

Our Story: Revering the Past, While Trusting the Future

A History of the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor
Written for the May, 2015 150th Anniversary Celebration
By Timothy F. Richards
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photo by Steve Kuzma



Our Story: Revering the Past, While Trusting the Future

The history of the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor is a story of a community that played significant roles in the evolution of liberal religious thought through the 19th and 20th centuries and that has long been deeply engaged with social justice and political issues.

The Evolution of Liberal Religious Thought

On May 14, 1865 twenty-nine men and eleven women covenanted with each other to form the First Congregational Unitarian Society of Ann Arbor, Michigan “for the purpose of maintaining religious worship and conducting the temporal interests of a religious society.”

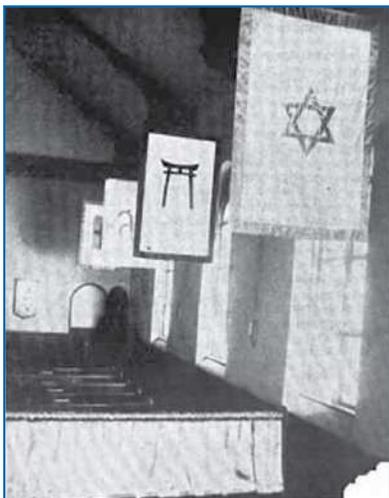
The founding members asked the American Unitarian Association to send a minister to lead them. The Association appointed the Reverend Charles Henry Brigham to serve as minister to our newly established congregation and to undertake as well a mission to reach students at the twenty-eight year old University of Michigan.



Charles H. Brigham

Our congregation’s first minister, Charles Brigham, was a mainstream Unitarian who believed in the existence of God and that “all truth is to be tested by reason,” a respected biblical scholar and an excellent preacher and orator. He began preaching here on the first Sunday of September in 1865.

RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY



World religion banners in our old State Street church

To a small group of radical Unitarian ministers here in “the West,” Brigham’s God-centered theology represented an outdated world view. The tension between mainstream and Western radical Unitarians reached its peak during the ministry of Brigham’s successor, Jabez Sunderland, who insisted on a theistic basis for Unitarianism. Sunderland, who was a leader of the mainstream group, thought that to abandon the idea of God was to abandon religion itself. A key question of the time was whether the Western radicals’ motto of “Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion” with its aim, “Truth, Righteousness and Love,” connoted a disregard for God, immortality and worship. Sunderland thought it did.

Eventually, Sunderland negotiated a compromise, which was ratified in 1894 at the National Conference of the American Unitarian Association. Despite their differences with the Western radicals both Charles Henry Brigham and Jabez Sunderland, promoted the primacy of “reason” within the bounds of Christianity.

Eliza Sunderland, the remarkable wife of Jabez Sunderland, represented Unitarian Women of America at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. In an address to the Parliament, Eliza Sunderland, a scholar of world religion, asserted that the "study of all religions was necessary to the intelligent comprehension of any one religion." This is advice that our congregation took to heart, by hanging flags representing religions of the world in the sanctuary.

Jabez Sunderland's successors, Joseph H. Crooker and Henry Wilder Foote maintained theistic, traditional Unitarian ministries but our congregation was becoming less conservative and student interest in conservative Unitarianism was waning.

In 1910, the American Unitarian Association sent Dr. Percy M. Dawson, a professor with little ministerial training, to Ann Arbor to revive interest in the church. Dawson eschewed traditional pastoral duties and he was perceived as abrasive by members of the congregation. A rift quickly developed within the congregation, resulting in Dawson's dismissal in 1912. Dawson acknowledged that he was "misfitted" for what he described as one of the most conservative churches of the Western Conference.

THE HUMANIST MANIFESTO

A key event in the history of Unitarianism occurred in the summer of 1920, when the Unitarian magazine *Christian Register* asked our minister Sidney S. Robins, to interview Professor Roy Wood Sellars, a University of Michigan faculty member, a noted humanist philosopher and an active friend of our congregation who signed the membership book in 1934. At this time, humanist views were controversial within Unitarianism. Opponents insisted that "we must avow our faith in God" and that "atheistic humanism" would lead to the death of Unitarianism.

