure from the committee's "left-wing" members.

"To some extent," Marshall said, "the committee stood in an adversarial relationship with respect to the general membership, in that it attempted to persuade members to support or do one thing or another."

Out, but Not Over

Although the Social Justice Committee was not replaced by a comparable body until 1988, this did not mean that BUC activists were grounded, by any means. BUCers continued to throw themselves into a variety of altruistic acts.

In 1975, for example, many members were inspired by Bob Marshall's sermon "In Defense of the Human Family." They acted to establish an Outreach Committee (later called Community Outreach, and then Grants Review). Initially, $2000 in seed money was designated to spur BUCers to get involved in outside programs and propose ways in which the money could be used.

Carol Glass, a founding member of the Outreach Committee, recalls, "The idea was to support our values in the community. A church member would sponsor a project that needed funding and obtain approval from the Outreach Committee, which would then go to the board of trustees for final approval. Board approval was really a formality; I can't remember ever being turned down.

"The first project was one I proposed. It was for $250 to buy materials for a playhouse for a non-profit nursery at Oakland University. Since several of our members were involved with the nursery, it seemed like an ideal first example of supporting member efforts in the community. Parent volunteers built the playhouse."

Other recipients of Outreach funds that first year included Planned Parenthood, an Oakland County rape crisis hotline, and outings for minority youth in Pontiac sponsored by the Black American Motivational Association.

Capitalism for the Cause

With limited resources available from the church's operating budget, Outreach members became innovative fund raisers. Thousands were quickly raised from a Christmas fruit, cheese, and nut sale and pledges to Bob Marshall's marathon sermon. Proceeds from Sunday morning coffee donations were designated for Outreach. Other ventures followed, such as "The Bleeding Arts and Talent Auction," and, the most fragrant Outreach fund raiser, the "Annual Annual Sale."

Outreach Committee members proved themselves truly entrepreneurial with the Annual Annual Sale. They took orders for spring flowers. On one Saturday in May the Outreach team would fill up their station wagons at Detroit's Eastern Market, then bring the flowers to the church for display and delivery after Sunday service. As sales grew, soon the committee was contracting with local greenhouses to deliver flats to BUC.

Carol Glass, an Annual Annual team member, said, "Hundreds of pots, hanging baskets, and flats of flowers adorned the courtyard, social hall, and spilled out, covering every spare inch, eventually lining the walks and entries to the church. It was an incredible amount of work, but for one day, the church was transformed into a greenhouse of flowers. It was beautiful."

The committee's impact, notes Richard Halsted, went beyond money: "Not only was financial assistance given to a number of deserving projects under the auspices of Outreach, but the committee felt that the encouragement and moral support given to BUC members and their projects was equally important. And it was also satisfying to see the 'bridges' that were started, or further supported, between various groups in Pontiac and throughout Oakland County and BUC."

Potluck on Proliferation

In the mid-1980s, a Peace Leverage Group was formed to address nuclear proliferation. The group pledged to "provide support to BUC and the community in dealing with the fears we all have of nuclear war." They sponsored a Friday potluck on nuclear proliferation, educated BUC voters on threats to peace they needed to consider, and sponsored a young person to attend a march in Washington for "Jobs, Peace, and Justice." This group also put together a Sunday Service and Summer Sunday called "Marigolds, not Bombs."

Rolling Up Sleeves

Outreach existed primarily to provide grants and encourage participation, yet there was a need for a group that would coordinate and encourage hands-on community service. Judy Hessler, then Outreach Committee chair, formed the Needs Network. Under her leadership, and later Bonnie Speck's, many projects were tackled.

One group of members regularly cooked and served Saturday lunch for hundreds on the Cass corridor in Detroit and occasionally served at Saint Dominic's Soup Kitchen near Wayne State University and at homeless warming centers in Royal Oak.

Another church group established a partnership with the Ravendale/Corbett Colony Block Club in Detroit to revitalize its neighborhood. Members worked for six full days painting houses and fences, planting trees, and cleaning vacant lots and yards. And Ravendale residents returned the favor by coming to BUC to help the Needs Network during the South Oakland Shelter week for Oakland county homeless.

In 1987 BUCers began to participate in Habitat for Humanity, a national organization supported by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter. Members helped rebuild homes in numerous neighborhoods in and around Detroit.

Fred Straky, a member who contributes his carpentry skills to both the Ravendale and Habitat projects, said, "I especially remember one project where the woman who would own the house we were building was there working right alongside of us. Whenever we'd break for a few minutes, she'd put down her hammer and show us exactly where each room would go, and where she'd place every piece of furniture. That's when I realized that for us it meant a little volunteer work; for her it meant dignity, security, and the home she never had."

In all of the Needs Network projects there was a conscious and concerted effort to determine what BUCs role could be. "Through a wide range of projects," said Needs Network activist Lillian Dean, "we discovered what fit with BUC. For example, we tried to promote letter writing on issues, but our strongest participants always favored hands-on doing-- building or buying items needed by community groups rather than just providing grants."

Church Regains its Voice

Meanwhile the now time-worn issue of whether the church itself should take official positions came to the fore once again. It was 1987, the Social Justice Action Committee was dusted off and reinstated, and the new minister, Doug Gallager, felt it was appropriate for the Social Justice Action Committee to take positions, although not speak in the name of BUC.

"In a highly institutionalized society," read the mission statement put forward by the first chair Bonnie Sawyer Speck, "we believe the appropriate and most effective way of bringing about change lies in working directly with our political and social institutions and processes."

In its first year the committee coordinated a letter writing campaign on school funding proposals, and took note of an increasingly vicious racism and ethnic hatred in the Birmingham-Bloomfield schools where students were openly sporting skinhead and Nazi regalia. Civil rights cutbacks had created a nourishing environment for a culture of bigotry, which was reflected in racist and anti-Semitic incidents at Birmingham's Groves and Seaholm high schools. A BUC representative, Annis Pratt, joined the Birmingham Bloomfield Task Force on Race Relations and Ethnic Diversity to deal with the problem.

Shooting at Firearms

Handguns also became an issue. To make a stand, a handgun control subcommittee was established, which formed an alliance with the Anti-Handgun Association (AHA), a Detroit organization promoting stronger handgun regulations. While the Brady Bill was being discussed on the national level, the BUC committee decided to focus on state legislation on the control of handguns.

Ed Howard thought up an especially creative way to get local attention about gun control: monitoring the local press for reports on gun use in burglaries and then writing letters to editors expressing the Social Justice Action Committee's position on gun ownership.

Even cap guns didn't escape BUC anti-gun activists. Ray McCarus and Ed Howard participated in AHA demonstrations against the sale of toy guns and war toys at local retail stores. And at the BUC rummage sale, Pan Godchaux, Rummage Sale Co-Chair, discarded all toy guns which came through the door.

Invisible to Those Who Do Not See

Of all the challenges BUCers had embraced, one of the most troubling and tenacious was homelessness. BUC is in Oakland County, one of the most prosperous counties in Michigan. Yet virtually invisible in a county of manicured lawns and palatial homes are legions of homeless men, women, and children. Lillian Melville, Director of the South Oakland Shelter (SOS), said, "More than a thousand people in Oakland County have no place to sleep on any given night. While Oakland County has four shelters, they serve only a fraction of the need."

The logical solution would be to build more shelters, but logic doesn't apply with such an emotion-charged issue. "It's the old 'NIMBY' (Not in my back yard!) syndrome," said Tony Hardesty, BUC member who served on the SOS board. Once we tried to purchase a building in a light industrial area across from a run-down tavern. But the bar owners protested. Cities have even changed zoning designations just to keep a homeless shelter out."

A solution that has filled the void for more than a decade is SOS temporary housing in participating churches. Each church becomes a homeless shelter for a full week every year. Beds, meals, toiletries and other necessities and daily transportation to and from the church are all provided by the sponsoring church.

Lillian Dean had heard about SOS, and in 1989 she led a campaign to make BUC one of the week-long hosts to the homeless. "We were actually late," said Dean. There were already 30 other churches in SOS before we got involved."

BUC Needs Network chair Margaret Marsh said, "After church members were assured the guests wouldn't burn down the church, they were supportive."

Church members not only bought in, they jumped in enthusiastically, volunteering for the many tasks necessary, from washing sheets to taking the midnight shift at the church.

"This round-robin solution isn't ideal," said SOS volunteer Joanne Copeland. "It's hard on the guests and church volunteers, but it does have the advantage of making people more aware and increasing donations. Someday it might even make a community feel guilty enough to let us build a permanent shelter."

Linking Arms and Moving Ahead

In 1989, BUC "Extension," as it was called, consisted of the Needs Network, the Social Justice Action Committee, the Social Issues Forum, and the Grants Review Committee.

Doug. Gallager spearheaded a BUC brochure titled "The Church in the World, the World in the Church." It expressed BUC's conviction that "growth and celebration of the spirit include political analysis, theological reflection, and just action."

Although functioning as separate committees, branches of Extension could be called upon to address a particular issue. Thus the Gun Control issue was addressed by the Social Justice Action Committee while members were urged to join AHA in their protests. They networked with Save Our Sons and Daughters while applying to the Outreach Committee for funds to support AHA. And a church Social Issues Forum was launched with Detroit City Council member Maryann Mahaffey arguing against easy access to handguns. Coordinated efforts were common with many BUC committees and outside groups.

Taking the Bus

Even Detroit's failing public transportation system, the SMART bus system, was a logical target for social action. BUC members were convinced that, as Martin Luther King had put it in his *Freedom Budget for All Americans*, racial justice required full employment, and full employment required good public transportation. Therefore it was inevitable that the church would work to improve bus service in the Detroit metropolitan area. Rebecca Powers, a *Detroit News* reporter, surprised by the suburban church's stand, wrote:

"At the Birmingham Unitarian Church, even the ailing SMART bus system can find its way into the Sunday dialogue. As part of the church's Social Issues Forum topics, presented Sunday mornings along with two sermons, the relationship between city and suburb will be discussed."

Welcoming Congregation

Gay and lesbian rights became a front-line issue in the winter of 1994. The board voted to make BUC a Welcoming Congregation, meaning a church where gays and lesbians were welcome. "Hal Breidenbach was the heart and soul of the effort," said Len Johnson, a Welcoming Congregation Committee member. "He worked for two

full years to go through all of the steps it took to achieve a Welcoming Congregation status." To dramatize the stand, BUCs minister and board president joined with all members to tie a yellow ribbon around the entire church.

The event was witnessed by many, including two neighbors who had recently moved into a condo to north of the church. Keith Brown says, "I found out later that when they saw the tape, they were worried that there might be some kind of police problem next door, until they read in the next morning's *Free Press* that church members had strung the ribbon as a symbol of welcome to gays and lesbians."

The men were not only relieved, but impressed—so much so that they returned and secretly planted hundreds of daffodil bulbs along the church's wooded trails. It seemed a miracle to the congregation when they looked out the new sanctuary windows the next spring to see the sea of yellow daffodils blooming in the woods.

Committees Fall; Activists Go On

By the mid-nineties the Social Justice Action Committee had faded out of existence once again. It was briefly replaced by PAG, the Political Action Group, which focused on campaign finance reform.

Race relations in the Birmingham Bloomfield Area continued to be strained; however, and in 1997 an Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity Task Force was organized to carry out a UUA program initiative for dismantling racism and encouraging diversity. Two years of planning culminated in February, 1999, with a "Journey Toward Wholeness" weekend, a UUA-designed workshop to help congregations examine themselves for racism. Participants painfully examined issues of their white power and privilege and understanding racism where they work, shop, and play. The experience was so useful that a second weekend was added.

Multi-Ethnic School Mentored

BUCs mission "to encourage members to contribute their time, talent and resources to the betterment of the society and world in which they live," was expressed in yet another venue in 1999. BUC established a partnership with the Whitmer Human-Resources Center Elementary School in Pontiac, a multi-ethnic school which included a large group of Hmong immigrant children. Urged by long-time member Walt Johnson, some 90 members volunteered to serve in numerous ways, including tutoring, providing food, becoming Big Brothers and Big Sisters, donating computers, and much more. In one effort, so many books were donated to Whitmer

that the church had to send volunteers to catalog and place them in what had been nearly empty library shelves.

All of this and more, much more, suggests the scope of BUC's social commitment. In this, the church is not unique, for Unitarians and Universalists have been on the forefront of socially just causes for two hundred years.
And while BUC members do a great deal for others, we are ultimately doing these things for ourselves. For, in the process, we relearn the wisdom of one of our early Unitarians, Ralph Waldo Emerson, when he said:

"It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself (and herself)."

Chapter 10

Social Super Glue

by
Al Lee

"The eternal quest of the individual human being is to shatter his loneliness."
Norman Cousins
Publisher and Unitarian-Universalist

A couple of thousand years ago, Aristotle said, “People never know each other until they have eaten a certain amount of salt together.” At BUC, individuals get to know one another by passing the salt at intimate dinner discussion groups, eating salted popcorn at BUC Film Buffs events, and perspiring lots of salt on cross-country bike trips with the BUC Outsiders.

