



# UUCR *at* 60

**UUCR 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary History**

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*To Beloved Community*

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## Introduction

In 1956, a small group met in a living room to talk about starting a church—our church, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Rockville. This is the story of our community’s 60-year journey. I’ve attempted (and hopefully succeeded to a reasonable degree) in giving the flavor of each period of our church history, the ups and downs, including the things particular to a certain era as well as the things that haven’t changed over the years.

A few words about my sources—UUCR has almost complete sets of newsletters, board minutes, orders of service, and annual reports, which were invaluable. I used two lists of milestones compiled years ago as a framework. Then I browsed through the old documents to flesh out the narrative of the church’s history trying as best I could to give an accurate account of events. Along the way, the hardest part was deciding what to leave out. (I had no interest in writing a book about UUCR history even if anyone wanted to read one.) So if I’ve omitted your favorite story, event, or activity, my apologies. Hopefully, I put in something else that you will enjoy reading about. And I’ll have a suggestion in a minute about those things I left out that you want others to know.

Another note about what I’ve omitted. Names. So many people over the years have given so much, done so much for the church, it’s impossible to name them all. So with a few exceptions, the only names you’ll find of individual members are of people who did something noteworthy and unique *outside* of the church that somehow connected to it. For example, an early member, Charlie

Byrd, was an internationally-known guitarist who also gave benefit concerts for the church. For the same reason I arbitrarily decided to list by name only a few staff people—ministers obviously, and some but not all of the directors of music and education.

Now back to how you can add your favorite story about UUCR to our historical record. You'll notice I have worked in quotes that enhance the sometimes dry organizational history with wonderful, personal detail. Many of those came from two collections: *Recollections and Reminiscences* (1995) and *UUCR's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Book of Memories* (2006.) It's my hope that going forward we'll have a similar vehicle for collecting and preserving the memories and stories of today's members and friends.

## **Why Then, Why Here?**

World War II was over. In the 1950s, soldiers and civilians alike picked up the strands of their interrupted lives, finished education, established careers, and started families. The Baby Boom was on, and builders across the country converted fields to housing. The Washington, D.C. suburbs grew especially fast as the federal government expanded creating ever more opportunities for talented, educated workers from across the country. The population of Montgomery County more than doubled between the 1950 and 1960 censuses with most of the growth in the areas closest to D.C. Here in Rockville, new neighborhoods such as Twinbrook took shape and filled with young families.

Many religious denominations including Unitarianism enjoyed a growth spurt during this time. A. Powell Davies, the charismatic minister of All Soul's Church in Washington, inspired and spearheaded the establishment of Unitarian churches around the Beltway. Unitarianism with its child-centered religious education curriculum (as opposed to one focused on Bible stories) appealed to many parents, particularly ones who questioned or rejected traditional religion but wished to provide their growing families with spiritual and moral instruction and a supportive church community.<sup>1</sup>

The nascent Unitarian Church of Montgomery County (UCMC, now Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church) attracted young couples from the Rockville area who listened to A. Powell Davies's sermons piped in from All Souls and enrolled their children in

UCMC's classes. One mother recounted years later, "There we were in the mid-fifties, young families living the post-war suburban patterns: first houses, small children, commuting Dads, stay-at-home Moms active—maybe over-active—in community affairs, and traveling on Sundays from Rockville to Bethesda so that our children could attend Sunday school in crowded classrooms at staggered hours..."<sup>2</sup>

### **The Rockville Unitarian Center**

In 1956, sick of the Sunday commute and inspired by the success of UCMC which had recently hired a minister, John Baker, six or so Rockville couples met in May to discuss starting their own church. On June 24 a group agreed to petition the Board of Trustees of UCMC to sponsor them as a Unitarian Center and elected a Board of Managers consisting of six men and one woman. The new Board quickly set to work holding their first meeting four days later. Minutes and newsletters over the next six months recount a string of "firsts."

Volume I, Number 1, of the newsletter, published on July 16, announced that UCMC had agreed to sponsor the Rockville Unitarian Center. John Baker would act as minister for the group but RUC would have its own services and religious education program. On September 9, a trustee of UCMC presented the group with its own membership book which 33 people signed that night. On September 16 the first of three lectures on Unitarianism

was held at Richard Montgomery High School. The presenter, Ross Weston, minister of Arlington Church, was followed by John Baker on September 23 and A. Powell Davies on October 7.

Meantime various committees were busy organizing a church school, dealing with financial affairs, and planning for regular Sunday morning services which began on October 14 at Richard Montgomery High. That first service included a traditional-style doxology and featured a recorded sermon by John Baker. Hymns were sung and a pianist played classical music. The church school met at Rockville Jr. High next door. Forty-three people came to the service and forty-seven children attended classes. Most services during this period featured recorded sermons of John Baker. A budget of \$3,175 was approved in September; the first canvass was held and fell short of its goal by 37%. Nevertheless, the church was able to hire a staff assistant late in 1956 and closed out the year with almost \$500 in its bank account. They had a mitten tree on December 23 and a family Christmas service a couple of days later.

Most of the group were young couples with growing families—newsletters from the fifties contain frequent birth announcements.<sup>1</sup> As a result, a huge amount of the energy and time went into the religious education program which grew rapidly and consisted of about nine or ten classes. Although the majority of teachers were women, most lists show at least two or three male teachers. One of the first problems addressed was the inconvenience of having the busy school in one building and

services in another. In February 1957, RUC moved both to the West Rockville Elementary School (present-day Beall Elementary). It still wasn't an ideal situation. "We were allocated only one closet in the school for weekday storage, far too small... the Board voted to rent a U-Haul-It Trailer for storage space and purchase a trailer hitch for our station wagon," wrote one woman. Every Sunday her family hitched up the trailer and towed the church's supplies and equipment to the school for services.<sup>2</sup> It's no wonder that as early as January 1957 the Board was discussing the possibility of purchasing land for a church building particularly before real estate prices rose more.

The group continued to work hard to raise funds and attract new members, and growth continued briskly. By late 1958, membership had topped the 100 mark, and a Pulpit Committee was operational. In April 1959, the third annual meeting of the congregation was held. They were presented with a resolution dissolving the Rockville Unitarian Center and creating the Unitarian Church of Rockville. The minutes record that, "It was accepted by a standing ovation."

## **A Minister and a Parsonage**

Not surprisingly, taped sermons left much to be desired. Orders of service in 1958 and early 1959 increasingly list real live speakers, both lay and ministerial, on a wide variety of topics. The April 1, 1959, newsletter strongly (desperately?) urged members to turn

in their pledge cards declaring that, “The services of a minister of our own hang in the balance... and even without a minister, we can’t continue to enjoy the high calibre (sic) of guest speakers we have had this year. We have about exhausted the FREE speakers.”

Enough tardy pledge cards must have arrived because at the annual meeting in April the Board of Trustees was empowered to buy a parsonage and the Pulpit Committee reported that they had sent a prospectus to 11 candidates. The special midsummer edition of the 1959 newsletter reported that Robert M. Doss, who had preached at the Sunday service on June 21, was chosen that evening to be UCR’s first minister by a unanimous congregational vote.

That newsletter also described the parsonage that had recently been purchased. “It is brand new, and is well suited to be a residence for a young family and a church office, since it has... a full basement with a separate entrance... for use as a church office and minister’s study.” The house at 1024 Brice Road, two miles from West Elementary School, provided the church with its first independent space for transacting church business and holding small meetings. After a summer break, the newsletter resumed September 16 for the first time as *Quest*, the name suggested by Bob Doss who by now had moved into the parsonage with his wife and little daughter and was holding regular office hours. On October 25, 1959, UCR ordained and installed him in a service held at the West Rockville Elementary School followed by a reception at the Rockville Civic Center.

As the fifties closed out, members could look back with satisfaction at their accomplishments—creating a new church with a busy religious education program, ordaining and installing their first minister, and buying a parsonage. And they were having fun—newsletters are full of announcements for social activities. Looking beyond themselves, they had established a Social Action Committee that was starting to address some of the day’s major issues. However, while the church was progressive and liberal, it was nevertheless the 1950s. The November 1957 newsletters reminded people to not smoke after services until they had exited the school building. That December, a newsletter article about an upcoming event led off with this question. “Does the little woman ever complain ‘You never take me anywhere!’?”<sup>1</sup>

## **Growth, Land, and Fund Raising**

With its own minister the church grew rapidly over the next few years. The 1961 Annual Report stated that there were 238 members and 236 children registered in the school. Activities of all sorts abounded. There were social events for the older children and youth and for families. The Women’s Alliance was up and running by mid-1960 “serving ourselves with stimulating discussions” and socializing opportunities as well as serving the church and community in multiple capacities. The theme of the Alliance’s first year, “discussed penetratingly but lightheartedly” was “The Liberal Woman.”<sup>1</sup> Numerous other committees—ushers to finance to music—were busy. The congregation held theme

parties at the Rockville Civic Center mansion. They included celebrations of beatnik culture and the Roaring Twenties as well as a Roman party (or “orgy” in some versions) complete with togas. On a more serious note, philosophy discussions were held and social action projects undertaken, many of them involving civil rights.

