

HISTORY OF THE IOWA CITY UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY

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Preface

This brief history has been written using sources in the Iowa Historical Society, as well as the historical comments compiled by Jim Jacobsen, who also used the historical society and especially drew on two personal recollections written by Mrs. Ruth Irish Preston in 1907-08.

The Iowa City Congregation has been in existence since 1838 and has, with brief interims, employed ministers during the entire period. It is clear, from reading the accounts, that the congregation has never been large, nor has it been prosperous, at least in a material sense. There have been brief periods when the congregation was lively, and enjoyed good-spirited participation by its members. The financial support of the congregation, however, has been continuously difficult, never easy. The congregation has always been indebted and has, from time to time, resorted to hard decisions, such as selling property, utilizing assistance from the denomination, etc., to meet its obligations. It is a high credit to those recently involved in UU leadership that the present state of the Society, financially as well as socially, appears to be as good as at any time in the history of the congregation.

Finally, it is with a great deal of humility and respect that I consider myself one of the ministers of the Iowa City Society. There have been several ministers at this congregation who would be esteemed colleagues in any circle — persons of intellectual quality and religious depth, some of whom went on from here to wider fields of service and recognition.

History

The story of Unitarian Universalism in Iowa City is part of a larger story of Unitarianism and Universalism, two protestant denominations which have their American roots close to 1800 in New England.

Universalism, at first, was a new theological point of view preached by such figures as John Murray, Hosea Ballou, and Abner Kneeland as early as 1775. The little movement developed until by 1800, there was a new denomination. Its most attractive feature was a rejection of the old Calvinist view of God's sovereign predestination of nature and history and his pre-selection of the damned and the saved. The Universalists preached "salvation for all universally." In late 18th century New England — recently scorched by the stringent Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards and newly invaded by Methodist circuit riders — the Universalist message was both new and welcome. The Universalist message spread quickly and new churches were begun.

In 1800, Timothy Dwight, evangelical President of Yale College, was the leader of the "second great awakening" in revivalist Christianity. For the next quarter century, there was to be a vivid "new light" movement which would split established churches and follow the caravans leaving for the new western frontiers. That awakening became famous for its camp meeting revivalism, especially in areas west of settled New England.

At the same time, in New England, a second movement was in early stages of birth. Harvard College, long a bulwark of proper training, religious and secular, maintained a distinguished chair of divinity, the Hollis Chair. When that chair was vacant in 1805, the

appointment of the new Hollis professor became an issue between those proper Calvinists who wanted to maintain their tradition at Harvard, and newer thinkers who had been drawn to the ideas of the 18th century philosophical enlightenment. They had read Paine and Jefferson and Priestley. They were aware of Kant and Hume and Coleridge. They wanted to bring religious thought into the forefront of intellectual excitement. (They were aware that, in Europe, biblical scholars were applying methods of literary critical science to the "Word of God.")

These liberal thinkers carried the vote at Harvard to place Henry Ware in the Hollis Professorship and the college, from 1805, became the seat of liberal Christian thought. By 1810, the college decided to found an entire liberal seminary.

William Ellery Channing (one of the liberal thinkers) had graduated from Harvard in 1804 and settled in Boston for a lifelong ministry. He and others were instrumental in supporting this liberal development at Harvard. Channing himself became the intellectual leader of these new thinkers who began to develop the system of ideas which was to become known as "Unitarianism." In 1815, Channing published a long sermon essay entitled "Unitarian Christianity." In 1819, Channing preached the ordination sermon of young Jared Sparks, who had just graduated from Harvard and had been called to be minister of the new liberal church in Baltimore. The ordination sermon was a clear statement of the new Unitarian ideas.

The Unitarian ideas received so much journalistic attention, and caused so much tension in ministerial conferences and local congregations, that, in 1825, ministers sympathetic to those ideas formed an association and named it the American Unitarian Association in Boston. Local congregations, throughout New England, were faced with a choice of whether to go on in their older Calvinist ideas and loyalties or to follow the new thinking and become Unitarian congregations. That was a time of conflict and tension in community after community.