Any church worth its salt has special interest groups to bring people together. Yet in a large liberal church like BUC, where exploring ideas and experiences virtually is the religion, they take on even greater significance.

“Everyone needs to be involved in a small face-to-face group,” said the Rev. Douglas Gallager. “This is where we really become known as individuals, and knowing and being known more deeply is essential. In the interest groups people can really get into it, laugh and play together, and get serious together, as well.”

Social interest groups have been described as “the glue” that holds the church community together, and, equally important, it allows newcomers the opportunity to get close enough to get stuck on the fascinating people within.

A large, mature church can seem imposing and impersonal to the newcomer. One can exchange superficial pleasantries before service and during coffee hour, yet it’s virtually impossible to get to know anyone amidst the hubbub of Sunday mornings.

“In all due respect to bagels and donuts, we have found that curries and carbonara somehow stimulate much more fascinating conversations,” said Holly Gilbert, who along with husband Garry are newcomers to BUC. They found their connection

through the Round Robin Dinners, where people meet in homes for dinner and casual discussions.

"In the dining rooms and kitchens of our new friends," Holly said, "we have taken excursions real and figurative– through family photos, vacation pictures, philosophical ideas, Unitarian ideas, and personal convictions. We've compared notebooks, movie reviews, oral histories, and recipes. In the Round Robin, the wisdoms of the retired grandparents, the challenges of the single mother, the rapture of the newlyweds, and the anxieties of young parents mingle and mix. It's quite an education."

What, No Pigmy Existentialist Club?

Round Robin Dinners are one door to relationships. At BUC for over half a century there have been many, a range as diverse as the individual members themselves. Dinner discussion, philosophy club, reading groups, travel, singles, couples, family camping, bridge, music, dance, gardening, issue forums, men's and women's groups, and the all-purpose potlucks – are but a few of the elegant variations of the special-interest-group theme.

Because they are formed around personal interests, there's a natural starting point for conversation. And because most of these activities are small, there's ample opportunity for frank exchanges and to get to know people beyond name tags and niceties.

And because they are often the spontaneous creations of current interests, these groups are typically informal and seldom permanent. Social interest groups appear like mushrooms on the lawn, thrive for months or even years, then vanish when tastes and interests change. Yet upon this nebulous social whirligig, friendships are formed that serve a lifetime, and the community itself is solidified.

Wisps in the Wind

"Defining a social interest group isn't all that easy," said Carol Glass, who has been a founder in a number of groups at BUC. "I consider the Rummage Sale a social interest group, for example, and that's where I met and got to know a lot of people when I first came to the church."

It is difficult to categorize these groups, as virtually all of the major organizations within the church -- Music, Alliance, Rummage Sale, Women and Religion-- initially began as small social interest groups.

Even the church itself, circa 1948, would have fit neatly into the description of a loosely-organized group getting together to socialize around some common interest – in the case of the fellowship, to explore liberal religious ideas.

There was little need for social interest groups when the entire church membership could fit into a living room. Yet as the church grew, and even the social programs like Alliance became large, the need for more intimate gatherings arose.

The first interest that brought people together was food. Potluck suppers began even before the church was built to hold them. One Friday night every month the organizers provided the main dish, and participants each brought a "covered dish to pass."

In the traditional 1950s, a way to a man's heart was still through his stomach, and to the women's hearts in presenting favorite dishes which inevitably drew praise and recognition. "Most women were still working in the home back then," said Michelle Marshall, an early church member, "so we had the luxury of preparing gourmet dishes."

Tremendous creativity went into a range of potlucks, from food themes to dances, and even period themes. Lee Philips recalls, "During a 50s Night potluck, many people came in costume, women in poodle skirts and pony tails and men with greased-back hair. Jean Mehlenbacher came dressed as if she were pregnant, because, she explained, "The only thing I remember about the 50s was being pregnant."

The potlucks became a mainstay of BUC social life, continuing unabated through the 90s, when they mostly featured talks by BUC members.

Bonding Voyage

One way to get to know individuals, perhaps even too well, is through travel. For several years in the 1960s, for example, the place to be in the summer was the Lake Geneva Summer Assembly, where several hundred UUs from throughout the Midwest gathered on the shores of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. The church was

largely young families then, and they got into wonderful down-to-earth conversations sitting and watching the children play on the beach.

Travel became a special interest group mainstay. Trips ranged from family camping in Copper Harbor, to city tours of Boston and Chicago, to choir trips to Europe, and more than one Bob-Marshall-led vacation in Israel. A favorite, and frequent, destination was The Mountain, a UU camp on top of an Appalachian mountain in North Carolina.

Adventures in travel are not always pleasant ones. Abe Amir remembered the time in 1991 when he was in the Mountain's school bus when it nearly went over a cliff. "The bus started down the steep embankment," he said, "then it stopped. I held my breath and waited for it to roll over and continue down the mountain, but it didn't. The Unitarian gods had come to our rescue in the form of two three-inch-thick trees that the bus got caught up on."

If that weren't enough, two years later when Amir returned to the Mountain, a smaller bus he was riding in also went off the road and was saved by small trees. "After that," Amir said, "none of the kids would ride in the same bus with me at the Mountain."

Such harrowing experiences were not the norm for BUC social interest groups. Since Unitarian Universalist tend to be on the highly educated end of the continuum, most social groups tended to the cerebral.

Cogito Ergo Sometimes

The Philosophy Club, for example, debuted in 1965 to explore "the world of ideas." One or more members would give a brief presentation, which was followed by open discussion. Topics ranged from moral and ethical values, love, hate, genetics and politics to John Dewey. The club's official slogan was: "Everyone is a philosopher." Perhaps, but lots of people couldn't seem to make up their minds about talking philosophy. This group only lasted a few years, and with a couple of re-inventions years later, never seemed to become a down-to-earth church staple.

Book discussion and reading groups have fared much better. Everyone simply agrees on a book and meets to discuss it, much like in an English Lit course, minus the grade book. Some participants really get into the reading. At the Reading Circle in 1995, for example, Carolyn Dobbie was to lead the discussion on a

western novel. She came in, plunked a toy six-shooter on the table, and said, "Howdy pardners, let's talk."

Talk in the late 60s and 70s tended toward action, mostly social action. In 1969, for example, an Issues Study Group described itself as "a group of searchers" interested in discovering "effective forms of response to the social problems which concern us as Unitarians." They read Eric Fromm's *The Revolution of Hope*, studied bills for legalizing abortion in Michigan, and held a poster-making workshop.

Coffee, Tea or Social Insurrection

The 1970s, in fact, seemed to be a spawning period for special interest groups at BUC. Twenty-three new groups formed over a four-year period. Coffee hour in the 1970s, in fact, looked like a social issues bazaar. Tables ringed the Pavilion, and one could sign a petition at one table, join a march at another, a lettuce boycott at the next table, contribute to another cause at the next table, and sign up to bring a pot to pass for the next Friday-night potluck. And amidst it all, one could also get a cup of coffee.

Social interest groups during this era of intense political activity tended toward the purposeful. Jack Barthel, for instance, formed an Environmental Problem Study Group in 1970, which met every other week and aimed to study issues, then "see what we as individuals can do ---perhaps such things as refusing to purchase certain types of detergents, gasoline, and containers. Then there are bills to study and congressmen to write."

Serenity Now!

And then there were the "New Age" social groups of the early 1970s. Hatha Yoga classes, meditation classes, and personal growth groups were "in." George Smith, then "resident Yogi," taught five yoga programs consisting of ten sessions each. "In one program," he said, "I had 72 people sign up --there is no way to put 72 people horizontally in the Social Hall." The horizontal space problem was compounded the next year when 200 people showed up. And for those who'd rather remain upright, member Michael Gramlich began open-ended meditation sessions to "ground people more fully in the life experience so that participants become more effective and concerned members of the human race."

“Define Couples”

While most groups are the result of someone in the church seeing a need so great as to overcome the work to run it, often a minister provides the initial spark. That was the case with one of the most successful groups of the ‘70s, Outgoing Couples. Rev. Bob Marshall suggested to Jerry and Sandy Leupen that they start such a group, and it was an immense success.

With a significant percentage of the congregation consisting of couples with young families, Outgoing Couples filled a need to get out of the house, and to contribute to the financial wellbeing of baby sitters. All manner of events took place including progressive dinners, hay rides, theme dances, and holiday parties. And, like all good Unitarians, there were always minor protests. In the late ‘70s, for example, a popular Outgoing Couples’ event was a treasure hunt. Couples would get a clue, drive to where it said to go, uncover the next clue, drive to the next destination, and on until they reached the final destination, where a party was set up. Members Len and Carol Hojnacki felt this was terrible waste of gasoline, a dwindling natural resource. Not wanting to miss the party, they protested by cajoling the hosts to let them in on the final destination, then met the group there.

Another major disagreement was what exactly constituted a “couple.” Many assumed couples meant “married,” but more liberal meanings prevailed, and soon dating singles, then same-sex couples, and other variations on the term “couples” began attending events. The name was eventually changed to “Outgoing People.” Carol Glass, a group leader, recalls. “It got to a point where it was no longer politically correct to define couples as married pairs, so the group lost its purpose and shifted to basically a singles group. Then everyone eventually lost interest.”

Athletes’ Feats

Cerebral, political, spiritual, and for many groups… O.K., a select few… physical activities also were the focus. Yet as the BUC softball team of the mid-70s attests, BUC was far from becoming a farm camp for professional athletes.

Carl Hildebrand organized the softball team, which competed in the Birmingham Area Inter-Denominational League. The BUC team did not exactly fit into the league of church teams. “We made a fashion statement,” Hildebrand said. “Virtually all of the other teams wore matching caps and shirts with the names of their churches on the back. BUCers arrived in all manner of apparel, mostly T-

shirts bearing questionable messages. The Unitarian kids' pony tails and less-than-Sunday-school language also sent a questionable message."

The BUC team thought it had a chance because they had a secret weapon– Polly Perkins. She was an outstanding softball player, but one super star does not make a team. The softball team lost nearly every game, and many still talk about the final game at which BUC lost 25 to 2; and, without an ounce of embarrassment that should be associated with such a score, they had a great time before leaving the field for good.

Tree Huggers Unite!

Nature-linked activities-- hiking, camping, walking and bicycling seemed to do much better with BUCers. Long-time members Hal and Cathie Briedenbach, for example, started Outsiders because of their "love for all things out of doors." And the love sometimes was literal, such as the time Julie Bradford met a charming cyclist on the Michigander bike trip and is now riding as Mrs. Julie Bradford Coronado.

Cultivate Your Own Garden

Some BUCers venturing out of doors followed Voltaire's advice and stuck to their own gardens. Gardeners met as a group from February through October at the homes, or gardens, of one in the group, anticipated spring by looking at seed catalogs when the ground was frozen, learned tips and techniques from one another, and talked of the spirituality they found through gardening. Getting the Round Robin Gardeners going was as natural as a seed pod opening. Stan Mudd said, "I just mentioned it to Walt Johnson, who led the church Programs Committee. I said it would be nice to meet in one another's gardens, and he took the idea and got the group going."

Where Have All the Young Ones Gone?

A phenomenon characteristic of UU churches is that once the young people go off to college, they don't tend to return to the UU fold until they marry and have children who need an RE program. So getting the younger members involved in groups always seems to be both a challenge, and a priority.

Kaylynn Mitchell went up against just such a problem when she joined BUC in the early 90s, looked around, and saw few people under thirty like herself. With Doug

Gallager's enthusiastic endorsement, she set up a table during coffee hour to recruit members for her proposed "Under 30s" group. After the first social event, however, she felt a slight modification was needed.

Make Lemonade

"What do you do when you call a group the Under-30s, and most of the people who show up are in their late 30s?" Mitchell asked, answering herself. "Why, you change the name to 'Sub-40s' and have a good time.

"It worked," Mitchell said. "Several delightful couples and singles came to our Sub 40s potlucks and other outings, making opportunities to really become acquainted with others who shared our religious philosophy. Nice friendships were cemented, and many of us moved on to become infiltrated into the mainstream of the church, so we did not need the group as much."

Members and ministers inspire special interest groups, and sometimes, outsiders do, too. And occasionally, the outsider becomes a BUC insider in the process.

Yo MAMA

David Walker, for example, was a folk singer and guitarist who started a group called MAMA's Coffee House-- the "MAMA" stood for "Michigan Artists Music Alliance." The idea was to create a venue for local folk artists. Walker, performing under the name David Folks, rented the church social hall a couple of times to put on the coffee house evenings.

