

# First Unitarian Church of Alton

History Update 2009

## **DEDICATION**

This history update is dedicated to all the unsung heroes whose names are not found within these pages, but whose enthusiasm and tireless efforts have made our church what it is today.

*"Trying to plan for the future without a sense of the past is like trying to plant cut flowers."*

Daniel Boorstin, American historian (1914-2004)

The decade of the 1960's was a time of change and upheaval. The Vietnam War, although never officially declared a war by the U.S., became more and more controversial as the decade wore on. The military draft and increasing casualties contributed to the frustration and anger resulting in large anti-war protest marches and demonstrations. The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968, added to the sense of fear and insecurity felt throughout the country.

Associated with the radical social upheaval of this period was the development of a method of psychotherapy known as Sensitivity Groups, also called Encounter Groups and T (training) Groups, consisting of small numbers of people engaged in intensive interaction to increase self-awareness and improve interpersonal relationships. The groups were popularized in the 1960's by people such as Dr. Fritz Perls and Dr. Will Schutz of the Esalen Institute in California.

Our minister, Rev. Hugh Kennedy, visited Esalen in 1968 and returned with a desire to start such groups in the congregation. Several groups were formed and soon became controversial. While some members found them to be helpful, others thought they were harmful. In a previous church history written by Lottie Forcade, the Sensitivity Groups and some experimental changes in the Sunday services are blamed for a split in the congregation that emerged in 1970. Rev. Hugh Kennedy left in 1970 (Lottie simply says, "We could not afford a minister"), but the groups continued for two years after his departure.

In reviewing Minutes of the Board of Trustees and congregational meetings for that period, a more probable cause for the split was found. The Minutes state:

"On Sunday, January 8, 1967, the congregation voted unanimously to proceed with the construction of a new Religious Education facility. The Board of Trustees was granted authority to use funds from the Building Fund Drive and unrestricted endowment funds and to assume a mortgage as required to construct a religious education facility as outlined in the Ultimate Comprehensive Design presented by Roy D. Murphy & Associates. The Fund drive directed by Dudley Giberson has yielded almost \$55,000 that together with the UUA endowment gives us a prospective total of \$92,000 over the next three years. The building and revisions to the Wuerker Room is roughly estimated to cost about \$130,000 that will require a mortgage subsequently. It was the general feeling that a continued second effort and additional members in the next few years will make the mortgage completely manageable."

A report from Andrew Kochman, Chairman of the Canvass Committee, and Dudley Giberson, Chairman of the Finance Committee, to the Board of trustees dated June 4, 1968, states, "We are disappointed in not attaining the pledge goal established by the Finance

committee... We must take the necessary steps to protect the credit standing of the church, regardless of how painful the task may be.” These were soon to become prophetic words.

A communication marked confidential from the Finance chair, Dudley Giberson, to the Board of Trustees was found. Dated July 3, 1970, it stated, “At the present time we do not have sufficient financial support to justify a financial institution, such as the First National Bank and Trust Company in Alton, to approve a mortgage for the First Unitarian Church.”

Later, in Lottie’s history, she writes, “The congregation approved making an unsecured loan at the bank for \$75,000. The architect stated he had never heard of a church borrowing a large amount without security being demanded in the form of a mortgage.”

The loss of our minister, Hugh Kennedy, who had been with us for 11 years, as well as the diminished membership and pledges led to some serious meetings and “soul-searching.”

The church turned to the Unitarian Interdistrict Representative, V. Emil Gundmundson, for advice. He visited the church for a weekend and suggested in a letter dated Dec. 14, 1970, “an interim minister before launching the actual search for a new minister on a permanent basis.” In a reply to this suggestion, John McCall wrote that, “Although this idea had definite merit for our situation, due to financial reasons our Ministerial Committee (with support from most of the Trustees) concluded it is not ready to take this step.” He adds, “Your particular visit was a definite help. For example, the possibility of continuing indefinitely as a ‘fellowship’ was getting some thought. Now, that seems no longer viable for quite realistic reasons which you have brought to mind.” More meetings were held and various alternatives explored.

At a semi-annual meeting of the congregation in April 1971, following the usual items of business, the discussion focused on four questions: Does this church need a minister? Does it need a full-time minister? Can the church pay for a minister? And, can you increase your financial support? The first three questions were answered almost unanimously: Yes, this church needs full-time professional leadership in the form of a minister to help revitalize the church and encourage stronger participation by all age and interest groups—especially younger persons. Some reservations were expressed but not about this ultimate goal. With a concern to live within our present financial means was included the suggestion to hire someone on a part-time basis. This might be “a minister, youth worker, or a church school director.”

John McCall, who reported on this for the Newsletter, adds: “Quite significant, I think, was the widespread belief that we must strive hard to secure a minister within the coming year. More than two years of inattention to certain individual needs might take a large toll on membership.” Some members suggested that we take our chances: hire a full-time minister and count on renewed vigor to boost church pledges in a year. Other members voiced strong opposition to any steps which amounted to financial gambling.”

By the next Semi-annual meeting in October 1971, the most important item on the agenda was the candidacy of Mr. Kelley Wells who had recently completed seminary training at the Starr King School in Berkeley, California. He had interned at the Emerson Unitarian Church, Canoga Park, Los Angeles, and gained experience at the Napa State Mental Hospital in California. He

had also served six months as minister of the Brussels Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Brussels, Belgium. He was a graduate of Kirkwood High School and LRY (Liberal Religious Youth) president (1963-64) in Eliot Chapel so he was familiar with the St. Louis area. He said he was looking forward to serving the entire parish church, with programs for different age and interest groups.

An article in the *Alton Evening Telegraph* of October 30, 1971, announced the start of his ministry with us. The church was helped in financing his salary with a grant from the Sunnen Foundation that Kelley helped arrange. His employment agreement with us was on a month-to-month basis, and he was soon ordained. However, in June 1972, he informed the Board that the salary arrangement was no longer acceptable and unless the Board could increase his compensation he would be forced to seek other employment. He suggested that it might be possible to divert some of the money used to pay off the mortgage to the minister's salary account.

Pledges had continued to decline and Board action was inevitable. A committee appointed to study the problem met and recommended that the building fund money not be used to increase the minister's salary. It was accepted by the Board unanimously. A statement to the congregation from Board President Joe Russo said, "The fact is that our financial condition is not as favorable as it was a year ago, and it is thoroughly unrealistic to think of changing our present arrangement, which is month-to-month." At the next Board meeting the secretary was authorized to send the minister a letter expressing our thanks and regret.

In the Minutes of a Board of Trustees meeting on Oct. 15, 1973, it is recorded that "Periodically, the idea of freeing money from building pledges to ministerial funds comes up, but it is our president's (Joe Russo) opinion that it is more feasible to pay the mortgage so the interest will lessen. The amount paid on the mortgage per year will not pay a minister's salary."

(Author's note: The term "mortgage" and "building loan" appear to have been used interchangeably in the budget and Board minutes. No record was found to verify that any mortgage was actually obtained during this period.)

The inability to obtain a mortgage, the assumption of a large (\$75,000) unsecured loan and the determination to maintain a good credit rating put a great burden on the small congregation. It became a matter of priorities: pay off the debt or hire a minister. A small core of advocates for each developed. With a high interest rate periodically being increased (toward the end it was 11%), the debt usually won out and various arrangements for lay members to substitute for professional staff in providing secretarial tasks and religious education needs were made. A ministerial reserve fund was started.

In 1974, efforts were made to have two members authorized to officiate at weddings. The UUA was contacted and permission granted for two members, Joe Sutton and Joe Russo, to perform this duty. However, it was found that this was illegal under Illinois State Law unless a judge first performed a civil ceremony. One wedding was conducted with that condition.

In 1973-74, the church actively sought outside groups to rent rooms in the lower level of the new building to help with the budget.

In 1974-75 the Board considered buying a telephone answering machine or contracting with an answering service to answer the telephone when no one was in the office. In 1975 the total annual budget was only \$11,600 including \$1,850 in building loan interest. Pledges to the operating budget were \$8,930 and to the building fund, \$5,385.