In 1825, the Unitarians and the Universalists were two separate denominations, and their members were quite different people. Their clergy also were noticeably distinct. The two denominations might have acknowledged some common affinities but they would hardly have been comfortable sharing the same congregation. The Universalists were more middle and lower class. Ministers were not always well trained. They knew their Bibles well and were probably open to some of the new critical approaches to Bible study, though it is unlikely that they spent much time mastering those approaches. Almost certainly, they did not know of and had little use for philosophical ideas. The ministers were people of the plain folk, much like the Methodist circuit riders. They were hardy and followed populations as they began to move westward in the early 19th century. It was often remarked that in the frontier camps, you could depend on finding a Methodist circuit rider and a Universalist minister. In fact, it became a rather popular event, in the newly-settled western communities, for Methodist and Universalist ministers to challenge one another in public biblical debates. Ministers rose to regional fame, occasionally, on the strength of their success in these debates. There are records of such debates here in Iowa in the 1830s and 1840s, especially in Mount Pleasant.

The Unitarians, in 1825, were still in their comfortable homes in New England, They were of the upper classes. They were well educated and they expected the same of their ministers. Most of the ministers were products of Harvard and preferred cultured parishes close to Boston. Rarely, one of these "hot house" ministers would accept an assignment in some western frontier community. One such, James Freeman Clarke, went to Tennessee, from which he wrote longing letters back to friends "in civilization"

wondering what, if anything, he could possibly do to bring a religion of civilization to such a rough and tumble people. Naturally, then, the Unitarian ministers were not eager frontier preachers and there was no frontier Unitarian movement. Even if they had tried to convert frontiers-people, it is likely that the more educated messages would have found little audience among the frontier's working classes. The Unitarians would move west later, after the first wave of settlers had carved out towns and villages and formed new colleges and universities.

So it was that Universalist (not Unitarian) preachers visited a small group of Universalist-minded settlers in the village of Iowa City as early as 1838. The meetings of this group, for the first couple of years, were held in log cabins. It was recorded that very few of the log cabins had not, at some time, served as a "temple of religion."

Between 1840 and 1844, the Iowa City Universalists first met in a room at territorial government headquarters and soon purchased a small wooden building of their own for \$90, where they met for a couple of years except when winter weather made it unbearable. In 1841, the congregation managed to hire Reverend A.R. Gardiner — a man, it seems, of rather extraordinary abilities and character for that situation. Gardiner became loved and respected by his congregation and also rather feared, sometimes disliked, by the more orthodox Christians of the community, who feared his message and his rhetorical power. Gardiner led the congregation in building (starting to build — it was unfinished yet when it burned in 1868) a new church on the southeast corner of Dubuque Street and Iowa Avenue.

The early success of the congregation must be attributed to Gardiner. A record of 1844 states that Gardiner conducted a wedding in the new building, indicating that he was still present as minister and that the new building was in use. Gardiner traveled to the East Coast seeking assistance for financing the church building. Two contributors were Horace Greeley and P.T. Barnum, both Universalists. The net result of his trip was an amount of \$1,402.33, while his travel expenses were \$290.93.

In 1845, the need for a preacher was noted in a letter written by a James Robinson on behalf of the Iowa City congregation:

We are but a small band of believers, rich in the word of truth, but poor in purse, and can hold out but slight inducements, at present, in a pecuniary point of view. With a good preacher, however — one who would preach out of the pulpit as well as in — and who could do with a small salary at first, they would have no doubt of raising up a good Society which would yield an ample support.

For twenty years, following the ministry of Gardiner, the congregation had rather shaky leadership and they struggled along with their small new building (not quite finished) and debts which weighed on them. Reverend Gardiner was followed by Reverend Kelso who did not stay long. The next minister was Reverend I.M. Westfall who, according to C.W. Irish, was "a good scholar and a first class controversialist, which gave him great power when debating differences of doctrine with ministers of other denominations." Westfall was in Iowa City from 1846 to 1849.

The next minister was Reverend H.S. Marble who took special interest in the religious education of the children, instituting a system of "merit cards" for the young people. Following Marble was Reverend Eben Francis of Newark, who was called scholarly and efficient but who seems best remembered for his three beautiful daughters who graced the youth group and the choir.

Reverend Joseph Kinney came to the congregation in 1866(?). He was diligent, but his

health failed. He died at age 46 in 1868 and left the congregation again without a minister.

