

UUCP History – The 1950's



graphic: UU Fellowship in 1958 at new site

May 6, 2003, marked our fiftieth year as a congregation. The history of Unitarianism in Princeton, however, started fifty-five years ago when, in July 1948, Lida T. Priest wrote to the American Unitarian Association (AUA) suggesting the founding of a fellowship in the Princeton community. The following spring, on March 27, 1949, an open meeting was held to determine the extent of local interest in liberal religion. Among those present were Margery and Alson Robinson, retired minister of the Plainfield, NJ, Unitarian Church and a vital force in our early years. The first service was held several weeks later on Easter Sunday. Fifty adults and five children attended. On May 4, 1949, a Certificate of Membership in the AUA was issued by Boston in recognition of the Princeton Unitarian Fellowship.

By spring 1953, forty-three families were active in the fellowship, and interest was growing in attaining church status. To do so, the group was required to have sixty-five family units and to show it could undertake the financial responsibility of hiring a full-time minister. Immediately an informal "Lasso Committee" consisting of Margery Robinson, Margaretta Rutter, and Agnes Braden went to work, and by April the fellowship had its sixty-five families. The AUA agreed to assist in finding an experienced minister and to underwrite a portion of his salary for the next ten years.

On May 6, 1953, the denominational headquarters in Boston granted a charter to the Unitarian Church of Princeton. The group quickly incorporated under the laws of New Jersey and elected officers: Simeon Hutner, president; Ashley Montagu, vice president; Charlotte Holmes Wengel, secretary; John Drury, treasurer; and June Heald and Mary Wigner, members-at-large.

Straughan Lowe Gettier Called as Minister

June 4, 1953, Straughan Lowe Gettier was called as minister to the church, beginning his pastorate the following fall. The assembly hall of the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton was the site of his installation service on November 22, 1953; the principal address was given by Dr. George D. Stoddard, former president of the University of Illinois and a member of the Princeton church. The following spring, Harold Dean, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, was appointed student assistant to Mr. Gettier, with special responsibilities toward the Liberal Religious Youth (LRY) group.

From the very beginning, growth was a delight and a problem. First meeting in the music room of Murray-Dodge Hall on the Princeton campus, the fellowship then moved to Princeton Country Day School on Broadmead; thence to Avalon (former home of Dr. Henry Van Dyke on Bayard Lane and location of current YM-YWCA); and then to the former YMCA building on Witherspoon Street (now the Paul Robeson Community Center). By March 1954, it was clear that the church needed a permanent home for its now 110 members, and a building committee was formed to find a way to meet the church's needs.

Buying Land to Build Our Home

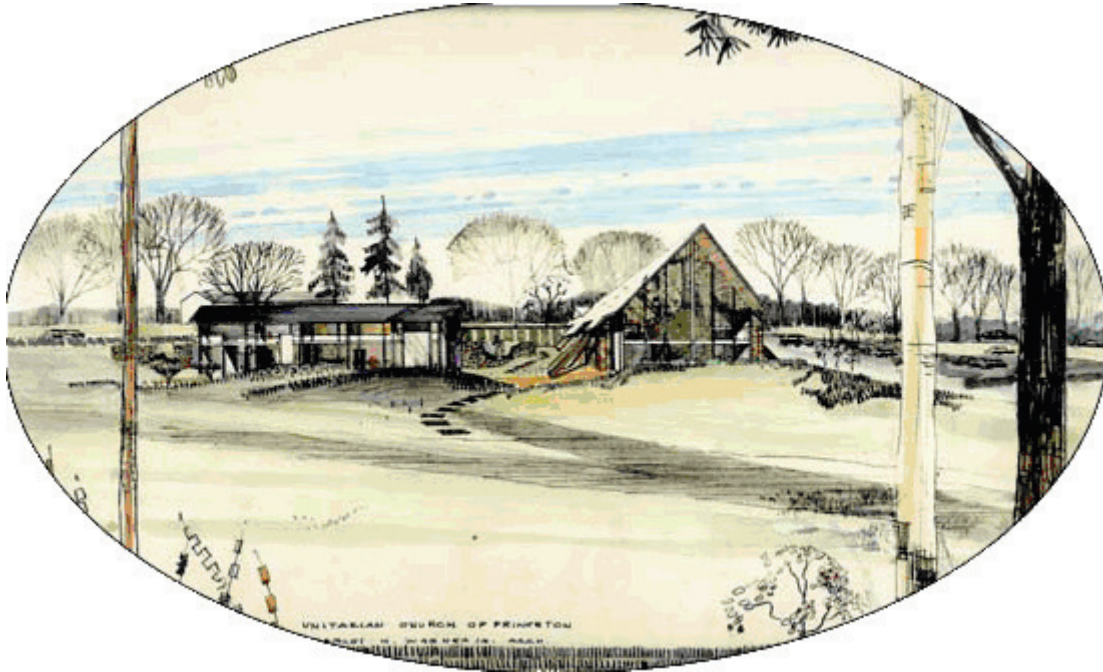
Dreams approached reality in October 1954 under President Peter Putnam, when the church began negotiations for the purchase of four acres on the corner of Route 206 and Cherry Hill Road from Mrs. George A. Harrop. In March 1955, the groundwork for a capital fund campaign began under the general chairmanship of Ken Wells with Peter Putnam chairing the special gifts portion of the drive.

