

A Brief History of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock

The Little Rock Church began in the summer of 1950 when the American Unitarian Association placed advertisements in the Little Rock newspapers. On October 15th of that year the first Unitarian meeting was held in the Temple B'nai Israel. On October 30th the Little Rock Unitarian Fellowship with its 16 members formally affiliated with the American Unitarian Association. By June of 1951 there were 28 members.

The first formal services were held at the Sam Peck Hotel on January 20, 1951. The first Sunday School class met on February 17th of that year. The membership split in the spring of 1953 on the question of admitting African Americans to the congregation (the "pros" prevailed). The first building fund was started that same year. The following year the Board of Directors was created.

The Unitarian Fellowship Newsletter (now called The Outer Circle) was first published in 1954. In July and August Carl Whittier, a student minister, served the fellowship for six weeks.

In June of 1955 the church, then 42 members strong, began renting the American Legion Hall at 24th and Wolfe streets.

The building fund was discontinued in 1957 in favor of securing a minister for the Fellowship.

Forty-five-year member Shirley McFarlin recalls this as a pivotal time. One of the most hotly debated business topics for the fledgling group was always whether they would even take up a collection. Now they had to set up a formal donation system to be able to support a minister. It told her that they were going to be a viable group. Unitarian Minister-At-Large, the Reverend Charles A. Wing, assisted the Fellowship from December 1957 through April 1958. On January 26, 1960 the Reverend Richard Kelley was installed as the first minister.

Rick Kelly had a profound effect on the life of Mrs. McFarlin's husband, Jack. "He really challenged our intellects and made us think. He also gave us the feeling that there were others across the country who thought similarly to us."

During this period the Unitarian Fellowship served as a gathering place for those whose religious and social views went decidedly against the grain of traditional thought. In October, 1954, shortly after the Brown v. Board of Education decision, Ray Schute, national President of the Unitarian Laymen's League led a panel discussion in Little Rock on the import of that decision. Later, when Gov. Faubus closed the schools, rather than integrate, the church with only fifty-some members had as many members of the Women's Emergency Committee To Re-open Our Schools as any church in Little Rock, with the possible exception of the Temple B'nai Israel.

The Rev. Kelley served the fledgling congregation until January 1967. During that time the church:

- legally incorporated on November 6, 1960;
- bought the land on which the current edifice sits on March 10, 1961 and paid off the mortgage just a year later;
- built its own building which continues to house the services and other activities. The first service in the new building was held January 10, 1965.

New church groups and activities during this time included the Unitarian Forum, the Women's Alliance and closer ties with the Southwestern Unitarian Conference.

The Rev. Fred F. Campbell succeeded Rev. Kelley and served for eight years. During the Seventies both co-chairs and the majority of the leadership of the Coalition to Ratify the Equal Rights Amendment were members of this small congregation. The Chair of the Women's Political Caucus is also a member. Members found fellowship through an active square dance group, a singles group and the institution of the Feathered Goat Roast on Labor Day.

When Rev. Campbell left in 1975, the Rev. Gerald Sylvester began his tenure, which lasted until March 1982. One of the most notable projects of that time was the establishment of the UU Film Society, which showed foreign and avant-garde films. It was to continue for more than 20 years. In addition to the active participation of many congregants in feminist causes the church also participated in other social causes such as the annual hunger walk.

The Rev. Jean M. Rickard (now the Rev. Rowe) arrived in February 1983. During her nine years of service the congregation became more multi-faceted and embarked on an ambitious program to expand the church facilities. The new building program included expansion of the sanctuary, revamping the religious education wing and construction of a fellowship hall that also houses the church offices, known as Thomson Hall. UUCLR hosted the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in June of 1987. Community involvement during this time included the formation of a R.A.I.N. team, a partnership with Garland Elementary School and providing meals at the Our House homeless shelter. UUCLR members and friends continue to support "Our House to this day.

