

How Did First UU Get Here? Rev. Jennifer Hamlin-Navias March 10, 2019

The title of this sermon can be asked different ways

How **DID** First UU get here?

When asked that way with that emphasis the story ties into our theme of journey so well. Our congregation has been on a journey since 1860. It hasn't always been an easy journey, it has sometimes been contentious, it has sometimes been full of joy but it is our journey and important to remember

We have had different eras

Before 1860 there were a few false starts to establish a universalist congregation in the young and growing city of Syracuse.

1860 – 1889

What I would describe as the eras of arguing infighting and generally not knowing how to get along

In 1860 Rev. Aaron Thayer came to town and established a Universalist church which held its first meeting on April 2 1860 and papers of incorporation were filed shortly after that. We had several short-term ministers; Rev. Thayer stayed 6 years followed by Tomlinson who stayed one year, Rev. Sweetser served three years. A Mr. Hibbard was hired by the trustees in early 1870 but submitted his resignation in September of 1870 before he was ever installed. There was much conflict around Mr. Hibbard. We then had a Rev Stocking, a Rev Fisk and several after him.

Our congregation was known as First Universalist Church, and it had many locations because it was small and we argued a lot, we opened we closed we opened again we barred a minister from preaching. Our beginnings were not our best time.

1889 saw the beginning of the Betts Era 1889-1932

"By all accounts, there was little to recommend First Universalist as a hopeful ministry in 1889. In thirty years, there had been nine ministers, a serious schism and many years of supply preaching. The congregation was fragmented. There were only sixty members. They had remained in serious debt since 1871 when the building was built. ... The church was in ill repair. Clearly though this was a church with a remarkable fortitude."

Betts worked hard and was beloved by his congregation. He was 31 years old when he arrived and he was 74 when he died on March 4, 1932. "The most distinctive characteristics of his ministry were his efforts to advocate for oppressed, disadvantaged, and misused populations of the community in many ways. He was a social radical. One of his significant efforts was to address the problem of prostitution. His approach was not to lay the blame on the women, but to consider the economic system that placed them in such a debasing situation. He saw the connections between

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education and opportunity. He questioned first those who profited from the houses of prostitution and the men who frequented them. He did not blame the women." That was a very forward-thinking stance at that time – it still is really.

The Reamon Era It is our practice now a days to have an interim especially after such a long ministry but not so in 1932. Rev. Reamon was offered the position of pastor here on June 11th 1932. He was pastor here until 1970 38 years. During his time the congregation grew, and innovations were added to life of the church like a newsletter. During the Reamon Era we had a number of well known and well monied members. H.W Smith for whom the HW smith school is named was a member here and was the Smith of Smith Corona. Nancy Spire was a part of the 3M family. Rev Reamon was the president of the Universalist Church in America 1943-47

This was an era where the institution and finances of the church were a bit more solid. It also saw the consolidation of the universalists and the Unitarians into the UUA. The two denominations came together in Syracuse in 1959 for that vote. Reamon opposed it but even a former president of the denomination could not stop it.

Our Post merger years – post Reamon years

You may not realize this but we had two really well-known scholars as our ministers

Rev. Charles Howe 1970 – 1982. Charles Howe wrote *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism* which was for many years required reading for people preparing for UU ministry. One of the goals he helped set for this congregation was reaching out to serve the larger congregation

David Bumbaugh 1984-1988 wrote *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History*

It may or may not mean a lot to you that those two ministers wrote those books. But it was a very pleasant surprise for me when I came here to discover that two of the authors I had to read for my preparation for entry into UU ministry had served here.

I think one of the things that was most notable in the time that reverend Howe and Bumbaugh served our congregation is that it was during this time that we really transitioned from a Christian Universalist congregation to a theologically diverse Unitarian Universalist congregation, albeit with strong Universalist roots.

Blanchard Era

Although we know this era ended in a large conflict and a difficult time it was not all bad. There were many good years with David. He led this congregation to become and Welcoming congregation – an official designation from the UUA that means we have done serious work and continue to do serious work so that we are welcoming and hospitable to, at that time Gay and Lesbian folk, and now to all people whatever their sexual orientation or gender. Much of the work that he did with this congregation is the foundation of our deep welcoming ways today.

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And that really brings us to now. I have named these different eras mostly after all the ministers. Perhaps this next era will be the Hamlin-Navias era – but that is not my preference First of all it does not roll off the tongue and mostly that centers me and not the congregation. Perhaps the Era of the Phoenix would be a better name.

We have a history of cyclical shrinking and growing. We have it in our DNA to find ways to grow and revitalize ourselves. I believe we are in a revitalization phase.

