

“Memories of First Unitarian Church”

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As the Reverend George Augustine Thayer notes in *The First Congregational Church of Cincinnati (Unitarian): A History* (1917), the first property for our congregation, on the corner of Race and Fourth Streets, was purchased in 1829 for \$3,700. Our first building cost just over \$10,500 and was dedicated in May 1830.¹ The word “Unitarian” did not appear in our first name. In his *Sesquicentennial History of First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati (Unitarian Universalist)*, Ed Lutton notes that this was probably because the name “Unitarian” was too inflammatory at the time.² The Unitarian movement in the United States was only five years old and highly controversial. However, we have always been Unitarian.

Since 1830 we have had three buildings and five major building campaigns, two congregational splits (one in 1862 and one in 1889) and one congregational reconciliation (1876), three name changes (The First Congregational Church - 1830, The First Unitarian Congregational Church - 1919, and First Unitarian Church), one spin-off congregation (Northern Hills Fellowship in 1961), thirty two ministers including me (though I might have accidentally skipped one – this includes ministers from Redeemer but not Unity), at least three organs (probably more), significant congregational fights over abolitionism, clergy conduct, and pacifism (with member loss and rupture), the institution of a church wide canvas in 1941 which ultimately relieved 75 years of debt and the outdated practice of pew rental, and a respected reputation as a beacon of progressive theology on issues such as abolition and freedom of speech and thought within the city of Cincinnati.

Our members have served as Ohio Governor (George Hoadly), Ohio Supreme Court Justice (Alphonso Taft) who upheld the right of the Cincinnati School Board to prohibit Bible instruction in 1869, Principal of the first black Cincinnati high school (Peter Clark in 1866), Founded of the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship which sent Unitarian material to people in isolated areas (Sallie Ellis in the 1880’s – her picture is in the back along with some of her postal mission material), President of the United States (William Howard Taft), and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (William Howard Taft). In the 1950’s we achieved significant racial integration before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and hired an African American Religious Education Director, Pauline Warfield Lewis in 1956. The First African American President of the UUA (Reverend Bill Sinkford) came to this congregation as a boy.

I was thinking about these things when I went to visit Ginny Lutton and Betty Cavanaugh this week. Ginny is our oldest living longtime member of the congregation. She and her husband, Ed, first came in 1935, over seventy years ago (a few years after the congregational practice of pew rentals was eliminated). They became members in 1939 when Reverend John Malick was nearing twenty years as minister of this congregation.

¹ Thayer, 8-9.

² Lutton, 3.

As Ginny remember it, his ministry came to an abrupt end after he divorced his wife and married a “buxom” member of the choir. After regret and debate, Reverend Malick was asked to resign and Ginny remembers him saying “I thought this was a liberal church.” Oh, the perils of ministry. Even successful twenty year ministers can have affairs and implode an otherwise successful career.

Another strong memory for her is 30 people at Sunday morning service, sometimes up to 50 in attendance on good days. Ginny also remembers a dominant *Republican* presence and contentious congregational meetings, one with shouting between two older gentlemen and her husband, Ed (a young man at the time) coming forward to say “This is no way to act in a congregational meeting.” Ed died just two years ago and as Betsy Gotwals wrote in an email to me “a very happy and still vivid memory is of sitting behind Ed and Ginny Lutton, when they came together to church for so many years. He was truly our ‘Rock of Gibraltar.’”

Ginny and Ed came over seventy years ago. Much of what they would remember is outside on our art wall this morning. I encourage you to stop and take a good look. The great UU religious educator, Sophia Fahs, preaching here, brought by Pauline Warfield Lewis (no wonder she looks so pleased at the end of the dining table), church picnics, Tom Kahle and Dick Miltner as hippies, old members and friends like the Percivals and the Montillons, pictures from the Carter Reconciliation service and our recent work with Ceasefire, all there. And yet, this is only one third of this congregation’s story, one third of its history. Founded in 1830, no one here knows the founders, or virtually anyone else who served or joined here for the first 100 years of this congregation’s life.

