

Looking Backward, Living Forward

by Rev. Joy Atkinson, Interim Minister

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Back in September, a phone call came in to the Church office from a woman who was inquiring about any information we might have on a Mrs. E.C Clowers, who was a founder of this congregation. The caller was from a local group that is working to save the Clowers house from being torn down. This inquiry sent me into the Church archives, and the result is this sermon today about the history of this congregation. It is admittedly a sketchy history, gleaned from several old documents and a write-up of the history, done in 1996.

This is the sixth oldest Unitarian Universalist congregation in the Pacific Central District, dated from either 1892 or 1911, depending upon whether you start from the earliest organized appearance of Unitarianism in Stockton, or from the re-founding of the Unitarian Society after a lapse in activity. In either case, it is many decades older than the great majority of UU congregations in this district.

On February 21st, 1892, a small group of people who had been meeting in each other's homes here organized as a Unitarian Society. At that time, the city of Stockton was only 42 years old. The American Unitarian Association sent the Rev. William Ellery Copeland to be the Society's Minister. However, the Rev. Copeland was asked to leave only 14 months later. The history says only that he "may not have been a 'very satisfactory leader,' " and that he was also a "radical liberal."

From September 1893 to June 1896, the Rev. G. Heber Rice came to serve as minister. The Unitarian Society went into debt to pay the Rev. Rice, and by 1900 it floundered and essentially died. But five charter members of the original Society, all women and all widows, kept the Unitarian spark alive, and by 1911 it was reorganized and the Rev. Franklin Baker from Sacramento came to serve as minister. In November 1914, the Rev. Arthur Heeb became the re-organized Church's second minister. But in 1917, just before the American entry into WW II, the Rev. Heeb, who had a German wife, became a pacifist. His stance split the Church, and membership and income declined. That same year, the Women's Alliance was formed; it was then called the "Lend a Hand Club."

In January of 1916, discussions began about acquiring a building. The American Unitarian Association purchased a lot at Center and Elm. But no church was built. There were many reasons: world conditions, a decrease in membership and revenue, and continuing controversy over the Rev. Heeb's leadership. Heeb resigned in 1918 after the AUA withdrew funding for him. According to Heeb, he resigned because he claimed that any minister who did not support US War efforts was cut off from AUA subsidies. Subsidies were cut, but there seem to have been other problems with Heeb's ministerial style as well. After Heeb resigned, the building fund was dissolved to pay off debts. It was decided that the church had to make do without a minister until after the war, and the little group that was left hung together through occasional "cottage meetings."

In 1924, under the leadership of the Rev. Thomas Clayton, the Society was resurrected, with regular Sunday services held at the Native Sons Hall on Main Street. In the spring of 1925, the group incorporated with the state of California as the First Unitarian Society of Stockton. Its membership was 30. The building of the church on the current site began. At that time, this location was on the northern outskirts of town.

The following year, 1926, the Rev. Clayton left, after two years of service, and the Rev. Milen Dempster began his ministry. The Church building was completed four years later, but during those years the depression hit, and funding the Church became difficult. In the summer of 1931, the Board asked Rev. Dempster, another strong pacifist, to leave. He later went to work for the Socialist Party. A new Minister, the Rev. Clarence M. Vickland, came to serve. In 1935, the organ was installed. The following year, after five years of service, the Rev. Vickland was also asked to leave. There was some allusion in the Church history to his possibly being a Communist, but the history also acknowledges that many Unitarian advocates of reform during the depression years were labeled "Communist." Vickland, and maybe Dempster, Heeb, and Copeland, may have just been too radical for the congregation at the time.

In October of 1936, the Rev. Arthur Foote began a ministry here and in the Sacramento Unitarian Society. Neither congregation could afford a full-time minister, so they shared the Rev. Foote's ministerial services. For the next nine years under Arthur Foote's ministry, the church grew steadily, and became more active in the community. The Rev. Foote left to become Minister of Unity Church in St. Paul, where he stayed for 24 years, until his retirement. He became a prominent minister and spokesman for Unitarianism.

Next came the Rev. Addison Steeves, who stayed for four years. During that time, a building campaign to create what became Jackson Hall was begun. Jackson Hall is named for Harriet West Jackson, an active and dedicated member who died in 1948. Jackson Hall was not completed until 1954, after two more ministers had come to serve: the Rev. Sam Wright for two and a half years, and the Rev. Ford Lewis for six years. During their tenure, the church continued to be involved in the community. Sam Wright was active in the local Council of Churches, Ford Lewis initiated public forums and spoke out himself on such topics as fair trade laws, recognition of Red China, and McCarthyism. Some concern was recorded in the history that sometimes he seemed to speak for the whole congregation rather than as an individual, but he was not asked to resign, which may mean that the congregation had become more liberal by the 1950s than it had been in its earlier years. During Lewis' tenure, churches were required to sign a loyalty oath to keep their tax-exempt status, and though the minister stood against that practice, church leaders went ahead and signed the oath, but did so under protest.

