

HISTORY OF THE UNITARIAN CONGREGATION OF NIAGARA

The Fellowship was founded in January 1954 by Rev. George Marshall who was the minister of the Unitarian Church in Niagara Falls, NY at that time. Several families from St. Catharines had been attending that church, the Laughtons and the Sankeys in particular, because their children were being asked at school what Sunday School they attended and they didn't have an answer. Mr. Marshall encouraged the Canadians to set up a fellowship in St. Catharines which was sufficiently distant from Niagara Falls to attract a different crowd. A preliminary meeting was held at the YMCA in Niagara Falls, Ontario in December 1953 at which it was agreed that a new Fellowship would have a greater chance of success in St. Catharines. The founding meeting was held on January 17th, 1954, establishing the "Niagara-St. Catharines Unitarian Fellowship". The officers elected were:

President - Taylor Barnes, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Vice-President - Josephine Morgan, St. Catharines

Secretary - June MacMonagle, Niagara Falls

Treasurer - Charles Sankey, St. Catharines

R.E. Director - Dorothy Laughton, St. Catharines

Our first location was at 127 Church St., a former private home, owned by "The Church of the Divine Revelation", a spiritualist organization whose principal supporters were Mr. Fred Hetherington, K.C. and his wife Lois. There were quarters for the medium upstairs, with a meeting room, sitting room and a kitchen on the ground floor. Mr. & Mrs. Hetherington joined our Fellowship and rented the ground floor for our meetings for a nominal amount. They remained staunch and committed spiritualists and were accepted as such. A few years later, Mr. Hetherington retired from his practice and moved to the USA. The spiritualist congregation had become depleted and title to the property was, through Mr. Hetherington's auspices, sold to our Fellowship for the mortgage, then amounting to \$5000. This was substantially a gift, but the circumstances

were complex and fortuitous. The Hetheringtons and one other person were the sole remaining active members of the Church of the Divine Revelation , with the Hetheringtons (who were well off) providing nearly all the finances, including bringing a medium from California for a couple of months a year. They got income tax receipts, of course. They knew they were planning to leave St. Catharines and recognized that if the C.D.R. shut down with a cash balance from the sale of the property there would be problems, and perhaps unpleasant problems, with distribution among inactive “members”. The mortgage was maturing. So our Fellowship established Trustees to take title. We borrowed \$5000 from the TD Bank on a demand note, endorsed by ten members of the Fellowship, and Mr. Hetherington used this to discharge the mortgage. We agreed to make annual payments on the loan sufficient to discharge it by 1965. The Fellowship financial statements later refer to our “mortgage”, but there never was a mortgage. We obtained far more favourable terms via the demand note. Two of those signing the note, Joe Reiss and Trevor Morgan were each valued clients of the bank, and the security provided by the ten signatures was top level. It was a condition of the sale that the medium could take up residence upstairs in his séance room for up to a month each year provided he did not miss a year. The Fellowship would not use the séance room, their responsibility being limited to providing access and accommodation. In fact, the medium came once for perhaps three weeks. He wrote wanting to come back some 3 or 4 years later, but we said no as our obligation had been fully met.

It was at the time of the property acquisition that we became “The Church of the Unitarian Fellowship” The name was carefully chosen, having regard to the purposes and make-up of our group. A major attraction was our church school. Quite a few essentially liberal Christian families did not send their children to Sunday School and the children had problems at school when they were asked by their teacher what Sunday School they attended. We almost had to be a “church” to meet this issue. Many of the founding members were primarily looking for a spiritual centre of a liberal but definitely “religious” nature. Others had become disenchanted with their churches, their attitudes ranging from agnosticism to outright rejection, throwing out the bathtub as well as the baby with the bath

water. Others were “humanist” in the atheistic sense, and we had Theosophists and Spiritualists as well. Politically we ranged from a later Conservative member of Parliament to the radical fringe of socialism. It was quite a group and covered broad range.

Our meetings were often on Sunday evenings to accommodate a service taken by the minister of the Hamilton church (Dr. Brockway especially) or by Rev. Marshall from Niagara Falls, NY. Several of our own members were capable of taking an excellent service. There was good singing, as Taylor Barnes had a magnificent voice and we had musical talent to burn from the Laughton and Sankey families. Dr. Sankey was able to get an old grand piano and we had it fixed up. For several years we shared an outdoor spring service with the Niagara Falls Unitarian Church. We expanded primarily because of our Church School and by attracting excellent people from some European newcomers. The Dutch connection included Nap and Eva Kremer, Margaret and Walter Jutting and Jenny Leach. There was, however, far too much turnover. We outgrew the capacity of 127 Church St. and for a time had our meetings at the YMCA on Queen St., with the children continuing at 127 Church St.. At this time, in 1966 and 1967, there were over 50 people in the church. This was, of course, highly inconvenient and basically unsatisfactory. A solution was found when we were able to acquire our present premises at 223-225 Church St.