In 1976, Rev. Calvin Knapp was contacted to help with Sunday sermons and to be on call for other pastoral needs. He had retired from serving the Quincy church and was living on a farm with his son. The farm was 130 miles from Alton and he would make periodic trips to speak at Sunday service and attend meetings. On weekends when he was to speak, he was available for consultation, memorial services, weddings, etc. He also conducted adult discussion groups revolving around the sermon theme before his Sunday services. He was paid \$100 per trip and a hotel room at the Stratford Hotel for overnight stays was provided free by the hotel's Unitarian owners. He had hoped to spend more time with us and was eager to help us, but his farm took up more time than he had planned.

Also in 1976, the church was notified that Assen Kreteff, a former member of our church who had moved away, had died and left us a legacy. Assen Kreteff was a retired music professor at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville (SIUE) and had organized and directed a children's choir at our church.

This windfall lent encouragement to those wanting a minister, and at the semi-annual meeting of April 25, 1976, the Minutes read, "Tempers flared warmly and voices rose mildly as the specter of the continuing function of the church without the services of a full-time minister rose from the floor. In conclusion the consensus was that the church body does recognize the merit and need for a minister, that the completion of the funding program for the Religious Education building (which now appears imminent) should remain our first priority, and the completion of that goal to be followed by an active pursuit toward securing the services of a full-time church leader."

At the July, 1976 Board meeting, a discussion was held on the financial feasibility of having a part-time minister. The Chair of the Finance Committee announced that the Kreteff estate would probably be settled sometime that year with the church receiving approximately \$15,000 to \$20,000. Suggestions were made that this money be used to pay off the building debt with the rest going into an endowment fund. Another proposal was that the money be used to pay off the church debt with the balance available for a minister. Not all agreed and it was left for the Board to decide what to do with the funds when they were received.

Just as the members who were striving for a minister had seen a glimmer of hope in the church finances, the church building demanded attention. On September 19th, a report from the Building & Grounds Committee to the Board of Trustees stated, "For a number of years the maintenance program for the building and grounds has not kept pace with needs. As a result, there are many items needing attention, some urgently. Listed below, in approximate priority, are the most important repairs that are needed. There are possibly others which should be added." It then lists nine items recommended for bidding.

At the Semi-annual congregational meeting on October 23, 1976, the Chair of Building & Grounds reported that money would be required immediately for roof repairs. A motion was passed to authorize the Board to make the necessary arrangements to borrow the money from the bank. At the November 21st Board meeting, it was suggested that some church members might wish to loan money for the repairs and this idea would be presented in the Newsletter.

When the Board met on December 5th, it was reported that two people were willing and interested in making part of the loan covering the roof repairs. Standard notes at 6% interest would secure the loans. It was also reported that the Wuerker Room furnace had failed and would need to be replaced. The Board met again on Dec. 12<sup>th</sup> and agreed to borrow money from members plus any balance needed from the bank for 6 months @8 ½ % interest. The repayment would be included in the next year's operating budget.

On March 13, 1977, the recommendation of the Board to pay off the building loan was rejected by the congregation by a vote of 23 to 18 on a secret ballot. (Author's note: While the Secretary's notes refer only to "building loan" it was to include a loan for present repairs and would have required the entire Kresteff legacy funds.)

Also in 1977 a separate Ministerial Services Account was established at the bank and a formal arrangement made with Rev. Earl Holt of First church, St. Louis, and Rev. John Robinson of Kirkwood Chapel to be available for weddings, funerals and pastoral counseling. The sum of \$705 had been contributed to this account and one person, William Elmore, was put in complete charge of it to insure counseling confidentiality.

Later, the Finance Committee recommended to the Board of Trustees that, "When the Assen Kresteff bequest is received we should proceed as previously authorized by the Board of Trustees and the congregation: namely, pay off balance of building mortgage (\$3,200) and set aside in reserve, \$14,500 toward the Ministers Fund." The balance of \$3500 was to be applied to the maintenance loans repayment. With this action, the split between the members who wanted the church's top priority to be having a minister and those who wanted the debt to have top priority was officially acknowledged and acted upon.

A Long Range Planning Report presented at the Semi-annual meeting, April 30, 1977, gave a profile of the congregation: There were a total of 65 family units listed in the Church Directory of which 51 were members (the others were Friends). "The 51 units are composed of 103 individuals of whom 85 are actual members (others are children). The average age of the members is 53 years; likewise the average age of the Friends of the church is 53 years... Although 31 members live in the city of Alton, 43 live in surrounding Illinois, 4 live in Missouri and 7 members live so distant that their attendance is likened to an infrequent family visit... About 30 members attend church regularly... There are 24 family units where at least one member attends church either frequently or regularly. The average annual income of all member family units is \$28,000." This profile shows a small, ageing congregation scattered geographically, academically oriented due to the presence of local colleges, and financially unremarkable.

In 1977 the congregation was informed of a Minister-on-Loan program and voted to apply for it. This program consisted of a congregation loaning its minister for six weeks to a congregation without a minister. The lending congregation would continue to pay the minister's salary, but other expenses were to be paid by the borrowing congregation. This arrangement was within the funding limits of our church and the preparatory requirements of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) were quickly satisfied.

The UUA soon provided our minister-on-loan person, Rev. Maryell Cleary, minister of the Olmsted Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in North Olmsted, Ohio. Under the able leadership of our president, Barbara Giberson and vice president, Ruth Shaw, the Minister-on-Loan project went smoothly. They had both met Maryell previously at a General Assembly meeting and were excited to have someone of her quality available to us. When Maryell arrived after a long drive, she was greeted with a suitable apartment and a warm dinner with friends. Both Maryell and our church had done a thorough job of preparing for her time with us and she immediately started a full schedule of receptions, interviews, meetings, supper clubs, and consultations. Her professional background included experiences as a technical librarian, elementary school teacher, religious education director, free-lance writer, and pastoral counselor. She described herself as a humanist and spoke frankly about her views on religion and current events. The *Alton Telegraph* described her as "a quiet, introspective woman who isn't afraid to express an unpopular opinion." In that interview she told them that she personally felt that the activism in the 1960's was a tremendously successful period of advance in social progress and the recent swing back to the right had caused her some distress. "We are definitely in a period of reaction. I think it's not surprising that the tremendous involvement of the 60's would be followed by a withdrawal. I'm not terribly discouraged, but we must see that withdrawal doesn't become a retreat. We must hold on to our gains and wait for another day. And there will be another day."

At the end of her time with our church, she met with the congregation to draw up a list of "hopes and dreams." This was for a five-year period to be achieved by December 1982:

1. 150 members
2. 100 in church on Sunday mornings
3. Groups to fill people's needs
4. An active, growing Church School
5. New "hustles" going on
6. A good experience with a settled minister
7. Making an impact on the community
8. An orientation outward
9. Constant liaison with students
10. Active involvement with the denomination: SLAUUC (St. Louis Area Unitarian Universalist Council), Central Midwest District and continental UUA (Unitarian Universalist Association)
11. Continuing program over the summer
12. A choir

After Maryell left, our president, Barbara Giberson, in a letter to the Olmsted UU Fellowship, said: "The spirit of the congregation has been lifted, new people have been coming and participating and some of our 'drop-outs' are back...I think the Alton Church is more than ever

convinced that we need a full-time minister who can do over the long road what Maryell has been doing.”

On March 10, 1979, our president, Ruth Shaw, in a letter to church Members and Friends, wrote, “A momentous day arrived in mid-January, 1979. For the first time in a decade, a full-time minister occupied the pulpit of the First Unitarian Church of Alton. The generosity of the late Assen Kreteff and the solid financial support of many of you enabled this congregation to seek, find and hire the Rev. Sylvia Falconer. . . . There is a spirit of renewal about us these days. Sylvia Falconer is here, the tempo has quickened, the activities increase, the congregation grows. The Alton church blooms once again.”

