

UUCP History - the 1990s – Searching for Leaders



Artwork from Unitarian Hungarian Church – Székelyderzs (Dârjiu) |photo attribution: Dârjiu, murals-King Ladislaus I. of Hungary (left) fighting with a Cuman Warrior (right)| By Vargatamas (File:Derzs101.jpg)

A September reception welcomed the Rev. Peter H. Samsom as Interim Minister for 1989–1990. He was soon to note in *Skylights*: “Among all the 13 Unitarian Churches I have served as minister (six settled and seven interim), the Princeton Unitarian Church takes the prize for having the most complete and varied Christmas observances.” But the yuletide was not our only festivity as we kept old and created new traditions through the interim year. Ferdi Serim produced his popular jazz nights; NNYA held a spring fling dance; current and past officers hosted receptions for newcomers; trustees hosted their New Year’s Day reception; a Spaghetti Factory family dinner fed 90 adults and children; and we held a seder. We celebrated the 50th anniversary of the UU Service Committee with a gala dinner, attended by UUSC Director Richard Scobie. We said goodbye to “the large aud,” “the small aud,” and rooms “21/22 and 23” when the Room Naming Committee gave us “Channing Hall,” “Sophia Fahs Theatre,” the “Founders Room,” and the “John Murray Room.”

Beginning in 1989–1990, the vice presidency for administration was split in two, one for administration and one for building and grounds. Satisfactory results from this division of volunteer labor led the Board to consider it no longer necessary to plan for the hiring of a church administrator in the near future; the suggestion for a staff administrator as a future hire “when practical” had gained congregational support the previous year.

On April 1, 1990, the Board replaced the staff position of choir director with that of music director. The Music Committee began the search for a half-time music director who would be responsible for all church music, including the broader reach beyond Sunday services into other adult and youth programming and would also be the piano accompanist. On the year’s last Sunday service in June, Ginnie Aronson ended her nine years as choir director. Later in the summer, Peter Lauffer was hired as music director.

The second successive “interim year” was planned quite differently from its predecessor, with no full-time interim minister. The Rev. Fred Ward was hired to provide essential pastoral counseling and rites-of-passage services for church members and friends. For Sunday services, the Speakers Committee, chaired by Melanie Milner and Bart Hoebel, arranged 27 services with post-sermon discussions. Speakers included 17 Unitarian ministers or other UU leaders from around the country; three ministers from other denominations; and seven speakers from academia, law, or the performing arts. In addition, the Music Committee provided three complete services, including Mozart’s “Magic Flute,” complete with orchestra. Extravaganzas directed by Richard Swain that year also included the “Christmas Tryptych,” followed the next season by Molière’s “Les Facheux.” A children’s choir was organized.

During that interim year, volunteers certainly did “run the church.” This included ministering to one another during the Persian Gulf War, in which some of our former church-school students took part. A statement issued in November 1990 by the UU ministers of the New Jersey Area Council deplored the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq but opposed U.S. military action in the Persian Gulf. Church schoolteachers attempted to quench the fears of children who witnessed the war daily on television; Fred Ward offered conscientious objector counseling; and NNYA arranged for a unit of the Red Cross blood drive to be held at the church.

May 1991: Paul Johnson Called

After a candidating week crowded with two services, receptions, dinners, and interview meetings attended by hundreds of old and new members, the congregation called the Rev. Dr. Paul S. Johnson as its new minister on May 2, 1991. His formal installation was held November 10.

Chris Reed Chosen as Director of Religious Education

In spring of 1991, when no minister of education and program had been found despite two years of intensive effort, and with the arrival of a new parish minister, the congregation decided to stop this search for the time being and to reassess its needs. That summer, Chris Reed, who had also served as interim RE coordinator in 1989–1990, was given a two-year contract as director of religious education (DRE).

The fall of 1991 was the beginning of a rich church life with Paul Johnson. He introduced new rituals and ceremonies to Sunday services, added a new dimension to caring for the church family and the larger community, and instituted a variety of adult education programs in cooperation with Chris Reed. The church had a new look that September, too. We were greeted by the long-awaited repaved parking lot, Channing Hall sans “the hump” that had always stood in the center of the back half of the room, and 50 additional chairs that had been purchased with substantial assistance from the Mary Peck Memorial Fund.