Walker and his family began attending BUC on Sunday mornings, where Dave sold BUC on the idea of producing the coffee house as a member activity. With the endorsement of BUCs Music Committee, a group of BUC members would set up and taken town equipment, sell tickets and refreshments, and promote the monthly programs, internally at BUC as well as to the public. The Music Committee gave them a small grant, and an anonymous church member provided a loan so the group could make the down payment on sound equipment. "I found so many kindred artists at BUC that my wife and I decided to join the church," he said.

Walker called himself a "Christian Buddhist," and said, "This church gives you room to believe your own way." Eventually, the MAMAs Coffee House gig

became too much work. Walker passed coffee house leadership on to others and got busy with “the day job.” But he and his family remain active church members.

Déjà vu Again

Reincarnation, while not necessarily believed by Unitarians, is nonetheless practiced when it comes to special interest groups. Some ideas repeatedly are born, die natural deaths, then are brought back to life in an endless cycle of reinvention.

Who Can’t Make Commitments?

Singles’ groups are singularly the greatest example of reincarnation. Earliest singles groups appeared in 1960, joined up to expand their membership with other churches, then died by unknown causes. In 1967, the idea was revived when Nicholas Christ and Bill Schanilec started USA, Unitarian Single Adults.

A few years after the demise of USA, the “Pavilion Group” began, a singles group that took the name because that’s where they held their bi-monthly meetings. Phyllis Blonson, the founder, reported “so far, it’s mostly women.” A few years later, in 1976, in search of members and [read “men”], BUC’s Pavilion Group joined up with UU Singles of Metro Detroit.

The late 70s was the height of the sexual revolution, and apparently a lot of marriages became casualties. A metro-wide survey showed that, at the time, one of every three Unitarians was single. The Metro Singles benefitted, and grew to 600 members. Occasionally, a little subterfuge was used to pack an event. For instance, the most well attended singles event one year was a discussion at First Church of Detroit entitled “Prostitution—a Viable Alternative Life Style?”

After Metro Singles died, BUC was again without a singles group. Carol Glass, a church activist found herself single in1981 and formed a group. No formal membership, but they gathered for brunch in restaurants once a month.

After Glass’s group faded away, the Rev. Joe Bartlet arrived in 1984 said, “There’s no singles’ group; someone should start one.” He asked Valerie Snook and Fred Straky, and this new group flirted with stability for a few more years.

After that group joined the choir eternal, Pat Kridler came back to BUC and conducted a seminar, “Living Well Single.” Kridler gave the singles’ idea a shot

of adrenaline, or more accurately, Geritol. Bob Bowen, no spring chicken himself, called this group "the geriatric singles" because most participants would not see 40 again unless reincarnated themselves. Bowen, then an eligible bachelor, offered his home for a party. Twenty women showed up and only a few men. Bowen said, "Now this is what I call a real party."

After that singles group, yet another came into being and went out of existence in the 1990s, and there are rumors at this book goes to press there is yet another one being conceived in the social hall coffee hour.

Unique Reruns

While the topic might be the same, the events themselves can be extremely different. Cinema Guild of the 1970s for example, was completely different when it was eventually reborn. "When I joined in 1990," said Darlene Karle, "there was a group that met and showed old classic movies. Some of the film was in pretty bad shape. Then Larry Wisniewski and I took over, and I selected films that were higher physical quality and had value as films. Then we added the Theatre Buffs as a spin-off for play-going all over Southeastern Michigan."

Bond! Do you Mean 007?

Some groups tend to have brief lives between reincarnations. Men's fellowship groups are a case in point, having appeared, died, reappeared, died, reappeared, etc., more often than Freddie in Friday the 13th movies.

The first men's group, for example, was the Laymen's League in the late 1950s. "The Laymen's League, or any of the men's groups, didn't last," said Hugh Brown, former Laymen's League member. "We were never sure why, as the women's group were always strong. Maybe men just didn't need as much socializing."

Success of a special interest group has little to do with longevity. Even the most ephemeral, like the men's clubs, served their purpose. Of the short-lived men's club of the 80s, for example, Rich Schreck recalls, "Our motto could have been '*Liberté, egalité, fraternité'* as we went out for dinner, attended ball games, and just talked about things important to men. Good friends resulted."

"Good friends resulted" may be all the explanation, or justification, special interest groups need. In sharing the scarcest of all life's commodities, time itself, people

socialize, play, laugh, and learn together. Living in those moments is, in itself, intrinsically rewarding. And if in social groups those moments accumulate and "good friends result," what more can be asked of a community, or of a life?

Chapter Eleven

Alliance: Women on the Move

by
Marj Taylor

"Don't shut yourself up in a bandbox because you are a woman, but understand what is going on, and educate yourself to take part in the world's work for it all affects you and yours."
Louisa May Alcott
Author and Unitarian

While the men were busy running the new church in 1953, the women were off doing their own little thing-– like founding an organization that would be the longest standing social and service group, and by far the greatest group source of income for the church over the next half century.

The seventeen founders defined the organization's purpose as "service and extension" -- "service" to the Birmingham Unitarian Church, community, and country; "extension" -- getting the Unitarian message out the church door and to the public.

Yet not attempting to reinvent the wheel, the group brought in Lois McColloch, a representative of the Unitarian's denomination-wide women's alliance, then called the General Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women. McColloch praised the founders and cautioned that "membership participation is more valuable than a series of speakers, no matter how expert the lecturers may be."

The Women's Alliance was officially installed May 5, 1954. Anne Perkins, the newly elected president, and her board gave the pledge: "Together we dedicate ourselves to the high callings of truth, the urgent needs for human service, and the responsibilities of freedom and the larger meaning of worship."

The Alliance immediately went into action to serve the church both for Sunday services and to host potluck suppers. The Sunday morning support consisted of providing flowers and a formal coffee after services.

Reflective of a more elegant time of long white gloves and equally spotless etiquette, the after-service coffee hour was rather refined. Charlotte Marshall, an Alliance stalwart, complained to church members, "We have all been delighted with the lovely tables which have been arranged lending an air of home-likeness. However, it has meant a lot of hard work and early morning rushing to produce this. Carrying a silver tea service is not easy to do."

She also added that the women on the committee served cookies or doughnuts, which were "time consuming to make and costly to buy." Soon the coffee hour was simplified by a less formal table, with church members serving themselves. The cookies, however, remained home baked, since this was the Betty Crocker era, and women wouldn't think of serving anything that wasn't fresh from the oven.

The Women's Alliance established several committees. The service committee, for example, collected children's books to be donated to the Baldwin Public Library, while the extension committee purchased pamphlets and leaflets to be given to persons desiring information about Unitarianism. Since books have always played an important part in Unitarians' lives, the Alliance set up a "Book Table" to sell Beacon Press books after church services. Much later, this effort became the "Book Shop" and later evolved into the "Book Store." Alliance realized a nice profit from this business venture, but more was needed. And the Alliance was ready to do much more.

Junk Accepted, Antiques Sold

The rummage sale became the seminal creation and permanent BUC tradition (and the subject of an entire chapter in this book). Kathryn Loomis was in charge of the first venture and, in character with her thorough approach, met with the rummage chairs of Temple Beth El, Christ Church Cranbrook, and the Presbyterian Church, carefully noting the proper procedure for a successful sale, then drawing up BUC's plan.

A room in the I.O.O.F. Lodge in Royal Oak, next to the Farmers' Market, was rented for two days for $35. Publicity went out to the local newspapers; posters were distributed; an announcement was made on a Pontiac radio station. Meanwhile, BUCers began their collecting. Charlotte Marshall, collection chair, stored rummage in her basement so that some of it could be marked before the sale; she had several station wagons available to deliver rummage to the hall on Wednesday.

On Thursday the sale began. "We let no customers in before 9 am," Loomis said. We had about twelve salespeople for morning and eight for after lunch. Some of these worked at the cashier's table, and a runner took money to the bank about three times during the day. Saleswomen wore men's white shirts as smocks. Good device-- neat, and customers could tell at a glance who were the salespeople.

“We blocked off the women's room with a merchandise table," Loomis said, "and let the sales staff use the men's toilet room, to the caretaker’s dismay!" When the sale ended, the women had made a profit of $1020.96, which was added to BUC's Building Fund.

Kathryn Loomis' advice for rummage sale publicity, to be "gay and rather breezy," was followed with great ingenuity in the years to come. In 1966 the *Birmingham Eccentric* ran a photograph of a forlorn dachshund sitting amidst a pile of boxes and stacks of household items. "Rusty Waits for Sale - Rummage Hides His Bed" read the headline, and then "Routed by Rummage Rusty Roams." The article goes on to tell how accumulated rummage had taken over the dog's space, displacing him. But there was a happy ending. The account continues to announce the details of the upcoming rummage sale, at which time Rusty would have his bed back. Dogs would factor into rummage sale publicity again in 1999, when the *Eccentric* featured an electric doghouse offered at the BUC sale.

The first rummage sale brought BUC its first $1000 of "rummage money." Hundreds of thousands more would be raised over the years. It was rummage money that helped pay off the second mortgage on the new church building. Rummage money furnished the interior, landscaped the grounds, and helped with needed maintenance. By 1999, rummage sales were all-church events, with more than 150 church members involved. Instead of one room, all available space at BUC was devoted to rummage, with sales bringing in close to $40,000 per year.

She Who Controls the Purse Strings…

Along with the rummage sale, Alliance had other fund raising events in the early years. In fact, by 1960 Alliance was the unofficial Ways and Means Committee for the church. Margaret Raney, president, wrote of this in her annual report:

"Our service projects have been almost entirely in the field of money-raising. We have had two rummage sales, a Christmas house tour, two theater parties, and will have a May Mart auction this month. These six affairs will show a net profit of at least $4000. When you consider that our Alliance membership and attendance averages about fifty women, this is a staggering sum to have raised."

Theater parties consisted of purchasing a block of tickets to sell and organizing a cocktail party before the show or an afterglow following the performance. Shirley Hodas chaired two parties in 1959-60 for "The Visit" and "Music Man." In 1962 the Women's Alliance and the Laymen's League, the men's group, bought out the house of the Birmingham Players' production of "The Pleasure of His Company." Neighborhood groups furnished the refreshments for the afterglow buffet table.

In the late 1950s, Christmas home tours were all the rage in the Birmingham community as a money-making activity for women's groups. Lucile Roehm and Charlotte Marshall chaired the Alliance Christmas Home Tour. Four members' homes were decorated and opened for viewing. Before the tour, Alliance members met several times a week to make Christmas decorations to offer for sale. More than 200 people attended this event, which raised $200 for the Alliance. But Christmas home tours and theater parties stopped when rummage sales grew larger and became Alliance's primary fund raiser.

As an ongoing service project, the Women's Alliance adopted a ward of 35 women in Hall G at the Pontiac State Hospital, an institution which cared for mentally ill patients. From nine to twelve Alliance members visited these women monthly and provided refreshments for a small party. Alliance members also collected cotton dresses one year so that each of the women would have something new to wear. A later effort produced 164 handmade stuffed animals to be sent to patients in the senile ward. Ted A. Panaretos, with the Pontiac State Hospital, said, "Being remembered is so important to the ladies and to all of us."

Working Women Align

In 1961 the Evening Service Group of the Women's Alliance was started. Betty Page, chair, described its origin: "We decided to try to organize some sort of group where working women and mothers of preschool children, unable to attend daytime meetings could render service within the denomination and community."

The first year the evening group made 35 handbags and 23 pillows for the "ladies" and mats and pictures for the walls of the hospital. They also collected warm clothing left over from the rummage sale to send to Spanish refugees in France. Finally, they bundled magazines to be sent to university libraries around the world.

The evening group had its own fundraisers. “We were most famous for two things," Dorothy Prier said about the Evening Alliance, "our stained glass candy and our spiced tea. We made the candy in the church kitchen. There were ten or twelve different flavors and colors. These were poured over powdered sugar and cut up. The candy looked beautiful, and it was wonderful to taste. We sold the candy and tea as a fund raiser after the church services. It was really hard work because we were such a small group."

The Evening Alliance used the money for a coffee urn for the Pontiac Hospital to heat water. Then they gave each patient a jar of instant coffee and tea bags so that she could have coffee or tea whenever she wished. They decorated shoe boxes and turned them into treasure chests filled with all kinds of personal items for the women. Even though they couldn't participate in the monthly daytime parties at the hospital, they could make contributions.

But not all endeavors were well received.

"When I was working as a social worker," Prier recalls, "I noticed that women who were mentally ill or suffering from alcoholism frequently didn’t have a bra. In fact, I saw one woman throw her bra into a waste basket. So I thought it would be a good idea if we gave bras to the women in our adopted ward. I asked the attendants to measure the women, and then I made the appropriate purchases in time for the daytime Alliance to take them as gifts to the Christmas party.