Ruth’s words were very appropriate. Like a welcome rain after a long drought, the church started the process of renewal. When Sylvia arrived, the outside work on the church building had been mostly finished but the inside painting had not been started. Members quickly organized into a painting brigade and under the able leadership of Gene and Chiuzko Duncanson, the work began in earnest. The minister’s study, halls, nursery, Wuerker Room ceiling, and sanctuary were all painted by enthusiastic volunteers with only the cost of materials expended. Workman’s Compensation was added to the insurance policy because some of the work required high ladders but there were no accidents.

Sylvia’s previous experience had included: counselor of women, consultant in early childhood education, folk singer, television personality, Head Start director, Human Rights Commission member, feminist, university professor, story teller, civil liberties activist, free-lance writer and mother of three. Her education was a B.A. in Speech and Communication, a B.A. in Education from The University of Washington in Seattle, and a Master of Divinity degree from the Starr King Theological School. This diverse background as well as her intuitive sense of diplomacy would serve her well in the ministry of the Alton church.

Over the years without a minister, the church routines had become lax and informal and the need for more structure was evident. When Sylvia suggested to the worship committee that we have designated ushers, the members took time to think it over. One said that he thought it would destroy the spontaneity of the service. Sylvia responded that she lived in fear that when she announced from the pulpit that the offering would be taken, no one would come forward to collect it. A system of designated ushers was then adopted.

When Sylvia attended her first meeting of the Alton Pastor’s Association, she arrived a little early and took a seat at the back of the room. As the members arrived, one asked her which minister she represented, assuming she was a secretary. Upon hearing that she was a minister, she was warmly, if a bit cautiously accepted. Not only was she the first female minister of our church, but also the first female member of the Association. A few months later, she was elected Treasurer and later, President. Under her leadership, the group grew from 12 to 42. Membership had been changed to allow persons in traditional non-pastor positions of ministry, such as teachers, chaplains and church musicians to join. In an article about Rev. Sylvia Falconer’s presidency of the Association, the *Alton Telegraph* stated that she had “By all accounts, been an outstanding leader” and “One of the first actions of the organization was to change its bylaws, which said a belief in Jesus Christ was necessary to become a member (for one thing that

excluded Jews). Today the bylaws state that no member needs to assent to any creed or interpretation of the Bible as a condition of membership.”

Sylvia provided pastoral counseling for clients of the Oasis Women’s Shelter in Alton. Members of our church had been instrumental in the establishment of the Shelter a few years earlier and the congregation was very supportive of their efforts in helping battered women as well as men.

The city of Alton and the state of Illinois were prominent in the struggle to pass the Equal Rights Amendment to the Federal Constitution: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex”. This amendment, composed of only 24 words had been passed by the U.S. congress in 1972, but it set a seven-year time limit for ratification. During this time, 38 states needed to ratify the amendment and the deadline found it lacked three states needed for ratification. Congress later added a three-year extension that made June 30, 1982 the ratification deadline. Sylvia was a vocal supporter of the ERA Center that was set up in downtown Alton to work for passage of the ERA.

Alton was also the home of Phyllis Schlafly, right-wing leader of the Eagle Forum/Stop ERA that played on the same fears that had generated female opposition to woman suffrage at the turn of the century. Anti-ERA organizers claimed that the ERA would deny a woman’s right to be supported by her husband, privacy rights would be overturned, women would be sent into combat, and abortion rights and homosexual marriages would be upheld. Opponents surfaced from other traditional sectors as well. States-rights advocates said the ERA was a federal power grab, and business interests such as the insurance industry opposed a measure they believed would cost them money.

Fundamentalist religious groups also organized opposition to the ERA and Sylvia’s public support of the ERA did not go unnoticed. In a co-authored letter to the Editor of the *Alton Telegraph*, dated June 9, 1982, a minister of the New Life Fellowship Church and a female resident of Alton wrote, “If the Religious Committee for the ERA would read God’s word and accept it as Gospel, their worries as to Who should have What, When, would be over.” They quoted First Timothy 2:12: “But I suffer not a woman to teach or to usurp authority over man, but to be in silence.” They went on to say, “If Sister Maureen (Author’s note: Sister Maureen was a nun who supported the ERA) and Sylvia Falconer would study the word of God and would listen to His teaching, they would know that God never discriminates against anyone. They would also find that the ERA is 100% Anti-God.” The ERA did not gain the necessary three states to ratify and the struggle remains.

Sylvia was noted for her story-telling ability and her pulpit presence. She made few notes so we have little trace of her sermons. An unusual completely written one, titled “Porcine Praises” was found in the church files. It speaks elegantly in defense of the pig and traces its history back to the early stages of mythology and religion. She started the tradition of gathering the children together for a “children’s sermon” before they left the sanctuary for classes during the regular adult service, a practice which continues today.

On December 14, 1982, Sylvia presented her letter of resignation to the Board. She had been called to serve the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado, a larger church.

In a subsequent letter to Maryell Cleary, the minister-on-loan who had preceded her, Sylvia asked for help again for the Alton congregation. She stated that “there are many people who feel they should not have another minister, that they cannot afford another minister” etc. She went on to say that she disagreed with this position and felt that trying to go ahead without a minister would bring them into the “same dilemma that you (Maryell) found them in before.” She asked if Maryell would do a workshop to help the congregation explore its options.

Before Sylvia left, the congregation voted to start a search for a new minister. A Search Committee was elected and within seven months, a candidate was accepted. Dr. Jean Gilpatrick began her ministry with us in December, 1983. Her background, experience, training and drive to become a minister at the age of 59 were qualities that appealed to us. She had a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology from the Connecticut College for Women, a Bachelor of Divinity from the University of Chicago and a Doctor of Ministry from Meadville/Lombard Theology School in Chicago. She had worked with an adolescent crisis center and taught at both a community college and at a black college. The idea of becoming a Unitarian minister had been on her mind for a long time but was postponed until her children were grown. In the meantime, her family lived in Lynchburg, Virginia, where her husband Tom was a professor at Sweet Briar College. He taught history, government and constitutional law. Lynchburg was known as a very conservative city, and Jean and Tom were active in supporting civil rights and desegregation.

Jean’s life was rich in travel experiences. Soon after her marriage to Tom in 1949, they traveled to Denmark, where under the sponsorship of the Danforth Foundation, they lived with Danish families, learned to speak Danish and attended Folkhighschool (residential adult education). In 1953, she co-directed with Tom a project in Palo Alto, California, which brought together students from different religious, cultural, political and racial backgrounds. In 1967, when her husband had a year long sabbatical, they lived in Hyderabad, India, where he taught Western philosophy. They spent a subsequent sabbatical in Croyden, England. Jean arrived in Alton alone and moved into a beautiful home in Fairmont Addition that the church had fortuitously found and rented for her. Tom intended to follow her after she was settled and he could get a sabbatical leave from Sweet Briar. He was very supportive of her ministry. In an interview with the *Alton Telegraph*, he said he planned to either retire early from Sweet Briar or take a year’s leave and teach at a college here if a position could be found. He added, “She gave up a lot for a good number of years, losing her mobility. I couldn’t see where I was giving up that much.” After her ordination in May 1984, she assumed the title of Rev. Jean Gilpatrick.

As Sylvia had before her, Jean found herself being asked to defend the diversity of belief found in the Unitarian church. An article in the April 28, 1984, *Alton Telegraph* stated that the UUA had reported that belief in God had become significantly stronger: in 1984, 80% of Unitarians believed in God, while in 1967, it had been only 70%. It added that the predominant view agrees with the statement: “God may be appropriately used as a name for some natural processes within the universe, such as love or creative evolution.” The early 1980’s had seen a beginning of an increase in the religious and political power of the far right in the U.S. and while some in our church saw the increase in belief in God as a step backward, Rev. Keith Pruitt, a minister of the East Alton Church of Christ was outraged. In a letter to the editor, he wrote, “Could one imagine a church where only 80% of the people actually believed in the existence of God? And consider that this 80 percent belief is then even defined in the very humanistic approach that is

characteristic of this denomination. They have been very prominent in the fields mentioned in the article and in the attempts to break down the very basic religious fabric of society.” He then suggests, “The solution to the errors above is a complete return to the authority of the scriptures.”

