

## *The Little Fellowship That Could* by Rev. Doug McCusker

Exactly a year ago, I was here visiting you all as a candidate to be the second full-time settled minister in the history of the Fellowship. It was an amazing week. You all were so welcoming and gracious. You were curious about me and I was curious about you. I attended 28 meetings over 8 days, preached twice and ate too much at all the pot lucks. We shared stories about ourselves and talked about our aspirations. Then on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, you called me to be your minister and I said “Yes”.

Wow, how time flies. I started my ministry here on August 1<sup>st</sup>. In these last 9 months, I have become acutely aware of history and how it shapes the present.

While I was considering coming here, I talked with the out-going consulting minister, Rev. Walter Braman on the phone. He suggested that I read a book on the history of the Fellowship Movement as a way to put in context some of the things that I would discover as I got to know you all. I had never belonged or served a Fellowship, so I ordered the book and dutifully read it before arriving.

I learned that right after World War II, the Unitarian religion had a big growth spurt as did most of the mainline churches in the United States. For Unitarians, the main engine of that growth was the Fellowship Movement. Between 1948 and 1967, small autonomous, lay-led congregations called Fellowships popped up all over the country.

Prior to that, lay-led churches were rare. The usual method for starting new congregations included full-time ministers from the beginning and a long period of financial subsidy from the denominational office in Boston. But that model was mainly used in urban areas where there were a lot of people to start a church rapidly.

The Fellowship Movement was a radical departure that targeted smaller communities, especially in college towns. All it took was for 10 people who gathered on a regular basis in a home or borrowed space to petition for recognition as a Unitarian Fellowship.

The typical Fellowship included college professors and other professionals. They tended to reject the rituals and dogma of organized religion in favor of intellectual discussions about ethics and culture. The predominant theological position of most Unitarian Fellowships was humanistic atheism.

Our Fellowship, when it was founded in 1956, pretty much followed that pattern: small college town with intellectuals and academics who were humanists. In the first couple of years the membership was between 10 and 20 people. At several junctures they almost disbanded. They met in homes or in the basement of the Beth Shalom temple until they bought their own place in 1961. Having their own place was a shot in the arm that gave them a sense of security.

From the outset, the mission was to be an alternative to church, an oasis for people who still wanted something that resembled religious community, but without the trappings of church. There wasn't a huge demand for that in Fredericksburg at the time, so the Fellowship remained relatively small with around 30 - 40 members for over 25 years.

In his 2003 article about the history of this Fellowship, Bill Lakeman, one our founders, wrote in the 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 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.

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 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 Spirituality, from hard-nosed reasoning and search for meaning to the solace of rituals and mainstreaming."

As we celebrate our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary it is right and fitting to look back with pride on the journey that this Fellowship took to get where we are today. And yet it is also appropriate to cast our index finger in the air to see which way the winds are blowing.

Is Bill right, are we in the midst of a pendulum swing into a new normal? How will we change as a religious community? And probably more importantly, what does our greater community require of us. These are tough questions that are usually answered in retrospect. When you are in transition all you can see is what is immediately in front of you.

As a former systems engineer, I tend to look at things, including history, through a systemic lens. Institutions like this Fellowship do not do things randomly. They take on input from the surrounding environment, process it based on the collective experiences and needs of the organization and respond in a way that attempts to maintain equilibrium. Systems are predisposed to avoid change unless absolutely necessary. And yet, their very survival depends on how they evolve and manage change.

I represent change just by being your new minister. Everything I do is new input to the system. How it is processed is often influenced by invisible forces like past trauma and old patterns of behavior. That said, I have been amazed at how willing most people are to try new things and enter into new experiences with an open mind. And yet, Reverend Braman's advice to pay attention to the history has helped me pick up on the underlying rhythm of this Fellowship.

Luckily we still have folks here like Bill Pinschmidt, Don and Becky Reed, Ralph Phipps, Mary Jo Parish, and Ron Wasem who have been around a long time, and if coaxed, will share stories of the old days. And then there are all the archives and artifacts that have been preserved. Most of those things are on the back table. Some of it was kept in my office for the last couple of months so little by little I would peruse the photographs and documents. They sort of filled in some of the gaps in Bill Lakeman's historical accounts.

What emerged for me was the human element of the system. I read annual reports and memos of the various building committees. I read newsletters that announced where people were going on vacation and where the Sunday school would be held on a particular week. I looked at the lineup of topics for the Sunday program as

it was called back then. They didn't seem much different from the lay led services that we still have today.

Prior to reading these materials, I didn't know anything about what went on here during 60's and 70's. Bill didn't talk much about that period in his histories. That's because nothing remarkable happened. In the urban areas UU churches protested the Vietnam War, sent folks down to Selma, got caught up in the free love movement and were known as hippie churches. But here it was quiet. Growth was stagnant. For about 10 years there wasn't any children's religious education and people seemed content with the way things were. It was a typical small family size Fellowship in the rural south.