How did First UU get [HERE](#)

How did we get here to this building?

The short answer is that Lyman and Nancy Spire donated the land and here we are but there is a longer history to that also

I mentioned that our beginning was fractured and a bit chaotic and a little hard to trace in some of the histories.

But eventually we built and established a church over on West Genesee street actually not too far from where The Dinosaur barbecue is now. Hmm how might that have changed church meetings if we had stayed in that neighborhood?

This was the church building that Rev Betts started in. But as time went on there were difficulties with that building

"As the city of Syracuse grew and changed, the church felt that its location north of the canal was no longer suitable. The neighborhood around the church had become settled by Catholic Italian immigrants who demonstrated no interest in the Universalist Faith. According to Betts, "between 1870 and 1890 the whole population around the church changed. North Franklin St. became the center of an Italian settlement which moved north from the Erie Canal. There is a ribbon now, perhaps two blocks wide, which centers on North Franklin Street where for a half mile or more the Italians have made their home purchased much property and settled down permanently." There were other factors involved in the move but the most prominent cause was the discomfort church members had with the ethnic and religious changes in the neighborhood. On Feb 13 1898 the congregation held a meeting at church they decided to build a new church at a different location in the city."

The congregation bought a piece of property on the corner of Warren and Adams street which at that time was on the edge of the city.

The money was raised within the congregation to buy the property and build the building Mrs. Gridley donated 10,000 toward the building which would be something like 279,000 dollars today. We moved into that church in 1907

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That church served us well until the 50s and 60s. What Syracuse saw then was what is known as white flight. Post WWII white GIs could get good mortgages and move into new developments in the suburbs. Even if the black GIs could have gotten the mortgages, which they couldn't, they were redlined out of buying property in the suburbs. Add to that I 81 was put in in the late 50s and destroyed the 15th ward a thriving black middle-class neighborhood. When 81 went in those folks had to go somewhere

"The church building showed signs of age. The downtown neighborhood was deteriorating as whites left the city for the suburbs and African Americans moved into south side neighborhoods and the nearby public housing. In the mid 1950s a fact-finding committee found this piece of property we are on. Lyman and Nancy Spire bought the property and donated it to the church."

Our church on the corner of warren and Adams had become too large too empty and too expensive to maintain. We opted to move to the very edge of the suburbs. And we moved with the white flight

Our moves from west Genesee to Adams and Warren and the move to here were in part due to the congregation's bias against folks of different heritages, the Italians and African Americans. Yes, the buildings were old and needed work but we chose not repair or rethink the buildings we chose both times to move. And both times we moved to the edge of the city.

Our move to this location was part of a larger wave of folks who were moving away from downtown Syracuse and those folks were white – our move out of the city was part of the white flight. Did anyone in our congregation say the words "we need to get away from the African American folks in Syracuse" I would guess not in so many words or at least not in so many words.

It just was part of what was happening in the city at that time. We might have made another choice – we might have chosen to re-locate to a smaller building in a different section of the city. We might have chosen to create an urban ministry.

As much as I like this location and like this building and find this sanctuary beautiful. This part of our history is not the part I am most proud of. None of us made that decision to join in the white flight and leave the downtown area. But it is part of the history of this church.

We cannot go back and change that part of our journey. I think we just need to recognize it not hide it so that we do not let it define us.

I could try asking the question again how did first UU get here with yet another and different emphasis. But I think at this point in our journey as a congregation is a better question where are we going?

I hope that we are beyond the point of moving to solve our problems. It seems as if we have a fairly strong commitment to this location and this building. If I have done my research well and my math I believe that we have been in this building longer than any other building that we have been in.

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Where do I want us to be going in this journey?

Well let's use this location that we have. We are just over the city line. Although our mailing address is Syracuse, we are really in Dewitt. It has been explained to me before why this is but it still does not stick in my head.

Our forebears made the choice to move here in part to avoid the urban parts of Syracuse. But that does not need to be our vision. We have this church that literally sits on the edge of the city. We could use that location to be a bridge between the suburbs and the city.

We have this part of history where our forebears chose to physically remove themselves from the issues of race and poverty in Syracuse. But we do not need to continue in that choice. Syracuse and Onondaga county have changed a good bit since 1959, the year we built this church. We know now that in order for Syracuse to be a healthy city there needs to be a positive relationship between the city and the surrounding area.

We can recommit ourselves to the work of racial justice, of economic justice, of gender justice, of climate justice. That is a journey that I would like to see this congregation commit to.

In a world without end may this be so.