The board asked Jean to write a reply and it was published in the May 9, 1984 edition. She reminded readers that Rev. Pruitt had expressed surprise that only 80% of Unitarians and Universalists affirmed the concept of God and was concerned about the nature of these beliefs. He had called the theistic beliefs humanistic. She then proceeded to say, “Concepts of God today are many and diverse. Does he know that Paul Tillich, the noted theologian who described God as the Ground of Being, was an Evangelical Lutheran; Alfred North Whitehead, philosopher of religion, who wrote of God as active in the creative process, was Anglican; and Mary Daly, the noted Feminist theologian who speaks of God as ‘She’ is Roman Catholic? In our Unitarian Universalist congregations we have not only theists but also agnostics and humanists. We are a religious community welcoming honest religious search, religious diversity and dialogue. Even more important is our commitment to extending love and justice in the world. It was Jesus who said: ‘Thus you will know them by their fruits’ (Matthew 7:20).”

At the semi-annual meeting, October 28, 1984, the minister reported that she saw ministerial and church activities as “bubbling.” Ten new people had turned in blue cards expressing interest in the church; the Sunday Forum was having vigorous discussions; the ushers and the membership committee were active and organized. The Anna D’s were thriving, supper clubs and the telephone tree had been arranged and a new room for RE (Religious Education) had been set up. A few months later, the president would report that Rev. Gilpatrick offered thoughtful scholarship and that her counseling skills were valuable to several members and friends.

Jean’s time with us was soon to end; the budget was showing “financial stress,” the church members became restless, and although Tom had secured a teaching position as a sabbatical replacement for a full academic year at St. Louis University, he did not get the full year leave he requested and expected from Sweet Briar College. Jean resigned and returned to her home in Lynchburg.

During this period, the UUA had circulated a Developmental Chart suggesting that 200 members was necessary to support and maintain a fully functioning church with a full time minister. Our church had never had that large a congregation and although pledges were above average, it had been a constant struggle. Between ministers, the church would decline in membership, pledges and programs, making it more difficult for a new minister. The UUA and Midwest District tried to help by encouraging us to start the search for a new minister before the present one left. A new Fellowship had started in West County, St. Louis and Rev. Denise Tracey, Executive of the Midwest District, helped arrange a shared ministry with the new Fellowship, Emerson Chapel, with each congregation paying one half the expenses of the minister.

Under this arrangement, Martha Newman was hired and began her 3-year ministry with us as an Extension Minister in September 1986. Rev. Newman, a native of St. Louis, had an M.A. degree from the University of Denver, attended Eden Seminary in Webster Groves and received her Master of Divinity Degree from Meadville Lombard at the University of Chicago. Martha had a traditional Christian background but had grown beyond that in her own spiritual development.

She was 62 years of age and her mature and tolerant demeanor fostered a comfortable and safe atmosphere for the individual growth of the members and friends of the church.

1986 was the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Alton church. In a message from the president and vice-president to the congregation, they wrote: "Inventory time! What do we have here at the corner of Third and Alby? Just about the best location in Alton, as far as the eye can see, clear to Missouri, across the tumbling waters of the great Mississippi. We have an irreplaceable elm tree, a beautiful and historic church and a very functional and pleasant educational building. It is a wonderful place for people to meet and talk and eat and listen and grow. As we honor the sesquicentennial of our founding, a quote from an earlier celebration seems germane. 'The church, its people and its ministers struggled against many things... but always it is a story of a people struggling to keep alive a community and a vision that the rights of the human individual shall be held sacred, that there shall be a place where a mature individual may seek the religious meaning of life concentrating not upon symbols of a past generation but the best insights and knowledge that are available to one who seeks.' The struggle continues, but it is a joyous one."

The final event of the Sesquicentennial was held on Oct. 5, 1986, at the church. A social hour at 6:30 P.M. was followed by a candlelight dinner in the beautifully redecorated Wuerker Room. The speaker of the evening was Reverend Earl Holt, III, minister of the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis. A series of historical vignettes was also presented.

At a Board meeting on Sept. 5, 1986, it was reported that Aetna Life and Casualty had assessed the value of the church building at \$730,200 and the contents at \$43,750. In November 1986, the Board discussed making the church more accessible by adding a walkway and ramp that would eliminate having to climb stairs. A month later, President Neville Gilmore announced that committees were "shaping up" and suggested that as a working method was developed, it should be put in writing so next year the committee wouldn't have to "re-invent the wheel." The Secretary was asked to keep a file of all committee records and reports. In January 1987, Martha requested the purchase of a book in which to record marriages and deaths. She also reported that the congregation had received high marks by District Executive Denise Tracey on a recent visit.

On November 9, 1986, it was reported that there were no RE classes but childcare and the children's sermon at the beginning of the regular service were continuing.

In 1988, the Growth committee reported that overall church attendance was up and an average of 10 children were attending each service.

On August 2, 1989, a letter was sent to the Congregation reminding them that Martha's Extension Ministry would be completed on July 31, 1990. Emerson Chapel had decided to have a full-time minister and Rev. Newman didn't want full-time employment. She envisioned working part-time for two or at the most three years and then retiring. She was willing to be minister of the Alton church if the congregation desired it. The congregation was surveyed and Martha was hired as a 2/3-time minister.

In the Minutes of a Board meeting held February 20, 1991, regarding the Minister's Report, it states, "She remarked on the pervasive fear that our church will someday die and suggested that we create an endowment fund to negate that possibility. The establishment of such an endowment would also put to rest one of the oldest controversies in our church: which is ultimately more important to us, having a minister or keeping the building in which we meet?"

At the semi-annual meeting October 27, 1991, it was reported that RE had 25-30 children attending and needed a co-sponsor for the Youth Group. It was also reported at this meeting that we had two basic options for endowment money: 1) augment our current endowment with the UUA or 2) start a new local endowment fund. The membership was informed that the principal of our UUA endowment could not be withdrawn. A committee was appointed to consider putting our memorial funds into the UUA or other possibilities.

It was decided to establish a local endowment fund and the sum of \$7,120 was used to purchase an income fund from American Funds. A draft of a founding resolution to establish the endowment fund was started but not finished and the project was sidelined for several years.

Upon returning from a trip to Maine, Martha presented to the church the bell that hangs at the front of the sanctuary and is rung to signal the start of Sunday services. At this time, the chalice lighted at the start of Services was also sculpted and donated to the church by Ned Giberson, a church member. Ned will be remembered as the artist who sculpted the life-sized statue of Robert Wadlow, the world's tallest man, found on College Avenue in Alton.

In 1991, the church received a letter requesting some information regarding Rev. Phillip Mercer who had been our minister from 1929-1934. The letter came from Charles Hooper, a representative of the John Pelham Historical Society, an organization dedicated to Major John Pelham who was a celebrated Confederate soldier in the Civil War. It seems that Mercer had written a biography of Pelham, *The Life of the Gallant Pelham* and Hooper was eager to know more about the author. John Dunphy, secretary of the Board of Trustees, and an author in his own right, searched for the requested information and was surprised to find that Rev. Mercer had ended his life by suicide in our church building in 1934. In a church history of that time written by Rev. Wallace Robbins, Phillip Mercer is described as a "hard working, scholarly and sincere minister who served the church well until the time of his death in November 1934." It was left to the *Alton Telegraph* newspaper in Alton to record the details. In the November 21, 1934 issue, it states that Reverend Mercer's body was found with a piece of sash cord around the neck suspended from a transom of a door leading from the Sunday school room into a hallway. "No farewell note was found, and no definite explanation of his taking of his life, but it was the belief of intimates that he was the victim of a nervous breakdown."

Readers may remember that 1929 was the time of a huge stock market crash and the start of the Great Depression. In the Board of Trustees Minutes, there is much discussion of difficulties in financing programs of the church and in 1933, Rev. Mercer had returned part of his salary so the church could balance the budget. He had agreed to waive his salary for the summer months and start the year on Sept. 1, 1934, and to continue so indefinitely. His position with our church was described in the Board Minutes as "insecure." Today the original edition of Mercer's book is very collectible and a single copy has sold for as much as \$500.