Another cause taken up by the Social Action Committee at this time involved Roy Torcaso, described as someone “who has recently been attending our church with his wife.” The 1960 Annual Report recorded that, “The (Social Action) Committee met with Roy Torcaso, who was denied a Notary Public’s commission in Maryland for refusing to take an oath declaring ‘belief in God.’” Torcaso went to court over this issue of separation of church and state. In the fall of 1960 the Social Action Committee urged members of UCR to consider giving money to help cover his legal costs. A modest sum, around \$50, was raised. In the 1961 case, *Torcaso v. Watkins*, the Supreme Court reaffirmed that the Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office.<sup>2</sup>

Meantime members were planning for the church’s future. At the April 1961 annual meeting the congregation voted to purchase approximately six and a half acres of undeveloped land near the West Rockville Elementary School for \$3,200 per acre. The Building Committee was already hard at work gathering the information about the congregation’s needs and how other churches had designed their buildings. Funding was becoming ever more critical, and in February of 1961 the newsletter

expressed the treasurer's concern about low balances. There was disagreement and conflict over issues of confidentiality of pledges (should the Finance Committee be privy to the amount of individual pledges in order to better plan for the future) and the role of the minister in fund raising.

Not all fund raising was a struggle. The church was fortunate to include among its members Charlie Byrd, a highly respected professional guitarist (later best known for his association with Brazilian music, particularly *bossa nova*). Starting in November 1960 he gave a number of concerts over the years to raise money for UCR. The first concert was held in the newly opened Rockville Civic Center Auditorium. The November 17<sup>th</sup> edition of *Quest* said, "Charlie enjoys that rare distinction of being one of the few guitarists in jazz today employing the classical guitar technique on an unamplified Spanish guitar...Charlie has performed on the concert symphonic stage as well as in jazz clubs." Tickets cost \$2 (\$3 for reserved seating), and the event netted around \$700.

In March 1963, Reverend Bob Doss left UCR for the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, an old and well-established church where he served until his retirement.<sup>3</sup> In the fall of 1963, Mr. David H. Cole began serving as UCR's second minister. (Although ordained, he preferred the honorific "Mr.")

## **A Building!**

The church was finally going to get a building! But what sort of building? One of the first things to be decided was what kind of space the congregation wanted given that they couldn't possibly build a dream structure meeting all their needs immediately. The June 7, 1962 edition of *Quest* reported, "It was voted that the congregation prefers building an assembly or all-purpose room first, to serve all functions and letting the sanctuary wait until a later phase of building."

One can't help but wonder if folks had any idea how long they'd wait for that sanctuary. Perhaps they did; money was an ongoing concern, and board meetings were filled with fund-raising discussions and plans during the early sixties. However, the priority was classroom space, the RE students numbering around 300 at this time. As it was, the congregation had to hold two services and two sessions of religious education classes when it moved into the new building. UCR had already outgrown its proposed new space, but that was all that could be afforded in the first phase of construction.<sup>1</sup>

In November 1962, board minutes show that the trustees selected Stanley H. Arthur, Jr., to be UCR's architect. Arthur, a modernist, designed many buildings in this area including schools, churches, libraries, and the Rockville Civic Center Auditorium. A tremendous amount of design work and fund raising was done in 1963.

Groundbreaking took place in January 1964 on a day remembered as “cold, cold,” and the building was ready for its first service on September 20.<sup>2</sup> Well, more or less ready. For months after, the newsletters and board minutes are full of references to the heat duct grills that weren’t delivered until after the holidays and mysterious water leaks.

The building was dedicated in November 1964 with a series of events. An exhibit of art created by members was displayed on the walls, the first of so many exhibits over the years. On Sunday afternoon, November 8, the residents of the neighborhood and other friends were invited to an open house. (Church oral tradition has it that the neighbors referred to UCR’s complex of buildings as “the African Village.”) A party and dance for church members was held the following Friday evening, and on November 15, Justice William O. Douglas (a friend of David Cole’s), spoke at the formal dedication ceremony. Over three hundred attended—the worship hall was filled and a hundred watched in classrooms on closed circuit TV.

Settled into their own building, members and staff dealt with issues from signage to installation of a pay phone. Committees were formed for maintaining the building and beautifying the grounds. A Boy Scout troop was soon organized that met in the building. By the summer of 1965 discussions began about renting the classrooms to a pre-school in order to provide much needed income. The parsonage, having served its purpose as an office for church business, was sold in 1965.

The Site Development Committee reported in the 1965 Annual Report that they had been busy the prior year improving the plot, which had been farmland. Then, as now, drainage was an issue, and they had to clear a swampy area. In the process they located some springs and directed the water into an existing stream bed. And they planted trees—many trees! The following year’s Annual Report shows that members planted 700 ivy plants. (This is the same ivy that current members spend hours—many hours—tearing out because it’s invasive.)

### **Civil Rights: Selma and at Home**

*“No doubt the most significant event in my life was the opportunity to participate in the Selma registration voting drive... The death of Jim Reeb has moved us all very deeply... Our church responded in a most magnificent manner...”<sup>1</sup>*

In early March of 1965, UCR’s minister was one of forty clergy members from the Washington area who flew to Selma to support the effort to secure voting rights. Back home the newsletter editor wrote on March 18, “This has seemed such a long week as we winced with shame at brutality committed in our own America; as we waited in suspense for news of our gentle friend, Jim Reeb, and of our own minister...” The horrific killing of Reeb was felt personally here; as assistant minister at All Souls he had preached at least once at UCR. Many people responded by

contributing to the church's Jim Reeb fund that was used in various ways to support the cause he died for.

In addition, seven members of the congregation joined Mr. Cole in Selma. One of them writing later of the trip, recalled, "The last morning was a great one, in which 20 or so of us crowded into a small living room to listen to President Johnson give an address supporting the civil rights bills that were being debated at the time... It was to all of us some sort of vindication of our being there and having stood up with MLK for justice and for the things that were so obviously right."<sup>2</sup>

While many members of present-day UUCR know that the minister and some members participated in the historic marches in Selma, what they may not know is how much social justice (or as it was called then, social action) work was undertaken by church members right from the beginning. The March 4, 1957, board minutes show that the congregation had collected clothing for Hungarian relief following a popular but abortive uprising against the Soviet government. In the years to follow, newsletters are full of social justice meetings, projects, and legislative efforts many of which were aimed at correcting inequalities that existed in Montgomery County with its Southern heritage. For example, local schools and public accommodations were segregated with change coming slowly.

According to one member, "In 1962 the Fellowship for Social Action was created to serve the church as eyes and ears on these issues...In 1963 the most pressing issues were in the areas of

equal justice, public accommodations, fair housing and equal employment opportunity.” The Fellowship worked with groups such as the NAACP and the Montgomery County Human Relations Commission.<sup>3</sup>

Among other actions, Rockville Unitarians marched locally, tested out public accommodations laws, signed petitions, met with state and county legislators, and collected clothing, other goods, and money to assist those in need near and far. They rolled up their sleeves and grabbed rakes and shovels to help clean up Scotland, a nearby community of descendants of freed slaves which as late as the early-1960’s lacked electricity, running water, and decent housing. Alphonzo Lee, an African American leader in the local civil rights movement, was a member of UCR and active in the Fellowship at this time.<sup>4</sup>

A number of members were involved directly in local government particularly in the sixties and seventies. One wrote of, “...election nights when the Worship Hall became a political headquarters with election returns from all over the city tallied to show the victories of our church candidates. In all, we elected three mayors and four council members from this church. The Unitarian Church played a major role in defining what kind of city Rockville became, winning all-American city awards for our strong citizen involvement.” Alex Greene, a founding member of UCR, was mayor of Rockville from 1958 to 1960, a time when the small town was developing into a modern suburban community.<sup>5</sup>

## **Growth And Growing Pains**

The Annual Report of 1966 noted a 14% increase of membership over the previous year. Membership was to hit 400 in early 1968, the goal of the original members. By fall of 1966, the Membership and Growth Committee was focused on two problems: “A serious space problem in the R. E. School... (and) ... a far more complex problem: Where are we going as a church in terms of size of membership, physical space, and the financial implications of both?”<sup>1</sup>

The management structure was modified to better meet the needs of the larger organization. The first leadership conferences (similar to board retreats) were held during this period. Financial crises loomed and were dealt with; people were urged to remember to pay their pledges; budgets were modified; and credit arrangements made at least once with the bank. There was discussion about eliminating the offertory, which was “generally abhorred on aesthetic grounds.” (For the time being they kept it, needing the money.)<sup>2</sup> It’s possible that UCR was stretching more than it was ready for. Dave Cole pointed out to the Board in one meeting that the budget was the eighth largest in the denomination and most of those other churches had either endowment or building funds.