I am regularly reminded of this. I am the thirty-second minister in our history. I am currently the third longest tenured. If I remain another eleven years I will become the second longest tenured, after Reverend John Malick. If I remain another twenty five years I will become the longest serving minister, outlasting the Reverend George Augustine Thayer who served from 1882-1916 and you heard me quote from his history of the church this morning. When he left, the congregation dedicated the Tiffany Window of Moses in his honor. The Tiffany Window next to it was dedicated in honor of his wife. If I remain twenty five more years I will very much enjoy seeing what you dedicate in my honor. I promise you this right now, I will neither have an affair with a member (like Malick), nor will I become an interfering emeritus minister like the wonderful Thayer who caused a rift so deep and long on the issue of pacifism in 1918 and his open conflict with the newly settled minister that the young people left this congregation not to return for an entire generation.

What is the measure of a congregation? What is it made of? Who owns it, represents it, controls it? Technically, because of our congregational polity (policies) the lay members control it. But no one really controls a Unitarian Universalist congregation, there are too many individualists. In truth, we share this congregation, with those who came before, those who are now here, and those who will someday come. The congregation belongs to all of us. Like the land, we are but stewards of a great gift and legacy and our job is to treasure it, nurture it, and pass it on. The mission of a congregation is to simultaneously create and give itself away.

When you think of it, it is pretty amazing that a small group of Cincinnati Unitarians, many of them influenced by their New England Congregational and Unitarian

roots created a congregation that still exists today. They laid the ground work for us, but they could not imagine us with telephones, cars, and computers, a female minister who votes and wears pants, an integrated congregation, living in a country that is considered a “superpower.” They could not have imagined this. It was not their job. Their job was to create this congregation and pass it on by giving it away to others who also shared their values. It is still our job today.

And in the midst of this creation and passage there is a unique interwoven story of a congregation. Thayer wrote the history of the church and marked it by his ministry, his inability to retire and the windows we still cherish given in his honor. His legacy. Ed and Ginny Lutton came in 1935 and Ginny is the oldest living member. Ed wrote the most recent history of our congregation, one I am using to preach this sermon today. His legacy. The two gentlemen Ginny remembers engaging in a heated congregation argument, Harry Burns, a gruff, liberal, C G & E employee, and Charrington Fisher, a conservative owner of a jewelry store who left money in honor of his wife, Elaine, for our Fisher Room in which we still meet today.

If you stay long enough, the stories go on and on like that, passing from one generation to another. And still, remarkably, we are very much like that first group of Unitarians that Thayer described

The new Cincinnati church was therefore to be founded upon the ideas of the essential dignity of human nature; the impartial goodness of God . . . the trustworthiness of cultivated reason or intelligence in dealing with all doctrines whether in the Bible or elsewhere; and of emphasis upon character and conduct as the true test of worth in the sight of God and men, rather than upon beliefs and ceremonials.³

It’s incredible to me that Thayer wrote these words about our founders over ninety years ago, and his words are still true today. After 178 years we are still those people. They did a wonderful job of creating and passing on a legacy (even with 80 years of debt, a few scandals and a couple of fights). Always there has been the public voice of liberal, religious freedom.

When asked about what you remember, those of you who responded sent me memories of people and events. Sue Howard remembers a Beatnick Party, the Family Groups, church retreats, and “the family Christmas party we had at church, where we decorated a Christmas tree and made Christmas decorations, made cookies in the kitchen, sang carols, and had a visit from Santa” (I think we should “resurrect” this tradition – sounds fun). Sue writes “Members I miss who have passed on: George Montillon, George Pemberton, Anna Steinberg, Gayle Means, Sara Smith, Marguerite Montillon, to name a few . . . or moved away: Shelly Denham, Bebe Hale, Wendy Hager, Stan and Ginny Karp.”

Linda Miltner remembered Dutro Blocksom in his naval uniform at a “Come As You Were Party,” the Adoptive Families Group (photos on the wall), an Olympics Games party at her house in 1996 where families created their own names (Upper Jacobia, Ragsdalovakia, Wonestrailia, etc. - photos also on the wall), and this memory of teaching the junior high “At the beginning of the church year we piled into my van,

³ Thayer, 5.

picked up donuts, and drove to each person's house. We hopped out, took a picture of everyone on the front steps, and moved on to the next house . . . the kids were amazed at all the various parts of town where each of them lived."

Amy Elfner wrote of her memories "Sue Koehler and Ed Rider ARE Breakfast with Santa . . . Shiau-uen playing her piano piece fingers, elbows, feet and all . . . [and her son's response when she asked him why he will sing with our children's choir when normally he is so shy] 'it's different Mom, at church it's more like singing in front of my family.'"