“Well, you should have heard the comments from the Alliance. I was so embarrassed. And I'm not even sure that the women in the hospital appreciated the gift." After hearing Prier's tale of woe, one Alliance jokester declared that the whole project was a "complete bust."

Another community project undertaken by the Alliance was the evening study center for 5th and 6th grade pupils at the George Washington Carver Elementary School in Royal Oak Township. The center operated two nights a week for two hours in an eight-week fall session and a ten-week winter session. Not only did

the Alliance support the center with a monetary contribution, but they also arranged for thirty volunteer tutors from BUC.

BUC's Significant Others

Charity begins at home, and the Women's Alliance was especially generous in furnishing BUC. Ingenuity often played a part here. Helen Haas, an Alliance president, started collecting the trading stamps given by local merchants to customers. When a certain number was acquired, the stamps could be traded for merchandise. She appealed to the congregation for help.

Constance Crossman recalled the results: "Owing to the generosity of church members, the collection produced the following articles: seven electric clocks for RE, an electric 32-cup percolator, an electric clock for the kitchen, a wall can opener, a covered roasting pan, a 12-quart sauce pan, and eight kitchen towels." Other interior projects included buying carpeting, chairs, tables, and draperies.

Not only did the Women's Alliance furnish BUCs interior, but they dug in on the grounds. Alliance women supervised the landscaping, maintained the flower beds, and weeded the myrtle ground cover.

From grubbing in the yard to formal attire at a Christmas tea, the Women's Alliance incorporated an active and exceedingly broad community life.

The late sixties and early seventies were times of great social upheaval in the United States. Along with student revolutions, marches for racial equality, and anti-war protests, the feminist movement was in full swing. The women had come out of the kitchen to reclaim their own names. Early Alliance records listed members by their husbands' names; but now, Mrs. Tom Edwards, Mrs. Robert Dearth became Birdie Edwards and Gina Dearth. This time of social change was a time of stress for the Women's Alliance. In fact, it came close to collapsing.

"In the first of the seventies," member Connie Crossman remembered, "the Alliance was having trouble attracting women to its meetings. BUC women were so interested in projects of their own that they could not seem to find the time to serve as officers or take on another meeting or task.

"BUC was not alone. Other churches were finding the same difficulties. They all suddenly realized that no longer was 'the ladies aid' the only social and

economic outlet for women, especially in and around larger urban centers. Many women were involved in jobs as well as being housewives and mothers."

At BUC, women were assuming greater roles and responsibilities. They were chairing all-church social action committees and serving on the board of trustees. BUC elected its first woman president, Diane Sharples, in 1975. Community service projects previously done by the Women's Alliance were now the tasks of other church committees, such as the Social Action Committee, Outreach Committee, and Project Friendship.

The Alliance reached a low point 1972 when the nominating committee could not fill the slate of officers for the following year. The remaining members called a “desperation meeting” to consider the possibility of disbanding the organization.

Several women of this small group were determined to keep things going. Janet Jentzen and Julie Davock stepped up, agreeing to co-chair, and the group concluded that if the Women’s Alliance were going to be viable, it would have to change.

They would focus on better programs. Riding the trend of interest in personal growth, the program co-chairs Erma Butterworth and Donitza Smith initiated several workshops and study groups designed to draw women back.

Pat Kridler launched a fourteen-week workshop on "Life Planning" and another on "Death and Dying," a topic seldom talked about in polite society. The interest was so great that Bob Marshall presented a sermon on the topic. And Alliance initiated dinner discussion groups for BUC, which attracted about eighty people, who enjoyed meeting in small groups to share a meal and discuss timely topics.

The 1974 program lineup began with salad-tasters’ luncheon, or potluck salad bar, a popular tradition that would be repeated each September until 1988. The Alliance began holding its meetings in the newly-built Pavilion. “The relaxed atmosphere contributed immeasurably to the mood and camaraderie,” noted President Janet Jentzen. Things began to turn around.

A series of programs on education especially appealed to young mothers.. And with mothers came their children. While child care had been offered for Alliance events since 1961, it now took two or three sitters to care for all the little ones.

Eventually child care was offered every week, even when there was no Alliance-sponsored activity. With this “Mothers’ Day Out” program, women could drop off their kids and go shopping, or even out to lunch, while their children were being cared for. Unfortunately, this popular service ran into trouble. One afternoon while the Board of Health was inspecting a nursery school that was renting space at BUC, they noticed the sign for "Moms’ Day Out."

"You're breaking the law," they said. "It's all right for a church to have child care if the parents are on the premises, but you can't do it if the parents are off the grounds; then you're running a day care center, and you need a license for that."

While the daytime Alliance was returning to life, the Evening Alliance was winding down. Meetings at BUC were discontinued, except for a shared brown-bag supper the first Monday of every rummage week. Eight of the "regulars" continued meeting informally in homes. They later attempted to revive the group at BUC, but this revival lasted only a few years, as more women chose to attend another evening group, Women and Religion.

In 1975 the "Women's Alliance" dropped the word "Women" from its name, in keeping with the national struggle for equal rights. Men had always been welcome visitors at Alliance meetings, but now they could become members. The purpose of Alliance was stated on the cover of its annual report: "The Alliance is an organization which helps improve the quality of life for ourselves and others. While not excluding men, it focuses on and is supportive of women." Although this statement may not sound particularly welcoming to men, Alliance did enlist several each year. The first man to join was minister Bob Marshall.

Allowing men to officially join their ranks may have been inspired by Clark Hallock, who was BUCs number-one coffee maker. Hallock had faithfully taken over the preparation of the Sunday morning coffee, a task previously performed by the women. Hallock also made the coffee for the rummage sales and other church functions. "I like to do it," he said, "and it's a way I can help." Hallock and his wife Nan helped BUC in another way, too. Following their deaths, their generous bequest to the church was the beginning of BUCs endowment fund.

Over the years, Alliance meetings have always featured a variety of entertaining and thought-provoking programs. And at each meeting the planners would have a passing moment of panic: What if the speaker failed to show up? This

ultimate fear became a reality in 1978. Rabbi Sherwin Wine was scheduled to speak at the February meeting, but he was nowhere to be seen. The women waited and waited, but he never showed up.

He later said he'd lost our date in a transfer of appointments to a new date book. When Wine appeared at the rescheduled meeting a month later, he claimed that he had been detained by a UFO.

Rabbi Wine became a popular and frequently scheduled speaker at Alliance meetings. Only once was his popularity challenged, and that was when Gundella the Witch also appeared on the year's program. However, the same UFOs must have been at work, for Gundella never returned, but Rabbi Wine continued to be an Alliance highlight.

Driving Ms. Daisies

Not all programs were confined to BUC. Janet Sherman had access to a free bus for the group to use, and the women stepped out together all over town. "It was lots of fun," Susie Safford, past Alliance president, recalled. "We were always out and about. We visited an herb garden, Cranbrook, Kirk in the Hills, Meadowbrook, Detroit Historical Museum, Detroit Institute of Arts, the historic homes of Romeo -- we did a lot of high stepping."

Former Alliance president, Lorene Rever, remembers some especially "high stepping," a Christmas party at the Whitney, one of the oldest and finest palatial mansions of Detroit's lumber baron era. "The Whitney party was the biggest turnout in Alliance history," Rever said. "There were lots of people, and lots of people spending time at the bar. We sure had fun."

Two other BUC women's groups, Women and Religion and the Evening Alliance, joined the Alliance in sponsoring several evening programs. Martha Griffiths, Michigan's Lt. Governor, was the speaker in 1984 and talked about Women's Role in Politics. In another year, Susan Watson of the *Detroit Free Press*, told about her life as a writer. Especially motivating was the address delivered in 1991 by Maryann Mahaffey, President of Detroit City Council, who spoke on "The Future of Detroit -Where Are We All Going?" Mahaffey's suggestions on how residents in the suburbs could help people in Detroit led to the establishment of BUCs partnership with the Ravendale community. This continuing project takes BUCers into Detroit to help neighborhood residents improve their area.

The recession of the early 80s saw many young mothers returning to the work force, leaving fewer free to attend a daytime program. Alliance slowly shifted, and by the decade’s end, nearly all who attended the programs were retired. Senior members had more time for leisurely lunches, which Alliance realized by 1989. Thereafter they began offering complimentary luncheons at all meetings. That same year the “Alliance Rummage Sale” was changed to the “All-Church Rummage Sale,” acknowledging the church-wide nature of the event. In this vein, to lessen the reliance on rummage money to fund their monthly meetings, Alliance began charging a nominal fee for their lunches.

Alliance, in fact, adopted a whole new philosophy on distributing its money. Up to that point Alliance had kept money from the rummage sales in their own treasury to be doled out to worthy causes and to BUC as needed. If the mortgage came due and the church was low on funds, Alliance was there. If the furnace needed fixing or the parking lot needed paving, Alliance wrote a check. "We were like a crisis account," Safford remembers. "When things were needed, people turned to the Alliance."

The Alliance board realized that the church could not operate in this fashion. Some areas were in greater need of funding than others. Decisions on spending should be made by the BUC board, as they were in a better position to see the total picture. Much discussion ensued, as some women were understandably reluctant to relinquish their role as benevolent benefactor. But when the vote was taken, the Alliance agreed to turn rummage sale income over to the church to be used as needed.

"I was really proud of that decision," Safford said.

The Alliance kept funds for the kitchen because after decades of luncheons, they were entirely at home on that range. An up-to-date kitchen was of great importance to the women. Their first proposed purchase was an automatic dishwasher. No more hand washing of coffee cups. An opposing view was expressed by Ann Van Veen. “We can do it using the Girl Scout method," she claimed. She then went on to explain how the Girl Scouts would add a disinfectant to their dish water while at camp. "It's every bit as effective as a dishwasher and not as expensive," was her argument.

When the final vote was taken, the Girl Scouts and environmentalists lost, and the church got an automatic dishwasher.

In the decade to come, Alliance continued to add to kitchen supplies by purchasing serving bowls, silverware, towels, punch bowls, table cloths, and the like. They also kept track of the inventory. Likewise, the kitchen fund continued to grow until it was capped at $14,000. When BUC begins work on a vastly improved kitchen for the year 2000, this Alliance money will come in handy.

The most dedicated member of Alliance of the 90's was Ann Throop. Whether in the kitchen slicing fruit or standing in front of the group introducing guests, Throop has been the spark plug that has kept Alliance going. She started in Evening Alliance, serving as the president of that group. Upon retiring from the business world, she joined the daytime Alliance, eventually becoming its president.

During Throop's administration an all-church Rummage Committee was formed to manage the rummage sales. Like a parent watching a child go off into the world, Alliance was somewhat wistful, but heaved a sigh of relief. The rummage sale had become big business, requiring hundreds of workers, clearly a task beyond the capabilities of one small group. But Alliance's touch is still there as it continues to handle the bookkeeping and provide volunteer workers. And the chair of the new Rummage Committee? Ann Throop, of course.

“Alliance, by definition, means a partnership,” Ann said. “Our Alliance has lived up to the full meaning of its name. We’ve been solid partners with the church and with the larger community. We’ve lived in this partnership for almost 50 years, and will continue to do so in the future.”

At the turn of the millennium, the Alliance still serves, not only food for the body, but for the mind and soul, as well. With 57 members in 1999, the Alliance continues to be a significant community of friends who enjoy being together, thus enriching themselves and the church.

And the future? Well, the Alliance has lived and served through several futures, and the next one is unlikely to find these innovative women any less prepared.

Chapter Twelve

Treasuring Trash

by
Cathie Breidenbach

"Life is a great bundle of little things."
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.
Physician, Author, Unitarian

The Catholics have high holidays, the Moslems Ramadan, and BUC has the rummage sales. The church's spring and fall calendars revolve around the rummage sales, events of such magnitude and high-spirited communion as to be as close as this church comes to sacrament.

Begun as a fund raiser by the Women's Alliance in 1956, the rummage sale has grown into two week-long annual rituals, a time to put Unitarian values into practice and, above all, to commune in a common cause.

To the uninitiated, the event is bizarre. Words cannot describe the ordered chaos of a week-long rummage sale. Tens of thousands of items, from used clothing to couches and computers, are crammed into eight rooms and spread across the church's central courtyard like remnants of a shopping center explosion.

Workers wearing men's white shirts as smocks carry and sort and rearrange for four days. Then three days of public sales begin as thousands swarm, pick, barter, and buy… leaving a trail of discarded hangers and broken bric-a-brac in their wake. The frantic week culminates on the final Saturday sale, which Susie Safford, a rummage veteran, calls "the day of the locusts, when they descend on the church, devour everything in sight, and move on."

Sounds like a lot of work and confusion, and it is. Yet the lure of the rummage sale is mysteriously compelling. There is the satisfaction of achieving order out of a chaos, of recycling on a meaningful scale, of fund raising, social connections, and the chance, the enticing possibility, of finding a bit of treasure amidst the trash.

