

There Grew a Little Flower

Bill Lakeman's History of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fredericksburg

In 1948, the American Unitarian Association voted to launch an outreach program called "the Fellowship Movement." It was surprisingly successful. In the next 10 years, 315 new Fellowships popped up across the continent, and the Fredericksburg Fellowship was one of them.

The founder of the Fredericksburg Fellowship was a young newspaper reporter, Don Heine (he was a shy, awkward, studious farm boy from North Dakota who had come to Fredericksburg in 1950). He and I were bachelor roommates in the early 1950s. We were both reporters at The Free Lance-Star, and had similar social and political views, but he was into religion and I was not, so we often went our separate ways on weekends. He used to drive up to Washington on Sundays and attend the All Souls Unitarian Church at 16th & Columbia Road and he was active in a young adult group there. In the course of that, he heard about the Fellowship Movement and thought it might be nice to have a Fellowship at Fredericksburg. I think he consulted with a couple of Unitarian ministers on how to do it, and so he began rounding up prospects in the Fredericksburg area, trying to get the minimum of 10 people needed to start a Fellowship.

I knew nothing about all this at the time --- until he approached me at the last minute, saying there was a Sunday night meeting of a group of people and would I like to come. In hindsight, I think I must have been the 10th man he needed for a quorum. At any rate I said "Okay," not knowing what I was getting into. It was more of an organizational meeting than the intellectual discussion I had anticipated. There were two such sessions in early December 1955, in the home of a school teacher in the Courtland Heights section, and I don't think there were quite 10 people at either of them. Nonetheless, plans were shaped to seek permission from the Beth Sholom Temple to use the basement room there for Sunday night meetings starting in January. And that is what happened.

Those first public meetings in the Beth Sholom temple hold some of my fondest memories.

We would sit in a circle of folding chairs and use the printed program material that had come by mail from Boston. Often these were role-playing scenarios in which each of us had a sort of position statement to read, going around the circle in rotation, before free-for-all discussion began. The subject might be "Was Jesus a God, a Man or a Myth?" with the arguments taken from sources ranging from Saint Augustine to Bertrand Russell. Or it might be "Are Unitarians Christians?" with a similar spread of views.

On rare occasions, we would have a Unitarian minister come in from Arlington or Richmond or Charlottesville to speak to us, and sometimes a faculty member from Mary Washington College or a physicist from the Dahlgren base would be guest speaker. But there were never any ceremonies, like hymn-singing or responsive readings or passing the plate. And there was no Sunday School.

After two years, the Fellowship switched its Sunday meetings to hotel rooms and began shifting to Sunday mornings instead of evenings. It grew to about 20 members and then there was some turnover --- among other things, the founder, Don Heine, got married and moved to Chicago --- and the Fellowship began going downhill, reverting to Sunday night meetings again, but in each other's homes.

So in 1961, a meeting was called to decide whether to disband or continue, and at that meeting there appeared Dr. Kurt Leidecker, a kindly old philosophy professor at Mary Washington College who said "Oh, you must keep going. You cannot let the Fellowship die!" And we said "All right; but you're president."

That was the beginning of what I call the 'miracle of 1961,' for in the next six months, the Fellowship turned around from death bed to putting up and opening its first building in College Heights.

First, we discovered that a prefabricated building that sold under the trade name of National Homes could be put up for as little as \$5,110 if you left out the interior walls. And there was a lot for sale in College Heights for \$2,500 which Dr. Leidecker put a \$25 deposit on to hold for our consideration. Then an angel appeared in the form of a gentle gray-haired lady from Maryland who came to Fredericksburg because the winters were warmer. She was a widow and a longtime Unitarian and her daughter had been scolding her about living alone on a snowbound mountain in western Maryland.

Her name was Mary Porter Evarts. She was delighted to hear that there was a Unitarian Fellowship in Fredericksburg and wondered how she could get in touch with it. Someone told her "Go see Bill Lakeman at the newspaper." And she did. "As a matter of fact," I told her, "there is a meeting of the Fellowship this Thursday evening at Dr. Leidecker's house." She asked if she could come and I said "Sure."

So she came and sat in a wing chair in Dr. Leidecker's parlor and listened to our back-and-forth discussion of the building plan for an hour and then quietly announced "I will lend you two-thirds of whatever it takes to do this thing you are talking about, and I will lend it at one percent interest in the first year, two percent in the second year, three percent the third year, and five percent thereafter."

There was a Unitarian minister from Mount Vernon at that meeting, and when he heard what Mrs. Evarts said, he got so excited he paced up and down, saying "If you people don't jump on this offer, you're crazy! In fact, if you put up this building I'll see that you have speakers for the whole first year after you open it."