Campus Ministry and Pledging Grow

The Campus Support Committee became active and coordinated activities with the Rev. Donna Di Sciullo, the UU campus minister at Princeton University. UU students met for dinner at the church with officers and interested members, and some of our denominational outreach funds were committed to the Campus Ministry along with other specific groups and causes. Because

we had been contributing to the denomination since our inception as a fellowship, this was also our 43rd year of UUA giving. The trustees, in 1991–1992, committed the church’s participation to a fourth six-year cycle in the Leadership Leaves program.

In 1992, the Creative Worship Committee was formed to plan additional forms of spiritual expression on themes taken from nature, humanism, and mythology.

By the mid- to late 1980s, the Forum for Singles had become an autonomous organization, and in the spring of 1990, it moved to other facilities. In 1992, a new congregation-based singles group was started, quickly attracting between 70 and 100 participants.

In 1992, our annual pledge drive reached \$200,000 for the first time. At the beginning of the year, the Music Committee had presented the trustees with a detailed report on the need for a new piano for Channing Hall; on May 10, the congregation supported the Board’s recommendation to buy a new grand piano, using special donations to lighten the capital expenditure. Our new Steinway arrived on June 24.

During the 1990–1991 interim year, with guest speakers, we had returned to one Sunday service; in the spring of ’92, the congregation voted to return to the two-service schedule in 1992–1993 to accommodate once again the growing church school enrollment, which reached 210 children in early 1993.

Despite radical swings in the church school population during the 1970s and 1980s, dedicated religious education staff and parents continued to enrich the curriculum with innovative materials. Introduced into the program were such courses as “Celebrating Our Roots and Branches,” “Growing Up Human,” “Earth, Sky, Life and Death,” “Ethics,” “World Religions,” “Growing Times,” “Why Do Bad Things Happen?” “Images of Our Lives,” “How Can I Know What To Believe?” “Holidays and Holy Days,” “Friends,” and “Windows.” Many adult education series also were created by both staff and lay leaders. These have included “Developing Your Total Self,” “Building Your Own Theology,” “Career Life Goals,” “Explorations in Aging,” “Helping: Emotional and Spiritual Aspects,” “Life Mapping for Partners,” “Interfaith Relations,” “A Course in Miracles,” and “Active Parenting,” as well as various series on UU history and beliefs and other religions.

Winding Up the Century

In 1992, the Cookbook Committee, after a long year’s work, published the beautiful recipe collection called Gatherings, all profits from which were donated to the Trenton Soup Kitchen. Joseph Swies, church custodian since 1987, retired at the end of 1992. At a Sunday service in January 1993, the congregation, including some members who had been around when we bravely took on the costs of the 1968 building expansion, burned the mortgage and celebrated becoming debt free. An Appraisal and Review Committee worked from August to April to survey the congregation on the importance and performance of all aspects of church programs and governance. The George Ortman art work “Directions” was relocated to a different area of Channing and the reredos was restored to its original condition. At a congregational meeting in April, members approved a bylaw amendment that eliminated our two classes of membership,

voting and nonvoting. All members became voting members and a “member” was redefined as one who has both signed the membership book and made a financial pledge to the congregation.

Members of our congregation continued to be involved in denominational activities. During the 1990s, Doug Rhodes became president of both the Continental District Presidents’ Association and the New York Metro District. Later he served as District Ministerial Settlement Representative. Carl Haag preceded Doug as District Ministerial Settlement Representative and also served on the board of the Murray Grove Association and was instrumental in saving it from bankruptcy. Carl had also helped develop the Leadership Leaves program, among other efforts. Butch Arnould was a member of the District Executive Committee; Stefanie Craib chaired the UUA-UN Service Committee; Ted Fetter became president of Murray Grove. Carol Allen continued to be active in UUs for Social Justice. Through the 1990s and into the current century, our youth have held numerous leadership posts in the Metro District Youth–Adult Committee (YAC). As we approached the end of the twentieth century, the 1999–2000 annual fund drive was the first to exceed \$300,000.

In 1996, after much study, many neighborhood meetings, and much effort by dedicated members of the congregation, we developed a mission statement and adopted it at a special congregational meeting.

The Message Is the Media

After many years of editing *Skylights*, our newsletter, Al Shostack retired and was replaced by Bruce VanDusen. In 1997, Bruce transformed *Skylights* into a periodical regarded as one of the finest in the UUA. It was praised for organization and professional presentation not only by our congregation but by the UUA as well. In 1998, through the efforts and creativity of Henry Powsner, our website was born; Henry has continued to nurture <http://www.uuprinceton.org/> into the twenty-first century. *Skylights* became available online along with current and past information about our congregation. Henry also created an electronic listserv giving members who subscribe the ability to contact one another as a group. This growing electronic community helps spread news quickly and recruit volunteers for urgent service. It also serves as a chat room where topics such as “god talk” and “spiritual humanism” are discussed.