John Dunphy, who went on to extensively research Mercer's life and the writing of Pelham's biography, has stated "Mercer is the minister that the local 'ghost hunters' believe haunts First Unitarian Church of Alton. He should be remembered for much more than his suicide in our church and his supposed going bump in the night."

Near the end of Martha's ministry, she strongly urged the congregation to ask the Office of Ministry for an Interim Minister to begin in Sept. 1993 when she would be leaving. Martha had done a good job of prodding the congregation to make a high priority of fulfilling the steps necessary to obtain an Interim Minister and on September 12, 1993, Alex Holt began his ministry with us.

He came to us after serving as summer minister at Fairfax Unitarian Church of Oakton, VA. He had a bachelor's degree in speech and theatre from the University of Southern Maine and a master's degree in comparative literature from Pennsylvania State University. His graduate work at the University of California at Berkeley was in the area of Scandinavian studies with an emphasis in medieval Icelandic culture. He had also taken various courses in systems dynamics, computer literacy and organizational methodology while employed at Bank of America in San Francisco, CA. He attended Starr King School for the Ministry from September 1988 to May 1993 when he received his Master of Divinity degree. He listed his theology as Zen Buddhism.

His sermons reflected his theology. In his first sermon to us, he described Zen Buddhism as being "all about human beings and how we echo the sacred themes of the natural world around us. As a humanist I believe that the sacred begins in ourselves. As a mystic I believe that there is a Mystery that is all around and in us. So my sermons tend to focus around the themes that tie together our human hopes and our sacred ties with the world and one another; connections between head and heart, because another theme of Zen is balance between the two."

In another sermon he spoke of the similarities between Buddhism and Unitarianism. "Theologically, we probably would applaud the words of the Buddha when he said:

Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it.

Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations...do not believe anything simply because it is found written in your religious books.

But...when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.

Surely, these are words we Unitarian Universalists might appreciate."

At the October Board meeting, the Ministerial Relations Committee recommended that Alex should be retained for a 2<sup>nd</sup> year. Although he had been with us for only a month, he received high marks from the congregation and if he were to leave after his contract expired in 9 months, he would need to file an application for another position in November. He was willing to stay at the Alton church for a second year at the same rate of pay (\$24,000 for a nine month appointment). This would mean \$32,000 for a full year.

Much progress had been made under his leadership and there was still much to do to make plans for 2001 and beyond. The Board agreed unanimously and after a vote of the congregation at the Semi-annual meeting, Alex was retained as Interim minister for a second year.

A month later, it was reported that the Sanctuary furnace needed to be replaced. There was also interest in obtaining a new copier and computer. The Board decided that a Capital Fund should be established in addition to the regular budget to finance large items that needed to be purchased. It was also decided to check on the possibility of borrowing \$20,000-30,000 as a Capital improvement loan from the bank to use for big items to be purchased in the next six months.

In January 1994, a canvass report stated that the budget forecast for FY '94-95 would be \$62,419 with pledges needed in the amount of \$52,419. Some discussion followed, including the thought that the budget should immediately be trimmed, as that amount was far too much. Others commented that although it didn't look easy if we wanted to move forward the budget was not out of line. It was decided that if trimming were necessary, it would be done after the pledge campaign rather than before.

In April, the Canvass Committee reported to the Board, that although pledges had increased 10%, the total income was expected to be \$13,000 short of the budgeted \$62,400. They suggested this would force the congregation to look at four options with regards to our Interim minister: 1) Borrow the money to pay the balance of a full year salary; 2) Contiguous commitment with a summer program (and five weeks vacation), where our contract with Alex was extended for nine months to end in March; 3) Offer an Interim minister package for nine months starting in September (our usual church year); 4) Hire another Interim minister. However, prior to the Board having an opportunity to discuss any of the options, Alex took the floor. At this time he stated that because his family circumstances had changed (he had married a woman with a young child) he must realistically consider their need for health insurance as part of any salary package for the coming year. Also, he stated that he was not in favor of the congregation taking out a loan to pay a minister's salary. The two other options, which would have given him a 9-month contract instead of 12, were also declined. He then made the gracious suggestion that his ministry end at the close of the present church year. After some discussion, the Board saw this as the fiscally responsible thing to do and accepted his resignation.

In the following weeks there was much concern among members of the congregation. Had we breached our contract with Alex? Were we being fair? What about severance pay since none was budgeted? Helen Bishop, District Executive of the Central Midwest District and Rev. John Robinson of Eliot Chapel were consulted. Based on their advice and a revised budget, the membership voted to pay Alex one month's severance pay plus \$600 for expenses to attend General Assembly. This was in addition to a Severance Fund to which individuals could contribute independently.

The church's inability to fulfill a contractual responsibility and a constant struggle with finances left many members with a feeling of dismay. On May 12, 1994, Helen Bishop of Midwest Central District recommended that the church consider a ¼ time ministerial student from Eden Seminary.

Upon reviewing our church history of the past 30 years, a recurring pattern emerged: 1) the congregation would be without a minister for a time during which money would be set aside in anticipation of hiring a minister; 2) because of our small congregation and budget, our search invariably resulted in hiring a very recent graduate of Seminary; 3) in a few years, our reserve fund would be exhausted, we would not have grown enough in members or money to maintain a ministerial presence and the process would start all over again. We had become a “boot camp” for new ministers.

While this process had resulted in an interesting time of exposure to varied views and personalities, it also meant a lack of continuity and a constant “reinventing of the wheel.” It was decided to try more cautious alternative methods of leadership.

Dr. John Hoad, who had recently retired as Leader for the Ethical Society of St. Louis, was hired to fill the pulpit two Sundays a month. He was a good speaker with a depth of knowledge and a concern for individuals that made him very popular with the congregation. He had emphasized that he wanted only to preach and would not be available for other ministerial functions.

In 1994, the Board, concerned about the need for pastoral counseling especially for several members with terminal illnesses, contracted with Dr. Aline Russell to provide such services. Dr. Russell was an ordained Presbyterian minister and a psychological counselor whose religious views were “very close to Universalism.” In dealing with individuals, she stated, “her concern was in helping them find their source of comfort.” She was well known to a member of the Board and later the President would write that she found her “very capable, wise and helpful.” Her original contract which provided for 20 hours of counseling per month for \$1,000 was renewed in June 1995.

This staff, together with a part time paid administrator, a secretary and an organist helped to maintain most of the essentials of a fully functioning church.

Much of the credit for the increased energy and support from the congregation during this period can be attributed to the added presence of some members of the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church of Florissant Valley, Missouri. The headline of “The Jeffersonian,” the newsletter of the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Fellowship of Florissant, Missouri, proclaimed in its May 1994 edition “Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church votes to disband.” The article continues, “The membership has declined to thirteen. There seems little likelihood that many new members will be attracted.” Included at the end of the newsletter were the following names: Bill Fischer-President, Lucy Bouton-Vice President, Jim Elliott-Treasurer, Ron Zygmunt- Corresponding Secretary, Ron Glossop and Jim Moore-Trustees and Pat Moore-Hospitality and UUSC Support. These “magnificent seven” transferred their memberships to the First Unitarian Church of Alton and continued their active involvement as Unitarians.

A brief history of the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church has been compiled from its newsletters and interviews with members and is recorded here.

“T.J.” had begun its fellowship in 1966-67 to provide a place for the gathering of like-minded people from the north county area of St. Louis and surrounding counties of Illinois.

Since they did not have a church building of their own, T.J. members met in a variety of locations over the nearly thirty years of the life of this group. To have a meeting place for Sunday services required using facilities at the North County YMCA, the Florissant Civic Center, other churches during Sunday afternoons and finally at the Rectory of St. Thomas The Apostle in Florissant. Sunday School was offered with classes through age fourteen. Board meetings were often held at the homes of members. Although a small group, T.J. provided a fascinating, diverse program of Sunday sermons presented by members and speakers from universities and churches in the area. They had a wide variety of social activities, outings and potluck dinners. Over the nearly thirty years of its existence, the group was involved in community and regional affairs and active in the St. Louis Area Council and U.U. General Assembly.