You'd think that would do it. But we kept talking and talking until Dr. Leidecker decided to appoint a committee of two to make a written summary of all that had been said, and mimeograph copies of it for everybody in advance of the Fellowship's annual picnic, when we would vote whether to go ahead with it. I was one of the two committee members. The other was Dr. Myrick Sublette, an economics professor at Mary Washington College.

Dr. Sublette added another key element later -- a plan to get up the other one third of the funds for the building. He proposed a partnership of three people, me, himself and Henry Gore, to be called "the Unifred Association," which would loan the Fellowship the other one-third at 5% interest. Each of the three put up \$900 for a total of \$2,700.

The bottom line of the mimeographed summary was that we'd have to get \$1,200 in pledges for the coming year to make the building plan fly. At the picnic meeting, we only had \$1,150 in pledges in hand, but we voted to go ahead anyway, figuring the other \$50 would surely come in. And it did.

At the September opening of the building, we had the district executive of the Thomas Jefferson Conference, Rev. Clifton Hoffman, of Atlanta, as guest speaker, and the mayor and city manager of Fredericksburg gave ceremonial greetings. Maybe 25 people in all, but a big crowd for us and an unforgettable day.

The first Sunday School in the Fellowship was started a year later by MWC faculty wife Rudd Kenvin --- primarily for her two daughters, but two sons of another faculty member also. They met in a corner room of the building that also had a kitchenette at one end and an office at the other, leaving a settee in between that served as the Sunday School classroom.

Later they shopped around for larger quarters as the Sunday School grew and at some point, wound up meeting in a Mental Health Clinic building on Princess Anne Street, where one of the Fellowship's new members, Dr. Donald Reed, was psychiatrist. But that building (a big old Victorian mansion) was gutted by fire one night and the Sunday School moved again to the home of Elizabeth George on Charlotte Street, which had a big back yard for kids to play in. And still later, when that generation of kids had grown into teenagers, the Sunday School fizzled out and was abandoned.

Fast forward now to 1982, when the Unitarian minister at Charlottesville, Rev. Terry Sweetser, was invited to come to the Fellowship for a one-day workshop on growth. One of the things he stressed in that workshop was reviving the Sunday School. And so it was --- back in the same corner room of the Fellowship building where it began. And thereby hangs a tale.

The new head of the Sunday School was a feisty grandmother from Nebraska who was also an elementary school teacher in Spotsylvania. One Sunday in the fall of 1983, Edna Elvers exploded over the cramped quarters in that corner room and stalked

out into the adult meeting with an ultimatum: "If you want me to run this program, you're going to have to give me more room."

Would you believe that the adults voluntarily agreed to give up the whole building to the Sunday School and start looking for another place to meet, and larger quarters for both adults and Sunday School. It would take almost a year and wind up with the Fellowship's big move in 1984 to downtown Caroline Street.

Jack Brown, who chaired the committee to look for new quarters, was a retired businessman, lawyer and born-and-raised Unitarian from Syracuse, N.Y., who had retired to Lake of the Woods in Orange County. He became a work horse for the Fellowship, finding a bar in an Italian restaurant where the adults could meet, an ancient downtown building for sale for \$110,000, negotiating a loan from the UUA to finance the purchase along with the sale of the Fellowship's College Heights building to a pair of speculators in Woodbridge.

There were two very long business meetings in that barroom on the U.S.1 Bypass that ended with a split vote by the Fellowship to make an offer of \$90,000 for the Caroline Street building. It was accepted, but another six months elapsed before the \$40,000 loan from the UUA came through and the sale of the College Heights building for another \$40,000 was consummated. The remaining \$10,000 of the purchase price came from a Fellowship savings account.

Membership in the Fellowship doubled with the move to Caroline Street and the annual budgets quintupled. But an enormous task also began to transform the building back into a church from the Bingo hall and fraternal lodge it had been for two decades. Most of the work was done by volunteer members, somewhat like an old-fashioned barn-raising, starting in the summer of 1985, but extending over five years to the summer of 1989, when the red-brick exterior was painted cream yellow with white trim.

Along with this was another gradual transformation of the character of the Fellowship from informal, non-churchy, lecture-type meetings to the beginning of formal, conventional, church-type rituals. The pioneer was in-house pianist, Ray Baker; a former Baptist minister turned assistant school principal in Stafford, who introduced once-a-month services with hymn-singing, responsive readings and short, homely sermons. He got away with it because (1) anti-churchers discreetly stayed away on those Sundays, and (2) everybody loved Ray. Next came a pair of lay leaders in the Harrisonburg, VA, Fellowship who had decided to marry and enter Meadville-Lombard Ministerial School together and who wanted to try out their pulpit skills. A three-month series of joint services by Wade Wheelock and Ann Marsh on basic Unitarian principles was very popular and boosted their courage for their mid-life career change. The next year, John Baros-Johnson, fresh out of Meadville-Lombard, became the Fellowship's first paid, part-time minister on a one-Sunday-a-month basis. He was followed in 1992 by Paul Russell, of Charlottesville, another former Baptist minister who had retired from 20 years with the overseas AID program before discovering Unitarianism. He was so popular, he was retained a second year on a two Sundays-a-month basis.