In 1869, the congregation called Reverend Augusta Chapin. She was "college educated" and broad minded. All evidences indicate that Augusta Chapin was extremely able and widely loved. She led the congregation to its highest point since its founding, in spite of hardships. Not long before her arrival, the 1844 church building (still unfinished) burned completely. The congregation immediately rented a building at the corner of Burlington and Dubuque, a building which formerly had housed a bowling alley. Later the congregation met in the sanctuary of the Lutheran Church. During the period, the congregation was apparently visited by such distinguished traveling lecturers as Mary Livermore and Susan B. Anthony. Augusta Chapin obviously had flair with the congregation. There are records indicating that during her ministry there were annual fairs, great Christmas celebrations, grand Sunday school picnics, and a new kind of fair-weather Sunday service called Basket-Meeting services — picnic meetings usually held on some farm near town. The Sunday school during these years was high quality, and the fine choir was led by a German instructor, Otto Schmidt.

In 1870, the enthusiastic congregation leased their Dubuque Street property and bought land at the corner of Clinton Street and Iowa Avenue (where Phillips Hall now stands). There they began a building and laid the foundation stone. That building was dedicated on January 12, 1873. Reverend Chapin was minister for some time after the dedication but then was called to another pulpit. A Reverend Powers substituted some after her departure but was never the called minister of the congregation.

In 1878, there was a noteworthy change in the congregation. In spite of Reverend Chapin's fine ministry, after her departure the congregation dwindled rapidly and there were not sufficient Universalist members to support a minister and the new building. The American Unitarian Association in Boston at that point expressed interest in the Iowa City Universalist Church and offered an arrangement by which the local congregation would supply a church building and the AUA would pay and provide a minister (a Unitarian minister, not Universalist). That minister turned out to be Reverend Oscar Clute, another minister of high quality according to accounts. The congregation, which had suffered ups and downs nearly from the beginning in 1838, was delighted with Reverend Clute (except a few Universalists who were not certain of his Unitarianism). One member recorded, "We find Mr. Clute a highly cultured gentleman — a man of high purpose, liberal thought, and an earnest worker."

Clute provided good Sunday services and a vigorous new social life for adults and youth. One new feature was "dancing and cards" at the church, where youth, under supervision of parents, were given, within reason, those pleasures too often sought in demoralizing company and places.

During Clute's ministry there was a group for youth, the "Agassiz Association," for the study of nature's religion. Reverend Clute himself organized and taught a very popular Shakespeare Club which met until he left Iowa City. The Women's Working Society met to quilt on Wednesdays and on Saturdays served royal home dinners at 25 cents per plate for "the combined benefit of the church treasury and hungry farmers and tradesmen."

Reverend Clute was an intellectual and an able debater who worried not only other Christian leaders but some of the leaders of the University (though it was allegedly non-sectarian). The professor of applied Christianity was especially upset and entered a sparring match with Reverend Clute which filled the papers and became community news. It was reported by a member of Clute's congregation that the efforts of the

professor became "the means of the Unitarian message being more widely disseminated than it might otherwise have been."

Reverend Clute was called to be General Secretary of the Unitarian Association in 1884, and he was followed by Reverend Beavis, who though acceptable, "did not supplant Mr. Clute in hearts of the people."

Reverend Beavis remained as minister for four years until 1888 when he left the ministry to enter the College of Medicine at the University of Iowa. Reverend Robert C. Morse then served the church for two years.

From 1892 until 1896, Reverend Charles E. Perkins of Athol, Massachusetts became the minister. One of the things Mr. Morse did was to pen a brief history of the congregation, quotations from which follow:

The history of Unitarian effort in Iowa City is a striking commentary upon the inefficiency of our pure congregationalism. The long intervals between pastorates have been discouraging to the people of the church and have furnished every opportunity, nay, have invited their withdrawal and connection with other churches. ...The sentiment of Iowa City, so far as it is religious, is of a pretty decidedly orthodox tone. The general impression is that the field is a hard one and the general impression is not far from right.

Continuing financial struggles plagued the congregation. In 1896, the congregation (now a mix of Unitarians and older Universalists meeting in a Universalist-owned building) could not hang on to their building any longer and sold it to the Iowa Universalist Convention. Three years later, the church was sold by the Iowa Universalist Convention to the Iowa Unitarian Association.

In 1896, Reverend Perkins was replaced by Reverend Eleanor Gordon, a graduate of Cornell College, who served as minister until 1900. Misfortune continued to haunt the Iowa City congregation. In 1896 a second fire did extensive damage to the new church and created further financial pressures plus the discouragement of having to restore the building.