Staff Undergoes Changes

In 1997, the congregation demonstrated how much the next generation meant to us when we unanimously appointed Drake Baer to the position of a paid youth advisor, one of the first such positions established by any UUA congregation. After two years, he was succeeded by Dave Gibson, a recent graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary. Until fiscal 2002, a UUA demonstration grant subsidized the youth advisor’s salary.

The search for a minister of religious education, begun in 1987, was terminated after two years, and Christine Reed was approved as director of religious education (DRE). She then began her studies to become a Minister of Religious Education. In 1998, having fulfilled those qualifications, Chris was called by the congregation to be our MRE.

Renaming and Remembering

After considerable discussion and numerous meetings to discuss the name of the Unitarian

Church of Princeton, at the Annual Meeting in May 1998, we voted to become the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton. We thus finally gave our formal recognition to the 1961 union of the Unitarians and Universalists.

In the same year, we established an endowment policy. For years, the congregation had received small bequests that it retained and invested, but in the 1990s we received major bequests from Ed Rey and Annemarie Knopf, both longtime members, totaling nearly \$200,000. The Endowment Fund was formally established. Policies were adopted by the trustees to guide the management of these funds and their future disbursement. In subsequent years, by congregational vote, we adopted policies on socially responsible investment and adjusted the process for deciding on the use of endowment income.

In September of 1998, the Kenneth and Jean Wells Wall was dedicated. The wall, which was erected in the memorial garden, had as its impetus a generous donation from Roger Wells to memorialize his parents. Erected in the wall area in the spring of 2003 were two cast bronze plaque holders: one to reflect the familiar “Roots hold me close” theme sung in our worship services, the other to commemorate deceased members and friends.

Going Global

In 1994, Paul Johnson suggested the idea of a congregational trip to Greece, and a group of members started planning the itinerary. The two-week trip with seventeen individuals departed in May 1995, touring Greece by bus and ship. A party of eight continued on to Istanbul Turkey for an additional six days, while a smaller band traveled to Cappadocia.

Again in 1998, Paul Johnson suggested another trip and the group decided to go to Eastern Europe, including Prague, Bohemia, Budapest, Transylvania, and Vienna. The trip began in May when eighteen people set off from the church. A highlight of the travels occurred in Romania where church members explored the possibility of partnering with the Unitarian Church in Feheregyhaza, a village in the Hungarian-speaking region of Transylvania. In December 1998, a congregational resolution supported our congregation forming a partnership with the Unitarian Church in Feheregyhaza as part of the work of the Partner Church Council of the UUA. Since the establishment of that formal alliance, a dedicated group under the leadership of Ethel Mae Theriault and Nancy Keene raised thousands of dollars to help build a new church for our partner and to finance many related improvements. Congregation members also donated \$10,000 in support of the construction of dormitory rooms at the college in the nearby city of Koloszvar that educates local youth. Over the years, our members and youth group have visited the area repeatedly, attending the dedication of the new church and strengthening ties with their members and minister, Jakab Benedek. He and his family visited our congregation in April 2002, and he returned in 2003.

Earth-Based Spirituality

Beginning in the 1990s, one could look at the UUA and find affiliate groups blossoming. Interest groups range from UUs for Jewish Awareness to Evangelical Universalists. In 1999, three members of our congregation formed the Evergreen Chapter of the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, an earth-centered, independent affiliate of the UUA. By 2003, the group had 24 members, some of whom served as RE teachers, youth group advisors, members and chairs of

committees, and on the Board of Trustees. Their interests range from music to the Veggie DUNs group to peace activism. The chapter functions as an outreach arm of the congregation by being the first contact some Neo-Pagans have had with liberal organized religion, and it educates our other members about earth-based spirituality.

The Nineties Leadership

Ministers – Dr. Paul S. Johnson (until 2002), Christine F. Reed (until 2011)

Church Presidents – James Johnson (1989–1992), Theodore Fetter (1992–1995), Raj Nigam (1995–1997), Charles Ascher (1997–1999), Judy Malsbury (1999–2002)