

A Church without Walls

Prepared by David Jordan, May 2014

Historically, Unitarian and Universalist ministries have attempted to offer fellowship, guided worship and information about the denominations to rural members and members who were otherwise unable to attend congregational services. Beginning in the days of the Pony Express when circuit riders brought tracts from the Unitarian “Post Office Mission” to ranches and farms in the west, these attempts have evolved into what is now the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF). The history which follows is largely excerpted from the website of the CLF.

In the 1800’s, Unitarians in Boston organized the American Unitarian Association, which dispatched itinerant ministers and missionary expeditions to fledgling Mid-West cities and distant prairies. Universalists devised similar outreach efforts. Liberal views in the form of letters and published tracts and pamphlets were carried on foot and horseback, house to house, and to Civil War soldiers in their camps. A Unitarian Women’s Alliance opened an office in Chicago and formed a relay system of letter correspondence called the “Post Office Mission.”

The founding of the Unitarian CLF took place in 1944, at the Annual Meeting of the Association. The CLF’s purpose was stated as two-fold: “To provide a spiritual home for isolated Unitarians and their families, and to transfer the allegiance of its members to local Unitarian churches whenever and wherever possible.” The Universalists founded their own Church of the Larger Fellowship in 1947 under the auspices of the Universalist Church of America. When the two denominations merged in 1961, the two CLF’s conjoined, and the Church of the Larger Fellowship Unitarian Universalist was born.

The post-merger time was one of increasing innovation and diversification. In response to requests for home educational materials for adults, a popular “Independent Study Program” was created. Another innovation was the “Directed Discussion Course” in which participants corresponded with a CLF director and each other. This new concept in interactive religious learning attracted the attention of the incarcerated, and in 1965, a prisoner at San Quentin became the first prisoner to join the church. The CLF now includes more than 450 incarcerated members.

The next few decades saw significant changes: Membership was broadened to include individuals affiliated with a local church or fellowship who by choice or circumstance also wanted a ‘church by mail.’ A new category of membership was extended to include small congregations and fellowships, signifying a move to programs and services especially designed to meet those needs. The dual purposes were recast as a two-fold mission to provide a spiritual home and connection for isolated religious liberals as well as programs and services designed to promote the growth of Unitarian Universalism. A popular ‘minister’s 800 line,’ was introduced, further increasing the accessibility of connection with a minister.

In 1999, the CLF stepped up to the new millennium with a creative and contemporary approach and “Church by mail” became church “on-line”; the ‘post office mission’ became a mission by website.

Quest (CLF's monthly worship publication), became available on-line and by podcast as well as by postal mailing.

In Niagara, we are privileged to have a Unitarian congregation with a welcoming and accessible physical presence at 223 Church St. in St. Catharines. We invite interested people to explore Unitarianism by attending our Sunday 11:00 am services. But for those who cannot attend or who wish to explore beyond our local congregation, the CLF is available at <http://www.clfuu.org>. As well, more information about the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara is available at <http://www.unitarian-stcatharines.org>