Another sign of growth was the implementation of a third service in September 1967, this one on Wednesday evening, for adults only. Sometimes the minister preached the same sermon he had delivered on Sunday but more often it was a discussion session or

some other non-traditional format. A Family Christmas Festival held at the Civic Center in late 1967 drew more than 500 people.

The November 1966 newsletters report that the membership celebrated the church's tenth anniversary with a buffet dinner, dancing and "a musical comedy written especially for the occasion." That party was also notable for being the only one in church history featuring a woman jumping out of a cake.<sup>3</sup>

The world outside was changing. Vietnam was increasingly on people's minds. The church struggled to find consensus on one of the most divisive issues in modern American history. One member summarized by saying, "From its beginning, the Vietnam War was a major concern of the church and an issue on which members intensely disagreed. Some members strongly believed in U.S. objectives... a much larger number hated the war, and those numbers increased as the war and killing went on..."<sup>4</sup> In mid-November 1969, more than 50 Rockville Unitarians joined the massive anti-war Moratorium March on Washington. Sixty young people who had come from out of state to take part in the protest stayed overnight in the church. Most were college students and were described as being good guests. Church members brought food and provided housing in their own homes for another 100 marchers. However, some of UCR were not happy about the church being used in that way.

People grappled with Black Power and the place, if any, of white liberals in the fight for civil rights and equality. In October 1967, Mr. Cole preached a sermon entitled "The World of the Hippies"

in which he asked: “Is it a serious movement? Should adults try to understand or simply reject it as youthful folly?”

Closer to home, members were involved in cultural activities. A play reading group met often for a while, and some people were active in Rockville Little Theater. There were frequent art exhibits as well as musical programs and worship workshops. Members supported Unity House, an inner-city project sponsored by Washington area Unitarian churches. In 1968, the Women’s Alliance expanded their annual gift sale held in late November; the newly named Bizarre Bazaar netted \$700.

Throughout it all, some members harbored significant dissatisfaction about how things were going at UCR. In 1968, the Board requested comments about various topics including the job the minister was doing. Comments received in May and June split pretty much evenly with these two summing things up: “We support the minister strongly.” “We think it’s time for a new minister.” That fall, Mr. Cole announced that in early 1969 he’d be leaving to lead the West Shore Unitarian Church of Rocky River (a suburb of Cleveland), Ohio, a church twice the size of UCR and one that likely gave him a better platform for the national and international social justice work he engaged in throughout his career. He was to stay there until retirement. William (Bill) R. Moors, Associate Minister at Cedar Lane, was called to UCR in the early summer.<sup>5</sup>

## Changing Times, Changing Ways

Judging from the Annual Report of 1971, UCR entered the seventies on an upbeat note. Parson (the title he preferred) Bill Moors described the prior year as “the happiest one of my ministry,” while the Board Chairman called it “one of the most satisfying that I’ve spent in any Unitarian church” and observed that, “It seems we are more ‘together’ now than we’ve been for several years.” The music director declared, “It’s been a Very Good Year.” But major social changes begun in the sixties were already starting to affect the congregation in ways confounding, wrenching, refreshing and liberating.

The national folk music revival of the 1960s had really taken hold in UCR by 1970. Parson Moors encouraged the long-time music director, Alice Davis (later known as Niki Davis), as she included folk music in many of the services. Not only did a folk group made up of members play regularly, but folk versions replaced the traditional settings of some hymns.

The Worship Committee was experimenting with different formats “rather than always riding piggy-back on Jewish and Christian celebrations.” These formats included chancel dramas, new ways of singing and more opportunities for individual expression.<sup>1</sup> Some sermons were followed either immediately or later in the week by “talkback” sessions where anyone could voice their thoughts on the topic. The Wednesday night services sometimes had monthly themes that included politics, the Bible, life styles, and poetry. They were well attended; in 1970 it was

reported that even on a snowy night, never fewer than 25 people came.

Parson Moors and his wife, Marilyn, started a program of summer Sunday brunches in the early seventies that were very popular (and are still remembered fondly by several members). A simple brunch was followed by a short informal program such as a panel discussion or a musical presentation. Spring Thing also began in the early seventies. It was described in the 1978 Annual Report as “a potpourri of original programs, activities and discussions held on seven Sunday mornings.” That year it included 26 offerings such as yoga, singing, painting, and a raft trip. It continued into the mid-eighties.

Worship workshops continued to be very popular the most notable one being Jean Horneck’s 1974 *Ritual of Change and Growth*. A member called it “a compelling worship service of dramatic readings, music, dance and dialogue scenes... (that) helped all of us deal with the strains and joys of the loss, change, and growth that we all experienced during those exciting but scary years.” It was performed by members of UCR here, at area churches, and at the UUA General Assembly.<sup>2</sup>

Various church groups reflected cultural trends as Americans explored newly popular ideas. There were films and discussion groups on personal growth, relationships, parenting, and marriage. PSI, the UCR parapsychology group numbering about a dozen, met for several years in the mid-seventies studying topics such as UFOs, handwriting analysis, meditation, and the Bermuda

Triangle. Meanwhile, a small sign of the times was a 1972 reminder in the newsletter to refrain from smoking in the worship hall during services.

National demographic changes were reflected at UCR. Attendance in the RE school tapered off as the last of the baby boomers moved through grade school and beyond. Fewer students meant that there was no longer a need for double sessions, and the church returned to one Sunday service and RE session in September 1972. However, adult membership held fairly steady between 360 and 390 during the early and mid-seventies.

Another change was that the congregation was becoming more diverse age-wise. Not only did some older people join, but with time the original young couples edged closer to middle age and beyond. In the mid-seventies a group called the Second Fifties (later renamed the Prime Timers) formed for the purpose of “exploring ways and means for enhancing the quality of life as we grow older.” They also admitted to having a lot of fun socializing. And they must have—the group continued well into the nineties.<sup>3</sup>

Some things didn't change so much for UCR, including its financial ups and downs. At various times board minutes report pledges down and concern about meeting obligations including the minister's salary. Later a good pledge drive is celebrated and plans are made to give the minister a salary increase. The idea of dispensing with the offertory was revived and implemented around 197. Until the fall of 1996 the orders of service politely asked people to support the church and directed them to

collection baskets at the rear of the sanctuary. (A number of long-time members have said that part of the impetus for this came from people who had developed a distaste for offertories in their former churches.)

One of the members, Walter E. Brown, decided to help the church with a cause near and dear to his heart. In 1972 he donated \$15,000 in securities “to provide a financial basis for beautifying the Church property by the planting of trees, shrubs, and flowers.” More than four decades later, this fund continues to pay for new plants and related expenses.<sup>4</sup>

Church members and friends continued to enjoy social activities including the Dinner Shebang (similar to Dinners for Eight—over the years, the format and name have varied somewhat). Social action continued with a wide variety of causes being supported. Among other things, the church was an active member of FISH, a group that provided food to Rockville residents in emergency situations. In 1974 the minister and church members began an Amnesty International group that still meets at the church.

## **The End of the Women’s Alliance**

By all accounts the “wake” held in February 1972 to celebrate the end of the Women’s Alliance was quite a bash—even by UCR standards of the time (and these were people who knew how to party)—complete with a hairy-legged male chorus line and a casket. The Alliance had been formed at a time when almost all

of the church women were stay-at-home mothers. By the end of the sixties, most of them were working or going to school, and it was getting impossible to keep the Alliance going. And as one of them observed, it was more than just a grand party, “This was our salute to Women’s Lib.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, major changes in American culture were reflected at UCR. However, it’s also true that being a group of progressive people, gender roles from the very beginning were less traditional than in many organizations. For example, men taught in the RE school right from the start. There were women on the Board from the very beginning. However, it seems that it wasn’t until the early or mid-seventies that a similar number of men and women regularly served as trustees.