During this period many members of UUCLR were active in supporting Planned Parenthood and working to defeat state legislation that would undercut a woman's right to choose.

After Rev. Rickard became the extension minister with a new Memphis congregation, the congregation was lay led for more than a year. During this period new mission and covenant statements developed in a series of Saturday morning workshops were adopted. The Rev. Fern C. Stanley served as interim minister from September 1993 to August 1994.

The Rev. JoEllen Willis was called by the congregation in April of 1994 and arrived in Little Rock in August 1994. She quickly became active in the community, participating in the newly formed Interfaith Alliance, serving on the board of Planned Parenthood of Greater Arkansas and volunteering at our partner school, Garland Elementary - all in the first year.

During this recent period the congregation paid off the mortgage that financed the expansion, expanded the religious education program and established Covenant Groups. Members of the congregation have taken the lead in defending the civil rights of gays, lesbians and bisexuals especially their rights to act as parents.

Rev. Willis left UUCLR in 2002 and Rev. Scotty Meek served as interim minister during the search for a new settled minister until April 2004. Rev. Meek, now retired and residing in Arizona, led the congregation gently toward a "unity of diversity" and was voted as UUCLR's first Minister Emeritus in April 2004.

In April of 2004, the congregation voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Rev. Bob Klein as the new settled minister. Rev. Klein began his settled ministry in August of 2004; he was installed on November 17, 2004. He and the congregation enjoyed a mutually respectful and affectionate relationship for his nine-year tenure. For the first few years, Rev. Bob's wife, the Rev. Jane Bechle, was an Affiliate Minister. During this period, attendance and membership sometimes surged, and developments were implemented to move the congregation from a "pastoral type" to a "program type" church. These included the creation of a congregational covenant called, "At Peace Among Ourselves;" the creation of a Strategic Plan; and new

Program Council and Rules and Regulations. The congregation also moved to a "Second Hour Church" model on Sunday mornings, with Religious Education for all ages at 10:00 a.m., and worship for all ages at 11:00 a.m. Many new programs began which are still thriving, such as: outreach to the Correction Center, Young At Heart, "UUCLR Presents," "Pilgrims and Strangers," and Second Sunday Potlucks. The congregation beautified the Memorial Woodlands, became an official Welcoming Congregation, began the annual Blessing of the Animals service, started a drumming circle, and issued congregational resolutions on peace and social justice. Young adults' activities flourished, as well. Several efforts were started as ministry for the earth, recycling, and becoming a Green Sanctuary. The Cornerstone Society was also established, to honor long-time members whose leadership was distinguished. UUCLR's relationship with the District and the UUA remained strong. It hosted a district conference, and sent members to UU leadership schools, trainings, and gatherings. UUCLR also celebrated its sixtieth anniversary. In the spring of 2013, Rev. Bob resigned to take up a settled ministry in Stockton, California. His ministry for UUCLR was distinguished by advocacy to abolish the death penalty, building relationships with the Turkish community, supporting PFLAG (Parents and Friends of people who are Lesbian or Gay), and outreach to the low income population of Little Rock.

In August of 2013, the Rev. Jennie Barrington began serving as Interim Minister. This two-year Intentional Interim Period focuses on examining and strengthening the congregation as a whole, including its programs, religious education, pastoral care, facility needs, meaning of membership, mission and purpose, and governance structure. The main goal is for UUCLR to have a successful vote to call a new settled minister, to begin in August of 2015, and we are well on track to do so. As well, we are engaged in all the usual work, celebration, worship, and caring of the church, and enjoyably so. Musical and choral programs, OWL classes (Our Whole Lives comprehensive sexuality education which is age-appropriate), and thoughtful discussions in many forums are flourishing. Rev. Jennie's ministry is distinguished by her support of lay leaders; well-researched sermons and cohesive worship services; assistance regarding finances, stewardship and fundraising; her love of children; and her rite-of-passage ceremonies, including twelve legal gay marriages in the Pulaski County Courthouse on May 12, 2014.