

History of First Unitarian Church of Des Moines

by Dwight Saunders
Past Church Historian

In 1877, a small number of Des Moines citizens, unhappy with the pattern of conservative evangelism preached in the churches in the city, decided to invite a representative of the Iowa Unitarian Association to come to Des Moines, a community of some 16,000 persons, to explore the possibility of the establishment of a Unitarian Church in the city. After a couple of meetings led by Reverend J. R. Effinger of Keokuk, on August 7, 1877, nine persons signed an agreement to form the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines. At the next meeting two weeks later, some ten others signed the agreement, and so the church began, holding its meetings in an upstairs meeting hall on Locust Street in downtown Des Moines.

First Full time Minister, First Building Erected

A church, of course, is basically the members of the congregation. It may or may not have a chosen leader or minister, and it may or may not have a church building. For a couple of years, Reverend Effinger divided his time between serving as a part-time pastor for the congregation and working for the Iowa Unitarian Association. During this time, he lived in Des Moines with his family and spent a considerable amount of time traveling in Iowa, evangelizing for Unitarianism. Finally, in August of 1880, the church hired its first full-time minister, the Rev. Sylvan Stanley Hunting, who had been serving as minister in Davenport, Iowa. During Rev. Stanley's six years of service to the Des Moines congregation, the first church building was erected at a cost of some \$9,000.

And so the Unitarians began to look like a "real church." However, it was the congregation that was the most significant part of the fabric of the church. For example, the Rev. Effinger's wife quickly aligned herself with the women's suffrage group in Des Moines, and within a few months was on the board of the group and became the editor of a weekly newspaper the suffragists were publishing.

Minister and Legislator, Benjamin Gue

However, perhaps the most dynamic and interesting member of the congregation was a gentleman with the improbable name of Gue (pronounced "goo"). Benjamin Gue was raised in New York State as a member of a Hicksite Quaker family that was ardently anti-slavery. Upon the death of his father, Gue and a younger brother came to Iowa and took land in Scott County. They cleared the land and built a log home to which Gue brought his mother and younger brothers and sisters. Dissatisfied with the positions of both the Whig and the Democratic parties, he along with other Quakers and abolitionists helped form the new Republican party in Iowa. In 1857, he was elected to the Legislature and served in both the House and Senate in subsequent years. During his first term of office, he initiated and succeeded in getting passed legislation establishing The State Agricultural College and Farm in Story county, which would eventually become Iowa State University.

In 1865, after having been elected lieutenant governor, he became president of the Board of Trustees of the just-about-to-open college. He persuaded a bare majority of the board to permit the admission of

women to the college, he himself casting the deciding vote. Thus the new student body (when enrollment occurred) was 20 percent female.

It was Benjamin Gue who had invited Rev. Effinger to Des Moines, which in turn led to the formation of the church. Mr. Gue remained an active member of the church, the Legislature, the suffragist movement, and the community until his death. Many years later, Gue was said to have been asked what were the three most important things he had done in his life, to which he replied "Marrying Elizabeth Parker, helping women to go the college at Ames, and helping to found the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines."

Early Emphasis on Rights of Women

The emphasis by the congregation members upon the right of women to full membership in society resulted in an early tradition of choosing women as ministers of the church. The third full-time minister was the Rev. Ida C. Hulting, who came from Algona in October 1886. Another early minister was Mary Augusta Safford who served between 1899 and 1910, when she resigned because of poor health. The Rev. Safford was very active not only in church affairs, but also in the wider community. Her leadership was particularly noted in the suffrage movement, and in helping a women's group Unity Circle to become an important cultural group in the city. Unity Circle presented plays, organized lectures and musical events, and raised funds for needed community improvements. The public was invited to attend these events and did so.