Robins' article, "What is a Humanist? This Will Tell You" appeared in the July 29, 1920 issue of the *Christian Register*. In it, Sellars stated "belief in God must not be a creedal element." The response to publication of Robins' interview with Sellars "was vociferous" and, unlike the 19th century Western Controversy, this conflict was not regional.

In 1931 Professor Sellars was the chief author of "A Reflection on the University Mind," which was signed by nineteen members of our congregation who were also University of Michigan faculty members. This statement included the ideas that human experience is the sole source of authority for any philosophy of life and that religion consists in the daily quest of the good life here and now.



Roy Wood Sellars

In 1932, the Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference asked Professor Sellars to prepare a "definitive statement of humanism." Eventually, the "Humanist Manifesto" was released on May 1, 1933. It was signed by thirty-four prominent individuals, including Sellars and our congregation's minister, Harold Marley. The Manifesto included the notion that the scientific method is fundamental in acquiring and interpreting reality; it is possible to live an ethical life without God and that religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and the rejection of an afterlife.

Publication of the Manifesto elicited little reaction. What criticism it did receive focused on its "sweeping rejection of theism." What is most interesting from our

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perspective is that two individuals, Sidney Robins and Roy Wood Sellars, who played important roles in formalizing religious humanism within Unitarianism in the 1920's and early 1930's were closely associated with the congregation whose ministers had vigorously opposed the Western Radicals in the nineteenth century.

In November, 1929 our home at the corner of State and Huron was rededicated and the Reverend Harold Marley was installed as our congregation's minister with the pledge that "This Church is incorporated to carry on such religious, benevolent, and charitable work as shall promote Freedom,

Fellowship and Character in Religion," which had been the 19th century motto of Brigham's and Sunderland's arch opponents, the Western Unitarian Radicals!

In the years following publication of the Humanist Manifesto our congregation was firmly anchored to a humanist base, although there continued to be tension between theists and non-theists. Marley and his successors, Edward H. Redman, Erwin A. Gaede, Kenneth W. Phifer, and Gail R. Geisenhainer were all humanists, although Redman described himself as "a humanist with reservations." During the 1950's Redman introduced our congregation to religious ideas and practices from around the world in an effort to reach beyond theism and humanism to a broader understanding of the many ways to be religious.

Many who joined our congregation during the 1960's and '70's had left other religions, rejecting religious creeds and ritual. During this turbulent period there was tension over politics and tension between theists and non-theists in our congregation as people wrestled with such questions as "Who are we?" and "What do we stand for?"

Many of the wounds that were opened during the 1970's were healed under the leadership of Kenneth W. Phifer, who became our minister in 1980. Since the early 1980's our congregation has become "enormously diverse in its religious understandings and in the ways we understand and practice our spirituality." The authority of direct experience has evolved as an important component of the spiritual life of our congregation. Small group ministry emerged as a new component of our spiritual life in the 1990's. Covenant groups such as the Wisdom Seekers and Chalice Circles have become fundamental elements in the spiritual practice of many members.

Music has long been central to the spiritual life of our congregation. Current Music Director, Dr. Glenn Thomas Rideout has spent the last eight years expanding our choir and deepening the robustness of congregational singing. Our current minister, the Rev. Gail R. Geisenhainer and Dr. Rideout have jointly endeavored to promote congregational singing as a primary spiritual practice in Sunday services.

COMMITMENT TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Our first minister, Charles Brigham served as a missionary to university students and Eliza Sunderland continued and expanded his work by teaching a Bible class at the University of Michigan for 17 years. Traditional Sunday School classes for the children of our congregation's members began under Brigham and continued through most of our history. In 1972 a course on human sexuality was presented for the first time, which has evolved into today's Our Whole Lives (OWL) program. The Coming of Age program for adolescents was begun in 1980.



