

The History of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

Celebrating our 125th anniversary in 2014

On March 5, 1889, a group of 22 liberal religious people came before Justice of the Peace Francis M. Vaughn to form the Unity Church of Middleborough and named five members to its Parish Committee.

Although 1889 is the official founding date of what is now called the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough, the church can trace its lineage back almost another half century. In 1842 the First Universalist Society formed in town and met for three decades. In the late 1870s a new group began meeting in various homes and halls, inviting ministers from neighboring churches to speak. Some of the former First Universalist Society members joined this group, which sought official recognition in 1889.

On June 29 of that year, the new church hired Unitarian minister the Rev. William M. Ramsey of Salem for a term of one year and a salary of \$1,200. That fall Enoch Pratt donated a lot on Pearl Street, and the church began erecting a building, which opened for services on October 26, 1890.

A music committee formed in 1892, and the “Lend-A-Hand Club” raised money to buy a Woodberry and Harris tracker pipe organ, which we still enjoy today. The church wasn’t big enough for the organ, so members raised \$579.48 to add to the building.

Other early church organizations included the Sunday School, Ladies’ Sewing Circle, Afternoon Alliance, Boys’ Mandolin and Guitar Club, and Layman’s League. For several years a free kindergarten operated in the Parish Hall.

In the early 1900s David Pratt gave us a more central and visible parcel of land on Main Street next to the Town Hall. The church building was cut into three pieces, pulled through the streets, and remounted on its current stone foundation with a new porch in 1907. We can still see where the floorboards were joined in our sanctuary.

The society called its first woman minister, Clara Cook Helvie, in 1929 at a salary of \$1,800, and she served through the Depression. She inaugurated a popular Sunday evening “Friendly Hour” service, with guest speakers.

In 1941 Curtis Beach, a student minister who was also a carpenter, was called to the pulpit. He enclosed the parlor fireplace to create an altar for a small chapel and improved the choir loft.

A parsonage was purchased on Courtland Street in 1949. On October 1, 1950, the church held its first coffee hour.

By the 1970s, membership had dwindled to eight remaining souls. In an act of courage, they voted to sell the parsonage in order to hire a minister, the Rev. John Skeirik, in 1976. He came as a team with his wife, Betsey, who started a women’s chorale. Both were creative, artistic, and magnetic personalities. Membership surged. A number of teachers, social workers, and musicians joined at that time, which is still reflected in our congregational makeup.

Ever since, our church has again been a visionary and vibrant presence in our community. Several years before the Americans with Disabilities Act, we took the initiative to make our building accessible. For our centennial in 1989, Vincent Mack, a carpenter in our congregation, found a way to insert an elevator into our 19th-century building.

We created a display of symbols in our sanctuary, representing our belief in religious pluralism and tolerance: Jean Bacon designed the Unitarian Universalist flaming chalice with hands on our altar table. Betsy Ehlers drew the world religious symbols, originally eight, and we added three more in 2011 to reflect the practices of pagan, Micmac and Wampanoag, and humanist members of our congregation.

In 1990 the society called as minister the Rev. Elizabeth Tarbox, originally from St. Albans, England. Membership boomed again, our religious education classes were bursting, and we undertook several curricula and social justice campaigns.

We sponsored families fleeing unrest in Laos and later Rwanda. A church committee started Middleborough’s recycling program, first with drop-off locations, then eventually taken up by the town with curbside service. We became one of the early churches to receive our denomination’s Welcoming Church designation in 1994, actively

welcoming people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. We helped found a gay-rights advocacy committee in the town, a support group, and the Diversity Coalition (now called the Gay-Straight Alliance) at the high school. As part of our Journey Toward Wholeness anti-racism campaign, our youth wrote an award-winning series of four plays, working with the high school drama department to produce them for local cable television broadcast.

In 1992 Mary Corthell led the creation of a Memorial Garden at the front of the church, a place of beauty for meditation and the internment of ashes.

In 1998, the church called as its next minister the Rev. Patricia Tummino, a longtime member and our former church administrator. Under her 12-year tenure—the longest of any of our ministers—the church became a Teaching Parish to three student ministers and began to realize her vision of “shared ministry” among the minister, music and religious education directors, and congregation.

Under the leadership of the Rev. Tummino and member Janet Walkden, our church in 2000 pioneered a Safe Congregation policy, detailing what to do if a sex offender becomes known or asks to come to church as part of his recovery, and how the church can minister to both offenders and victims of sex abuse. Our denomination was the first in this country to tackle this issue, and we were one of the very earliest churches to do so.

We cosponsored several speakers’ series at the local library, notably about Middle East affairs, veterans concerns, sex abuse, and mental health.

We have partnered with numerous organizations to help members of our greater community in need: an interfaith hot meal program, the St. Vincent de Paul food pantry, Habitat for Humanity, Build It for Robin’s Children, Christmas Wishes, the Jimmy Fund, Walk for Hunger, and the Middleborough Area Assistance Coalition. The church compiled a brochure of free resources for those in need, used by local police, food pantries, and child care facilities. We also give the cash in our weekly collection plate to local organizations that serve our community, and our minister’s discretionary fund helps many people in need each year.

In 2010 we started a Caring Choir, which travels to sing at the homes of those in need of comfort. Our dinner and musical show, called Men Who Cook, Women Who

Sing, has become an annual event in the town social calendar. In 2014 we restored our organ, a major undertaking that replaced hundreds of wood, felt, leather, and wire parts.

After years of adopting environmentally sustainable practices and educating our members, we became one of the early churches in our denomination to receive a Green Sanctuary certification in 2011.

In 2012 the church called as minister the Rev. Sarah Person, who has already increased our membership and religious education offerings and is helping us with plans to expand our building. Following the tradition of the Pratts, members Rick and Cindy Benard in 2013 donated a parcel of land adjacent to our current lot so the church can keep growing.

Reflecting on our history, the Rev. Person says, “The thing I find striking about our history is that these earnest and energetic visionaries, true to their theological leanings, had such a practical side as well,” she says. “They knew how to get things done with ingenuity. All this energy and ingenuity echoes an essential facet of our faith; we make room for one more voice, one more perspective, one more church on the block, as we strive to serve the common good. And, in a way that is uniquely American, we are not afraid of change.”

—Compiled by Kimberly French,
drawing on histories by Bessie Bailey in 1939 and Betsy Walters in 1989