Individual members of Unity Circle were also active in the affairs of the city and the state. For example, the Reverend Eleanor Gordon, who was for a time the assistant minister under Mary Safford and who, like Safford, was active in the suffrage movement, was attending a parlor meeting of Unity Circle one warm summer day when she decided that something dramatic needed to be done to stimulate public interest in the suffrage movement. She proposed that a march be held, and under her leadership, such a demonstration was held in Boone, Iowa. Some of the women in Unity Circle attended but others did not. However, at the head of the demonstration proudly marched not-quite-5-foot-tall Unity Circle member Mrs. Mary Jane Coggeshall, carrying the American flag. And be it noted that this street demonstration in Boone was the first such demonstration in the United States!

Indeed, the congregation members in the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines were strong workers for what they envisioned as the needs of a better world.

Building a Better World

During the late 1890s, the congregation became increasingly less concerned with theology and "other-worldliness" and more concerned with how they, as humans and Unitarians, could interact with society and help bring about change for the better. As the congregation changed, so did the viewpoints of the ministers whom the congregation chose. Growing out of this shift in emphasis, in 1915, the Reverend Curtis W. Reese became the pastor of the church. Reese had started his ministry in the Southern Baptist denomination, but soon he found that he could no longer believe in many of the creedal aspects of the Baptists and so he became a Unitarian minister. With this, he began to increasingly emphasize the role

of people as instruments of change and to downplay the importance of divine intervention in the grand scheme of things. Out of this soon grew what became known as the American Humanist Movement. When Reese left the Des Moines church in 1919, he became involved in the formal creation of this organization and served as its first president. However, he remained a Unitarian minister and taught on the faculty of the Unitarian seminary that he had helped move to become a part of the theological faculty at the University of Chicago. Thus, in a very direct way, the Des Moines church helped launch religious humanism in the United States.

Active in Support of ICLU

Another social activist and humanist minister served the congregation for one year, 1934-1935. He was Aaron S. Gilmartin, and he not only actively worked to support organized labor in the area but also joined with a mild-mannered Quaker mathematics professor at Iowa State University to help form the Iowa Civil Liberties Union and served as its first president. Since that time, several church members have served in a variety of positions in the ICLU and still do so.

In 1961, the Rev. John B. Isom who followed much the same religious path as Reese had trod became pastor and remained as such until his retirement in 1974. While here, Isom became involved in trying to get a program of community help started to aid poor families in acquiring ownership of a home. A man who had grown up in the sand hills of Alabama when the Civil Rights movement began calling forth violence from the white community of Selma, Isom went to Selma to try bring peace to those troubled waters. But mostly, as a religious humanist, the Rev. Isom sought to help members of his congregation to become aware of the great potentials which existed in each human to call forth the "highest and best" from each person.

Post WWI Relief Work

Since 1900, laypersons of the Des Moines church have been active in trying to bring about a better world. During the period following World War I, and again following World War II, the ladies of Unity Circle sought to make the lives of the victims of war easier. They collected clothing and non-perishable food and sent it tons of it to relief agencies in Europe. Unity Circle was notified that Fort Des Moines had thousands of overcoats left over from WWI, and Unity Circle could have them. However, there was a small problem: all the brass buttons with U.S. Army insignia had to be removed. Unity Circle accepted the overcoats and the challenge of replacing the banned buttons. The ladies notified the newspaper of the problem and of the need for buttons for the overcoats. The newspaper spread the word, and soon the mail began to bring packages of buttons some from as far away as Alabama. Women from all around Central Iowa showed up to remove and replace buttons, and the job got done. From the Des Moines Unity Circle, almost 8,000 overcoats were sent to the Unitarian Service Committee for distribution in Europe.

Member Edna Griffin Takes Action for Civil Rights

In 1948, Martin Luther King Jr. was ordained a minister. This was seven years before Rosa Parks refused to move her tired feet to the back of the bus in Birmingham. In this same year, Edna Griffin, a black member of this congregation, ordered a sandwich and a soda at a Des Moines lunch counter where she knew she wouldn't be served because of the color of her skin. Soon after, Griffin filed suit against the

lunch counter for violating Iowa's Civil Rights law, and the case was heard all the way to the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, Griffin and her friends (many from this church) picketed the lunch counter every Saturday for six weeks. The lunch counter was found guilty, and in 1949, Edna and her supporters walked into the lunch counter and were served. Because of this slight but not at all mild woman, Iowa's public accommodations were integrated.