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Lack of classroom space for religious education classes became a critical problem by the 1980's and was an important reason for our move to our current location in 1999. Initially housed in portable classrooms, the youth program continued to grow and now thrives in our classroom wing, which was completed in 2004

150 Years of Making a Difference in the World

As we celebrate our past, we can look with pride at our efforts and accomplishments in promoting social justice. From the mid-nineteenth century to this day, our ministers and members of our congregation have been engaged in efforts to advance and promote civil and human rights. The examples are numerous. Several of those examples are described in the following paragraphs.

PIONEER YEARS

Our first minister, Charles Brigham, was deeply involved in public health issues and was a member of the Michigan State Board of Health. Our second minister, Jabez Sunderland, was an advocate for social, economic and religious reform and preached sermons on such topics as "The Great Labor Problem and its Proposed Solutions," "Trade Unions" and "Arbitration as the Solution to Labor Problems."

Our nineteenth century Unitarian forebears also demanded reforms in the country's attitude toward Native Americans, insisting on efforts to eliminate poverty and illiteracy. Temperance was a major social justice issue in the late 19th century and many members of our congregation were active in the Unitarian Temperance Society.

During the 1880s, Jabez Sunderland argued strongly for India's independence and Eliza Sunderland was a prominent advocate in Michigan of women's education, employment opportunities for women, and the vote for women. She was a principal organizer of the Women's Western Unitarian Conference, of which she was President, 1882-87; and she was a leader of the National Society for the Advancement of Women. She spoke on "Higher Education and the Home" at the Columbian Exposition's Women's Congress in Chicago in 1893.

Active members of our 19th century congregation included the well-known abolitionist James Mitchell Ashley and a women's rights advocate, Olivia B. Hall, who was active in the women's suffrage movement. Hall served as president of Michigan's Equal Suffrage

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Association, was a co-founder of the Political Equality Club of Ann Arbor and was the first president of the Ann Arbor Equal Suffrage Association, which was organized in 1894.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Dr. Percy M. Dawson's ministry was controversial in part because he became deeply involved in the student socialist movement. After his dismissal in 1912, many students and liberal members left, leaving a small, divided congregation. Prior to and during the First World War members of our congregation were "unwilling to provide a place of refuge and comfort to the faculty members who were being persecuted for their German ancestry."

After the conclusion of the war our congregation moved toward active involvement in social and political issues. This is evidenced by that fact that in 1921 our minister, Sidney Robins, invited individual members to sign a covenant declaring the purpose of the church to be "to carry out such religious, benevolent, and charitable work as shall promote Freedom, Fellowship, and Character in Religion and Ethics."



Sidney Robins

In 1930, soon after Harold Marley began his ministry here, our congregation re-evaluated its programs for the purpose of increasing its activities in the community. Marley took a strong stand for civil liberties. He was an active member of the American Civil Liberties Union and when the University of Michigan barred controversial speakers from campus, our congregation opened its doors for labor union meetings, to controversial speakers and to any group that wished to meet for legal purposes.

During World War II, our congregation provided community support services for the workers at the Willow Run bomber plant. In the 1950s, our minister, Edward Redman, actively opposed McCarthyism and worked on behalf of Ann Arbor residents whose loyalty to the United States was questioned. He strove to maintain the church "as a place of trust and refuge wherein any person, regardless of beliefs, could participate freely" and participated in promoting an American-Soviet friendship movement. He also advocated for assisting "minorities in gaining access to services in the Ann Arbor community."

A generous bequest by members George L. and Bessie Jackson established The Jackson Social Welfare Fund in the 1950's "for the purpose of advancing the understanding and acceptance of the great principles of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, and for the promotion of the use of reason and understanding as the effective method of solving in a peaceful manner domestic and international conflicts and difficulties." The hundreds of grants that have been made from this fund over the years include contributions to the Committee to Abolish the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Interfaith Council for Peace, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Attica Defense Fund.