That May, the congregation adopted its present Bond of Union and made this historical statement of purpose:

The origins of Unitarianism are to be found in the sixteenth century among people like Michael Servetus, Francis David and the Socini, all of whom looked upon God as one rather than as a trinity. The early Unitarians, like their followers, were humanists seeking an ethical religion purified of irrational mysteries. Emphasis was on the power and ability of human nature to lead a moral life without supernatural aid. They rejected most of the traditional theology built upon the assumption that human nature was evil and needed a divine miracle to transform it. They denied the doctrine of original sin; man is not a fallen creature. They denied man's moral bondage, his unconditional predestination, his need of any magical redemption or transformation of nature, and hence they could not accept the theory of Christ's atonement for man's sins. In the figure of Jesus, they found a great moral teacher who was divine only in the sense that all men have something of the divine about them.

Of this statement and the Bond of Union, the congregation noted: "These statements are not to be considered permanent, and may be reconsidered from year to year." By this time, 165 individuals had signed the membership book. The church school enrolled 107 children; the LRY was composed of 13, and the university student fellowship was between 25 and 50. The annual meeting of April 1955 reported total annual revenues of \$9,126. Our transient accommodations during these years, however, created problems for both the religious and lay leadership. Thus, there was great excitement over the possibility of building our own church. In fall 1955, Warner,

Burns, Toan and Lunde were chosen as architects of the new building. Among their list of achievements was the Plandome, L.I., Unitarian Church. A building fund goal of \$100,000 in pledges was set, to be raised over the next three years, and extensive time and effort were devoted to preparation for the building fund drive. Church members and friends met in neighborhood groups to discuss plans for the building and to learn of the financial obligations involved. When held, the drive quickly raised \$108,000. News of the church's efforts reached the entire nation in October 1956 when Peter Putnam was interviewed on national television, showing movies of the church property and describing building plans. Groundbreaking took place October 4, 1957, with completion scheduled for fall 1958.



UUCP concept in 1958

Church activities continued enthusiastically during these months. The "Robinson group" met regularly for social events; panel discussions were held on the topic of the Middle East; a social concerns committee was authorized by the Church Council (the governing body of the church), as was a women's group. Members worried about how to help people get acquainted and how to welcome newcomers. Should members wear name tags? Mr. Gettier and members of the Hospitality Committee agreed to greet people at the door as they came to services. An activity preference survey revealed high interest in comparative religions, world affairs, religion and psychiatry, and social concerns. The Women's Association met to knit bandages for cancer patients in hospitals in Africa. A long-range planning committee under the chairmanship of Dick Mason studied the organization and bylaws of the church and proposed revisions. In the spring of 1958, during the planning of the new building, the Cherry Hill Nursery School group was formed by members of the church, who arranged to rent space in the completed church.

At the annual meeting in March 1958, President Ken Wells compared the church to an adolescent:

Trying to define ourselves . . . Trying to establish our church's scale of values. We want leadership, but not too much. We want new experiences, but we want to be quiet and calm. . . . We want our church to be a place where one can say "I don't know" and hold his head up when he says it. A place where our children have at least a fighting chance to find out why their parents are the kind of people they are. A quiet spot in a confusing world, a haven for people who will always love the unending search for their own certainties about God, Man and the Universe.

1958 – We Move In

In the autumn of 1958 we moved into our new church building. Although it was far from complete, a formal dedication was held on October 26. Nearly 140 children were enrolled in the church school. The Princeton community was introduced to the church that fall through a lecture series on world religions, given by such noted scholars as Frederick Mote, Philip Ashby, Horton Davies, and others. In February 1959, Doreen Spitzer chaired the first annual auction. The \$800 auction profit was spent on landscaping for our still bare property.



Some lay-led Unitarian fellowships, like the one founded in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1948, grew into churches with ordained ministers. Here, members arrive for a service in their unfinished building in 1958. Many other fellowships, however, remained lay-led.

Members of the Unitarian Fellowship of Princeton in 1958 coming to the newly built and incomplete church.

- Alan W. Richards, UUA Archives. The photograph is from an article in UUWORLD November/December 2002. The article is by Warren Ross, "A Precarious Path. The Bold Experiment of the Fellowship Movement" and recounts the origin of the Unitarian fellowship movement.

Meanwhile the unfinished building continued to receive the absorbed attention of many individuals. An ongoing discussion was whether to add a choir loft and to purchase an organ. Some claimed the acoustics in the large auditorium were poor, and the lighting was indeed incomplete. The minister's office was similarly unfinished, and the noise from the seventh-grade class, which met there during the Sunday service, brought quick complaints. Nevertheless, the church's activities and spirits climbed as we grew accustomed to our new space. As of April 1959, the church had 223 active members.

The Fifties Leaderships

Ministers – Straughan Lowe Gettier (1953–1960)

Church Presidents – Simeon Hutner (1953–1954), Peter Putnam (1954–1957), Kenneth Wells (1957–1959), Edward Morehouse (1959–1961)