Holly Brians Ragusa wrote

During a Sunday Service you talked about the violence in First Church's neighborhood, a shooting had just occurred. You explained about CeaseFire and how shows of public outcry had proved helpful in other cities. You then asked your congregation during the service to stand if they were going to be able to come to the first CeaseFire rally . . . I cried when I saw the amount of people stand to answer your call . . . My children and I came to the rally, a five and eight year old walking the streets of Avondale yelling at the top of our lungs, 'Cease Fire, Stop the Killing!' It remains to this day one of the best parenting decisions I have ever made . . . I then knew what the church family I was choosing to join could accomplish.

John Heideman writes "I remember looking into the happy, smiling faces of all those people I loved whose names I can't remember."

Janet Schenk writes

I became a member with Melanie Stegman. We have stayed in touch even after her move to NY . . . I learned I didn't kill African Violets, immediately anyway. The one I received on becoming a member lived and flourished for at least three years (I have two of these at home). . . After two experiences of need for transportation, I know I will always have a way to get to First U in hard times.

Laurie Hoppenjans wrote "My fondest First Church memory is Frank Homan's memorial service. This was my first Unitarian memorial service. I left with a deepened respect for Frank and his family and I will never forget it. Getting married at First is a distant second – most of my memories around that day involve sweat (documentary proof on the art wall).

Like Laurie, many of you have told me how much our memorial services mean to you. When I came here you talked about the memorial service for Doris and Phil Froehlich's son, Chris (there is a photo of the three of them on the wall too). The death of a loved one is a shocking, life altering event, and what we offer here that few others do, is a meaningful celebration of life that allows the community to laugh and cry, to survive the unbearable. Funerals are poignant moments of humanity that only a safe place like a congregation can hold. And here we celebrate our loved ones in our tradition of liberal religious freedom.

Betty Cavanaugh told me about receiving a call from Rachel Brown over twenty years ago and she immediately asked “Is something the matter?” Something was the matter, Rachel’s husband, Sandy, had hung himself in the basement. It was a shocking and devastating choice that this congregation named and mourned together. Sandy’s photo is on the wall too.

I remember sitting in the Vernon Manor with my former husband, Peter, waiting to learn the vote of the congregation on an extremely hot March day. The vote was overwhelmingly positive. Only two people voted against my settlement here. As I walked back to the church to accept, Duane Christy peeled out of Linton Street in an oversized vehicle with a lady friend in the front seat and yelled out the window “We weren’t the two.” I remember Ed Lutton fainting in the sanctuary on my third Sunday here and being removed on a stretcher by medical personnel. When I went to see him in the emergency room he opened his eyes and said “I am so sorry to have missed your fine sermon on Emerson.” I remember when Starita Smith stood at this pulpit on our first Carter Sunday and said “On behalf of the Carter family, I accept your apology.” I remember Adam Gerhardstein dressed as me at a Heart and Hand Auction (photo on the wall). I believe Ray Sinclair appeared as Peter.

It all becomes a tapestry of people and events larger than any one person or moment. Yes there are problems, but when I look at the memory wall (which I have done daily for the past week) I see people in religious community making meaning of life with our liberal, religious values. I see that our values have let in diverse members and I am proud. I see that our values have called us to build Habitat houses and work for the passage of Cincinnati Public School levies and bond issues (photo on the wall). I see that our values have made it possible for us to remember and honor our loved ones, even during tragedies. I see that our values have encouraged us to play so that we can create, and celebrate so that we can name our successes. Most of all, our history tells me that we can survive and thrive regardless of many obstacles and that we can change a location, name, or minister when we need to. For 178 years we have adapted, over and over again.

I hope you will take some time to look at the memory wall and if you don’t know a person or have a question about a picture, please ask. There’s usually a great story to hear and tell and it could be a way to meet someone new. If you are a visitor or new member, please also look. We welcome you. This is our story and you are part of our present and future, more than we could ever see or know. Please stay and help us grow in faith, memory, values, and mission.

In the coming year I believe it is time to reprint both Thayer’s and Ed Lutton’s history of First Congregational, First Unitarian Congregational, First Unitarian Church. If this congregation will find the means to reprint these worthy volumes, I would like to teach a class (or two) based on each of them. Next year our worship theme will be UU history and identity. Why not start with our own? We certainly have much here. In order to know where we want to go, it will help to know where we have been. I am looking forward to learning with you.