However, things picked up in 1982 when the minister from Charlottesville held a workshop here on growth and urged the Fellowship to restart the Sunday school. That was one of those turning points that caused things to change. Even though it had been tried once before and then disbanded, the Fellowship collectively said "I think I can." Unfortunately, the old building on Rowe Street was not large enough for both the Sunday school and the adult program. Thus emerged one of our beloved stories.

I'll let Bill Lakeman tell it: "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 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 with larger quarters for both adults and children. It would take almost a year and wind up with the Fellowship's big move in 1984 to downtown Caroline Street." In the meantime, the adults met in a bar of an Italian Restaurant.

Thus started a growth pattern that we have been on ever since. It works like this, offer new programs that address the needs of the community and people start coming. Then you need more space. Once you expand your space, more people show up and expect more vibrant programs. Invest in staff to help lead the programs and more people join. Then you need more space again. Couple that with the growth in the greater Fredericksburg area that's how we grew from 40 members in 1980 to almost 200 today.

But growth brings change and that causes challenges and anxiety. In 1990 we hit the big defining moment in the history of the Fellowship. To be or not to be a church. That was the question. All those new programs that people wanted like religious education and music started to resemble things that traditional churches did. There was even a call for professional clergy. The identity of the Fellowship started changing and along with that came a period of conflict until the new identity emerged.

I don't want to under-emphasize the magnitude of such a change. Imagine, you've been humming along doing pretty much the same thing for 35 years, nice and predictable, and then over the course of 3 or 4 years the rug gets pulled out from under you. Remember what I said about how systems are predisposed to avoid change unless absolutely necessary. As I understand it, there was a real danger that the Fellowship would split in two. Sometimes that's a good thing, but not if you are too small to absorb the loss of half your members.

That would have been a mortal blow. The Fellowship was like the little engine that was being asked to push the train up the steep hill. It had made it successfully through 2 building expansions, but absorbing lots of new people with different ideas of how to be a church, that was tough. No one knew what was waiting for them on the other side of the hill. The entire decade of the 90's was a long, sometimes fitful, sometimes grueling push up the hill. We had 5 ministers during those 10 years. People did leave. But we knew we could handle the challenge before us, and we did. We persevered!

Ultimately, we did change. For all intents and purposes we are a full-service church even though we prefer to use the term Fellowship as a connection to our past. We have had professional ministers in one form or another for the last 26 years. Rev. Jeff Jones served for 9 years, and Rev. Walter Braman served here twice. We are steadily expanding our professional staff. The community is continuing to grow and so is our congregation. Last year 102 visitors came through our doors and 25 people joined as new members.

The anxieties of those years of change and conflict are deeply woven into the fabric of this community. Some of the ways they manifest are through resistance to authority, fear of new rituals, and an aversion to religious language. Words like "worship", "God", "spirituality" and "church" carry some of the scars and must be used thoughtfully and respectfully.

Bill Lakeman's assessment of a generational shift is dead on. Most of our visitors and new congregants are what he called "come-Inner's", folks who have come into UUism with no previous religious association, but with a desire to express their spirituality. Even the "come-outers", folks who grew up in other religious traditions seem to be comfortable with ritual and religious language.

This trend is consistent across the country. The people looking for a liberal religious home like us aren't turned off by things that are "churchy", they're turned off by phony institutions that preach one thing and do another. Another trend, particularly among the younger generation, is an increased awareness of social injustice. They are willing and ready to disrupt longstanding oppression.

Our Fellowship has always donated to various causes and engaged in direct service to the community. If someone in our congregation needs help we come out in droves.

But social justice work hasn't been a strong part of our identity. We've been generally shy as an organization to get involved in controversial issues out of a concern that we might offend people. This goes way back to the early days when the Fellowship voted not to get involved in the multi-racial marriage issue that was centered right here in Fredericksburg. Nowadays we vote on social justice issues but leave it to a small handful of people to do all the work. And we invest less than 1% of our budget in this area.

The pendulum is swinging. Fear of the other is gripping our nation, whether they are transsexuals, foreigners or people who don't look or think like us. There is a world outside these walls that needs us to show up and live our values, our 7 principles of love, tolerance and interconnection.

We're not slaves to our history. We are living in the here and now. We write the history of tomorrow by what we do today. I want the congregation 40 years from now at

the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary to say we were a Fellowship that Could because we weren't afraid to Stand on the Side of Love and advocate for a real Beloved Community.

The pendulum is swinging. And there are people out there looking for a church like us, just like we did once upon a time. It's up to us to engage them in here and out there. It's up to us to be that Fellowship that Could: Could love; Could heal; Could take a stand; Could make a difference; Could dare to change the world.

Happy Anniversary!