

# First Unitarian Church, Alton, Illinois

Like other Unitarian churches founded during westward expansion, the one in Alton was planted by New Englanders. The beginning was a series of meetings in the office of William Emerson, a physician and second cousin of Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>1</sup> The renowned William Greenleaf Eliot, a Massachusetts native who had a church in nearby St. Louis, attended some meetings and gave professional assistance in the startup years.

Transcendentalism made an early appearance in Alton in December 1836, when the new minister, Charles Andrew Farley, preached on "Which is the true church?" Farley saw the true church not in any single sect, but rather in "the good in all these churches." In "the church universal" he included not only Jews and Christians but also "all who live under the light of nature" as well as Hindus and traditional Native Americans. The sermon, delivered two years before Emerson's Divinity School Address<sup>2</sup>, was printed and widely distributed locally.

Not all citizens shared Farley's broad ideas. In 1837 an armed mob gunned down his friend, the abolitionist newspaperman Elijah Lovejoy. Farley, having been threatened himself, fled back to Boston. The congregation went into decline but persevered and, in 1855, erected a new meeting place on a hill overlooking the Mississippi River, where their current building now stands. They did not hide behind the stout walls. In 1856 their minister was accused of being an abolitionist. He offered his resignation, but the congregation declined it, affirming freedom of the pulpit.

Situated in a conservative area of Illinois, First Unitarian has often struggled to maintain viable membership numbers. Yet, regardless of its size, it has regularly engaged with social issues. Alton's first public high school began in the church basement in 1858. Women sat on the church board as early as 1881. In the 1890s new bylaws committed the church to educational, missionary, and philanthropic work. When the Rev. Curtis Reese, later a founder of the Humanist movement, served the congregation from 1913 to 1915, he crusaded to rid the town of organized crime and vice, often receiving threats from the criminal element. "Over the years," writes Khleber Van Zandt, "members of the Alton church . . . laid out the city streets, developed the city park system, formed the local library, helped found the civic symphony, and integrated in the 1950's the public schools they had started in the 1850's." Desegregation efforts led to angry criticism and threats from some citizens and were opposed by some within the congregation. The ministry of Zoltan Nagy (1951-1957), an immigrant from Hungary, improved relations with the larger community and aided congregational growth.



Curtis Reese



Preparing an Easter service overlooking the Mississippi River

<sup>1</sup> This was in early 1836. Dr. Emerson died the following year.

<sup>2</sup> As observed by Rev. Khleber Van Zandt. Much material here is from a sermon he gave in 2007, when he was minister at Alton.

Membership grew in the 1960s and then declined in the 1970s. In 1978 Reverend Sylvia Falconer became the church's first settled woman minister. She restored structure to congregational life, built membership, and revived the church's tradition of social action. She persuaded the local ministers' association to become more religiously inclusive. The first female member of that group, she soon became its president. For supporting—in the home town of Phyllis Schlafly—the Equal Rights Amendment, Falconer drew fire from lay and clerical conservatives, though her congregation supported her. It may be no mere coincidence that the congregation continued calling women ministers after Falconer left in 1982.

First Unitarian's leaders over the last few decades have helped stabilize membership by prudent management and planning, e.g., by setting up a capital fund for plant improvement and investing in leadership for religious education. It looks to its own members' needs in several ways, such as organizing pastoral care and offering courses in spirituality. The congregation's presence on the World Wide Web dates from 1996 and has been effective in attracting new members: [www.firstuualton.org](http://www.firstuualton.org).

The congregation continues to work for many civic causes in the spirit of the Anna D. Sparks Alliance, a women's group that was vigorously active in social causes for well over a century. The "Anna D's" also made major contributions to keeping the congregation afloat. First Unitarian has supported a variety of community funds and provided counseling to troubled youths, among other services. It became a Welcoming Congregation in 2007, since then regularly marching in The St. Louis Pride Parade and offering support services for GLBT people. In 2011 a transgender person first chaired the board and currently (2014-2015) the minister is a transgender person. In activities like providing relief to Hurricane Katrina victims and to the poor and homeless in the Alton area, First Unitarian continues to honor values it affirmed in the 1800s.



Now entering its 179<sup>th</sup> year, the congregation has never had a large membership, but, like a small tree with deep roots, it is likely to endure and to continue making its presence known.

A brief and selective sketch like the present one cannot do justice to this congregation's story. The sources listed below provide much additional information, and there is more to come. On the initiative of the current interim minister, the Reverend Sunshine D. Wolf, a group of members are now at work updating the history of the First Unitarian Church of Alton.

## Sources

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Van Zandt V, Reverend Khleber M. How Open the Hearts, How Open the Minds? A sermon . . . at First Unitarian Church of Alton, September 30, 2007.

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Photos of the church, grounds, and members are from the Facebook page of the First Unitarian Church of Alton. The photo of Curtis Reese is from the article “Curtis Williford Reese” in the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, an on-line resource of the Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society. The author is Alan Seaburg.