Whatever the reasons, nothing else in the life of the church commands so devout a following. Former BUC members who have moved hundreds of miles away make

the twice-a-year pilgrimage back to work on the sale. Many who are not even church members religiously attend for those two weeks a year to be a part of this festive, capitalistic frenzy.

What a Difference 16,000 Days Make

It is difficult to see how the massive undertaking in 1999 evolved out of the modest event in 1956, at a time when BUC was itself homeless, renting space in the Upton School in Royal Oak.

In 1956, someone in the newly formed Women's Alliance suggested a rummage sale as a ways-and-means project. Yet Upton School was not available for such doings, which meant a rummage sale would be tantamount to holding a garage sale without a garage, from the trunk of a car, or many cars.

With the tireless Kathryn Loomis as chair, the Women's Alliance rented the Odd Fellows Hall for two days in October. Actual publicity for the sale, however, had begun the previous spring with announcements in the church newsletter asking members to start saving up their castoffs. Charlotte Marshall, collection chair, offered her basement to store these goodies.

Janet Patterson, who has worked all but two rummage sales, recalled her first experience. "Everyone brought their rummage to Upton School on Sunday and transferred it to station wagons that took it to be stored in the basements of several members. We priced all the items we could in our basements before the sale."

The effort was great, but so was the reward. Loomis recalled, "We made slightly more than one thousand dollars, to our delight and wonderment." An amazing amount of money for the mid-fifties.

Members of the Women's Alliance were pleased. But Ruth Silbar, who made hooked rugs, was even more excited by what she saw as an opportunity to increase sales to rug hookers. She offered to take any unsold wool garments, remove the linings, wash the woolens in hot water, and get them in condition to be sold to the rug hookers by the pound at the next rummage sale. "Humpf," commented Loomis, "sounds like incredible drudgery, but I think we should take her up on it." No record exists as to whether Silbar followed through on her idea.

In the fall of 1959, when the church finally got a home at Woodward and Lone Pine, the Women's Alliance had visions of much grander rummage sales. Now

rummage became a week-long undertaking. Everyone began bringing in their donated items immediately after church on the Sunday before the sale. Then the Alliance, along with other BUC helpers, had the entire week to set up and conduct the sale. They also had to be careful to have all traces removed and the rooms clean again for the next Sunday morning service.

Anything Goes

During the 60's some valuable lessons were learned about the ever-present threat that whatever wasn't nailed down might be sold off. Plants got "Not for Sale" signs posted on them, and everything else that the church would like to keep was tucked away or locked up. That didn't always work. One year the minister’s shoes and the church's brand new vacuum cleaner were sold by overly enthusiastic workers.

Tony Hardesty, long time rummager, vividly recalled the most frightening "almost-sold" story. During the 1967 fall rummage, she had brought her two-month-old son, Alex, along in his buggy. He was sleeping quietly with blankets tucked around him as his mother sorted in the Social Hall. When she turned around to check on him... the buggy was gone. A panicked search found Alex, still sleeping in his buggy, in the Blue Door room with all of the dolls and toys.

"Some worker thought he was a doll baby in a buggy and took him to the blue door to be sold," Hardesty laughed. "Luckily, no one had put a price on him yet."

After that, mothers put all the children and their assorted toys in the center of the Social Hall, then surrounded them with piles and bags of rummage to keep them corralled and out of trouble. The Alliance soon provided free child care so mothers would not have to worry about their babies being sold while they worked.

Other traditions evolved. Dedicated workers brought brown-bag lunches to eat in the social hall amid the piles of clothes. One day Shirley Schlorff brought a casserole to share, and that was the beginning of a tradition of communal rummage lunches. Since most of the workers at that time were young mothers isolated at home with small children, the free child care and lunches offered participant perks and breaks from the home child-care routine.

Trashy Entertainment

And a significant part of the fun was in promoting the rummage sale during the Sunday morning church announcements. Quite often music would be involved with an official "trash song." Shirley Schlorff recalls singing these parodies:

"During the time I was church soloist in the early 70s, Jean Mehlenbacher wrote songs for me to sing on the Sunday before rummage Sunday. It was intended, I'm sure, to get people to start sorting through their belongings and bag them for the following Sunday. Jean was phenomenal! I remember especially her rewriting of the famous 'Jealousy' to 'Rummage Sale,' which Barbara played and I sang with great Spanish gusto:

Rummage Sale!
My gosh, it's the rummage sale...

And to the 'Whiffenpoof Song,' I sang:

From the shelves down in your basement
To the halls of BUC
Come the clothes and shoes and hats we sell so well..."

Shirley Schlorff's loyalty to the rummage sale knew no limits. Even after she and her husband Bob retired and moved away, they continued to come back twice each year to join the workers who are pricing and sorting.

Other rummage announcements to the congregation were done in skits or often by a rummage fashion show. Bob Marshall regularly modeled his latest rummage suit from the pulpit. One year Pat Schwing appeared wearing a barrel, explaining that she simply had "nothing to wear" and was anxiously awaiting the next rummage sale to find a new wardrobe.

Rummage grew as an event, but despite its increasing size, the sale week remained informal and laid back in the 70s, a legacy of start-up informality mixed with the flower-power spirit remaining from the 60's.

Three-Ring Circus without Rings

One of the advantages of working at rummage was that members had the first opportunity to find and buy the best stuff. Yet the process was completely

unstructured. The honor system prevailed. Participants paid for their purchases simply by putting money in a cash box in the social hall kitchen. Of course, everyone knew where the cash box was.

Sorting through one another's discards produced some social blunders. Susie Safford recalled when Penny Hackett Evans, who would later become a UU minister, was working the intake table. A volunteer held up a worn, tattered bathrobe. She complained about the "absolute junk" some people gave to rummage. Evans said, "Wait a minute. That was my favorite bathrobe. I wore it last night."

Multiple Personalities

A doctoral thesis in psychology could come out of watching the ways church members relate to rummage. Some workers disdain the dust and rust of other people's discarded possessions, while others come to work with a shopping list in the backs of their minds. One may be on the lookout for a salad bowl her daughter needs for that first student apartment, while another looks for ski poles for the daredevil who broke his last season.

Personalities are as openly on display as the rummage. Some workers serve as runners, transporting goods from intake to departments, working a little here, a little there as rummage vagabonds. Others move into a department, put down roots, and work that department year after year.

Judy Arkell, a fabric artist, worked linens for many years to hunt for cast-off lace and fabrics. Every year Joanne Wentworth, in her gloves and rummage hat, tirelessly sorts at the intake table in the Social Hall; Anne Armstrong prices posh clothes at the Good Stuff Boutique, and Stephanie Greer arranges purses, hats, and scarves. In past years Millie Carmichael organized the shoe department; Gil and Dolores Dalrymple ran the book department; Chris Baker created and posted signs everywhere; and Janet Jentzen and Mae Willinghanz managed the housewares department.

A cadre of men gravitate to the "guy things." Len Johnson faithfully tests and displays TVs, computers, clocks, toaster ovens, and other contraptions in the electronics department. Ron Leinweber concentrates on the arrangement of "gentlemen's finer garments."

Anthropomorphic Trashology

Anthropologists who dig in garbage pits to read a culture could do equally well by attending a BUC rummage sale. Fondue pots and crock pots showed up in housewares about a decade after they were marketed as essentials for the good life. The cycle from state-of-the-art to destined-for-the-dump seemed to take less time as America gained affluence. Manual typewriters were common in sales of the 70s; then electric typewriters appeared in the rummage of the 80s; and last year's computers appeared in the 90s sales.

Cast off clothes provide another window to view a changing culture. Rummage workers reminisce about the good old days when ladies wore hats and gloves to church and men wore ties. Hats and gloves, de rigueur attire in the 50s, appeared in rummage a decade later. Bell-bottoms from the 60s showed up in droves in the late 70s. Nehru jackets and polyester suits passed into rummage in the 80s. Ties widened, narrowed, grew loud then conservative, in a shifting kaleidoscope of styles.

Some of those outdated styles, however, did find buyers and occasionally under peculiar circumstances. Sue Boyce tells the following story.

"This happened about two years ago," Sue recalled. "Our middle son, Geoff, a teenager, had discovered rummage as a great source for clothing. He was checking out, exclaiming over the great trench coat and pork-pie hat he had found. Dan had come to pick Geoff up and exclaimed, 'Why, those are MY hat and coat!' The check-out ladies were so tickled that they gave Geoff a 'deal' on the price. Now Geoff checks out his father's donations to rummage before they go to church."

More Stuff; Fewer Stuffers

More changes came to the rummage sale. In the early 1980s, church women, with most of their children in school, were taking jobs outside the home. The number of Alliance members available to staff the rummage sale was decreasing. Meanwhile the mountain of plastic bags awaiting sorting continued to grow. The church had added a new foyer and commons, which meant more room for rummage sale expansion... more stuff coming in like an avalanche to fill every available space.

By the late 80s the difficulty in finding workers reached a critical point with no one willing to chair the gargantuan event. By default, the president of Alliance was stuck chairing the sale. Rummage ran on automatic pilot for a year or two.

The Saints Come Marching In

In times of trouble, saints surface. Susie Safford, Pan Godchaux, and Rebecca Bottoms qualify as the UU saints who took charge of rummage when no one else would. Although not officially "in charge," Bottoms handled the pre and post-sale ordering and organizing. She would be there almost daily and on Thursday evenings to lock up. Safford and Godchaux circulated among departments resolving problems and ordering chaos all day long, all week long. During this period, doomsday rumors circulated about the impossibility of running such a large sale with a dwindling crew of workers.

Great efforts were made to ease these difficulties. Susie Safford remembered, "A couple of times we didn't have enough workers to staff the checkouts in each of the doors, so we consolidated the rummage into a smaller space that fewer people could oversee."

Another help was putting the Religious Education Committee in charge of the Silent Auction. "The Silent Auction," Safford said, "was the one remaining department we needed someone to oversee, but we couldn't get volunteers. So we came up with the idea to offer it to a group in the church as a money maker for them."

As the sales became larger, and finding leadership became more difficult, the Alliance board members began to feel like they were on a treadmill. They wanted to be something more than a "Rummage Committee." The only logical solution for saving BUCs main fund raiser was for Alliance to transfer the entire operation to the church community.

Alliance took this idea to the Long Range Planning Committee, which formed an all-church rummage task force. After studying the matter and planning for the implementation of the new committee, Dorothy Modrack, Alliance past president and chair of the task force, presented the recommendation to the BUC Board.

New Cycle for Recycling

In 1997 an all-church rummage committee was formed, and rummage officially became an all-church event. Working women, many more men, and teens joined the stay-at-home moms and retirees to make rummage the biggest inter-generational church-family affair of the year.

The evolution of the rummage sale is a tale of problems solved. Free child care, convenient evening work hours, and family dinners are some of the solutions that have helped recruit a large cadre of workers. The result was a broader spectrum of participants. The shift was from young mothers to an all-ages work force.

In the mid-70s the Alliance hired three baby sitters every day of Rummage week, and the sitters were overrun with fretful babies and hyperactive toddlers. During the Spring 1999 Rummage Sale, one care giver sufficed for the one or two kids who needed watching a few mornings during the week.

The organizational task was made less arduous by dividing management between 13 committee chairs to cover everything from layaway to publicity. The youth joined in by working Sunday preparation. For many years youth also provided much of the muscle power during Saturday cleanup after the bag sale. Rebecca Bottoms recalls memorable cavorting at youth sleepovers following clean up when everyone dressed up in rummage leftovers - even guys in sequined gowns.

While patterns were changing, the fun side of the rummage tradition remained. Workers continued to wear the most outlandish rummage clothing during the week -- an exotic boa or a cowboy hat. One year word went out that a hat was the ticket to lunch and everybody obliged by wearing a baseball cap, sun bonnet, flower-festooned garden hat, or knit stocking cap.

Like Hangars in a Closet

And through it all, the rummage sale grew. By the late 90s rummage commandeered eight areas of the church, including the foyer (Silent Auction), the courtyard (everything imaginable), the gallery (books and jewelry), the blue door (toys and holiday decorations), the green door (housewares and electronics), the pavilion (men's wear), the red door (linens), and the social hall (women's, teens, and children's clothes).

As the sale grew, so did the logistics and the costs of sorting and transporting rummage. In 1988 the committee began renting a 24-foot truck to pick up large, ungainly items like sofas and stoves (or the Yugo automobile Jane Ronca donated to one sale) and to transport rummage for those who are unable to bring it in themselves. They also began renting a giant dumpster to swallow the mounds of trash the sale generates.

And the revenues grew apace. The first rummage sale in 1956 netted $1,020.96. By the late 70s, rummage sales were bringing in $8,000 to $9,000. The 1982 Alliance annual report spoke of the challenge of breaking the $10,000 mark. Then, with enlarged facilities and new approaches, profits again rose. And by the spring of 1999, a record was set with a single rummage sale grossing $22,000.

