

The History of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Topeka, Kansas

The Unitarian movement in the United States in the 1850's embraced the struggle over the attempted expansion of slavery into the newly created Kansas territory. The movement's publication, the *Christian Register* supported the New England Immigrant Aid Society in its effort to populate Kansas with opponents to the expansion of slavery. Unfortunately, internal disputes limited the capability of the Unitarian Church, which was established in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1856, to play a major role in that community during the Bleeding Kansas era. The Lawrence church survived, but was eventually dissolved in 1944. A church was established in Topeka in 1885 but dissolved in the 1930's. A church formed in Wichita in 1887 and a fellowship emerged in Topeka in the early 1950s and became fully recognized in 1961. Fellowships formed in Manhattan in 1957, in Lawrence in 1958, and in Hays briefly in 1962.

The first Unitarian church of Topeka was formed in the 1880's by a group of liberal minded individuals, many of whom had been Unitarian in the New England communities from which they originated. A church was constructed in downtown Topeka west of the State Capitol. The American Unitarian Association (AUA) sent an Englishman, Dr. Enoch Powell, to serve as the church's first minister. According to Mrs. Lewis Keeshan, the first recorder of Topeka's Unitarian history, "From the beginning, this church was a leader in the religious, cultural, intellectual, and civil life of Topeka. It numbered among its members many of the most prominent and brilliant men and women of the city; and its ministers were men of amity and strength."

From 1914 to 1921 the church was without minister; however, it was held together by a strong Women's Alliance. Rev. Clifton Merrit Gray, a New Englander by birth, arrived in 1921 to guide the congregation. Membership increased significantly as members of the community responded to Gray's charming personality and skill in presenting scholarly sermons. He formed the "Sunday Evening Forum," a program recognized throughout Topeka for presenting topics of the day for critical discussion and debate. The Forum drew capacity audiences. In 1932, a debate between Clarence Darrow and Donald Muir on capital punishment was part of the Forum.

Rev. Gray passed away in 1932 and he was followed by Rev. Maynard Van Dyke who had to resign because of ill health in 1938. Like all organizations in the 1930s, the Topeka Unitarian church confronted serious financial difficulties. A liberal group from Central Park Christian Church withdrew from that church in 1937. The Unitarians felt that two liberal groups should not compete for members. A union was formed between the dissidents from the Central Park Christian Church and the Unitarians with the Unitarians furnishing the church building and the Christian Church dissidents providing the minister. The merged group identified themselves as the Topeka Community Church with Mr. C. G. McCallister as minister.

The new congregation struggled with financial challenges which led to McCallister's resignation and a merger with the First Congregational Church in 1940. The Unitarian label ended with the fusion with the Topeka Community Church although there was an affiliation of the Community Church with the Western Conference of the AUA.

Following the merger in 1940, the Unitarian church building, which was owned by the AUA, was sold to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints. They occupied it until the property was sold to the State of Kansas to make way for the construction of the Docking State Office Building. The Unitarian Women's Alliance continued to meet separately and was independently provided speakers from Chicago by the AUA. Apparently some Unitarians did not feel at home with the new arrangement, and Horace Wilkie and Marco Morrow, who was assistant publisher at Capper Publications, took steps to keep the faith alive outside the First Congregational Church.

Based on AUA extension section files, a group formed in 1950 as a Fellowship, and, although formally constituted in 1952, it was not particularly successful. The correspondence reflects the AUA's general dismay with the group's lack of growth and with proposals from the group to disband. The Fellowship members met in various locations in Topeka. A new group was reconstituted in 1957 but it was not until 1961 that the present Fellowship was organized and recognized by the AUA.

The group that received recognition in 1961, created a property search committee led by member John Webber who arranged the purchase of a ranch-style home in southwest Topeka. The two bedroom house, acquired in 1968, allowed for the conversion of the garage into the main meeting room and bed rooms into classrooms. A parking lot was added.

During the 1960s and 1970s the Fellowship's membership came primarily from Washburn University and the Menninger Clinic's faculty and staff. A humanist theology dominated programming. During the 1970s, an activist group formed within the Fellowship. Social justice issues became important with focus initially on recognition and support of gay rights which caused some brief internal resistance. Other social justice issues given support including opposition to nuclear power (i.e. Wolf Creek power plant in Burlington, Kansas), endorsement of the Equal Rights Amendment, decriminalization of victimless crimes, separation of church and state, abortion rights, and abolition of the death penalty.