The next step, a part-timer for two consecutive Sundays plus the week in between, was under discussion in 1994, when the TJ District Executive, Roger Comstock, paid a visit to the Fellowship and said the odds were very poor for getting anyone on that basis. But another option had very good odds, he added, for getting a full-time minister, through the UUA's Extension Minister Program, with a \$12,000 subsidy to boot. A \$14,000 grant from the TJ District's "Chalice Lighter" program also helped finance the move-up to a fulltime minister.

And so in June 1995, short, bald and cherubic John Rex, fresh out of Starr King ministerial school, became the first full-time minister of the Fellowship. He had been a Peace Corps worker in Africa and a high school English teacher in upstate New York (east of Buffalo) when he found Unitarianism and after involvement in youth work decided to go into the ministry. There was amicable divorce from his Catholic wife; but his teenaged son became a protracted manic-depressive case, and in the first week that he came to Fredericksburg, John Rex was called back to Lockport, N.Y., to officiate at the funeral for his young-adult son. In addition, the UUA picked him to be a flying ambassador to an estranged colony of native Unitarians in Sri Lanka and India, and he departed on that six-weeks' mission three months after he came to the Fellowship.

"Star-crossed" is a plausible image of his tenure in Fredericksburg, along with innocent conscientiousness. He had an emergency appendectomy at one point. He learned that his namesake ancestor (a lost family renegade) had been a Confederate slave-holder and philanthropist at Raleigh, N.C., and he campaigned to change the name of the TJ District because Jefferson was a slave-holder, only to lose by a one vote margin. Most of all, he caused accumulating friction by pushing churchiness upon a Fellowship that wasn't quite ready for it.

This came to a head in 1997, when a congregational meeting was held to decide if he should be the permanent minister of the Fellowship. (This was an option in the Extension Minister program, provided the Fellowship agreed by an 80% margin.) He got a 57% margin, which was not only far short, but exposed a deep split in the congregation.

Walter Braman, who became interim minister in 1998, was the opposite of John Rex -- bearded, blasé, easy-going and popular. He even agreed to stay on a second year, while a search committee took its time to find a new permanent minister.

The search committee's choice in 2000 was something else again: a Georgia Tech graduate, software engineer and research scientist who had been both lay minister at a big Atlanta church, and then a part-time minister in Atlanta and Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Jeffrey G. 'Jeff' Jones, in short, was a step-up in professionalism who seemed a safe pilot through the fog. The approval process anyway was smooth and unanimous.

Let us not count our chickens yet. The Fellowship is still an evolving enigma, pushed once again for more room, with double shifts on Sundays and sheltering gays, lesbians, pagans, infidels, "come-outers"¹, "come-inners," and born-and-raised UUs as well as AAs and nonmember "friends." It may well be wracked again by battles over bylaws and building plans.

But it is permissible, I hope, to be in awe of how long a way baby has come in much the same way that Fredericksburg itself has changed from the quaint little Mayberry of 50 years ago.

Epilogue

The Fellowship Movement is denigrated in some quarters today because many of its seedlings either died or didn't grow up into churches. A task force in the UUA has even recommended that no more fellowships be started unless there is enough membership at the outset to support a minister, Director of Religious Education, and Office Manager.

It took 45 years for the Fredericksburg Fellowship I to reach such a level, and it wasn't a smooth, easy process. It survived, at first, by the skin of its teeth; then languished for two decades; then was overrun by a population boom that hoisted it to its present state.

This kind of evolution in stages is not uncommon in other fellowships I have known, though I would not say it is the norm for all fellowships. My personal experience is largely limited to the Virginia section of the TJ District, wherein there are some 11 fellowships today in various size and stages of growth. I know of only two instances in the area of would-be fellowships that died.

Continentially, so far as I know, the great majority of congregations spawned by the Fellowship Movement survived and grew, despite setbacks, and they constitute today roughly 30 percent of the number of congregations in the UUA.

Hence, survivors of the Fellowship Movement are prone to suspect the change of attitudes is a generational pendulum swing from "come-outers" to 'come-inners," from Humanism to spiritualism, from hard-nosed reasoning and search for meaning to the solace of rituals and mainstreaming.

But, of course, we're biased.

¹ A "come-outer" is one who has come out of some other denomination into UUism. If the breakaway was traumatic, the "come-outer" is often talkative, rebellious, anti-churchy and Humanist, agnostic and atheist. A "come-inner" is one who has come into UUism with no previous association with any other denomination ... typically, quiet, conformist and spiritual. "Come-outers" dominated the early years of the Fellowship. "Come-inners" are relatively new.