While the money is always a welcome addition to the church budget, the greater value of the sales is that in the midst of this massive recycling of material goods, rewards of a far less tangible nature are found. People connect. They trade quips and personal memories while sorting juice glasses, hanging suits, and lining up outgrown baby strollers.

Rebecca Bottoms said, "Rummage allows us to see people we wouldn't normally see because the church is split between two services. We work together, and over the years a fondness develops."

And from it all has evolved a new status symbol, perhaps found in no other place. During coffee hour on any Sunday morning at BUC, someone may say, "What a sharp looking sweater." The answer you'll hear is, "Oh, do you like it? I got it at the rummage sale."

Chapter Thirteen
Women and Religion

by
Elaine Williams

"We have a hunger of the mind which asks for knowledge of all around us. The more we gain, the more we desire. The more we see, the more we are capable of seeing."
Maria Mitchell
Astronomer and Unitarian

Necessity is the mother of invention. In the late 70s, a great number of women who might, or might not be mothers, were faced with the necessity of re-inventing themselves.

The traditional roles of care-giver, selfless mom, and "the little woman" no longer were adequate. The pill had given women control over their own bodies, and declining family incomes and more single households fostered a need to work outside of the home. Amidst this turmoil, feminists were asking women the disturbing question -- "who are you, and what do you really want?"

With this backdrop, a group of young BUC women had come together to read and write poetry. As a natural consequence of self-exploration, they discussed ways of expanding their dialogue. Chris Hillman spoke of a recent resolution at the UUA General Assembly to encourage "Women and Religion" groups, to provide women an opportunity to explore individual and collective spirituality and to better understand and experience feminist thought.

At the poetry reading, Karen Schreck volunteered to take the concept of establishing a Women and Religion circle to the BUC board. It received the board's full endorsement, and BUC's Women and Religion group came into being.

Marilyn Mast recalls the early days. She said, "Our initial meetings were held on Saturday mornings, which was quite a commitment on the part of each woman."

Yet based on the diversity of the first meetings, the need was universal. Mast recalled, "It was remarkable. The age range was wide and varied. Some women

worked outside their home, others worked in their home. Some had young children, some were grandmothers, some had no children. Some were single, some married, some divorced, and some were retired.

“Women and Religion did not fit any mold. It was startling and breathtaking to experience the freedom we each discovered and the support we offered each other.”

Free at Last

Women and Religion provided BUC women moments where they could examine not only what it meant to be feminine, but what it meant to be "authentically feminine," to experience themselves fully as women, and, at the same time, to be strong, independent individuals whose power and authority were rooted within themselves. It was the quest to fulfill these deeply felt needs that was the soul, and the heart, of Women and Religion throughout the years.

Mast remembers that from inception, it was a place where a women could "own and share" a point of view.

“For some women, it was the first time they could express and find support and comfort for a self-view that was non-traditional," she said, adding: "It was all right, in other words, to be different from how women ‘should’ be.”

For some of the women, this was the first time they were free of the culture-bound meanings of their femininity, allowing them to explore a wealth of other values. Thus Women and Religion played a vitally important role in allowing each woman to re-imagine the feminine in her unique and emerging manner.

For Chris Hillman participation proved vital. In the mid-80s Chris was in the midst of her third pregnancy. She was at high-risk, having lost her first two babies, and had been given strict instructions by her physician for rest, restricted activity.

Hillman said, "I could not stand the thought of missing any meetings, yet I was terribly uncomfortable. I remember Karen Schreck bringing a lawn chair for me to sit in. As my difficult pregnancy continued, and I continued coming to the meetings, the women began to sing, chant and dance all around me. This was the first time I really saw what women could do together. We studied, played, worshipped and did ritual together---we made a profound difference in each other’s lives.”

A Night to Remember

Perhaps the strongest established tradition created by the Women and Religion was Twelfth Night. The name comes from the Feast of the Epiphany, a Greek word meaning to "show forth." And that's precisely what they did at BUC. The celebrations have brought women together, to enjoy a meal, to share creative moments of contemplation and connection.

It was not unusual at the all-women Twelfth Night event to find two or three generations of women from the same family attending the gathering. Women danced, drummed, read poetry, sang, told stories and were endlessly creative in celebrating each other.

Of Service

In 1983, the members of Women and Religion gave public voice to their awakening insights and consciousness at the first of many Sunday services. Entitled "Dream of a Common Language," it marked the place in their journey that would lead to the removal of sexist language in the church hymnals.

Marilyn Mast recalled another service which grew out of the death of one of the members in the circle. In the service women explored friendship, its nature, its various depths, its heart. And there were creative Sunday services, such as a dramatization of the friendship between Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The death of a number of women of Women and Religion gave everyone pause to reflect on all the little deaths each woman had experienced on her journey to wholeness, little deaths being a letting go of the person she was taught to be, whom others wanted her to be, and even the person she thought she wanted to be. Each woman came and joined the vision quest, the search for her new eyes. It was a profound transformational experience for most. As author Francois Feleon described the experience, it was: "When you come to be sensibly touched, the scales will fall from your eyes; and by the penetrating eyes of love you will discern that which your other eyes will never see."

Throughout the eighties and nineties, Women and Religion organized at least one Sunday service a year. Women spoke on such passionate themes as peace, women's history, the gifts of age, immanence of the Goddess, wisdom, freedom, and more. Organizing and sharing at Sunday services provided a way of reflecting,

and giving meaning to the deep conversations and experiences they shared with each other in their meetings.

Rebecca Pott summed it up when she said, "Women and Religion was an opportunity for me to experience and share the Goddess within the sisterhood of spirit. For our services, we were able to articulate our journeys and expand their possibilities for the entire congregation."

Awareness did not come easily for many at BUC, yet many played a role in raising consciousness. Bob Marshall created a Sunday drama where he was a seminarian forced to think of God as a woman. Marj Taylor played the head of the seminary, and the entire script shattered and challenged the patriarchal view of religion.

Explorers All

Exploring spirituality took the women of Women and Religion on many uncharted paths. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Women and Religion focused its meetings on the current issues of the times, including the environment, abortion, handgun control, feminine theology, and more. Numerous book discussions occurred.

Passionate readings included Nor Hall's *The Moon and the Virgin*, May Sarton's poetry and essays, and Stephanie Demetra-Kopoulaos' *Listening to Our Bodies: the Rebirth of Feminine Wisdom*.

Five programs were held and devoted to the study of the *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* curriculum, a program designed to help women explore and reclaim female religious history. In 1988, Dorothy Prier chaired a day-long program of film, luncheon, and discussion. Jan Andrews, Betty Appleton, Jan Evans-Tiller, Chris Hillman, and Karen Schreck each presented an aspect of the goddess curriculum.

While BUC's Women and Religion circle engaged in such self-study, Penny Hackett-Evans took a leading role in creating a wider vision for them by encouraging their involvement and participation at the UU continental and state Women and Religion conferences.

In 1985, Women and Religion sponsored Dr. Agnes Mansour as an evening speaker for the entire BUC community and joined in support of Chapin Crane's sponsorship of Starhawk, nationally known lecturer and author on peace and social issues. Through 1988, attendance and participation at the Annual Spring Conference

sponsored by the Chapin-Crane Women and Religion team was a regular, yearly activity for the members of BUC's Women and Religion.

Women and R & R

Not all serious study, the group also became a social outlet. Women gathered to celebrate each other as they entertained each other in their homes, had swim parties, and enjoyed summer and winter solstice celebrations and festive Christmas parties. Some members traveled to Pennsylvania for a white-water rafting trip and later conducted an early-morning bird watch and canoe trip followed by breakfast in the park.

Art became an important expression of the talents and personal gifts of the Women and Religion. Elaine Morse arranged a quilt show which hung in the Social Hall during the 1988 holiday season, and she shared her poetry with the entire congregation. During this same period, the group sponsored a six-session Art and Spirituality workshop led by Penny Hackett-Evans and Lois Robbins.

By the late 80s Women and Religion expanded their social commitments, some of which involved participation in the twice yearly rummage sale at the church, the promotion and contribution of books to the Sophia Lyons Fahs Reading Room (behind the yellow door), and yearly gifts to the Haven of Oakland County's program for victims of domestic violence.

Women and Religion also focused on political and social concerns into the 1990s. The church's hosting of the South Oakland Shelter gave the group a perfect opportunity for service as they hosted a portion of the shelter project. Many were equally involved in the creation and presentation of an Earth Day celebration, while others co-sponsored the program "Victims of the Media" with the Alliance.

Woven throughout the group's experience was a common thread which Renay Dillon captured in saying, "Women and Religion gave me something I could not get anywhere else. It challenged me to think in totally different ways-- ways which spoke to the growing awareness and the deep emotion I was experiencing, but for which I could not receive validation from anywhere else."

Unbroken Circle

As the 90s progressed, the women of W & R, through study, dialogue and coming together, seeded the notion that we can only know our position in society and its

attendant traditions and history if we know our mothers, our heritage, those who came before us. Women began to realize the importance of "remembering" our significance, our reality, our relationship to earth, to society, and to each other.

In 1991, Women and Religion met monthly to discuss Elizabeth Dodson Gray's edition of *The Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experiences*. Women began to look at the sacred events of everyday life. This led to more reading and discussion, including Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ's new edition of essays on feminist spirituality, *Weaving the Visions*. By March of 1992, four members of BUC's Women and Religion, Annis Pratt, Rebecca Pott, Gisela Vief, and Elaine Williams gave what was now the traditional Women and Religion Sunday service. This one was entitled, "Power from Within: Women and Work".

One of Women and Religion's significant moments occurred in 1993, when they sponsored the showing of a trilogy of films, "Goddess Remembered," "Burning Times," and "Full Circle," produced by Donna Read of Montreal, Canada. The movie, and the discussion which followed, drew more than a hundred women.

Women began to breathe in the strength of the feminine. The trilogy of stages of women's lives, maiden, mother, and crone, allowed each woman to see and feel the texture of their connection to the natural world, to their intuition, and to the many opportunities daily life allow women to bring the sacred into their present moments. The whole notion of the Goddess helped each woman realize how her inner life was her place of "knowing."

Among the many readings, one especially stood out. Clarissa Pinkola Estes' book, *Women Who Run with Wolves* became the theme of monthly meetings for more than two years. Women could not put this book down. Even Twelfth Night in 1995 took on the energy of Estes' stories, as "La Loba" and "The Vasalisa Story" were told by Renay Dillon and Elaine Williams and interpreted in dance by Dawn Ingram-Rigley.

Another spiritual activity added to the program in 1993 was the drumming circle. This circle helped members realize that feminine growth is cyclic, not linear. Through activities, readings, and presentations, the group offered to each of its members what Barbara Rosalik called, "deep, deep universality of women's perspectives."

Women and Religion had served a vital role in the lives of many BUC women, yet with growth came independence, even from this self-actualization group. In 1996,

Women and Religion was unable to find anyone to become chairperson, so that became the last year of monthly meetings.

The group was dissolving like a fine melody, yet not before their music wafted out into the larger community. During the final year, many women attended from outside the BUC community. JoElyn Nyman was one of those non-members, who recalled how "Women and Religion offered me a circle where women of diverse backgrounds could find a common thread of support, understanding and a desire to grow."

In one final reprise, the Twelfth Night was revived in 1998, with the theme of "Bring Many Names," which was celebrated in music, art and intimate sharing. And then silence. The passing of Women and Religion perhaps was itself a passage, a transition from constraining roles and times, to new power, awareness, and self-actualized lives.

Women and Religion, like the beat of its drums, continues to echo in the daily lives of the women who attended the meetings, participated in the rituals, celebrations and services, and now "see" with new eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

Governance: The Greatest Good

by
Ed Sharples

"I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves."
Thomas Jefferson
U.S. President and Unitarian

Birmingham Unitarian Church was born of the most direct democracy-- a group sitting around a living room coffee table, voting with nods and words on a common course.

Whether they were conscious of it or not, the fledgling fellowship was following a well-defined Unitarian tradition of democratic governance. As Curt Vail, a BUC past president, said: "Unitarian Universalists have strong roots in New England--famous for the town meeting. Our annual meetings are in the town-meeting, free-society tradition in which membership sets its goals and provides the commitment of people and resources."

Throughout the life of BUC, the democratic principle has guided governance procedures that respect individuals, vest policy and functional issues in the Board of Trustees and direct decisions on large issues to our own town meetings—the annual and special meetings of the congregation.

Yet democratic process evolves slowly, and democratic decision-making requires equal amounts of patience, understanding and forgiveness. As Winston Churchill, who knew the highs and lows of democracy, said, "Democracy is the worst of governments—except for all the rest!"