The long range viability of the Fellowship would have been in serious doubt if Brock University had not been started. It established a new population group in its staff, providing members and speakers. It also reinforced the need for a “spiritual” ground base for the group. Anyone who wanted to hear “lectures” could get better ones at Brock. Without Brock we would have remained below a critical mass, and that still remains a danger. We had a maximum of 25+ in our Church School, but this had almost disappeared and currently has. Of the 20-odd charter members, by the early sixties, three remained active, two others had withdrawn and the rest had died, moved away, or disappeared.

Our acquisition of the buildings and land of the French Roman Catholic Church, L’eglise Immaculee Conception was the next major development of our

Fellowship in 1967. Again, there were complex and fortuitous circumstances. The E.I.C. had built the basement of their planned building and roofed it, pending adding the church proper later. On the property were the parsonage, and a line of rather makeshift buildings attached to it behind, with a separate garage behind the church. Their facilities had become overcrowded and they found that they could buy a Mennonite church on Garnet Street (that had also been outgrown by its membership) for less than it would cost them to complete their own structure. Besides it was discovered that the land was built up from fill from the enormous parking lot behind, making it unstable to put a second story on the existing building. The end result was that the Mennonite congregation built a new church for themselves on Scott St., the E.I.C. parish moved to the former Mennonite church, and we bought the E.I.C. property in 1967 and sold 127 Church to the Public Utilities Commission which was next door. Because E.I.C. would not sell directly to us, the title was first transferred to Trevor Morgan and from him to us. Subsequently, they requested their cornerstone which we gave them and replaced with our own dated 1967. They also de-sanctified the building. Again, the financing was accomplished with a demand note to the TD Bank under much better terms than a mortgage and that note was soon discharged. Some members were not too happy with the acquisition, as the property was in a marginal district and the building left quite a lot to be desired. For example, the parsonage had no insulation in the walls, there was steam heating and we were spending a fortune heating the whole outdoors. The garage behind the church was demolished in the late 1970's and the parking lot enlarged. One of the attached buildings was a fair sized meeting room with a separate oil stove for heating. The Sunday School met in several rooms of the house. Gracia Janes taught the Church School for something like 14 years. The etched glass doors at the back of the present sanctuary I rescued from the house when it was to be demolished. They had been pocket doors separating two classrooms. Improvements to the building have been an ongoing process, ably assisted by such capable Property Chairs as Margaret Jutting and Peter Skelton. At one time Jim Glassford was Property Chair while he was still Principal at Alexandra School. He got a panicked phone call from the then tenant, the Social Planning Council of

St. Catharines that there was a MOUSE in the house and he should come over immediately and do something about it!

Most of our members have been, and are, active in some phase of Social Action of specific appeal to them. At one point 12 of our members were involved in Meals on Wheels. Project Ploughshares and Amnesty International had supporters. As a group we were able to give good support to the Unitarian Service Committee. Mary Delhaas and Winifred Sankey spent time mending and sorting clothing to send to USC. Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova visited us on several occasions, notably giving the "Chancellor's Lecture" at Brock, a result of her friendship with Dr. Charles Sankey (Chancellor at Brock) and Dr. James Gibson, President of Brock, both members of the Fellowship. Specific community projects by the Fellowship have been very limited, partly because of our numbers, partly because of our homes being spread among several municipalities, partly because of our very wide diversity in interests and outlook and partly because one of our major efforts backfired. A "Digger's House" was set up in 1968 in the church house to house half-way and "in difficulty" youths. It produced extensive property damage, dirt and beer cans and unpleasantness; in other words, it was not properly supervised and we had accepted assurances without adequate verification or control. Inevitably there were some bad feelings within the Fellowship as a result. Odyssey House Community School rented the church house from 1970-77, and was a school for bright children who didn't do well under the regular school system. We now are involved in supporting Community Cares and the Queenston Round Table, as well as seniors' hampers at Christmas. Financially we donate a percentage of our budget to 10 community organizations in the Niagara area. The issue of censorship of supplementary reading in high schools (specifically the banning of Margaret Laurence's "The Diviners" from the Grade 13 reading list) prompted a strong presentation by Gracia Janes to the Board of Education. From September 1983 to September 1985, the upper floor of the Church House was rented to a Buddhist Lama, The Venerable Lama Gangha Rinpoche, from Tibet. He conducted a Buddhist Meditation Centre and had a number of followers. His arrival had been arranged by Dr. John Mayer. The Fellowship charged only a nominal rent to cover the cost of heating and utilities.

Since September 1985, part of the Church House has been rented to the Social Planning Council of St. Catharines and Thorold. The PALS group (Preserve Our Agricultural Land) also rents space in the building and continues to rent space in the current RE room, paying \$150 rent even when they haven't actually had in person meetings. For many years the Shelley Lewis Dance School rented the hall for lessons. Burt Peters has conducted his Yoga classes there for 20 some years. The Old Time Fiddlers also rented our space on occasion.