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CIVIL RIGHTS

In 1935, when most Ann Arbor civic and recreational organizations, businesses and professional clubs were closed to African Americans, our congregation granted the use of our church to the Dunbar Center, an organization that provided housing and recreation for African Americans.

On July 31, 1949 the Reverend Eugene H. Sparrow was ordained in our

church with Redman presiding. Sparrow, who had been a member of our congregation while he was a student at the University of Michigan, was the first African American graduate of Harvard Divinity School to be ordained into the Unitarian ministry. Reflecting the challenges faced by African-Americans in that era, Sparrow was never called as minister by any Unitarian Congregation, although for a time he was listed as minister-at-large for our congregation.

As civil rights protests were escalating across the country in the early 1960's, new minister Erwin Gaede and members of our congregation were active participants in the Civil Rights movement. Like many of his fellow Unitarian-Universalist ministers, Gaede participated in the march in Selma led by Dr. Martin Luther King in 1965.

In 1962 our congregation approved a petition created by our Social Action Committee under the leadership of Don Pelz endorsing fair housing legislation in Ann Arbor. By the fall of that year, more than 3,500 Ann Arbor residents had signed the First Unitarian Church "Statement of Welcome and Covenant of Open Occupancy."

After being challenged in the fall of 1969 by a demand to provide money for clothes for children on welfare and for more economic opportunities for African Americans, our congregation provided substantial financial support for the formation and operation of the local Black Economic Development League-Welfare Rights Organization.

Today, there is a new call to address race issues in our nation. Gail Geisenhainer, Glen Thomas Rideout and the Challenging Racism group are initiating dialogue, study and action to continue our congregation's long history of standing up for civil rights.

ANTI-WAR ACTIVITIES

In 1900 a group opposed to American annexation of the Philippines, the Anti-Imperialist League, published our minister Joseph Crooker's pamphlet, "The Menace to America." Harold Marley was active and highly visible in the community in his antiwar efforts and allowed University of Michigan students to hold antiwar meetings at our church during the 1930's.

Erwin Gaede was a vigorous, out-spoken opponent of American involvement in the Vietnam War in the late 1960's and early 1970's. He counseled war resisters and wrote letters for those who applied for conscientious objector status and was highly visible in the community as a proponent of peace through his letters to the editors of various newspapers. However, his strongly expressed views and his frequent sermons on the topic created tension within our congregation, which led to a congregational vote in 1971 on whether to retain him as minister. The vote was in Gaede's favor. At this time, a separate Unitarian Fellowship was formed by a small group of disaffected members of our congregation.

Despite the tension, Gaede's work with draft resisters was a cause that the whole congregation supported. The local sheriff had created the "incorrigible cell", a windowless box within the County Jail where war protestors were held. Our congregation protested, collected several hundred signatures



Upon retirement, Erwin Gaede gave his iconic peace symbol to member Eric Erickson.

In September 1992 our congregation became one of the founding members of the Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN), a rotating shelter for homeless families.



on petitions and wrote letters to newspapers. Ultimately, the cell was declared illegal, and the sheriff was ordered to close it.

While Gaede's ministry was controversial, his social justice activism yielded much good. For example, he was instrumental in the formation of the Interfaith Council for Peace in 1965, which we know today as the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice.

SANCTUARY AND HOUSING HOMELESS FAMILIES

In June 1987 our congregation voted to house a family fleeing persecution in Central America. The Sanctuary Committee recruited over 90 people almost \$2000 in initial monthly pledges to support a Sanctuary family.

Our congregation became the third Ann Arbor congregation to provide sanctuary to a Central American refugee family when Francisco Rodriguez his wife and three children moved into the carriage house behind our church building at 1917 Washtenaw Avenue. We continued to provide the family with legal, medical, financial and emotional support for the next 18 years.