Since a democracy is an expression of us, it must include ways to change, to grow and, one can hope, to evolve. For example, in the 1950s, church documents reflected social norms and the universal practice then of using male pronouns to represent both sexes. In 1965, Board President Peter Finn reported to the annual meeting that BUC "provides a meaningful program oriented toward the betterment of man's relationship to man." Humanity was clearly a "he."

Yet a more enlightened church leadership in 1976 changed the constitution "to affirm our belief in the equal treatment of persons of either sex…." Five years later, the board approved revision of hymnals "to a more inclusive and degenderized text…."

That was a significant departure from the Ozzie and Harriet tone of the Historical Committee in 1967, a year in which the board sought to bring order to boxes of files. It was suggested that the task could be handled by "one or two persons (preferably devoted women)..." And it may be more than coincidence that 1975 was the year Diane Sharples became the first woman president of the Board, shattering the glass ceiling.

So the rules we write for ourselves as communities, our constitutions, should be like children's clothes, selected a size or so larger to serve anticipated growth.

Constitutional Conventions

The first BUC constitution as adopted on May 9, 1958, was designed to cover growth while perpetuating democratic principles. The basic purpose of the church, the constitution concluded, is to "further individual freedom of religious belief through study, worship, service, work and recreation."

The original constitution required voters to have been members at least three months (not counting July and August, which were non-church holiday months for Unitarians in 1958). Individuals had to be over 18 years old to join. Membership could be terminated at a member's request or by the board of trustees if a person had "not communicated with the church for one year or longer."

The constitution was also designed to keep board membership an open option. It stipulated that office-holders as president, vice president, secretary and treasurer could not serve more than two successive years in one office and that anyone serving on the board five consecutive years would be ineligible to serve again "until after the expiration of one year." There would be no shadow of a person's lifetime leadership on the grounds of BUC!

Revolutionary Reforms

Traumatic events often initiate a re-thinking of one's constitution. That was certainly the impetus in 1962, when church membership split over the firing of the Rev. Lester Mondale, and nearly half the congregation left to form its own

fellowship. Some thought that perhaps a constitution which more precisely reflected the aspirations of the church community could help the church avoid hiring the wrong minister or suffering other horrors in the future.

So several key changes were made to the constitution. A more expansive and complete statement of purpose was added. The church's purpose became:

"To improve the quality of human life by maintaining a free church which seeks truth wherever it may be found; a church which strives for an interpretation of religion that is in harmony with modern knowledge, and that will satisfy the spiritual needs of men [sic] while doing justice to their intelligence."

The 1962 revisions lowered the minimum membership age to 17 years, changed the quorum from 25 members to 10 percent of the voting members or 50 members (whichever is less). And, of course, having split over a minister, it was not surprising that ministerial review would be significantly revamped.

"The tenure of the Minister," notes the added text, "shall not be called to question during the first two (2) years of his [sic] ministry nor twice in the space of twelve months, nor during the summer recess of church services; except in a meeting of the society called by a two-thirds (2/3) vote of the Board of Trustees."

The new language gave a new minister a chance to become familiar with the congregation and the congregation with the minister before degrees of success or failure could be evaluated. "It was a necessary change," said Jim Boyce, Board President from 1968 to 1969.

More changes were included the following year, mostly to assure openness of membership and voting rights. Proponents of the new, non-exclusionary text wanted assurance that people would not be turned away from church because of any social or other bias. Membership had been embedded in the constitution for those in good standing as of the adoption of the amended constitution of April 2, 1962 and for others who had joined since then, "expressing sympathy with the purposes of the society. . . " Language, as proposed for addition to the Membership and Voting section said, "These shall be the only criteria for membership, which shall otherwise be open to all persons without regard to race, ethnic background, citizenship, economic or social status, or credal tests."

Some were opposed to the amendment because they felt such an inclusive statement was to suggest past exclusions. It might be an admission of guilt in

previous membership criteria. After considerable debate, a clause was added --"As has been implicit throughout the history of this church" -- and the amendment was adopted.

Minister Not Monarch

In the best of all possible worlds, the minister of a church and the board of trustees operate as a harmonious team. But as Pangloss learned, this isn't the best of all possible worlds. Some differences in perspectives between the minister and popularly-elected board members are inevitable.

During Bob Marshall's many years as minister, for example, there was always contention on how to spend the church's discretionary funds. That was always changing because church income expands and contracts with the economies and the effectiveness of pledge drives.

While the budget accordion was playing local-issue melody, the background rhythm was support for the continental association. In the tension between budgeting UUA fair share dues and some support of General Assembly delegates on one side, and the funding of local social action projects on the other, the congregation was divided, and Bob Marshall often came down on the side of the local, not the Association’s side.

Bob Marshall, never terribly enthusiastic about the Unitarian Universalist headquarters which had resisted granting him a ministerial fellowship, or the association’s seal of approval, several times suggested an easy course of simply "dropping out of the UUA." Most members, however, didn't share their minister's antipathy for the larger association, and were, in fact, very much involved with continental UU activities and social action efforts.
So the argument between paying BUC's fair share to the denomination and greater funding for BUC causes continued unabated for decades.

Stuck Like Glue

Another aspect of the same problem was that Bob Marshall clearly was all-inclusive, or as one member put it, "Getting off Bob’s mailing list was like trying to get untangled from an octopus.” Sign the membership book once, and you were “in,” receiving the newsletter and listed as a voting member permanently, even though you may have left to join the Moonies years earlier.

Elinor Coale, the church secretary then, remembers, “I told Bob a woman had called and expressly asked to be taken off the mailing list. He said, “She doesn’t really mean it. She’ll change her mind. Leave her on.”

In addition to the administrative and newsletter mailing costs, inflated membership rolls fostered a major financial concern. Dues to the continental Unitarian Universalist Association and to the Michigan District were predicated on the number of reported members. Inflated membership figures might flatter the professional staff, but they could also flatten the church coffers attempting to pay UU dues.

The Board, at Interim Minister Jo Bartlett’s suggestion, took a more reasoned approach in 1983 when it culled membership rolls. And the constitution was formally changed to reflect this in 1986, with a new section on inactive status which read: “The Board of Trustees may also place on the inactive member list persons who have not been contributors of record for the period of one year.”

Double-Digit Dilemmas

One definition of leadership is to find out where the people are going, then run out in front yelling, "Follow me." In the tumultuous final days of the 1970s and early 1980s, society was taking an abrupt turn in a new direction, and church leadership would have to respond.

America was plummeted into the worst period of recession since the Great Depression, and perhaps worse, as it was accompanied by double-digit inflation. The metropolitan Detroit area, dependent on the auto industry, was especially hard hit. As one *Detroit News* reporter put it, "Will the last person to leave Detroit please turn out the lights?"

The result was pressure on church leaders to focus more energy on their day jobs. Out of necessity, the vast majority of women were also making a mass exodus from homework to outside incomes. Everyone's time resources were stretched, and it was clear that the amount of time church members had was going to be limited.

Strains became evident in the governance structure. The board was involved both in policy and procedural or administrative initiatives, and the portfolios of the trustees had become excessively burdensome. To divide the work a little more, a trustee was added in 1982 with responsibilities for long-range planning, and the Chair of the Religious Education Committee and the President of the Alliance were

also added as trustees. The Alliance, now contributing more than $30,000 a year to the greater church, had an especially good case for board representation.

About this same time, the Board had to deal with an even more serious problem which raised the specter of a potentially divided church, and was reminiscent of the disastrous church split over Lester Mondale's ministry.

Who's the Boss?

In 1984, the church had called Jan Rugh to be their minister of religious education. Rugh, who after her marriage changed her name to Jan Evans-Tiller, also changed a lot of the minds of those who hired her. Her religious education leadership was questioned. She did little when Sunday classroom problems arose; less for the teens whom she chose not to recognize as part of her responsibilities. The issue of the MRE's leadership became the congregation's problem because, as ministers, MREs were hired and supervised directly by the congregation. Ultimately, Evans-Tiller resigned from her position.

Soon after her departure from the church, the constitution was changed to clarify reporting lines. Although there may have been no causal relationship between Evans-Tiller's leaving and the adoption of changes in governance, her situation probably made church leaders more receptive to change. (As the old maxim says, "Change has no natural allies.")

As the 80s wore on, church leaders began to realize that BUC was becoming a large church and that a board expected to make all decisions and be all things to all people simply was no longer viable.

Neither was the "portfolio" system of giving trustees direct responsibility for managing church affairs. One trustee might have the Facilities portfolio, another, the Religious Education and a third, Finance. Major functional responsibilities were vested in the holders of portfolios, and when the burdens of daily personal and work life grew heavy, portfolio management responsibilities tended to slide.

Mucking in the Minutia

Over the years, the board has been the locus of debate for large and small issues. It occasionally handed some of them to committees for review and recommendation but found the issues returned to the board for final deliberation and action. The breadth of board initiatives has ranged from recommendation for constitutional

amendments to such mundane items as approving a young people's concert, allocating $125 for toddler center equipment, and ordering notices to be posted on all doors of church furnace rooms.

Recognizing that the governance model and the physical plant of the church had both been developed for a smaller congregation, Doug Gallager initiated a governance agenda with the minister as head of staff. Doug saw that the established governance procedures and the building itself were inhibiting growth. "I believed," says Gallager, "that if we were to take advantage of possible growth, we'd need to change those two areas."

The board was so busy putting out little brush fires that its members had no time to consider broader trends within the church or in the broader society. A dozen people were being forced to hear, well into the night, about a toilet that needed fixing, a roof that was leaking, or the problem of finding ushers for Sunday services. Larger issues requiring perspective needed for planning and review were short-changed.

Although each of these items may well have done some good for the institution, it would be hard to defend any one of them as policy rather than administrative or managerial. So, in 1991, the board instituted a Church Council of Committees.

Mother of All Committees

Each first Monday of the month was designated all-committee night, a time in which committees could communicate and coordinate. By taking this initiative, the board's goal was to encourage more people to become involved in decision-making.

The next step in the evolution of governance was the creation of a Task Force on Governance in 1993-94. Chaired by Marilyn Mast, the Task Force included Clark Bell, Hugh Brown, Doug Gallager, Marie Miller and Lee Runk. The charge to the Task Force was three-fold:

1. to gather information from the UUA on governance models;
2. to examine governance models for churches of a size and diversity comparable to BUC, present and future, and
3. to recommend to the BUC Board a governance model for a growing church….

The main conclusion of the Task Force was that the minister had been right; the church had outgrown the governance model it had been using since 1958.

Split Our Differences

While it may not have worked for Solomon, the Task Force decided that splitting the baby in half could serve BUCs needs best. The concept was to abandon the one-board model in favor of two separate boards—a Policy Board, which would deal with large policy issues, and a Program Board that would focus on day-to-day operational details and decisions.

Not wanting to jump head first into the dark waters of an entirely new structure, the Board set up a "Prototype Planning/Policy Board" in 1994-95. The prototype was established "to uncover and examine some of the difficulties that would be encountered with a separate board of trustees that had only the issues of policy and planning to oversee." The Task Force on Governance remained in place with a revised mission of observing and evaluating the operations of the Prototype Board.

Went by the Boards

At that point, a small group of BUC attorneys came forward and advised against bifurcated leadership. Marilyn Jean Kelly (now Michigan Supreme Court Justice), George Meyer, and Marie Miller all felt that two boards would dilute oversight and governance. In doing that, more problems would be created than corrected. "Inherent in the concept of a board," says Marie Miller, "is centralized authority." No one on the advisory group of attorneys knew of any successful model of two boards of trustees.

Redirection and rethinking were in order. Out went the two-board concept; in returned the one-board model, though changed from what it had been.

More Work, So Fewer Members

And so, in 1996, the Board of Trustees moved to a decentralized model. Marilyn Mast, Chair of the Task Force on Governance, wrote that the goals were "to make the governance structure... one that would help us meet our goal of congregational growth and be appropriate for the larger church we intend to become. The principal change is to shrink the Board of Trustees from 13 members to 9, including officers in both cases.

"The portfolio management role of each trustee," continued Marilyn, "shifts to oversight of council committees, groupings of committees that share common interests. This decentralization leads to greater autonomy and authority for each council committee to focus on the various parts of the church program it deals with. This model also frees the trustees to focus on their proper role of policy-making and oversight, rather than management of church affairs."

But governance itself is an abstraction that does not stand alone. A governance procedure without members, without a system of replacing members, and without a treasury to support programs and staff is meaningless. A living document that responds to change, the BUC constitution has become increasingly inclusive and responsive to the needs of a large congregation.

Such are the processes and the lessons of democracy. By design, the sometimes confrontational decision-making process is inherently inefficient. Conclusions cannot be hurried or dictated. Instead, they take the slow road of examination and persuasion in the process of identifying needs, formulating review procedures, gathering broad support and finally moving forward to implement a vision.