In 1994, John Broyer, a Professor of Philosophical Studies at SIUE and a member of our Board of Trustees, researched classical organs and arranged for the purchase of a fine quality Wurlitzer classical console organ to replace our old, deteriorating one. He contributed much of the necessary money and the Board made plans for regular church payments of the rest. John provided money in his will to pay off any balance remaining at his death. He died January 2, 1995. Jack Jenkins, a very accomplished musician, performed a memorial organ recital dedicated to John at our church on the afternoon of Feb. 19, 1995.

The morning service that same day had been a special event. It was initiated by Rev. Tabscott, an activist and scholar from St. Louis, to honor and remember Rev. John Gill who had been our minister from 1944-1951. Rev. Gill's widow, Evelyn Pierpoint Gill of Greensboro, NC, and daughter, Mary Louise of Pittsburgh, PA, were warmly welcomed and the mayor of Alton proclaimed Feb. 19, 1995, as John Glanville Gill Day. The presentation of a citation honoring John Gill, as well as a citation from U.S. Senator Paul Simon was given to Mrs. Gill. After the service and lunch, our president, Virginia McCall and her husband, John McCall, drove the two honored women to Orland and Lottie Forcade's home where an emotional reunion took place. Orland had also been quite visible in his support for integration and, like John Gill, had received many threats. **[Author's Note:** During the time of Rev. Gill's tenure with our church, racial tension in the Alton area was very high. There was strong opposition to efforts to integrate the public schools and the Ku Klux Klan was organized and active. Rev. Gill's 1947 Harvard doctoral dissertation was titled "The issues involved in the death of Elijah P. Lovejoy, Alton, 1837" and he later wrote the first biography of Lovejoy (*Elijah Lovejoy's Pledge of Silence*, 1958). He had spoken out forcefully for integration and by 1951 had become very controversial; the congregation voted to dismiss him. Forty-three years later, on this day of reconciliation, Evelyn Gill and her daughter were very appreciative of the church's hospitable gesture and donated "seed money" for a John Gill Trophy for social action.]

The summer program in 1995 consisted of an expanded Forum with continental breakfast on Sundays from 10:00 A.M. to noon and a Coffee House in the evenings on the third Friday of June, July, and August. A Metro East Writer's Workshop taught by John Dunphy from 1992-1997 was also very successful with 150 area residents attending at least one session.

A notice was received from the UU church in Gainsfield, Florida, informing us that they were building a new church. They requested that two tablespoons of dirt from our property be sent to be part of their dedication ceremony. Our name was to be placed on a plaque along with other

contributing churches. So, should you visit the UU church in Gainsfield, you may find yourself standing on familiar ground.

In Sept. 1996, an agreement was reached with the City of Alton to lease the property next to the church at the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Easton for \$1.00/yr (payable in advance) and maintenance. Payment was made for the first 10 years.

The year of 1996 also saw the establishment of our church's Internet website which was maintained by Bob Showers. In future years, the use of the Internet would become a vital tool of communication for the church and its members.

In January 1997, the Finance Committee announced that we were beginning to build our finances and should be ready for a ministerial search within 3-5 years.

A survey of the congregation in May of that year showed overwhelming support for more emphasis on Religious Education. Search was started for a paid ¼ time Director. A second priority in the survey was a ½ time minister growing to full-time.

The "Wall of Fame" project grew out of a Religious Education program designed to honor a group of individuals who had been catalysts and mentors for our church and its religious programs. The Board selected members who were then interviewed by the children. This information was included in the commendation of the Wall of Fame inductees. On May 10, 1997, the first dinner ceremony was held to honor seven members. In her presentation of the honored guests, Midge Hallett said, "We are trying to link our illustrious past with our future work in progress by taking a look backward over our shoulders and celebrating the patriarchs and matriarchs of this church. With their dedication and their monumentally hard work, rational judgment and creativity, they have made this liberal church community a beacon for rational inquiry and spiritual renewal." On November 17, 2001, a second group of fourteen was added. The Wall of Fame photos and printed personal information were assembled in an album and placed in the church library. A compact disc made from an audiotape recording of the 1997 presentation is also in the church files.

In the Board Minutes of Feb. 10, 1998, is a report by Gerry Gilman stating, "A comparison of a planning document of 1991 with what we have achieved now shows we have lost ground – membership, pledges and RE attendance."

In October 1998, our church started participating in the Haunted History Tours. In a report to the Board in 1998, Peg Hotson said, "1285 people toured the church, heard about our history and took our brochures. Forty-five church volunteers served 450 meals and we made a profit of \$1,668." In subsequent years the church did not serve meals but the tours continue to this day. Alton has been described as "one of the most haunted small towns in America" and the church is one of the most popular stops on the tour. It has proved an easy fundraiser.

At a Board meeting on Jan. 12, 1999, it was announced that Carol Dole would be participating in the Youth Conference at our church Jan. 16-17. Also, that she had been invited by an unspecified church to a pre-candidating weekend Jan. 23-24 at an unnamed location. At the

same Board meeting, the treasurer reported that our ministerial fund contained \$20,000. At least \$25,000 would be needed to hire a part time minister. More than \$17,000 additional would be needed beyond what the fund would provide in subsequent years. At the current pledge level, our treasury would be depleted in 2002.

On Feb. 2, the Board appointed a ministerial search committee. On April 13th, the committee reported to the Board that the following recommendations should be presented to the congregation: 1. Call Carol Dole to be ½ time minister for the coming year beginning July 1, 1999. 2. Carol Dole is to be expected to assist the congregation in preparing realistically for the future of the church. 3. Dr. Hoad and Dr. Glossop should be retained to fill the pulpit occasionally during the upcoming year because of their strong support in the congregation. They added that the negotiating committee would meet with Carol Dole to arrive at a final salary and benefits package to present to the congregation at the time of the vote.

In June 1999, Carol was hired for ½ time ministry. She also had a ½ time job as Interim RE Director for the American Ethical Union. Her AEU office was in St. Louis but was relocated to our church in an arrangement whereby we received a donation for the use of the space and a separate phone line was installed.

Carol's ordination was held at the First Unitarian Church, St. Louis, on July 2nd. Her installation as minister of the Alton church was on Oct.10, 1999. By the time of her installation she had resumed the use of her maiden surname Wolff and this name is used in our subsequent church records. Rev. Carol Wolff had served as Director of Religious Education at First Unitarian Church in St. Louis for 12 years. During her last year of training at Eden Seminary our church had hired her to serve in the pulpit one time a month, and she was given other assignments such as pastoral counseling and leading orientation sessions. She was familiar with our church leaders and knew many members of our congregation. Performing the duties of a called minister in our church would not present many surprises, but "just in case"—the following excerpt from her installation service was a humorous but frankly realistic reminder of what she could expect:

## AVIRTUOUSWOMAN

(Proverbs 31-adapted, author unknown)

**Leader:** Who can find a virtuous woman?

**Congregation:** For her price is far above rubies and beyond the budget of the typical UU church.

**Leader:** The heart of her congregation doth safely trust in her; she will do them good and not evil all the days and nights, weekends, seasons and years of her life.

**Congregation:** She seeketh out plumbing tools; and vacuum cleaners; she worketh willingly with her hands and feet when the volunteer maintenance crew doth not.

**Leader:** She layeth her hands upon the copier; yea, her hands hold fast the broken door hinges.

**Congregation:** She stretcheth out her hands to the poor; yea, verily at pledge time she learneth that they comprise the whole of her congregation.

**Leader:** She is not afraid of snow and ice for she knoweth of the secret chambers where the scrapers and snow shovels are reverently stored.

**Congregation:** She is known by the Anna D's where she sitteth in awe before the elders with whom she shall meet regularly if she knoweth what be good for her political survival.

