

Celebrate 2000

Looking back at Central Illinois

Unitarians Promote Justice and Equality

January 9, 2000 by UUFD member Kenneth Robertson as featured in the Decatur Herald & Review

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Decatur dates from the rainy night of March 30, 1953, when 16 women and men gathered in the Dubonnais Room of the Orlando Hotel in response to a newspaper advertisement placed by Monroe Husbands, a minister from the American Unitarian Association in Boston. The 16 agreed to found the Unitarian Fellowship of Decatur. The Reverend Husbands sparked the founding of new Fellowships in Springfield and in Carbondale the same year. The Fellowship movement was a means to bring the free thinking religious experience of Unitarianism to localities unable to support a full-time minister.

During the first eight years, the Fellowship held weekly services in the YMCA chapel with attendees moving to an adjacent room for coffee and discussion of the sermon. The open and spirited discussions became an important tradition. By 1961, growth in membership enabled the group to own its own quarters. The Unitarian House was established at 716 W. William Street in a building that had been a large private residence. The carpeting, chairs, bookcases and massive walnut pulpit from the historic but then defunct Unitarian Church in Shelbyville were moved to the Unitarian House in Decatur. Weekly, the pulpit was filled by student ministers from the University of Chicago, by speakers from Unitarian congregations in Alton, Bloomington, Springfield and Urbana, or from within the Decatur congregation and community.

Several members of the Unitarian Fellowship saw the need for a family planning service to serve the area. They worked with representatives of other churches and health organizations to found Planned Parenthood of Decatur in November 1967. In 1979, continued growth enabled the Fellowship to call its first minister, the Reverend Mary Moore, who continues to serve both the Decatur and Springfield congregations. In 1983, the Fellowship built a new meeting place at 3773 N. MacArthur Road. At that time the name was changed to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in recognition of the national merger of the two denominations that occurred in 1961.

The Fellowship maintains an active Sunday school for children. Youngsters are not indoctrinated, but are encouraged to think for themselves with a curriculum that includes stories from the Christian Bible as well as from the other great religions of the world. Stained glass artist Charla Hathaway attended the Fellowship's Sunday school and returned as an adult to design and fabricate a stained glass window for the new building. The window features a flaming chalice, the denomination's symbol that stands for the individual member's freedom to search for truth and spiritual meaning within that person's own experiences.

For many years, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship sponsored a foreign film series to bring to the viewers many acclaimed films that would otherwise not have been shown in the community.

Although Unitarians trace their theological beginning to the time of the early Christians when many believers followed Jesus because of his moral teachings but did not accept his divinity, a national organization did not exist in America until 1825 after many Congregational churches within New England turned Unitarian in their theology. The Universalists also trace their basic belief in the salvation of all souls to the early times of Christianity. Today, Unitarian Universalists welcome the finding of modern biblical criticism, see no conflict between science and religion and seek to understand non-Christian religions and to cooperate with them.

At this beginning of new millennium, the Unitarian Universalist Association is undergoing rapid expansion with new congregations springing up in areas of population growth. Believing that an established creed limits a person's intellectual and spiritual growth, Unitarian Universalists prefer to promote seven principles:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

The rights of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.