From that date until age sidelined her, she continued to fight for justice and the protection of the rights of all kinds of persons, supporting the Tiny Tot nursery, raising funds for bail money for young people (including First Unitarian's Brian Peterson) who went to Alabama and Georgia to assist in education and voter registration. You name a good cause in Iowa and the nation, and you would have named a cause that found an active supporter in Griffin. Iowa has been blessed by this woman of this church who made a difference.

Viet Nam War Protest

During the Vietnam war, there grew up a loud voice of protest. In Des Moines, a group of middle and high school students offered a protest by wearing black armbands to school in memory of all the individuals who had died in the war. Some daughters and sons of members of this congregation participated in this. Chris Eckhart, whose mother Maggie Eckhart was a member of the church, and some Quaker children brought suit against the school system for depriving them of their rights of free speech, and this case was carried (thanks in large part to the Iowa Civil Liberties Union) to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled for the youngsters with the dicta that "the right to free speech does not stop at the schoolhouse door."

Protecting Our Environment

Currently, 46 Iowa organizations concerned with problems of the environment have been joined into an organization known as the Iowa Environmental Council, so that the pro-environmental forces can gain a united voice when appearing before the Legislature and the various branches of the media. This council was formed largely through the efforts of church member Linda Applegate. Another church member, Susan Heathcote, is a primary researcher for the council concerning the problems of preserving and supplying safe water to the citizens of Iowa.

And so the story will go on into the history yet to be made.

Another Historical Sketch

By Knox Craig,

Past Church Historian

In the fall of 1994, the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Des Moines installed its 24th minister, a woman. Not unusual. Women have played a strong role in the history of this church. Its third minister was a woman, as was the sixth. Both served Unitarian congregations years before women could vote in this country.

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines Organized

In the first week of June 1877, the Reverend J. R. Effinger of Keokuk, Iowa, came to Des Moines, a city then of some 16,000 residents, "to confer with the liberal element for the purpose of effecting regular services." He met with about 30 persons in a hall in downtown Des Moines. On August 7, the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines was formally organized. Nine individuals are listed as charter members.

Sylvan Stanley Hunting became the first full-time regular minister for the Des Moines Society. His years of service (1880-86) were not easy ones. During his first cold Iowa winter, he tried to hold services in an unheated hall and "people nearly froze to death and would not come out." His net income for preaching in 1882-83 was \$33. Despite the hardships, the society built its first meeting house during his tenure. The wooden building, dedicated December 3, 1882, cost about \$9,000.

The society's third minister was Ida C. Hulting, who came from Algona, Iowa, in October 1886 and resigned in 1891 because of ill health. Another minister was Mary Augusta Safford, elected in 1899. She served until 1910. Three other women ministers spelled the Reverend Safford at times during her tenure. A new church was built on High Street on the edge of downtown Des Moines during the Reverend Safford's ministry. It was dedicated April 5, 1905, and was to serve as the spiritual home for Des Moines Unitarians for 51 years.

The new church's pipe organ was a gift of the Reverend Safford, who also at the time paid off the church's entire indebtedness of about \$5,680. A bronze plaque memorializes Mary Safford in the room that bears her name in the present meeting house. Following her death in 1927, an editorial in the Des Moines Tribune noted that "it can be said of Miss Safford that everybody who knew her is better for her example and her affirmative leadership."

Hymn of Valor

The Des Moines society is indebted to an English Unitarian minister for its "Hymn of Valor," sung often at the conclusion of Sunday services in Des Moines and by a number of other churches and fellowships. Henry J. Adlard came to Des Moines in 1924 and remained until 1928, when he returned to England and served a Unitarian church in Bath. He wrote both words and music for the "Hymn of Valor."