For 50 years, Birmingham Unitarian Church has depended on democratic governance to achieve the members' collective, and however imperfect, vision. We have governed ourselves with the fundamental understanding expressed so eloquently by one our first full-time minister, Rev. Russell Lincoln. He captured the mission of governance in saying:

"Our church is a means to an end. This end is people. If we accomplish our purpose by infringing upon the happiness, the sensitivities, and the abilities of our people, then the church has lost its purpose."

After 50 years, and poised on the leading edge of a new millenium, there is a confidence that we can govern ourselves and resolve new issues, whatever they may be.

Chapter Fifteen

The Next 50 Years

"Future, is. that period of time in which our affairs prosper, our friends are true and our happiness is assured."
Ambrose Bierce
Journalist and Unitarian

Past is not, necessarily, prologue.

Looking at the past 50 years does not provide a preamble to the year 2049. The first 50 years of Birmingham Unitarian Church was a story of building-- several structures, a community, enduring friendships, and through vigorous social justice efforts, a more equitable and tolerant world.

In 1999, the buildings are in place, the compound and memorial gardens planted, and friendships and the community are on solid ground. And looking at social justice from the point of view of, say, civil and gender rights in America, one can see new foundations; looking at it from, say, the killing fields of Kosovo, one is far less assured.

Still, the first half century has witnessed Birmingham Unitarian Church evolve into a mature liberal and diverse community. We owe a great debt to the founders who planted the saplings, even though they knew they would never live to sit in the mature trees' shade. The stories of so many dedicated individuals and selfless acts presented in this history can inspire us. And while their struggles and determination can provide a moral compass, they can tell us little of the terrain ahead.

As with all things Unitarian and Universalist, there are no certainties, no dogmatic answers, no pre-ordained paths. For, as Unitarian R. Buckminster Fuller said of himself, and spoke for so many of us, "God to me is a verb, not a noun, proper or improper." "Revelations" to UUers is not so much a book as a personal and spiritual quest.

Yet if we do not have answers at Birmingham Unitarian Church, we have the next best thing. We have leaders. The mark of the leader, as Winston Churchill said,

lies in “the ability to foretell what will happen tomorrow, next month, next year, and to explain afterward why it didn’t happen.”

To end BUC’s first half century, we have asked our leaders, church president Sarah Smith Redmond, and the Rev. Douglas Gallager, to climb Mount Parnasis and play Delphic oracle for us. If nothing else, it will provide great material for the BUC historians in 2049.

Tomorrow's Answers in Today's Questions
by Sarah Smith Redmond,
President, Board of Trustees

Phew, what a story! Fifty years of vision, dreams and acts of faith, not to mention hard work, has brought us to the end of our half-century journey. Now we look through the other end of the lens to speculate about the next fifty years.

Being asked to predict the future, however, reminds me of Abe Lincoln's favorite story of the man who was tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. When asked about the experience, he said, "Well, if it were not to the great honor of the thing I would have declined." I'm honored to give my perspective as current president, yet I'm mindful that I'm speaking to Unitarian Universalists. Mine is just one view, one of our 600-plus members who between them probably hold considerably more than 600 separate and distinct perspectives. Anyone who says "there are two sides to every issue," has never been in a UU discussion. There are many sides, even coming from one individual.

Yet there are themes I think we all might address, namely growth, renewal and mission. We have grown from an idea fifty years ago to a mid- to large church today. Growth, in turn, has led us to new ways of governing and managing our affairs. That's necessity, and these adjustments will continue to evolve.

Growth, too, will continue unabated until we reach the point in the not-too-distant future when we have to face the physical limitations of our current space. Will we let that maximum physical size of 750 to 850 members close our welcoming attitude and open door? Or will we find new ways to expand within our space and seven-day week?

And there are more than two alternatives. Another option is for us to become an incubator to grow new churches. As we stand today, we draw from a regional

basis, not the three-mile radius church planners say is the usual span of a church. We've already begun down this road, in fact, with our encouragement and support of Painted Creek UU Fellowship in Rochester. Will BUC assume the role of nurturer, become the area's mother church as Church of Our Father in Detroit did a half century ago? It's a distinct option.

Our congregation started a conversation in the 1980s that led to the completion of the wonderful worship space we have today. Another conversation is underway today leading to whether we should finish that original building vision. Our church came together physically in four building stages, and each time, fiscal reality left some wishes unfulfilled. Will we finish the vision and complete the building? That's another option, and challenge, of our 50th year.

The question to answer is not growth, as growth is an inevitable aspect of life. As one of our famous UUs, astronomer Maria Mitchell said, "If you're not green and growing, you're ripe and rotten." The real question is not if we grow, but in what way?

Renewal is a never ending process for any group that remains a vital, sustaining organization. The strength throughout the centuries of Christianity has been its ability to adapt and change. Will we as Birmingham Unitarian Church be able to do this in our little corner of the world?

New families come with different pressures of raising children and managing two-income households. Will we, as a faith community, be responsive to their needs and ways of "doing church?" Will we continue to not only welcome diversity, but provide a nurturing program for those outside the traditional heterosexual, two-parent nuclear family? Will we provide programming for single parents, same sex couples, divorced and widowed members? When members stumble, whether it be through drug or alcohol addiction, mental illness, job loss, or physical disability, will we be as a community be there to help?

Growth means more people to incorporate, encourage, and serve. That means a need for more volunteers at a time when we have mostly two-income households and competition between family, job and community for every available minute. We are challenged with finding ways for all of us to volunteer on a limited basis, and for the church not to have to depend on the same handful of stalwart volunteers who traditionally have given their all. Can we find the time?

Another option, there are always options, is to engage more professional staff to offset the shortage of volunteer time, but that requires money, and brings up the entire issue of growth toward financial maturity. We've grown from the unspoken attitude that it was bad taste to even mention money to an understanding that we are the stewards of the church family budget and have a need to give, and rationally discuss, the support of our church. Can we bank on our financial responsibility?

One of the few issues that doesn't end in a question mark is membership and leadership renewal. That's essential. We are making that transition with a very healthy mix of new, young members and families of Baby Boomers and Generation X leadership, plus some tenacious pre-war babies to give us a mature perspective. Regeneration and renewal is a challenge today and will be the same in fifty years. Plan on it, and plan for it.

Without a doubt the greatest challenge we have for the next fifty years is one articulated by that self-appointed religious sage, Dr. Laura, the ultra-conservative talk show host. Are we to be a church or a club? Dr. Laura contends that most churches today are little more than social clubs. They do not stand for anything of substance, nor have principles to which they adhere. For me, with everything we do at BUC, the first question I ask is "Does it fit within our Seven Principles and our Mission Statement?" and "how is this uniquely Unitarian?"

A lot of questions. And perhaps it's a cop-out to say that we UUers are seekers who feel the questions, and the discussions, are as vitally important as the answers. As the new president of BUC in this pivotal year, I feel I've given a short-term view to a long-view request. Perhaps that's because I believe, as Winston Churchill said, "It is a mistake to look too far ahead. The chain of destiny can only be grasped one link at a time." Or perhaps it's because I feel it's risky to make predictions, especially about the future.

What will we, and our community, be like in 50 years? No one knows today any more than the founders could have foretold what BUC would be at this 50th anniversary. What they knew, what they believed, is what we know and believe today, that people of good will and faith can overcome whatever obstacles arise, and we can accomplish grand things together. Those who came before us proved that then, and now it's our turn to build on those foundations for future generations.

Rev. Dr. Douglas Gallager
Minister, Birmingham Unitarian Church
Faith In The Future

Former Unitarian Universalist Association president William F. Shultz once observed that about every fifty years a new theological center emerges among us. This is perhaps why, in the course of our two hundred-year history, we have developed into a decidedly pluralistic movement.

Two hundred years ago, when Unitarianism emerged as a movement distinct from the Calvinism of that era, there was but one theological center that distinguished us. William Ellery Channing called it "Rational Christianity." God would not have given us the power of reason so that we could use it in all of life except religion. Religion must pass the test of reason. That center, and that precept, is among us still. About fifty years later, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and the Transcendentalists added another center. They "universalized" religion beyond the confines of Christianity. Divinity, according to Emerson, is within each of us.

Around the turn of the last century Religious Humanism emerged as a third focal point of liberal religion. For Religious Humanists, religions evolve to meet human needs.

And fifty years later, in the post-war period where this church had its beginning, Scientific Naturalism became a fourth focal point of liberal religion. Nature, indeed the universe itself, is the source of the holy, and, reflecting our historic roots in reason, science, far from standing over against religion, is our best method of approaching the universe.

And now, fifty years later, as BUC celebrates our own fiftieth anniversary, a new center is emerging among religious liberals. Over the past twenty-five years or so, the two inter-related forces of ecological awareness and feminism have "spiritualized" liberal religion. This is best described in our Seventh Principle, which proclaims that our congregations covenant together to affirm and promote the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

So, where do we go from here? Knowing my own track record, I realize that I'd be hard pressed to foretell what is to come five years from now, not to mention fifty years. Nevertheless, if for no other reward than the almost certain knowledge that if someone picks up a dusty copy of this book fifty years hence they'll get a

chuckle out of it, I'll stick a wet finger into the air and tell you what direction the theological wind is blowing for religious liberals.

Intellectuals, for hundreds of years, have been foretelling the end of religion. So far they've all been wrong. My best guess is that fifty years from now there'll still be religion. But what will it look like?

Each of the theological centers of liberal religion that developed up to when BUC was founded share one important characteristic. All-- Rational Christianity, Universal Theism, Religious Humanism, and Scientific Naturalism-- are rooted in the Enlightenment. One can correctly say that modern religious liberalism is the natural outcome of Congregational Protestantism meeting the Enlightenment.

Enlightenment thinking has always been suspicious of theology. At the extreme, some "rationalists" dismiss theology as mere mumbo-jumbo. Consequently, people are able to be very well educated but know very little about religion.

One very common way this has been expressed in Unitarian Universalism over the past fifty years has to do with religious language. Many of our people were hurt by the religions of their childhood. So they react negatively to traditional religious language, words like “prayer” and “sin” and “salvation.”

This can go to extremes where it becomes real hostility. I recall a time when I was a pulpit guest at a small fellowship in Maryland. Before the service, as I sat in the chair near the pulpit, a man seated in the front row who had been reading my bio in the order of service said in a stage voice so no one could miss it, "A doctorate in theology? Sounds like an oxymoron to me."

Enlightenment thinking encouraged literalism in religion. Fundamentalists believe that heaven, for instance, is a real place with real streets paved with real gold. They can even tell you the exact dimensions of that place called heaven. It's in the book of Revelations.

There are "Enlightenment Fundamentalists" too. Religious Fundamentalists will say, "The Bible is literally true or it isn't, and it is." The Enlightenment Fundamentalists will say, "The Bible is literally true or it isn't, and it isn't." Both sorts of Fundamentalists take religion literally.

The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on science and reason, has always been at least a bit suspicious of things religious. But we are entering a post-Enlightenment

era. One of the things this means is that we're coming to see that, just perhaps, rationality is not necessarily the be all and end all. There are, perhaps, other ways of knowing. We're also beginning to realize that the Enlightenment image of humanity as that colossus, striding purposefully across the landscape, giving shape to the world, creating, through science and reason a progressively better world, onward and upward forever, is out of date. It's difficult to survey what's happening in our world and conclude that human nature is not seriously flawed. As the Age of Enlightenment draws to a close, people are beginning to take another look at what the Enlightenment thought it was "improving upon," and one of those things is religion.

As we move into the post-Enlightenment era, we're learning to move beyond literal thinking when it comes to religion. We're learning, as Maude Royden put it, that "There is a great difference between taking a thing seriously and taking it literally." As we learn to see religion metaphorically, we will find it richer and more nuanced, an important way of learning how to live good and even noble lives.

There are some institutional implications to this. For the past fifty years churches and denominations were fortresses of sorts. The true believers, who had special truth that none of the others had, would pull together to face off against a hostile - and wrong - outside world. So we had Methodists over here and Baptists over there; Presbyterians over here and Episcopalians over here.

That will change. We're already finding that, across the board, denominations are losing their importance. People don't particularly care to which denomination their church belongs. In fact, there's some indication that any denominational affiliation is coming to be seen as a sign that a church sees itself as a little band of the saved with their special truth, and that's a turn-off.

On the local level I think this means that there will be more cross-denominational cooperation. Increasingly, we'll stand shoulder to shoulder with people from various faith traditions to do work for the larger community.

Whether my prognostications are close to the mark or miss it by a mile doesn't matter too much. It doesn't so much matter what vision those who follow us will have. What matters most is that they have a vision, a vision worthy of their most sincere dedication. For it remains true, as the Psalmist wrote, that without vision the people perish.

Fifty years ago those who went before us had such a vision. We stand today as their spiritual heirs, deeply appreciative of what they left for us, and committed to leave this church in such a way that those who come after us may likewise look to us with gratitude.