Interestingly, the two areas where old fashioned gender roles remained strong until the seventies were hospitality and ushering. That was some years after the Hospitality Committee had commented, “For the 1965-66 year it is optimistically hoped that the list of (coffee) pourers will widen its membership. Perhaps next year we can break the discriminatory barrier which seems now to exist and permit all church friends to serve—regardless of sex.”<sup>2</sup>

Topics of presentations, sermons, and discussion groups reflect how people were reevaluating traditional roles over the years. There was a 1962 discussion on the “Dilemma of the Educated Woman” with suggested background reading of two articles: “Is College Wasted on Women?” and “The Entrenchment of the

American Witch.” Eight years later a program was held asking, “The American Dream... Is it for Men Only?” By 1973 there were three consciousness raising groups formed for the purpose of “sharing experiences, defining womanhood, supporting each other... (and) exercising full human capacities as women.”<sup>3</sup>

Before leaving the subject of the Alliance, there are two more things to note. First, over the years, it raised much needed money to help the church buy equipment and pave the driveway. And finally, when the 1964 building was being designed there was “a firm message from the Women’s Alliance: ‘NO KITCHEN!’”<sup>4</sup> (When the church was expanded in the mid-eighties, Rockville’s Unitarian women deemed it finally safe to have a full size church kitchen.)

### **Singles, Couples, Former Couples, New Couples**

Initially most of the members of the congregation were young couples. That, of course, changed as more people of diverse ages joined, some of them single, divorced, or widowed. The newsletter of June 5, 1960, reported that the first couple to meet at UCR had recently been married in the minister’s study. They were just the first of many to make a match at the church.<sup>1</sup>

In early 1971, the Caring Singles group was formed. It consisted of UCR members and others who met regularly at the church for wine and cheese after Sunday services. In addition, they held other events that were primarily social in orientation including

some activities for parents and children. Caring Singles remained active until the late eighties.

The other major group for singles at UCR at the time was Discovery, created in 1974, which often attracted 200 or more people to its events. It was described as “an autonomous, volunteer, non-profit organization of the Unitarian Church of Rockville, whose purpose was to provide a continuing opportunity for self-discovery, communication, and socialization.” It held Friday evening programs which usually consisted of small group discussions followed by conversation, dancing, and refreshments. It was staffed by a large group of volunteer facilitators and support workers. Participant donations covered the costs which included a yearly financial commitment to UCR for use of its facilities.<sup>2</sup>

One member wrote of hearing about Discovery at a bar several months after the breakup of his marriage. “(A man) asked me if I had been to that Unity or maybe Unitary Church in Rockville. It didn’t take me long to realize that he was talking about a Unitarian Church; my own Unitarian Church of Rockville.” The UCR member described how he found “a caring community that provided an opportunity for small group discussion of relationship issues in a non-threatening environment.” He went on to say that during the almost twenty years of its existence, Discovery helped tens of thousands of people, contributed significantly to UCR’s bottom line, and attracted people from around the Washington

area and beyond, some of whom became friends and members of the church.<sup>3</sup>

A major contributor to the popularity of programs such as Discovery was the rise in divorce rates nationwide around this time. (Reasons for the rise that are often cited include changes in gender roles and less stigma attached to divorce.) These large social shifts played out at UCR—sometimes in unusual ways. One congregant wrote that Parson Moors in 1970:

*“...expressed extreme concern for the future of the church, since there were an extraordinary number of 10- to 25-year marriages going belly-up at the same time. All those long term members and pledging units were disappearing before his very eyes...About two years later... it became apparent that a number of these separated couple were also remarrying and introducing their new spouses to the benefits of UCR.”<sup>4</sup>*

Sometimes the new spouses weren't from outside the church. One man described himself as “a major player in the 1970s marital partner permanent exchange program that shuffled wives and husbands... Most, but not all, of the (five or more) resulting couples stayed in the church and prospered.”<sup>5</sup>

It's probably inevitable that a group was formed around 1979 called On Being A Couple. Its purpose was to explore relationship issues of couples including parenting.

## **Celebration and Loss**

On October 2, 1976, Rockville's Unitarians gathered to celebrate their twentieth anniversary. Ten days later, they again gathered but this time in shock and grief at the sudden death earlier that day of Parson Moors, who had suffered a heart attack in his office. Over the next days and weeks, members and staff rallied around to organize two memorial services and make arrangements to conduct the church's business in his absence. Later a number of donations to causes dear to him were made and a folk song book published in his memory. The minister and his wife were held dearly by the community, and the congregation voted to give Marilyn six months of his salary after his death. She remained a friend of the church until her death in 2016.

It was decided to wait a while before seeking another minister. Ellen Nelson, the Director of Religious Education, took on the functions of chief administrative officer, and many members led Sunday services. The consensus in the 1977 Annual Report was that it had been a time of loss but also of growth.

A survey was conducted that helped the Pulpit Committee when it was time to start their search for the next minister. Findings included: "The majority says, 'God may appropriately be used as a

name for some natural processes within the universe, such as love or creative evolution.”” Most saw Jesus in the tradition of Jewish prophets and felt that some of his teachings were of value to them. And as a whole, the church would be most comfortable with a minister who was a humanist.<sup>1</sup>

## **Rounding out the Seventies**

In late August 1977, the congregation chose Reverend Robert (Bob) B. Fraser to be its fourth minister, serenading him with a song by the Pulpit Committee, “Bring Me a Minister in The Summertime.” Another significant staff change occurred in 1979 when Audree O’Connell left her post as Music Director after seven years. She was replaced by none other than Niki Davis (aka Alice Wyckoff) who had held the position from 1957 until 1972. She was to continue until 1994, in spite of initially agreeing only to finish out Audree’s final year.

The Ethier Memorial Music Fund was established in the late seventies in memory of Noel Ethier, “a good bass and a fine amiable person.” He had been a choir member for several years when he died suddenly of a heart attack. To this day, the fund helps pay for special musical programs.<sup>2</sup> The church’s first picture directory (1977-1978) was published at this time. Another first was the all-church retreat in May 1979 at Prince William Forest Park, which had 164 participants. Square dances were popular and the Book Group met often. The Social Responsibility

Committee educated and advocated on social issues including clean energy, prison reform, and farm workers' rights.

Finally, the decade ended on literally a more sober note as the Board instituted a new, stricter policy in late 1977 regarding alcoholic beverages on church premises or at all-church functions. The only ones allowed were to be wine, beer, and light punches with plenty of non-alcoholic alternatives made available. The Board cited the need to discourage abuse or dependency on alcoholic beverages.

### **The Eighties—Changes at UCR**

Membership at the beginning of the decade was in the low to mid 300s with RE registration around 105, and much of the church activity continued as it had in recent years. Discovery and other groups continued to meet. Niki Davis, the choir, and other musicians continued to delight the congregation with a variety of music including some classical works such as Rachmaninoff's *Vespers* in April 1980. In early October 1981, the newsletter announced the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary program featuring a "cast of at least 25 (who) will review our past."

There were some new things in the early and mid-eighties. The Action Auction made its debut in January 1980 and was an immediate success. The Quilters got their start in September of 1981 when a group of women were asked to make a quilt to be raffled off at the November Bizarre Bazaar. Yes, you read that

correctly—they had less than three months, but they pulled it off and haven't stopped making beautiful creations since. (Although with a lot more planning and lead time built in.)<sup>1</sup> The Caring Committee (precursor to the Pastoral Care Team) was created in 1986. Members and friends were urged to collect water in their summer travels for the ingathering ceremony of September 1987, starting a tradition which continues.

There were staff changes too. UCR ordained two Ministers of Religious Education, Ellen Nelson in 1980 and her successor, Betty Jo Middletown, in 1983. In the fall of 1984, Reverend Fraser resigned and subsequently went to the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu where he stayed for ten years until his retirement. Reverend Arthur Jellis was selected as interim minister and began serving in January 1985.

The church burned the mortgage for the original building at a party in November 1984. Now it was time to seriously start planning how to expand the church buildings. In the mid-eighties UCR embarked on a \$360,000 building expansion and renovation program of its aging facilities. It's notable that the congregation voted to put aside a percentage of the money raised in the building campaign and use it for social outreach; the amount totaled \$10,000.<sup>2</sup> Among other improvements, a kitchen and the Fellowship Hall were added. Renovations and upgrades included new roofs, air conditioning in the Worship Hall (which must have made summer services a lot more appealing), and more storage

and meeting space. On September 27, 1987, the new space was dedicated.