The active involvement of the church in concerns of the community was particularly evident during the trying times of both world wars. In World War I, thousands of soldiers were stationed at Camp Dodge near Des Moines. The church opened its building for the entertainment of servicemen, and church volunteers staffed the facility. Curtis W. Reese was minister at the time. In 1917, he delivered a sermon, "A Democratic View of Religion," that became instrumental in the formative stages of the Humanist movement in the United States. When the American Humanist organization was formed in 1941, he became its first president. The Des Moines church also was active in providing relief for the suffering people of Europe following World War II. Under the tireless leadership of then-minister Grant A. Butler and his wife, Calla, the Des Moines church stood second only to All Saints Church of Washington, D.C., of all Unitarian societies in the United States for contributions to the Unitarian Service Committee's effort for help to Europe.

Present Meeting House

The third and present meeting house for the First Unitarian Church was dedicated in October 1957. It is located on a 4-acre site given to the society by Amos Emery, a Des Moines architect, as a memorial to his parents, long identified with the church.

John Isom holds the longest tenure of any minister serving this church. He was installed in 1961 and retired in 1974. It was during his service, in the early 1960s, that Unitarian and Universalist churches merged nationwide. The Reverend Isom was given the title of Minister Emeritus in 1975. He and his wife, Elien, both remained active in the Des Moines church until 1999, when they moved to Arizona to be closer to family. In 1991, John Isom was included in the first annual Unitarian Universalist Church of Spartanburg, S.C., Liberal Hall of Fame. He started that church more than 40 years ago.

The Reverend Thea Nietfeld was installed in the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Des Moines in the fall of 1994. She succeeded the Reverend Oren "Pete" Peterson, who resigned in June 1993. Reverend Peterson came to the ministry after a 21-year career as a Navy officer, most of it flying carrier-based fighter planes.

Ministers of First Unitarian Church

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|---|--|
| 1. John R. Effinger -- 1877 to 1880 (part organizing minister) | 13. Donald Lothrop -- 1928-1929 |
| 2. Sylvan Stanley Hunting -- 1880 to 1886 | 14. Charles J. Dutton -- 1929-1933 |
| 3. Ida C. Hulting -- 1886 to 1891 | 15. Aaron S. Gilmartin -- 1934 to 1934 |
| 4. Leon A. Harvey -- 1891-1898 | 16. E. Burdette Backus -- 1935-1937 |
| 5. Oscar Clute -- 1898 | 17. Karl A. Bach -- 1938-1944 |
| 6. Mary Augusta Safford -- 1899 to 1910 | 18. Grant A. Butler -- 1941-1948 |
| 7. Eleanor Gordon -- Assistant to Miss Safford and Marie H. Jenney -- Assistant to Miss Safford | 19. Charles W. Phillips -- 1949-1956 |
| 8. Gertrude von Petzold -- 1908-1910 | 20. Harold Dodge Buck -- 1957-1960 |
| 9. Everett Dean Martin -- 1911-1915 | 21. John B. Isom -- 1961 to 1974 |
| 10. Curtis W. Reese -- 1915 to 1919 | 22. Kenneth G. Hurto -- 1975 to 1985 |
| 11. Edmund H. Reeman -- 1920-1924 | 23. Oren "Pete" Peterson -- 1986 to 1992 |
| 12. Henry J. Adlard -- 1924 to 1928 | 24. Thea Neitfeld -- 1994 to 1999 |
| | 25. Annie Holmes -- 1999 to 2001 |
| | 26. Mark Stringer -- 2001 to Present |

Members Noted in History

Benjamin Gue,
Des Moines Church Organizer, Abolitionist, First President of State Agricultural College of Iowa

Reverend Eleanor Gordon,
Women's Suffrage Leader

Edna Griffin,
Civil Rights Activist

Chris Eckhart, Free Speech in Schools Defendent

Linda Applegate

Environmental Issues Activist