Our congregation has long been involved in efforts to combat hunger and homelessness and to promote affordable housing. For the last fifteen years we have participated in a hands-on Habitat for Humanity-sponsored effort that has provided 25 affordable homes to low-income families in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti.

In September 1992 our congregation became one of the founding members of the Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN), a rotating shelter for homeless families. We have been actively supporting the mission of IHN continuously since. In 2000, IHN moved to a building called Alpha House, made available by St. Joseph Mercy Hospital. Our congregation continues to play a central role in IHN's operation, with more than 250 adults, youth and children regularly volunteering at Alpha House.

GENDER ISSUES AND MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Shortly after the Ann Arbor Gay Liberation Front was formed in 1970, Erwin Gaede invited them to hold their dances in our building. Gaede and his successor, Ken Phifer, invited the group to have holiday dinners there, to hold same-sex weddings and to conduct memorial services.

In the spring of 1988 our congregation became involved in the Unitarian Universalist Association's "Welcoming Congregation" program. The Common Vision Committee was formed to examine our congregation's treatment of gays and lesbians, to extend a congregational welcome to gays and

lesbians, and to work actively in the larger society for lesbian and gay rights.

In 1992, our congregation voted to become a Welcoming Congregation and Interweave was formed to create an explicitly welcoming presence. This presence has taken many forms including: the installation of a large Pride flag at our entrance, regular potluck meetings, educational programs,



an annual Interfaith Service of Affirmation, a spring retreat, and participation in witness and advocacy actions for marriage equality and equal rights. On June 1, 2014, our congregation unanimously voted to approve an Affirmation of Marriage Equality.

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

In 2008 the Board of Trustees established Social Justice and Environmental Action as core values, committing our congregation to programs that promote peace, justice and positive environmental action. The Renewable Energy Project Team's construction of a wind turbine and installation of roof-mounted solar panels on our building in 2010 provided visible, functional evidence of our commitment to sustainable sources of energy.

THE FUTURE

Today's Social Justice Council oversees numerous social justice activities, most started by lay leaders. In addition to those already mentioned, these include the Prison Books Program, the Mindful Eating Coalition, the Justice in the Middle East Group and the Global Climate Action Team. As we celebrate our past and look toward our future, we have an excellent opportunity to define what social justice means for the congregation today and to develop the social justice priorities and the strategies that will ensure that our efforts are directed toward bending the arc of our moral universe toward justice.

Conclusion

Our congregation has been an active liberal religious voice in the Ann Arbor community engaged in efforts to promote social justice both in the community and in the wider world since our founding.

When our congregation was formed, our membership looked to the Christian Bible as its source of spiritual authority and to the minister to guide us to the religious truths that were to be found there.

Today, in addition to Christian religious texts, we also recognize direct human experience, the words and deeds of prophetic women and men, the wisdom of all the world's religions and humanist teachings as sources of wisdom and truth. We look to our ministers to encourage us in our search for truth, to stimulate our thinking and to challenge us to put our values into action. - *Timothy F. Richards*



Acknowledgements:

This brief survey of our congregation's history is a collaborative effort: the result of a huge amount of effort by many dedicated people.

I am indebted to all the authors of the mini-histories that have been presented throughout the past year and to the Reverends Ken Phifer, Fran Dew, Tom Schade, Gail Geisenhainer and Mark Evens for their wise and helpful insights and observations.

I am grateful to Elizabeth LaPorte and my wife, Connie McGuire for their editorial suggestions. I am indebted to the amazingly energetic and immensely dedicated leaders of the year-long celebration of our 150th anniversary, Terry Madden and Sandy Simon for their encouragement and their insightful editorial guidance.