Two important hiring decisions were made in the mid-eighties. Deborah McGrady Kahn joined the staff as the Director of Religious Education in the spring of 1985, a post she was to hold until 2014, providing important continuity for students, families and staff. In February 1986, UCR called a woman minister to its pulpit for the first time. Reverend Sara Moores Campbell began serving in August, and in the 1987 Annual Report the Board Chair declared that, "Sara is all the good things we thought she would be and more."

The church thrived in the late eighties. As always, there was a wide array of programs and activities. Deborah Kahn held a very popular course on women's religious history named *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*. She was to repeat it several times into the nineties. There were events and developments characteristic of the 1980s. In October 1989 the newsletter called for volunteers to wash the ceramic coffee cups that were replacing the environmentally harmful foam cups. The Rockville chapter of the PSI Symposium held a workshop at the church in 1983 with New Age topics like "how to select a crystal and use it for cleansing auras."<sup>3</sup> And UCR bought its first computer in the summer of 1988 for use in the office.

A report summarizing findings from focus groups in February 1988 said that people were overall "pleased with the church staff...some felt we would need an associate minister in the

future.” Reverend Campbell is reputed to be an eloquent and thought-provoking preacher, and attendance at worship services steadily increased in the late eighties. Often latecomers had to sit in the lobby.<sup>4</sup> In fact, members were feeling ambivalent about the congregation’s growth; long term planning was undertaken to deal with questions such as how large the church should grow. After much debate, it began holding two Sunday services and two sessions of RE in the fall of 1989. (Wednesday night services had been dropped at some point in the prior years.) In the 1989 Annual Report, the Board Chair wrote, “UCR can usher out this decade with great pride in our accomplishments and welcome a new one with excitement.”

## **The Eighties—Social Justice**

Rockville Unitarians participated in ongoing social justice work during this time. For example, they worked with the United Church Center for Community Ministries (now known as Community Ministries of Rockville). Five thousand dollars of the ten thousand that had been raised during the building campaign and earmarked for social outreach was donated to help renovate a building for this organization’s offices. Another group that members were involved with was LegiCUUM, a citizens’ activist group that testified and lobbied on issues before the General Assembly in Annapolis. Housing—both affordable housing and the problem of homelessness—received a great deal of attention. For

example, UCR actively supported the Gude Drive Men's Shelter from its very beginning in late 1986.

The plight of refugees from Central America who were fleeing persecution and the violence of civil war was a major social justice issue in the early to mid-eighties. Immigration policy strictly limited the number of Central Americans who were allowed to stay in the United States. Most faced deportation. A number of UU churches as well as others joined the Sanctuary Movement which offered safety to refugees in church buildings in defiance of Federal law. In April 1985 at a congregational meeting, after much study and consideration, members voted on whether to declare UCR a sanctuary. There was "... strong support but not the necessary 80% of the vote (the number decided ahead of time)." In fact, just three ballots made the difference. The Sanctuary Committee continued to educate members and raise funds to support the movement.<sup>1</sup>

And as the AIDS crisis ballooned in the late eighties, church members responded in a number of ways such as working on an AIDS hotline. In October 1987 there was a large Gay and Lesbian March on Washington that focused on acceptance and rights as well as on AIDS. The Board of Trustees strongly supported the march and encouraged members to participate. Also, 14 out-of-state marchers stayed in the Fellowship Hall overnight.

## Transition and Challenge

The nineties began quietly and productively at UCR. Everyone had adjusted reasonably well to having two services on Sundays. Attendance and finances were steady. In 1990 Don Robinson served as ministerial intern. If the name is familiar, it's likely because he founded Beacon House in 1991 and is president of it to this day. Its mission is to improve the lives of at-risk youth in the Edgewood neighborhood of D.C. In 1990 Reverend Campbell's first meditation manual, *Into the Wilderness*, was published. (She has since written three other books under the name Sarah York.) UCR donated the second five thousand dollars of the ten thousand raised during the 1980s building campaign. The money went to renovate one of the rooms in what's now known as the Jefferson House. Operated by Community Ministries of Rockville, since 1991 it has provided permanent supportive housing to homeless men who have finished a recovery and/or treatment program but who cannot find clean, safe, affordable housing in Montgomery County.

In mid-May of 1991, Reverend Campbell announced that she had been called to the 575-member Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara, California where she was to serve as senior minister until her retirement in 1999. Among the reasons she gave for accepting the call were the "lure of family roots"—her husband had family ties to the area—and that she was "attracted to the traditional Spanish architecture and the sound of the pipe organ."<sup>1</sup> The Board responded as quickly as possible debating various courses of

action, and at a June congregational meeting, UCR voted to hire an interim minister. Reverend David MacMillan began serving in that position in August. Under his leadership, members of the congregation explored and worked to resolve what he described as “longstanding unresolved conflicts about church growth, Sunday programming emphasis & direction, style of ministerial leadership, & the integration of a new generation of younger church members... (all of which he felt were) a normal developmental crisis in its growth as a congregation.”<sup>2</sup>

In addition to dealing with congregational conflict and ministerial transition, UCR was soon also facing financial difficulty. By early 1992 income had dropped significantly partly due to the “prolonged recession and the financial difficulties of the Discovery program.”<sup>3</sup> Membership also fell somewhat that year.

Discovery had contributed substantial amounts to UCR for many years since it was formed in 1974. In the year ending March 31, 1990, the amount was \$10,000. That fell to \$8330 the following year, and there was “a noticeable decline in Discovery attendance due primarily to a large influx of other activities geared towards singles.”<sup>4</sup> Income from Discovery continued to fall precipitously in the next two years, and in 1993, the Board of Trustees voted to discontinue the relationship with Discovery.

## **“A Wave of Much Good Energy”**

Many positive developments were on their way. In May of 1992, Reverend Jack Young arrived for candidating week, giving a sermon titled, “Not Beyond the Sheriff’s Chicken-Yard.” At the end of the week, the congregation “blowing horns, beating drums, singing” joyfully escorted their newly called minister to the church.<sup>1</sup> In the 1993 Annual Report Deborah Kahn declared, “The year has sped by on a wave of much good energy and excitement at the arrival of Jack Young as our new minister.” Membership was up; enrollment in the RE program had risen to 220.

Reverend Young initiated Wonderful Wednesdays in the fall of 1992. The midweek evenings of dinner, vespers, and educational/enrichment programs were to prove quite popular for many years. Unitarian Singles (a successor group to Caring Singles of the seventies and eighties) was formed in the early nineties, and featured hiking, trips to places like Wolf Trap, parties, and holiday potlucks at the church. The Lunch Bunch, a popular group for many years, met regularly at area restaurants.

The long-awaited UU hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, debuted in the fall of 1993 with many new songs from a wide variety of sources and changes to some old favorites. Niki Davis declared herself “ecstatic” about it, and it seems safe to say that her enthusiasm and coaching helped others adjust to the new music.<sup>2</sup> Another major musical transition occurred the following June when she retired. She had been involved with UCR’s music program from almost the very beginning and had directed the

choir for close to thirty years. Needless to say, Niki Davis was a tough act to follow, but Myra Tate, a classically trained opera singer, proved herself to be another gifted musical leader.

Members were involved with many social justice projects and causes including an on-going commitment to helping alleviate the lack of local affordable housing. Some worked to support a woman's right to choice. A very special project was begun in early 1993 when UCR established a partner church relationship with a Unitarian church in Transylvania, Romania that still continues. Sandor Kovacs, the Romanian minister, wrote in November of 1993 that, "The people they burst into tears when they heard about your gift. Nobody didn't help us and now you are the first."<sup>3</sup> He visited UCR the following fall further cementing the ties between the two disparate congregations.

*Quest* took on a dramatically different, more readable and professional look in late November 1993 thanks to desktop publishing. This was one of many ways the office staff was using improved computer technology. In the mid-nineties there start to be mentions of that new way to communicate—email—and speculation that, "perhaps someday we'll be able to communicate news of UCR people and events this way."<sup>4</sup> In addition, the Worship Hall's sound system was upgraded significantly in March of 1994. Not only was sound quality enhanced, but new capabilities such as being able to tape events in the room were added.

UCR was struggling to become a more professionally run organization at this time. Of course, this took money. In January 1994, a consultant (a UU minister) gave two workshops for the congregation on long-term planning, fiscal management, the theology of giving, and the anatomy of a successful canvass. Two months later, Reverend Young wrote that the Board of Trustees (some of whom had been getting burned out) had decided to focus on setting policy and give him and the rest of the staff more responsibility for getting things done. He observed that, "The volunteer pool is smaller these days, here and everywhere." He then pointed out that, "At the same time, the staff is stretched very thin...So the proposal for the current pledge drive goes to the heart of our difficulty at UCR. We simply need staffing appropriate for a church of our size."<sup>5</sup>

The pledge drive was indeed successful, and new staff members were hired to work with the RE program and to coordinate various programs related to membership and social responsibility. Another major step forward was the expansion of Building 4 in the fall of 1994. This provided much needed classroom and office space. Two other steps were taken in the mid-nineties to ensure financial resources sufficient to fund the church's goals were the establishment of an endowment fund and the return of a regular Sunday offertory.