During the winter of 1973, we were exceptionally fortunate to have Rev. Phillip Hewett available under the "Minister-on-Loan" programme. As one of the most renowned Unitarian ministers in Canada, his leadership gave renewed life to our Fellowship. Following his stay, the CUC set up a chaplaincy programme with first, Dr. John Mayer, then Dr. James Gibson being provincially licensed for legal purposes to perform marriages, as well as the normal rites of passage of any religious organization. Subsequent chaplains have included Doreen Peever, Valerie Jaeger, Julianne Momirov, Desmond Sequeira, Ed Gilbert, Karen Stovell and Beryl Stovell.

In 1978 we hosted the CUC Annual General Meeting. Bob Bell was the President at the time. This was huge undertaking for a congregation of our size. The largest meetings were held at Brock University.

From 1987 to 1990 we shared a part-time Extension minister, Rev. Martha Munson, with the Hamilton congregation on a 1/3, 2/3 basis. Martha came from serving the Olinda Church, one of three original Universalist churches in Canada, the others being North Hatley in Quebec and Halifax. She was particularly outstanding in pastoral care, always bringing a loaf of her homemade sourdough bread as a gift. The arrangement was for a three year term with the possibility of extending it to five years, funded jointly by the UUA and each congregation. She terminated her time with us after three years for personal reasons but continued with Hamilton for awhile. The Hamilton Church was paying Martha from their Jarvis Fund, an Endowment Fund they had built up. Around this time Kit Constabaris wanted to donate money to UCN in memory of her mother. She suggested hymnbooks but we had just bought 75 of the green hymnbooks. I

suggested a clock, but she said the last one had been stolen. Finally I suggested starting an Endowment Fund and that is what happened. It has grown considerably from donations in memory of members who have died. Money from that paid for the wheelchair ramp in particular.

In 1992 we first published the “Sampler” a list of programmes and speakers for six months at a time. It also listed what we offered for children and the services of Lay Chaplains.

1996 saw the establishment of year-round services for the first time. The summer services were informal and led by a member of UCN of any topic of their choosing. Several other churches were impressed with our forward planning and adopted the model.

1997 saw the resignation of 12 of our members, mostly parents of children, led by Angela Klassen, then the president of UCN, with the support of the St. Lawrence District. Those of us who remained felt betrayed by this action. They rented a small church, I think in Vineland. The group didn't last long and many of them returned to UCN.

In 2000 Phase I of the renovations started with the demolishing of the church house at 225 Church St. and its replacement with a garden. The architect was Harald Ensslen. The wheelchair ramp was installed, the kitchen and washrooms moved to the ground floor. An office, RE room and a storage room were created behind the sanctuary area. Phase II finished in 2003 with a fully accessible washroom. New double glass doors to replace the solid wooden doors at the front and the double etched glass panel doors were installed at the top of the stairs, replacing solid wooden doors. This created a well-lit foyer.

In 2003 the name of the congregation was officially changed from the Unitarian Fellowship of St. Catharines to the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara. This reflects the broader area from which we draw members. It also replaces the word “church” with “congregation” acknowledging the baggage that the word “church” has for many people.

In 2004 we celebrated the 50th Anniversary of our founding. A big dinner held on New Year's Eve at a hotel, was attended by 96 people. The guest speaker was Lister Sinclair, a renowned CBC broadcaster and cultural sage.

For many years we have been represented at cluster and district meetings, as well as the CUC Annual General Meeting. It has been a matter of some satisfaction that we have always paid our "fair share" of the CUC's Annual Programme Fund. Dr. Gibson made a promise that he would augment our contribution if the church was short of funds. We never had to ask him to honour that promise.

Since 2003, when the law in Ontario allowed same-sex marriage, our Lay Chaplains have been in the forefront of officiating at such services. We were the closest Unitarian Church to the Canada-USA border in Niagara. Unitarians were widely known to be supportive of the LGBTQ+ community and interested couples found us on the internet. The Niagara Falls City Hall referred couples to us as well and were very welcoming to same-sex couples who applied for a license. This treatment was in stark contrast to the discrimination many of them had experienced at home. Their Canadian marriage certificates were ultimately recognized when President Obama legalized these marriages in the USA.

At the Annual Meeting in 2021 a motion was made to revisit the wording of our covenant which had been formulated in the 1980's. The original covenant was as follows: "We covenant to support an empowering church that affirms the individual and celebrates history, science and mystery in a welcoming, joyous and evolving fellowship." A committee worked for several weeks to reach consensus on a new covenant which was approved by the congregation in 2022. The new covenant reads as follows: "We come in peace to this place of fellowship and love, searching for truth and meaning, seeking justice and equity through action, supporting each other and serving our community, acknowledging and preserving the gifts of this world. This is our covenant with each other and with all."

For over 65 years the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara has been a focus of conscience and opinion in the Niagara Region. Its collective hope is to be able to continue a sensitive and discriminating outreach in the community. In a phrase used in other contexts, we stand on the shoulders of giants who built and

sustained this congregation. It is now the responsibility of each of us to continue their tradition. Through the following pictures, I will introduce you to these giants.

Revised , edited and updated by Doreen M. Peever

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