At the end of the 1970s, some members expressed a desire for growth in the Fellowship. With support from the UUA the Fellowship engaged the services of a Weekend Minister, the Reverend Alexander "Scotty" Meek, who traveled to Topeka from Minnesota in the fall of 1979 and the spring of 1980. Following the Weekend Ministry experience, the Fellowship secured the services of Extension Minister David Phraener, through the Prairie Star District. Although a dynamic presence in the pulpit, Reverend Phraener's presence created controversy.

In the 1980s, the Fellowship again sought to expand membership, religious education programs, facilities, and professional ministerial services. With the push for growth, controversies arose which led to contested elections for the first time over competing visions of the Fellowship focused on support for and opposition to growth.

In 1982 the membership voted for a building addition. The expansion was accomplished with fundraising and low-interest loans from the Prairie Star District, and the UUA's Veetch fund. The ground breaking ceremony occurred in the spring of 1985, and by that fall the Fellowship's current sanctuary and new restrooms were available.

In 1985, the Fellowship hired part-time minister Ms. Leslie Anbarari, a local liberal Presbyterian minister, who was worked with the congregation for two years. Her part-time ministerial services were all the Fellowship could afford at the time, and no UU minister was willing to relocate for a part-time position.

The death from AIDS of member Toby Scanland in 1985 was a significant event in the life of the Fellowship. Many members provided support during his failing health. He left a sizable donation to the Fellowship which assisted in reducing the burden of the building debt. The sanctuary in the new addition was named Toby Scanland Hall.

In 1990/1991, the UUFT engaged Judith Walker Riggs as a Weekend Minister for one service per month for a year. Her presence kept alive the growing desire for the presence of a minister. A long-range planning process was initiated, which identified the hiring of a minister as a major priority of the Fellowship. In 1994, the UUFT hired as a three-quarter time Extension Minister, the Reverend David Grimm. He devoted one-quarter time to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Manhattan. In 1997, the Rev. Grimm was hired on a permanent basis.

The 1990s were a period of modest expansion. Yoga classes became a staple of Fellowship life. The Small Group Ministry was initiated. Religious education, for all ages, flourished. The Fellowship paid off its mortgage on the 1985 addition. Lisa Schwartz, a Fellowship member, attended seminary in Kansas City, and was ordained at the Fellowship in 1998. In 1999, the Fellowship purchased a house adjacent to the Fellowship's building which was transformed into the Youth House which alleviated some of the crowding that occurred with the growth in the youth religious education programs.

With the turn of the century, the Fellowship sought to improve its physical facilities. The new additional parking area was constructed in 2001, the exterior of the building and the interior of Toby Scanland Hall were painted, a landscape project was completed, and new playground equipment was constructed.

In 2002, Reverend Grimm resigned to pursue a career in research and writing while continuing his ministerial duties with the Manhattan Fellowship. A search process for a new minister was initiated through the UUA. Pastor Lynn Brodie was selected as interim minister to serve for one year while the Fellowship searched for its new minister. Pastor Brodie has provided the Fellowship with its first full-time religious professional.

In 2003, after a year of the dynamic interim ministry of the Reverend Lynn Brodie, the Fellowship voted overwhelmingly to call a full-time settled minister, the Rev. Lisa

Romantum Schwartz.

As the children's Religious Education program continued to grow, Fellowship members decided to completely renovate the small house next door into a Religious Education Annex. Through the generous donations of time and talent of many members and friends, the RE Annex became a reality with three classrooms in 2004.

In 2005, thanks to a Chalice Lighters Grant from the Prairie Star District, the Fellowship made another long-term dream a reality by calling Dr. Judith Sasser to be a half-time Director of Lifespan Religious Education. Dr. Sasser's long experience in education and her deep commitment to Unitarian Universalism made her an ideal candidate, and the children's program continued to grow and develop.

In 2006 a member made a \$10,000 challenge grant to the Fellowship, promising to give that amount, free and untrammelled, if the members and friends would increase their pledges to a total of \$100,000. The Stewardship drive came in over that goal, and the Fellowship's 2007 budget was at an all time high, allowing for expanded services, including the hiring of a 1/4 time administrative assistant.

Sunday attendance continues to increase, filling the Toby Scanland Memorial Fellowship Hall nearly to capacity on most Sundays. The Fellowship is currently planning for two services in the fall of 2007.