Reverend Duren H. Ward replaced Reverend Gordon and served from 1900 to 1906. During his ministry, arrangements were made for the church building at Clinton and Iowa Avenue to be sold by the Iowa Unitarian Association to the state of Iowa for use by the University of Iowa.

In 1906, Reverend Robert S. Loring replaced Reverend Ward. Reverend Loring, himself interested in architecture, designed and supervised the building of the present church building at the corner of Iowa Avenue and Gilbert Street. Reverend Loring was well educated and preached vigorously on current trends in ideas and scientific exploration. He served until 1911. Reverend H. Houghton Schumacker served from 1911 to 1913; Reverend C.M. Perry served from 1913 to 1918; and Reverend Vincent Silliman served 1918 to 1919. Reverend Silliman had deep interests in worship and became a productive author of hymns and worship materials for the denomination, serving as editor of hymnals and worship books.

From 1919 to 1922, Reverend Franklin Carlton Doan of Summit, New Jersey, was minister. Reverend Doan had earned a Ph.D. in philosophy with work at Harvard University and in Germany. Following his ministry in Iowa City, Reverend Doan later became a professor at Meadville Seminary in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Needless to say, his ministry was high minded. Interestingly, also during his ministry, in a very successful

attempt to make some money for the church and do something creative for the city's children, Reverend Doan organized Friday afternoon movies for children after school. They were advertised in local papers and proclaimed as a great success.

Reverend Arthur Weatherly served as minister of the congregation from 1922 to 1929. There is little on record about his ministry in Iowa City. Later, however, Reverend Weatherly was recognized throughout the denomination for his social justice concerns in life-long ministry. He is now honored annually at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association by the awarding of the "Holmes-Weatherly Award," an award for outstanding ministry in the field of social justice. The other name, Holmes, refers to Reverend John Haynes Holmes, long-time social justice minister of the Community Church in New York City. Reverend Holmes achieved national recognition for his opposition to the First World War and his pacifist stand in 1913-14.

In 1931, Reverend Evans Worthley became the minister of the Iowa City congregation, where he remained for 20 years, until 1951. Evans Worthley was an active intellectual and a warm minister. His is the longest ministry in the history of the congregation. Worthley was a community intellectual leader and political and social leader.

Reverend Worthley-sponsored dances for college students in the lower hall, charging 50 cents per person as a way of raising money for the church and providing a creative outlet to students during the hard depression years. Reverend and Mrs. Worthley — Amy — were a team. Some people still (at this writing) remember Amy's apple pies baked for "Men's Club" (now Worthley Club, the monthly first-Tuesday dinner and speech club). In addition, the Worthleys lived in a parsonage which was located beside the church on Gilbert Street where Worthley House (religious education building) now stands. Amy says the parsonage was a source of income in the lean depression years. The Worthleys had roomers and boarders, helping the congregation to supplement the minister's income.

Reverend Al Henriksen became minister of the congregation in 1951 and served until 1957. As a young minister in Iowa City, before the rise of civil rights activity, it is remembered that Reverend Henriksen accompanied black male college students downtown to barbershops to assure that there was no difficulty and that they would receive haircuts.

In 1958, Reverend Khoren Arisian became the minister of the congregation. Reverend Arisian was recently graduated from Princeton Seminary and took pleasure in Sunday morning pulpit performance. Years later, he himself wrote that as a young minister in a small Iowa congregation he could freely spend "40 hours a week" in sermon preparation. During Reverend Arisian's ministry, the congregation planned and built the present religious education building which has been named Worthley House.

In 1965, the congregation called Reverend William Weir as minister. Reverend Weir was recently graduated from Meadville Theological School in Chicago. Reverend Weir, not a strong preacher, was involved in helping to found the Community Mental Health Center and he traveled to Selma, Alabama, with other Unitarian Universalist ministers to march with Martin Luther King, Jr. As a result of conflict, the congregation asked Reverend Weir to leave as of January, 1970, following which the congregation continued without a minister for a year and a half.

In September 1971, Thomas Mikelson became the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Iowa City and remains the minister until the present. During the years of Reverend Mikelson's ministry, the presidents of the congregation have been Melvin Oliven, Nancy Jordison, Jim Osburn, Bob Wall, Gail McLure, and Kenneth Hubel.