



UUAA - Univ Michigan Connections

The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor

About Our Roots with the University of Michigan

In 1865 our congregation was established by the American Unitarian Association as a frontier missionary church with the particular goal of molding the minds of the next generation of leaders by bringing Unitarianism to the students at the University of Michigan, at that time the largest university in the country with over 1000 students.

From 1882 to 1946 the Unitarian Church was located on the corner of Huron and State Streets, directly across from campus. It's large endowed library of liberal religious and philosophical writings was open to all and many university students and faculty spent time reading there and also attended very popular Bible study classes and Sunday evening public lectures at the "Unity Club". In the early days of the church even the Sunday services were often over fifty percent university students.

Minister Jabez T Sunderland and his wife Eliza Sunderland served the church for the two decades 1878 to 1898. Jabez served as minister and counselor to many students and published "The College Town Pulpit" subscribed to by many at the university. Eliza always had large crowds, as many as 200 attending her very popular Bible study classes for university students. Eliza was a pioneer in women's history at the university, receiving both an undergraduate degree and doctor of philosophy. Many of her students supported efforts to appoint her to the U of M faculty, but the effort did not succeed.

Two University of Michigan buildings bear the name of early Unitarians, Victor C Vaughn who was the Dean of the Medical School and Charles E. Greene, first Dean of the School of Engineering.

In the 1930s Unitarians helped organize the first student coops. When the university closed their doors to controversial speakers, notably John Strachey, a British Marxist, the church declared their assembly hall open to any group that wished to meet for legal purposes.

The 1930s saw the growth of Humanism and in 1932, Unitarian and U of M Philosophy Professor Roy Wood Sellars drafted the first version of the Humanist Manifesto, signed by a select list of people that included university professors and the minister of the Ann Arbor Unitarian Church, Mr. H.P. Marley.

During the depression, church membership fell dramatically. The remaining members were so heavily university families that church services had to be rescheduled during exam times.

Even after 1946 when the church moved from the campus area to 1917 Washtenaw and officially ended its status as a missionary church, very active Unitarian student groups remained associated with the church attracting a number of students to go on to train in Unitarian Universalist ministry. Eventually these programs dwindled in size and merged into the university's Guild House programs.

150 years after its founding as a missionary church to university students, the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor no longer has an active campus group. The congregation is very active in the wider Ann Arbor community and its membership comes from many different backgrounds, still including U of M professors, staff and students.