If you are interested in sources for this essay, please go to the Congregation's 150th Anniversary web site: <http://www.uuaa.org/150>

Senior Ministers 1865- 2019



Charles Henry Brigham
1865 - 1877



Jabez T. Sunderland
1878 -1898



Joseph H. Crooker
1898 - 1905



Henry Wilder Foote II
1906-1910



Percy Dawson
1910 - 1912



Robert S. Loring
1912 - 1918



Sidney S. Robins
1918 - 1928



Harold P. Marley
1929 - 1942



Edward H. Redman
1943 - 1960



Erwin Gaede
1961 - 1980



Kenneth W. Phifer
1980 - 2005



Gail R. Geisenhainer
2008 - 2016



Manish Mishra-Marzetti
2016 - present

Our Historic Buildings

1866 – 1882, Fifth & Ann Streets

Our first church building had been a Methodist Church on the corner of 5th and Ann, known as the "Unity Block". It was purchased shortly after our first minister, Charles Henry Brigham arrived in Ann Arbor.



1882 – 1946, 100 N. State Street

Jabez T. Sunderland, our minister from 1878 to 1898 oversaw the building of the lovely Romanesque church on the corner of State and Huron Streets that was completed in 1882. In 1884 a parsonage was built next door for the Sunderland family. In 1946, diminished membership and costly building repairs led the congregation to sell the building to Grace Bible Church.



1946-1999, 1917 Washtenaw Ave.

After leaving the State Street Church our congregation purchased the Dr. Dean Myers stone chalet home. The congregation began to grow quickly and an addition was added in 1956, designed by member and architecture professor George B. Brigham.



In **1999** we moved to our current home on 45 acres of grasslands and woodlands on Ann Arbor-Saline Road. Our building was designed by local architect David Osler. In November, 2004 we finished and dedicated our classroom wing designed by Sunstructures Architects.



PROCLAMATION

*First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor
150th Anniversary
September 15th, 2014*

- WHEREAS, The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor is celebrating its 150th Anniversary in Ann Arbor throughout this year: **Reason and Compassion in Action**; and*
- WHEREAS, The roots of the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor reach back to 1835; and*
- WHEREAS, The Unitarian Society began services in a rented room in the County Court House in 1865 where the original Articles of Association of the Congregational Unitarian Society were signed on May 14th of that year; and*
- WHEREAS, The congregation has been steward of two registered historic buildings, one built at the corner of Huron and State in 1882, and moving in 1946 to the Dr. Dean Myers home on Washtenaw where they added a George B. Brigham addition, and then in 1999 built a David Osler building on Ann Arbor-Saline Road; and*
- WHEREAS, This congregation is the spiritual home to a diverse and broad reaching community which has roots in political action, providing a printing press to labor unions in the 1930's, engaging with Sherriff Harvey in the 1970's, providing Peace Team participation during the KKK march at City Hall in 1998, and "Standing on the Side of Love" in 2014 by providing ministers and many witnesses to Ann Arbor's one day of same sex marriages; and*
- WHEREAS, The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor has a history rich in community support and involvement, contributing time and resources to such programs as Alpha House, Interfaith Hospitality Network, Habitat for Humanity, Food Gatherers, Washtenaw CROP Walk and providing books to prisons; and*
- WHEREAS, The UUAA wind turbine and solar panels demonstrate the congregation's commitment to and leadership in environmental awareness and action.*

NOW THEREFORE, I, John Hieftje, Mayor of Ann Arbor, Michigan, along with the members of City Council, extend our sincere commendation and congratulations to the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor for having so profoundly stood the test of time on the occasion of its 150th Anniversary; and express our appreciation and gratitude for this congregation's monumental contributions to the AnnArbor Community.

*I hereby set my hand and seal
this 15th day of September, 2014*



John Hieftje
John Hieftje, Mayor

TRUSTING IN THE DAWNING FUTURE



A freedom that reveres the past,
but trusts the dawning future more;
and bids the soul, in search of truth,
adventure boldly and explore.

Prophetic church, the future waits
your liberating ministry;
go forward in the power of love,
proclaim the truth that makes us free.

*Excerpt - Marion Franklin Ham, As Tranquil Streams,
Singing the Living Tradition, Hymn #145*