The Board, staff, and congregation continued to stretch towards defining and realizing their visions of UCR. Governing policies were developed to "provide some institutional memory in the

form of written policies and guidelines so each new Board does not have to ‘reinvent the wheel.’”<sup>6</sup>

Rockville’s Unitarians took a victory lap on Sunday, February 19, 1995, when they celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the building. The February 8, 1995, edition of *Quest* announced that David Cole, UCR’s minister when the building opened, would be the guest preacher that morning and that the evening would feature a dinner party with music reminiscent of the 1960s and surprise entertainment. A video of vignettes of UCR’s history was also planned, and members compiled the booklet *Recollections and Reminiscences, In Celebration of the 30 Years Since the Unitarian Church of Rockville Was Built*. (The subtitle or theme was, “Is This A Great Church, Or What?”)

## **The Late Nineties**

The next transition was triggered in mid-1997. “Jack Young addressed the Board and informed us that he would be retiring effective August 31. After the stunned silence there was much discussion.”<sup>1</sup> Reverend Jack Young is currently Minister Emeritus of UUCR.

Within a week, the Board met to initiate the process of obtaining an interim minister. They also began the process of choosing people for a Ministerial Search Committee and a Comprehensive Planning Committee. Reverend Mark Edmiston-Lange began a two-year stint as interim minister in September. During those two

years, much of the congregation's time and energy went into the ministerial search and discussion of the next steps for UCR. However, a few developments bear mentioning.

As far back as 1969, ashes of members and friends had been scattered on the church grounds; however, it was not until the mid-nineties that work was started on a Memorial Garden; a site was chosen after much discussion and a congregational vote. In June 1998 the congregation, after more than two years of education and discussion, voted to ask the UUA to designate UCR a Welcoming Congregation. (As early as 1965, David Cole had preached a sermon entitled "Homosexuals—The Strangers Among Us.") Later that year, the congregation voted to join Action in Montgomery (AIM), a community power organization working to make the county and state a better place. And in May 1999, thirty-eight years after the first of several failed votes, the congregation voted to include "Universalist" in the church's name.

Meantime the Comprehensive Plan Committee explored the issues growth (membership was close to 400) and what to do about limited building space and parking. The church began a capital campaign to improve and expand facilities and in particular to build the long-delayed sanctuary. Reverend Edmiston-Lange wrote in 1999, "There is widespread desire to get ahead with the project. There is the land for the sanctuary project. IF YOU DO NOT BUILD THE SANCTUARY YOU MIGHT AS WELL PULL A RUG OVER YOUR HEADS AND TAKE A NAP!"<sup>2</sup>

With that not-so-subtle encouragement, a new name, and a new minister, Reverend Jay Abernathy, who began serving in the fall of 1999, the church entered the twenty-first century.

## **Conflict**

There were a number of positive developments at UUCR during the first years of the new decade. *Our Whole Lives* (OWL), a program about human sexuality and relationships for middle school children, was offered for the first time during the 1999-2000 school year. (While this has been a particularly successful program, classes tackling the topic had been held at the church as far back as the early seventies.) In 2000 the church registered the web site name *uucr.org*. After decades of using the address, 501 Mannakee Street, the church successfully lobbied the City of Rockville in 2003 to have the name of Norris Street changed to Welsh Park Drive. This led to UUCR's current address, one that is much easier for everyone, especially emergency responders, to find. (As to why the church is the only occupant on a stubby little street, that has to do with a change in the original plan for this part of Rockville.)<sup>1</sup>

In April 2002, Virginia LaMarche, having studied at Wesley Theological Seminary, was ordained as the church's first (and so far only) professionally trained lay minister. She was responsible for implementing the Small Group Ministry program in 2002.

Changes were made to the governing structure. In 2001 the Church Council was established. Comprising chairs or representatives of all activities and committees, it was created to handle operational work such as developing and amending the church calendar and to facilitate communication and creative idea exchange between groups. It also allowed the Board to focus on policies and financial matters. Another change was in the organization of the Board itself with the position of board chair replaced with president and vice-president.

Some new groups and activities sprouted up as they always do. They included WOFF (Walking Outdoors for Fun and Friendship), an informal group of members and friends who went on local hikes. Family and Friends Potlucks got started as a way for people to get to know each other at church. They featured a casual atmosphere with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches provided. Several women's retreats were held in Western Maryland in the early and mid-2000s.

Most significantly, with the guidance of the Comprehensive Plan Committee, the congregation took up the challenge of building a new sanctuary. Back in 1962, the congregation had voted to build an all-purpose space and delay a sanctuary until a later building phase. Almost forty years later, surely it was time for that phase! In late 2000, the church kicked off an ambitious and successful capital campaign with the slogan, "Building a Church, Not Just a Building." The treasurer announced in the 2001 Annual Report that more than \$1,750,000 had been pledged. A Building

Committee was formed in 2001 and began discussions on the design with the D.C. based architectural firm of Wnuk Spurlock.

Unfortunately, conflict with and about the minister overshadowed these years. Reverend Abernathy had over twenty-five years' ministerial experience. In addition, he had trained as an architect and had overseen a million dollar capital campaign at his previous church. So he seemed particularly well-suited for UUCR at a time when it was planning for a new sanctuary. However, problems arose less than a year after he began. Not long after his installation in early 2000, there are references in the newsletter to "conflicts between some members and committees and the Minister (and) extraordinary and unforeseeable conflictual events in our church."<sup>2</sup>

Concerns continued that included the quality or style of sermons, a drop in attendance at services, less lay involvement than previously in services, and what was seen by many as too little time spent on pastoral care. The Committee on Ministry and representatives from UUA worked with Reverend Abernathy and unhappy congregants to try and bridge the divisions. Twice in 2002 the Board voted to support the minister. Things came to a head in early 2003 when a petition was circulated among the congregation stating that, "Based on personal experience and that of other members of this church, the undersigned believe that Jay Abernathy is not suited to the ministry of UUCR," and asking the Board to negotiate his resignation.<sup>3</sup> More than 70 members and approximately a dozen friends signed it. The Committee on

Ministry responded by saying that, “Some degree of anti-minister sentiment always exists...” in almost all UU congregations, but that differences are usually worked out. They went on to point out that, “In the past two years with Jay, UUCR has made many changes that enrich our congregation.” Furthermore, they declared that circulating the petition was “not an issue-oriented action. It is rather a personal attack, with the divisive potential of inflicting great injury to our church community.”<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the merits of the arguments on either side, there’s no doubt about the depth of feelings and the unprecedented degree of conflict within the church. Many who were present at the time still have strong opinions and emotions about the episode.

## **Healing**

In early March, Reverend Abernathy submitted his resignation (effective the end of June). While this resolved the immediate issue, deep divisions remained. Some people had left the church either because of the minister himself or the controversy surrounding him, and there were serious differences among the members and friends who remained. In the March 12, 2003, edition of *Quest*, it was announced that a Community Rebuilding Task Force had been formed and that in early April an open church meeting would be held to begin the process of “rebuilding our bridges of friendship and love and to reestablish the

supporting, compassionate, and welcoming community atmosphere here at UUCR.”

It was just the first of many meetings to deal with congregation’s emotional and social wounds. Reverend Sue Turner, a specialist in interim ministry who had experience in conflict management, was called to the pulpit for two years beginning in August 2003. She, along with various consultants, helped guide the church in the healing process and then into extended discussion about what members wanted of their next minister and about the support they would provide that individual.

One of the interim minister’s missions, of course, was to simply help keep things going as the congregation worked through the issues of the previous few years. And indeed, services were held, classes taught, social justice work done, and activities held as usual. The popular evening discussion program, Socrates Café, debuted in 2004. It continues to draw people from the church and the local community for stimulating conversations on a wide variety of topics. And since early 2005, the Craft Group has been meeting every Tuesday morning for crafts, coffee, and conversation—not necessarily in that order.