**Leader:** Strength and honor are her clothing (provided that they are of modest hemline and not too flashy)

**Congregation:** And she shall rejoice in the time to come when she shall be afflicted with burnout, ulcers and lack of sleep.

**Leader:** She openeth her mouth with wisdom twice a month for no more than twenty minutes, including dialogue (from time to time); her tongue is the instrument of orthodox feminist liberal humanist UU vocabulary which is not to be silenced even when she says "God."

**Congregation:** She looketh well unto the ways of her schedule, and eateth not the bread of idleness until she hath labored her allotted time (not to exceed eighty-five hours per week).

**Leader:** Her Governing Board arises up; they call her unspeakable names; they saith unto her:

**Congregation:** Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. Just who the heck dost thou thinkest thou art anyway?"

**Leader:** Favor is deceitful and beauty is vain.

**Congregation:** But a woman who feareth the Lord and the Semi-Annual Congregational meeting, she shall be praised above all servants.

**Leader:** Give her the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates.

**Congregation:** And remind her that she chose this crazy profession – and let her rejoice therein.

In 1998, at a weekend Board retreat led by Linda Porter of the Central Midwest District office, a thorough analysis of our strengths and challenges were explored and long-term plans developed for growth and sustainability. This plan, known as Focus on the Future would serve us as a basis for action for several years. Marcia Custer, recently retired from a full-time faculty position at SIUE was in charge of implementing the findings of the Focus on the Future program. She made this a top priority and went to work with enthusiasm, dedication and skill. New committees were organized with responsibilities clearly defined. Old committees were

restructured and strong oversight provided. By the time Carol had become our minister the changes were noticeable.

Two years after Focus on the Future was initiated, a progress report was made. In the area of fiscal responsibility, a local endowment fund had been established by resolution of the congregation, and a different canvass approach had been used with especially positive results. We had a fully functioning Finance Committee and Endowment Management Committee. To strengthen the church community, we now had a Member Committee with an active subcommittee designated as a “Caring Committee.” In the past our church had sometimes been described as having much intellect but too little heart. The Caring Committee would focus on identifying member’s needs. For professional staff, a one-half time minister had been hired as well as an excellent office manager. We also hired a part-time Director of Religious Education who was motivated to professionalize her role through continuing education. These efforts, along with the installation of central air conditioning set the foundation for growth, stability and comfort.

In 2003, the Board of Trustees and several committee chairs at a weekend retreat, set up three goals for the next five years. The first goal was to have membership grow to 100 members by 2008. The second was “to do needed maintenance and improve the aesthetics of our building inside and out to make it more attractive and usable to our members and visitors.” The third goal was “to strive for a consistent Religious Education program in the children and youth groups.”

On May 11, 2004, Carol Wolff submitted her resignation. She had been chosen for a full time position at another church on the East Coast. She had occasionally expressed her desire to some day move “back East.” to her home and her roots. This was a good opportunity for her and it was with mixed emotions that the church members said goodbye to her. She had enthusiastically supported the implementation of the Focus on the Future and much had been accomplished.

A search committee was formed immediately to look for a replacement for Rev. Wolff. In the meantime, arrangements were made for the pulpit to be filled on Sunday mornings by Dr. Ron Glossop, Dr. John Hoad and a student, Khleber Van Zandt, from Eden Seminary. With a part-time Director of Religious Education and a part-time Office Administrator, the lay leadership was determined to keep the church functioning. At the 2004 Semi-annual meeting of the congregation on December 11, a Congregational Covenant was adopted:

**On our life-long quests for continual learning and personal growth we covenant together:**

**To seek fellowship with others on our spiritual journeys;**

**To establish a caring community of acceptance and mutual respect;**

**To foster compassion, integrity and justice.**

The search committee quickly performed all the usual procedures of making a congregational survey, preparing an informational church packet, etc. and hoped to have a minister in place in a few months. However, finding a minister for a ½ time position was very difficult. The congregation had expressed a desire for a permanent (not Interim) minister who would start at ½ time and progress to full time. A financial plan was in place to provide for a full-time minister in

another year if growth continued. After Khleber had preached a couple of Sundays the committee approached him about the position. It was understood that the UUA had a rule that someone who preached at the church several times could not later be considered for ministry. The Midwest office and UUA were both contacted and they agreed that he could preach on a regular basis and if at some point we wanted to “call” him as our minister, it would be approved. Other prospective candidates were considered, but the committee was enthused about Khleber believing he would be a good match for our church.

The vote to call Khleber as our minister was taken following the church service on April 3, 2005. There had been some reservations expressed about some of the orthodox language used in his sermons and at a question and answer session just before the vote, the first question asked was “What is your theology?” In a written statement submitted to the Search Committee he had said, “On a continuum with humanist on one end and theist on the other, I stand on the humanist side with my toes up against the center. I often use the language of theism because I believe it important to help people recast and reclaim religious language and to remain in discourse with their neighbors.” After he had left and the secret ballot vote was to begin someone suggested that anyone voting against this candidate should have to serve on the next Search Committee. The vote was unanimous to hire him. Although his “call” to ministry did not formally begin until July 1, 2005, he immediately started taking an active role in attending board meetings and becoming familiar with the people and activities of the church.

The increase in attendance at Sunday morning services that averaged 43 during Carol Wolff’s last year had risen to 50 during the year without a minister and continued to rise to 70 during Khleber’s first year. A Service of Ordination and Installation for Khleber was held at the church on November 13, 2005. It was pronounced a “great success” with 200 in attendance including many visiting clergy and friends of Khleber. Under Rev. Khleber Van Zandt’s leadership, programming expanded with a full-time summer schedule and many added interest groups. The church’s successful financial five-year plan to support full-time ministry together with the start of an annual \$4,000 contribution from the local endowment fund led to the church offering Khleber full-time status which became effective in January, 2007.

In 2005, Khleber initiated the practice of having a Tennebrae service on the Thursday before Easter (Maundy Thursday). The word “Tennebrae” is Latin for shadows and it is a solemn remembrance service scheduled between Palm Sunday and Easter. It is based on the various stories of the passion of Jesus found in Biblical texts. During the service those who wish are invited to celebrate Communion in the Socinian tradition (all are invited), sharing bread and wine or grape juice in a silent remembrance of Jesus’ last supper. The silver flagon used in this service had been given to the Alton church in 1855 inscribed: “Presented by Ladies of the South church of Boston, Massachusetts on Sept. 1, 1855.” This was the first time it had been used for Communion. The practice of Communion was traditional in some Universalist churches before the merger with the Unitarians and it is more controversial in churches that were established as Unitarian before the merger in 1961. There are several kinds of “communion” that our church has celebrated in the past such as a “flower communion” where flowers are brought to church and exchanged, a “bread communion” where different kinds of bread are brought and shared and our most treasured “communion:” coffee hour. A song sung in UU churches everywhere celebrates this:

## **Coffee, Coffee, Coffee**

*By Rev. Christopher Raible  
sung to the tune of *Holy, Holy, Holy**

Coffee, coffee, coffee  
Praise the strength of coffee  
Early in the morn we rise,  
With only thought of thee.  
Served fresh or reheated,  
Dark by thee defeated  
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.

Though all else we scoff we  
Come to church for coffee;  
If we're late to congregate  
We come in time for thee.  
Coffee our one ritual,  
Drinking it habitual,  
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly

Coffee the communion  
Of our Uni-union  
Symbol of our sacred ground  
Our one necessity  
Feel the holy power  
At our coffee hour  
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.

This hymn parody may be found in *The Communion Book*, a mostly serious liturgical work edited by Carl Seaburg.

At the Annual meeting on May 18, 2007, the congregation voted to become a “Welcoming Church.” This indicated that we would be a strong voice for equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. This decision followed a long period of preparation. The process started in 1989 when the UUA General Assembly voted to start the program to educate its members. John Broyer distributed information at a Board meeting and the program was discussed. In subsequent years, our ministers discreetly presided over commitment ceremonies in various private locations. On August 8, 1995, the Board of Trustees affirmed the use of the church for same sex commitment ceremonies. The UUA program provided for six two-hour sessions over twelve months and on April 9, 2006, a Welcoming Congregation class began with good attendance.

