

FEATURES

October 15, 2005 12:00AM

Happy anniversary

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship celebrates 25 years

Denise DeMaio

Time-News Staff Writer

denise.demaio@hendersonvillenews.com

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville recently celebrated its 25th anniversary by looking back at its roots and looking ahead to another 25 years of growth.

The Rev. James M. McKinley describes the Unitarian Universalist Association as the "uncommon denomination. It is a way to be religious and spiritual in a community setting" without being bound by doctrines that restrict members' freedom of expression.

"We have worked to become a 'welcoming congregation'," McKinley said. "We want to be a strong presence for inclusiveness in Henderson County and Western North Carolina. There are other ways to be religious that are real and we are unapologetically enthusiastic about them."

The Unitarian Universalist Association, of which UUFH is a member, had its beginnings in liberal Christian tradition. The Unitarians, established in Europe in the 16th century, viewed Jesus as an example of the greatness of human possibility, according to McKinley. Universalism, which developed in America in the 18th century, believed in the oneness of the human family. Neither group believed that a loving God would condemn people to hell.

"It's a very different approach," McKinley said, "but it comes from very



The Rev. James M. McKinley celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville with members of the congregation. (Robin Nobling/Special to the Times-News)

Zoom

early Christian teachings."

As early as the 1830s, both groups were studying and promulgating texts from world religions other than Christianity, according to the Unitarian Universalist Association Web site, www.uua.org. By the beginning of the 20th century, humanists within both traditions advocated that people could be religious without believing in God.

The Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, forming the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The beginnings of UUFH have been described by Fred Harris in a posting on the fellowship's Web site. In the spring of 1977, Wendell Capes, then a member of the Asheville Unitarian Universalist Church told a church meeting that at some point it would make sense to have a UU fellowship in Hendersonville, since about a quarter of the members of the Asheville church lived in Henderson County. Three years later, two preliminary meetings were held in the community room of First Federal (now First Citizens). The bank asked the group to leave upon learning that Unitarians were a religious denomination and bank policy frowned on allowing church groups to meet in bank property.

A founding meeting was finally held at Rosa Edwards School on Sept. 7, 1980, with 14 adults signing on as members that first Sunday. Two joined the following Sunday and one the third Sunday for a total of 17 charter members. After four Sundays at Rosa Edwards, the city school authorities asked the group to leave and they began meeting at the Girl Scout Cabin, a cinderblock structure on North Main Street. According to the church history, "Daylight was visible through the cracks in the wall and the curtains rustled in the wind, even when the windows were closed. The cabin's antique heating system was inadequate and we sat huddled in our overcoats with the speaker's words not only audible but visible in the frigid air."

In 1982, UUFH moved to Opportunity House where it met until the summer of 1994 when it purchased its current building at the corner of Kanuga and Price roads, a structure formerly occupied by Faith Bible Church.

The congregation called the Rev. Charles W. Grady as its first minister in

September, 1990, the church's 10th anniversary. He retired at the end of June 1996 and the search began for a full-time minister. The congregation voted to call McKinley on May 4, 1997, and he began to serve as minister in August of that year.

From that nucleus of 17 charter members, the congregation has now grown to 240 adults and 60 children. In the winter of 2004, UUFH was selected as one of the top 10 growth congregations in the Thomas Jefferson District of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

"When you reach 80 percent capacity 80 percent of the time, it's time to do something," the Rev. James M. McKinley, minister of the congregation, said during an interview in the church's office on Patterson Street. "We're looking at going to two services next year."

The two services is a temporary solution.

"We want to grow and be available to the community," McKinley said. "That means we will have to buy land and build a new building. We are in the process of refining what our vision is. We went through a wonderful process of exploring what we want to do."

Worship services begin at 10:45 a.m. Sundays. Religious education is also available at that same hour. Coffee and conversation follow the service.

For more information about UUFH, call the church office, 693-3157.

DeMaio can be reached at denise.demaio@hendersonvillenews.com or 694-7864.