Meantime, the Board grappled with finances as membership declined for a few years. The Annual Report of 2005 listed membership as 307, the lowest it had been for a long time. Pledges were consequently down—not a good thing, particularly for a church in the middle of a major building project. Increasing membership became a priority. A program named Pathway to

Membership designed to help potential members learn about Unitarian Universalism and UUCR debuted in late 2004. The Publicity Committee worked to tell the community about UUCR. Aside from the usual focus on the web site, signage, and so on, the group hit on the idea of participating in Rockville's Memorial Day parade. For a few years, members built floats and marched in an effort to introduce the church to the community as well as just for the fun of it. Some of the floats featured social justice themes. In a lighter vein—and perhaps more memorably—one year the theme was “UUs on KazUUs” and yes, the participants marched through downtown Rockville playing kazoos.<sup>1</sup>

### **A New Minister, A New Building**

A Ministerial Search Committee had begun work over the summer of 2004, meeting almost weekly for about eight months. They spread a wide net, considering 23 far-flung candidates. In the end, they decided on Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss, Associate Minister at River Road Unitarian Church, where her focus was “on providing facilitative leadership to their large social justice program and on pastoral care.”<sup>1</sup>

On April 20, 2005, *Quest* reported that Reverend Strauss was “overwhelmingly approved by an enthusiastic meeting (on April 10). After the vote, with the colorful UUCR banner flying, a contingent proceeded to Lynn's house (conveniently located on Mannakee Street) to ask her to accept our calling... The day was

marked by joy, cherry blossoms, and hopes for a new shared ministry.” In September, she was welcomed with an all-church dance celebrating her new ministry and a new beginning for UUCR.

Meantime throughout the early 2000s with all its ups and downs, there was still “The Building.” The money had been pledged, a committee formed (of course!), an architect hired, plans drawn up... But as with any construction project things were neither smooth nor simple. The initial plans proved to be too costly to build and had to be revised to meet the target amount of two million dollars. The original construction company was replaced by another. For one reason or another building permits were delayed repeatedly. Finally the congregation celebrated the ground-breaking in mid-November 2003 with a bonfire and potluck. Not that things went any more smoothly after that. The obviously exasperated Building Committee listed “The Top Ten Reasons Why the Building Isn’t Started Yet” in the 2004 Annual Report. Reason # 7 was, “Trouble getting fire marshal approval for the perpetually flaming 100-foot chalice on the roof.” Finally the steel frame was erected in April 2005. It took another year with its share of delays and frustrations, but the building was finally ready for its first service on April, 23, 2006.

Now the congregation not only had a space large enough to seat everyone comfortably at one worship service and for special events, but it had a beautiful, inspirational place. New chairs had been bought with funds specially raised to complete and furnish

the building. The raffle winner of the 2006 quilt, “Shining Spirit,” donated it to the church where it hangs most Sundays at the front of the sanctuary.

During the Capital Campaign for the new building, one member had written of her vision of “a Worship Hall of simplicity and beauty, a place designed to raise our spirits, invite us to hope, make us believe in ourselves and the world—such a Worship Hall could make all of our services resonate with us far beyond what our present surroundings can do.”<sup>2</sup> The vision had become reality. A week later, the congregation installed Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss, and a new era had really, finally begun.

The celebrations weren’t done for the year. Sunday, December 10, 2006, was a particularly joyous day in the history of UUCR. The church’s Golden Anniversary was celebrated at the morning worship service when those people who had signed the membership book in the 1950s were named and thanked. “Actors representing the various decades of the church unfolded a golden ribbon as they highlighted each decade.” The choir sang *Jubilate Fanfare*. A brunch for 300 people including many former UUCR members from out of town was served afterwards. Following that, the Building Dedication was held with many special guests from the community. “We circled the room blessing the space. We had an official Ribbon Cutting Ceremony and official words of dedication were spoken.”<sup>3</sup>

## **2007-2016—“Living Into Our Changes”**

*We are living into our changes, our congregational identity and our future as a vital, growing congregation—a congregation that makes a difference in our lives and in the world.<sup>1</sup>*

The years 2005-2006 were a turning point for UUCR. Since then, the church has enjoyed a period of stability and able ministerial and lay leadership. This has led to growth, deepening of spiritual and social connections, and greater outreach to the community. (Of course, not everything's been smooth—it never is.)

Membership steadily built back up from a low of 307 in 2005. In March 2012, the position of Director of Communications and Membership, separate from Church Administrator, was established to aid in attracting and serving members. Membership is now close to 400 with over 130 friends. This was the target number of the founding members and has been the top range throughout UUCR's history.

Finances have improved significantly, although the Canvass Committee still has its work cut out to encourage people to pledge at a sufficient level to support programming and outreach, maintain and improve the buildings and grounds, and pay staff. Around 2006, successful efforts were begun to increase the endowment fund especially through planned giving. The Action Auction continues strong, but the 43<sup>rd</sup> Bizarre Bazaar in 2011, which raised almost \$15,000 (the budget goal) was the last. “The

need to reinvent our fundraiser arose from the difficulty ... of recruiting leadership for the Bizarre Bazaar, for which we had to collect, sort, price, sell and dispose of a large amount of ‘stuff.’”<sup>2</sup> Since then some different formats for the fall fundraiser have been tried, and the experiment continues.

One of the most visible signs of a maturing church has been the stability and growth of its ministerial staff. In the 2011 Annual Report, Reverend Strauss wrote that, “This year we experienced a full 5 month sabbatical for our minister for the first time in recent memory at UUCR. This significant event marks a transition toward a long settled ministry at UUCR. And this is good news for the health and spiritual maturity of the congregation.” Another milestone came on September 12, 2015, when the church celebrated the tenth anniversary of her ministry with an all-ages dance and party. Her role in unifying and growing the church after the crisis of the early 2000s is indisputable and deeply appreciated.

From 2008 to 2014, six intern ministers served contributing to services and congregational life, and three chose to be ordained at UUCR. Perhaps most telling of all, UUCR hired its first assistant minister (part-time), Reverend Doug McCusker, in the fall of 2014. (He was ordained at River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation, his home church, in the spring of 2015.) UUCR held a bitter-sweet celebration of his brief but productive ministry here soon after when he was called to be the settled minister at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fredericksburg (Virginia).

However, it was not long before Reverend Rebekah Montgomery was chosen to fill the assistant minister position. Each has enriched the church community greatly. (As well as giving the senior minister no doubt very welcome assistance.)

One area that's seen a good deal of staff change in the last few years has been the RE program. Most notably, after almost thirty years as the Director of Religious Education, Deborah Kahn resigned in late 2014 to follow her calling to prison ministry. Andrea Spencer-Linzie served two years as Interim DRE, leading a review and redevelopment of the RE program. A particular focus was to provide more training, support, and respite for the teachers. Dayna Edwards began serving as Director of Religious Education in the summer of 2016.

In another effort to improve how the church functions as an organization and spiritual community, some members of the church took part in lay ministry training in recent years. Many of these people now serve on the Lay Ministry Council (formerly the Church Council). Their training has covered such topics as Unitarian Universalist history, governance, and right relations. "The Lay Ministry Council is responsible for ... the program areas of the congregation, and for overseeing the congregational calendar."<sup>3</sup>

The Adult Religious Education Committee has concentrated its focus on religious and/or social justice topics and taken on a new name—the Adult Faith Formation Committee. After decades of mid-week programming including the long-running Wonderful

Wednesday series, most of the committee's programs are now offered on Sunday mornings when attendance is likely to be better nowadays, perhaps because of worsening traffic or more competition for everyone's time. The newest Adult Faith Formation program is Emerson's Sunrise Coffee Circle before the Sunday service. (It's actually at 8:30 a.m., sunrise being a trifle early.)

The increased interest in meditation and mindfulness in recent years in America has been mirrored at UUCR. For a several years starting around 2007 a meditation group met before Sunday worship services, and since 2010 the Spirit of Life Sangha has met after services. A Meditative Shamanic Drum Circle meets on Sunday evenings. Other opportunities for members and friends to explore and deepen their spiritual lives are women's spirituality groups and the ongoing Small Group Ministry program. In addition, starting in 2014, a multigenerational fair has been held on a Sunday in the spring. The theme of the first was story telling. In 2015 and again in 2016 a *Mind-Body-Spirit* fair introduced people to a wide variety of spiritual practices such as yoga, labyrinth walking and sand mandala sculpting.

Musicians have continued to inspire and delight the congregation. As of 2016, in addition to the adult choir, there is a children's choir, a youth ensemble (Unisons) and Sonaria, a women's choral group that performs a variety of more roots-based music. As in previous years, other professionals and amateurs regularly share their talents with the church.