Ford Lewis left in 1958, and the Rev. Harold Schmidt arrived. Harold Schmidt served for 15 years. During that time, the church grew and expanded. An office wing was added, the duplex was purchased to house the swelling religious education program, which had over 150 children, the fireside room was decorated and furnished, and for a while, until 1966, there were two services. Harold Schmidt went to Washington to protest the Viet Nam War, and to Selma to witness after the killing of the Unitarian minister and Civil Rights activist James Reeb. Schmidt apparently tried to resign in 1970, but his resignation was not accepted. Instead, the history cryptically says "a program committee would be set up to help him with ideas, etc." Perhaps he was beginning to burn out. He

was also dealing with a very ill wife. He took a sabbatical in 1971, and then finally resigned in 1973, and in 1974 the search for a new minister began.

At this point in perusing the history, a memory of a brief personal connection with this congregation surfaced-- a memory I had all but forgotten about. Although I had not submitted an application, I came down here to Stockton in June 1974, from Arcata California, where I was completing an internship. I had just been graduated from Starr King School For the Ministry in Berkeley and was ordained by the Arcata congregation, and I interviewed with a couple of California search committees informally in June, before sending any application materials anywhere. The ministerial search process in those days was less structured than it is now, and such informal interviews were permitted. In the interview I learned that this Church was looking for an experienced Minister, so I knew that it would be fruitless to submit any paperwork. I ended up going to my first settled ministry in Duluth, Minnesota, and you ended up with Reverend Robert Green, who served this congregation for the next 22 years, longer than any other minister in your history. Bob Green was very active in the community with such groups as Planned Parenthood, the ACLU, the Water Policy Commission, the Family Shelter and Emergency Food Bank. In 1986 he received the Unity in Community award from Metro Ministries, which he had helped to found, and in 1989 he received the Service to Mankind award from the Seratoma Club.

During Bob Green's tenure, Musicale, a musical program which lasted for 10 years, was launched, the church celebrated 50 years in this building, an endowment, the Spaeth bequest, was given to the church, which helped to ease financial pressures, the Rev. Harold Schmidt was named Minister Emeritus, a conference room was developed and named for John Flaherty, three classrooms were remodeled into office space, the congregation voted to support a petition calling for a Bilateral Nuclear Weapons Freeze Initiative for the State ballot, and later voted to declare the church a sanctuary for political refugees fleeing Guatemala and El Salvador, and still later voted to urge the government to withdraw support for the Nicaraguan Contras. In 1982, a significant split developed on feminist grounds over the wording of the quote inscribed in front of the sanctuary: "The place where men meet to seek the highest is holy ground." The issue was finally resolved when a panel was placed over the words. Clearly, the church had come a long way from its early days, when it appeared that the congregation was considerably more conservative than some of its ministers.

Bob Green resigned in 1996, and was named Minister Emeritus. On February 6th of that year, a remark appears in the history without any context, saying "at a special meeting on February 6th, it was MSC that this church remain in the Unitarian Universalist Association." What was that all about? The next sentence may offer a clue: "Discussion ensued on ways of raising money to meet our obligations to UUA and PCD."

In the last seven years, this congregation has undergone many changes: an interim year with the Rev. Leslie Heyboer, a brief ministry with the Rev. Nancee Campbell, which was ended when she developed health problems, then almost two years of interim Ministry with the Rev. Sean Parker Dennison. Toward the end of Sean's interim period, as many of you know, a candidate for the next ministry was selected, but due to communication problems with the candidate, the offer was withdrawn. Sean took a settled position in the meantime, so here I am—in a very unusual third year of interim ministry. Part of my task as your interim minister is to help you take a look at your history as a congregation, so

that you can deal with any past issues, and look toward your future. As the philosopher Soren Kirkegaard one said, " life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backward." In offering you this history today, I hope to begin a process of looking backward. To that end, I have posted a time line in Jackson Hall. I invite you to add what you like to the time line, including any feelings you may have about the events entered. Written comments may be anonymous, if you so choose.

Looking back over 110 years of the history of this congregation, I can discern some major themes (many of you may know of other themes as well): In the early years, there were many changes in ministerial leadership, along with struggles to stay afloat amid financial pressures, dwindling membership, differences with ministers and dramatic changes on the world scene. In the middle years, there was more stability and growth, and much longer pastorates. In recent years, we see a stable congregation, more financially solvent, but some turmoil and quick changes in ministerial leadership. There is currently some worry about the future with respect to ministerial leadership after so many transitions. But one thing comes through clearly to me: the amazing resiliency of this congregation through some very challenging times. Looking at the history, I see a rich and varied past, a present sense of dedication and anticipation, and a future bright with possibility.

I close with the words of the Rev. Arthur Foote, this congregation's eighth minister, from his book Taking Down the Defenses (he is talking here about personal, individual memory, but his words apply to collective memory as well):

Everyone suffers in some measure from childhood traumas. There are many things we'd like to forget, if only we could. To be assured that we haven't really forgotten, but have only repressed the memory of unpleasant, even devastating, personal experiences, is not comforting news. Every[one] is somewhat victimized by [the] past.

But here we would accentuate the positive. In large measure, our memory does work for us, and bless us. We should be totally lost without it. So let us treasure the extraordinary ability which allows us to recall at will so much that has enriched our lives.

Closing Words:

"The thought of our past years...doth breed Perpetual Benediction." – William Wordsworth

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