

Reflection 125 and Counting

The church of yesterday: On October 26th, 1890, the First Unitarian Society opened the doors of this church for services for the first time. Rev. William Ramsey was the minister, paid the equivalent of \$30,000. By historical accounts, our first preacher was Rev. C.H. McDougall of Rockland and it was during his ministry that 22 individuals organized under the name of the First Unitarian Society. But it was during Rev. Ramsey's ministry that the church was built. There had been liberal Christian elements in town for almost fifty years beforehand. Here is what historian Thomas Weston had to say:

Worldwide, the Universalists and Unitarians formally consolidated in 1961. Middleborough preceded that merger by almost 100 years.

The Universalists – especially the women – were a very active and public presence in town. In the 1850s and 1860s, they held picnics and social levees and fairs at Peirce Hall and American Hall. In contrast, the Unitarians were not as involved in social life – or did not have as much press when they were! At the turn of the century, after Universalists joined with the Unitarians and formed the First Unitarian Society, we see more men's activities in the press. The Society's Men's Club sponsored lecture series, the church hosted local bazaars, opened a free kindergarten, fostered a Woman's Alliance and a Junior Alliance. The Society's Layman's League, started in 1920, was the oldest continuous churchmen's group in Middleboro. In the 1920s we see them hosting dances, concerts, style shows.

We've had 30 ministers, four of them women. Rev. Clara Cook Helvie was the first, and the first woman minister in Middleborough. The congregation had originally voted in 1928 to call Robert Weston, but he declined. They called Rev. Cook Helvie to the ministry in 1929 and she served them until 1936. A pioneer in our denomination, she was outspoken and energetic; about women in religion, about politics, about the condition of migrant workers. She was the only female minister to take part at the dedication of the Unitarian headquarters in Washington, D.C., in 1925. Interestingly enough, there are contradictions in her biography about her former husband Charles Elmer Helvie. Her biographers with one exception refer to her as a widow in 1916 before she entered seminary. However one biographer tells us she had her marriage annulled in 1916 – a fact I tend to believe since her husband Charles died in 1918 in Florida.

Our second woman minister was Elizabeth Tarbox, another eloquent activist with a way of connecting deeply with her parishioners. Patricia Tummino was our third and longest-serving pastor, now our Minister Emerita, who combines a clarity of intellect with a passion for principles and yet a deep empathy and understanding of her congregation. I am humbled by my predecessors and hope to serve you with as much unique dedication.

As we look over our history through the decades, we see some common threads:

- Our desire to stretch the conventions of Christianity and faith that we saw around us. We put truth at the center of our beliefs.
- Our interest in theater, music and the arts. For over a century we have engaged in all of them and made them a feature of our congregational life and public presence.
- Our dedication to conversation and debate and general sociability. From the lecture series to Clara Cook Helvie's "Friendly Hour" services to our community-wide parenting series, we have welcomed the issues and ideas that hold our interest.
- We tend not to restrain ourselves from frank communication – a tendency that has gotten us into hot water with each other more often than not. [Johnny Selzer's story]
- The importance we attach to education, no matter whether we had 5 or 85 children.
- Our commitment to the rights of others: whether it's to ensure our accessibility by installing an elevator, supporting LGBT communities and same-sex marriage, helping refugees from far-flung corners of the world, cash-in-the-plate giveaways to worthy causes.
- As a matter of fact, we are and have always been more generous monetarily with others than with ourselves. Spending money on ourselves was a source of struggle; we prided ourselves on making do, doing without, and

do-it-yourself projects. We wanted to be more generous with our time and talents. We had part-time ministers for the major part of our history, and as a consequence, they would have to have a second job or leave us eventually. That sentiment is changing and we now have full-time ministry, a director of music and religious education, and fair compensation for all staff. We also have a realistic sense of stewardship, reflected in our successful canvass over the past few years.

- We pay attention to symbolism and the power it can have; our rainbow flag, 1000 paper cranes for Winnie Mandela, the town hall crèche and the Worship Cross and our resistance to public sentiment that America, and Middleboro, are exclusively and primarily Christian, the debate over whether to display flags in our sanctuary that focused and rightly so on the meaning the flags had for veterans and those who hoped for peace, the display of symbols of other religions on our walls.

The future: We have plenty of room devoted to education and community service. We are accessible and aesthetically gracious. We've bring light literally and metaphorically into all of our spaces and dimensions. Sharing food among ourselves and the communities we serve is central to our identity. Sharing music is central to our identity as well – making our space available to others for regular concerts. Our garden draws people in for respite. We go on mission trips both near and far as a way of challenging ourselves and cementing our relationships. We use technology to make us more connected. We have a cry room, and a bathroom upstairs. We are clever about multipurpose space. We love color. We have regular interfaith programs. We host regular meals, provide assistance to those who need it with visiting experts and advisors. We are more diverse, with more people of color, more ages, more differently abled. We are known in the communities we serve for our sense of balance, fairness and diversity. We come to each other and our communities from a sense of abundance. We are a voice in the community for diversity, and reminding ourselves and those around us that our country embraces and thrives on diversity – so much so that we have laws and principles that protect it, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us. We are not afraid to speak truth to power, even the power that folks don't realize they have. We demand that people realize the power they have to do good, or to neglect the good, and to act on their principles with what is now the core of our life and faith, and that is love.

May this church be the center of our life together,
weaving the strands of our business into a pattern,
a design, a meaning –

Uniting us with our companions of the journey,
helping us in our pilgrimage along the road
between the cities of birth and death.