On October 1, 2006, as part of the educational process, two large banners were hung on the front of the church. One bore the message, “A church of open hearts and open minds.” The second read, “Civil marriage is a civil right.” An article and photo about the banner installations ran on

the front page of the *Alton Telegraph* and received over a hundred comments and many letters to the editor. The majority of these were positive. Khleber received notes from two of his colleagues that members of their churches (non Unitarian) had brought the subject up in their own congregations, mostly in a negative light. Surprisingly, there were no irate phone calls, vandalism or organized protests against the church. Later, in what was to become an annual event, about twenty people from our church marched in the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender) Pridefest Parade in St. Louis. They carried a banner stating “Laws Don’t Make Families, LOVE Makes Families AND YOUR FAMILY IS WELCOME HERE First Unitarian Church of Alton [www.firstualton.org](http://www.firstualton.org)”. They were met with cheers and appreciation.

During 2008, membership grew to over 130 and Sunday service attendance averaged around 90. The budget grew to \$142,000. In October 2008, the local Endowment Fund totaled \$110,824 with contributions totaling \$87,235. The Fund was contributing \$4,000 annually to the general budget. The choir of over a dozen people provided music on a regular basis and other special music was a frequent addition to the Sunday service. There were many efforts to reach out beyond the church, including an annual trip to Louisiana to help with reconstruction of damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. The church building and grounds had never looked better due to good maintenance and lots of TLC (tender, loving care). Khleber’s life experiences as well as his engineering degrees and construction experience have served him well in his ministry to our church.

The Religious Education program, which had been struggling and showing various levels of success, gradually expanded and matured in strength and consistency with the hiring of a ¼ time RE Director in 2001. Our minister at that time, Carol Wolff, made RE a high priority and our new Director, Jamie Gross, was interested in professionalizing her position. She began taking courses in the RE Credentialing program and a Chalice Grant was obtained to increase funding. She is scheduled to become credentialed in April 2010.

New innovations in the curriculum and teaching methods have been adopted and attendance has increased. There are six classes, including nursery and youth groups with an enrollment of fifty. A youth member is now on the Board of Trustees. Because many of our members commute from a distance, a number of other activities are also scheduled for Sunday mornings. In order to allow adult members to take part in these, a professional Nanny Service has been used to help provide childcare.

According to an early history of our church by Rev. Wallace Robbins, our women’s organization, the Anna D’s was the first church agency in Alton that “left the confines of its own welfare to bring social services to the needy.” Their concern for the larger community led many non-Unitarians to join them in their efforts. The organization has flourished through the years though the nature and age of the group has gradually changed. For many years they could generously support the church financially through fundraising and larger membership. The entire community enthusiastically attended the annual fall luncheons. The Anna D’s cooking and canning ability was legendary. They would work all summer preparing the jars of fresh produce as it became available from local gardens. In the fall, it would be sold as a fundraiser. Not all of the food was garden produce. One notable exception was a delicious chocolate sauce made with a “secret” recipe. The ingredients were unknown to all but a few of the members. Now, many years later, a copy has survived:

## **Pearlie's Chocolate Sauce**

Melt in double boiler: 1 cup butter and 8 oz. Bakers unsweetened chocolate.  
Stir in gradually, 5 cups sugar, ½ tsp salt and 2 (12 oz.) cans Pet or Carnation evaporated milk.  
Add 2 tsps. vanilla extract (preferably pure vanilla extract)  
Cook over medium heat, stirring often until right consistency.

The Anna D's also sponsored a Bridge tournament for at least 40 years until 2003. This was a significant program because an amazingly wide spectrum of the community participated, including in some groups, husbands. The number of people involved gradually decreased due to age and social changes including the fact that younger women were working outside the home, having other concerns and playing Bridge was less of a priority.

There was always a close relationship between the Anna D's and the UU Women's Federation. Josephine Gaylord, Irma Zeitlin and Irene Mondhink all served on the National Board. Ruth Shaw has continued to actively participate in Federation programs.

Today the Anna D's is a quite different group. The membership is generally older and supports the church in different ways. The group meets monthly from September to June, usually at a member's home or at a restaurant. The goal of the group is to support the church and its Principles. The meetings are a place for long-lasting friendship and support of liberal religion.

On Sunday, July 27, 2008, tragedy struck a UU Church in Tennessee. Twenty-five children were performing the musical *Annie* for an audience of 200 friends and family members when a man walked into the church, pulled a shotgun from a guitar case and started shooting. Two people were killed and several others badly injured. According to a four-page note the gunman had written, he did it because he couldn't find a job and because he hates gay people and liberals.

Unitarian churches all over the world expressed sympathy and support for the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church. Our church held a candle light vigil on Thursday evening, July 31 in the park next to the church. Fifty people attended the service led by Rev. Khleber Van Zandt who had invited Rev. Bill Vieth from Trinity Lutheran Church and the Rev. George Humbert of the College Avenue Presbyterian Church to join him. They added to the message sung by the choir that we are "standing on the side of love." As the sun went down and darkness fell, the soft light from the sanctuary shining through the stained glass windows gave a feeling of peace and serenity to the gathering. Candles were lit and a reaffirmation of the strength and diversity of the church was made in the singing of the song, "We're a Rainbow Made of People." The words are by our own choir director, Ken Hoeft, sung to the tune of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken."

### **Refrain:**

We're a rainbow made of people,  
We're an army singing songs.  
There's no weapon that can stop us,  
For our love is much too strong.

1. Well, I was raised a Catholic  
And my husband is a Jew,  
Thanks to Unitarian Universalism,  
Now we sit in one pew
2. Now my mommies live together  
And my friend's daddies do too.  
We can worship all together  
Thanks to the U.U.
3. If your skin is black or yellow  
Brown, purple, red or blue  
If it's white or some other  
All together we're U.U.'s
4. We are Pagan and we're Atheist,  
We are Christian and we're Jew  
We are Muslim and we're Buddhist  
With some others we're U.U.

The *Alton Telegraph* reported that the event reminded them of the killing of Elijah Lovejoy and the threats against our then minister, Rev. Charles Farley in 1836-37.

While many factors have contributed to the current success of our church, much credit must be given to the use of new electronic developments. Most of our members have computers and can receive messages as well as the Newsletter by email. The church's website is excellent, up-to-date and easy to navigate, thanks to our Webmaster, Jerry Johnson and our resident Information Technologist, Kevin McCarthy. Most of our visitors tell us that they found us through the Internet. On June 30, 2007, the wedding of the son of a member and his Russian bride was transmitted by web cam to Belgorod, Russia, where her family could observe it on computers. Our wedding coordinator had an inquiry about doing a wedding at the church and when she offered to show the church to the woman, she was told that the couple was presently living in Switzerland but had seen our church on the web and wanted to have an American wedding in our building.

Khleber has reported two incidents of people who have told him they were first-time visitors and when he asked them where they lived, one said "Bahrain" and the other answered "United Arab Emirates." Each said they had come because they had seen and listened to the information on our website, were thinking of moving to the area and were interested in finding a church. Also, a young lady came to church one Sunday and even though it was her first time visiting with us, signed up for the UU & You Orientation class. When Khleber asked her how she knew she wanted to do that, she said she had listened to all the sermons and services on the web and knew this church was the place for her. When asked why she listened on the web instead of coming to church, she said she couldn't come because she had been living in England and had listened while she was there.

It's a small world!

| History Task Force       | Date Membership Book was signed |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Grace Madison            | 12/15/1963                      |
| David Wiseman            | 3/25/1956                       |
| Audrey Wiseman           | 3/25/1956                       |
| Marjorie (Midge) Hallett | 1/10/1965                       |

**Author's Note:**

In 2008, the world found itself in a global recession, the worst economic climate since the Great Depression of the 1930's.

On November 4, 2008, Barack Obama, became the first African-American to be elected President of the United States of America.

By the spring of 2009, six states had legalized same-sex marriages.

---- But those are things for some other historian to write about.