Myra Tate retired in 2007 after 13 years as Director of Music and was succeeded by Jen Rodgers, another gifted musician and singer. A highlight of her nine years at UUCR came on the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday in 2010 when the adult choir sang *The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace* at Lincoln Center in Manhattan. The church singers were part of a massed chorus of more than 225 from ten choral groups. In June 2016 Jen Rodgers left to pursue doctoral studies. Grace Cho began as Director of Music the following September.

The Pastoral Care Team has continued to provide traditional support services to UUCR members and friends furnishing transportation, running errands or delivering meals in a crisis. They also visit people in hospitals and at home, send greeting cards, and organize memorial receptions. In addition, starting in 2014 they began offering workshops on subjects such as end of life issues and hospice care. These have been well-received.

And as in the past, members and friends have come together in fellowship. Some groups have faded away, others begun as has always happened, but Rockville's UUs continue to meet to listen to music, discuss books, sew quilts, and share coffee and conversation. In January 2009, many gathered at the church to watch TV coverage of the inauguration of the country's first African American president.

The congregation continues to be involved in a wide variety of social justice work. Many efforts date back decades: Partner Church, Amnesty International, and Beacon House to name a few.

Members are still collecting food for local hunger relief and advocating in the Maryland General Assembly for legislation that reflects Unitarian Universalist values. UUCR continues to be a member of several collaborative organizations such as Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice and Interfaith Works.

In addition, there have been new projects of note in the last ten years. They include donating \$5000 to sponsor an exam room at the Mansfield M. Kaseman Health Clinic, an initiative of Community Ministries, which opened in 2010 in Rockville. Since 2009 the church has been sending a group of teens and adults to work on Habitat for Humanity projects in Garrett County, Maryland. Every week for a summer they help build homes for low income families. A recent innovation is the Partner Plate project; every Sunday's offertory is split with a non-profit.

The church has focused on certain social justice causes as they have become prominent in recent years. LGBTQ rights and marriage equality have been a focus of much activism. A notable program has been the Rainbow Youth Alliance, now in its eleventh year of supporting and serving local youth. The Immigration Action Group educates the UUCR community on issues affecting immigrants and collaborates with other groups to serve and advocate for immigrants. In March 2012, UUCR organized a community forum on ending gun violence that featured a variety of panelists such as the county executive and county police chief as well as politicians and faith leaders. The Black Lives Matter banner displayed in front of the building signals the

congregation's concern and engagement with issues of racial justice in contemporary America.

Unitarian Universalists have been concerned about environmental issues for decades, increasingly so as the seriousness of global warming has become clearer. Thanks to the efforts of the UUCR Green Sanctuary Team the church was accredited as a Green Sanctuary by the Unitarian Universalist Association in early 2015. Later that year, solar panels were installed on the roof. The Green Team continues the church's environmental efforts. Meantime members working on landscape improvements and maintenance have been working to improve storm water drainage and plant more native plants.

Finally, it's worth noting that following a congregational vote in May, 2012, what had been the Rockville Unitarian Center, then the Unitarian Church of Rockville, then the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville, was once again renamed. The "C" of UUCR now stands for "congregation," a term that many consider more inclusive. It is with that name that the community that began with a small meeting in a Rockville living room celebrates its sixtieth anniversary and moves forward.

## **Notes**

### **Sources**

|                        |  |  |
|------------------------|--|--|
| <i>A</i>               |  | Annual Report  |
| <i>B</i>               |  | Board minutes  |
| <i>N</i>               |  | Newsletter (The name <i>Quest</i> was adopted in 1959.)              |
| <i>RR</i>              |  | <i>Recollections and Reminiscences of Members and Friends</i> , 1995 |
| <i>50<sup>th</sup></i> |  | <i>UUCR's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Book of Memories</i> , 2006    |

### **Why Then, Why Here?**

1. For a discussion of the religious education curriculum “New Beacon Series” and its author, Sophia Lyon Fahs, see <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/sophia-lyon-fahs-revolutionary-educator> .
2. Jayne Greene, *RR*, 10.

### **The Rockville Unitarian Center**

1. However Henry and Lucy Redkey were older; they celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary in 1959. The April 1959 edition of the newsletter recalled that the initial meetings to discuss forming a church had been held in their living room. Henry was the first person to sign the membership book and first Board Chairman.
2. Peggy Jones, *50<sup>th</sup>*, 10.

## **A Minister and a Parsonage**

1. *N*, December 12, 1957.

## **Growth, Land, and Fund Raising**

1. *A*, 1961.
2. *A*, 1961 and *N*, October 27 and November 17, 1960.
3. According to Niki Davis, “He left because the church of his mentor, where he’d hoped to be sometime, came and asked for him. After wrestling with the decision, he decided to take that opportunity.” *N*, February 12, 2003.

## **A Building!**

1. Among the many capable RE directors the church has had over the years, it was Phyllis Leonard who faced what must have been a formidable challenge of moving the large program from rented space to the new building and switching from one to two sessions each Sunday.
2. Bob Prestemon, *RR*, 6.

## **Civil Rights: Selma and at Home**

1. Mr. David H. Cole, *A*, 1965.
2. Dorothy Millon Ladd, *RR*, 15.
3. Jim Wykoff, *RR*, 20.

4. See Eileen McGuckian, *Portrait of a City*, pages 159-162, for an overview of Rockville's struggle for civil rights and a profile of Alphonzo Lee.
5. Roald Schrack, *50<sup>th</sup>*, 12. He includes a complete listing of the mayors, council members and other officials from UCR.

### **Growth And Growing Pains**

1. *B*, September 7, 1966.
2. *B*, January 19, 1966.
3. See *RR*, 14, for an account by Audrey Koch, the cake jumper, of her exploit.
4. Bob Prestemon, *RR*, 6.
5. *B*, September 17, 1968.

### **Changing Times, Changing Ways**

1. *A*, 1971.
2. George Haldeman, *RR*, 25.
3. *A*, 1975.
4. Walter E. Brown, letter to Betty Prestemon, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of UCR, October 25, 1972.

### **The End of the Women's Alliance**

1. Virginia LaMarche, *RR*, 23 and Audrey Koch, 13.
2. *A*, 1965.
3. *A*, 1973.

4. Reiny Koch, *RR*, 12.

## **Singles, Couples, Former Couples, New Couples**

1. See *RR* and *50<sup>th</sup>* for a number of accounts of how people met their spouses at UUCR.
2. A, 1976.
3. Fred Beckner, *RR*, 24.
4. Dick Dangel, *RR*, 12.
5. George Haldeman, *50<sup>th</sup>*, 22.

## **Celebration and Loss**

1. Report on Self-Survey Questionnaire, March 1977.

## **Rounding out the Seventies**

1. Niki Davis, email to Jo Wilson, August 16, 2016.

## **The Eighties—Changes at UCR**

1. For a discussion of that first quilt, see Louise Friedenber, *50<sup>th</sup>*, 12.
2. See *N*, April 17, 1991 for an account of how the \$10,000 was spent.
3. Flyer for Workshop in folder, “UCR-PSI Symposium Crystals, 1983.”
4. Report included with Board minutes March 14, 1988.

## **The Eighties—Social Justice**

1. *A*, 1986 and *N*, April 30, 1985.

## **Transition and Challenge**

1. Reverend Sara Moores Campbell, *N*, May 15, 1991.
2. Reverend David MacMillan, *N*, January 8, 1992.
3. *A*, 1992.
4. *A*, 1991.

## **“A Wave of Much Good Energy”**

1. *RR*, Reverend Jack Young, 33.
2. *N*, September 15, 1993.
3. *N*, May 5, 1993.
4. *N*, December, 13, 1995.
5. *N*, March 16, 1994.
6. Dan Pierce, *A*, 1996.

## **The Late Nineties**

1. Burt Prince, *N*, June 11, 1997. A health crisis may have prompted his decision. See Niki Davis, *N*, February 21, 2003.
2. Reverend Mark Edmiston-Lange, *A*, 1999.

## **Conflict**

1. Sue Hedges, email to Maude McGovern, August 16, 2016.
2. Virginia LaMarche and Candice Haagan, *N*, March 8, 2000.
3. *N*, February 12, 2003.
4. *N*, January 29, 2003.

## **Healing**

1. Sue Hedges, email to Maude McGovern, August 25, 2016.

## **A New Minister, A New Building**

1. *N*, March 23, 2005.
2. Mead Karras, *N*, October 18, 2000.
3. Phyllis Childers and Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss, *A*, 2007.

## **“Living Into Our Changes”**

1. Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss, *A*, 2008.
2. Susan Hedges, *A*, 2012.
3. Fran Lowe, *A*, 2015.

# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF ROCKVILLE

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# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Rockville

Spiritual Freedom ... Beloved Community ... Social Responsibility

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