

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville

The Story of Our Fellowship

Edited and expanded by Fred Harris, based on a talk by Frances Underhill at our Tenth Anniversary Celebration, September 1990

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.

It was an idea whose time had not come. The Asheville church was in the middle of the second phase of its building program, the budget was tight, and the other members of the board were alarmed at the prospect of losing a quarter of its members.

Three years later, in the spring of 1980, Wendell and other Young Turks, feeling that the church was becoming too much a club for nice people, too much concerned with bricks and mortar, and too little concerned with community and social needs, ran an alternative candidate for president of the church. We spare you the gory details. Wendell says modestly that they wrote the book on how not to organize a change. "We went about it," he says, "in the worst possible way."

Two good things, however, came out of the unpleasantness: The Asheville church became much more community minded, and the Hendersonville Fellowship was founded.

Two preliminary meetings were held in the community room of First Federal (now First Citizens). The bank then asked us to leave; it had been unaware that Unitarians were a religious denomination, and had a strict policy of separation of church and bank.

The founding meeting was therefore held at the Rosa Edwards School on Sept. 7, 1980. Fourteen signed that Sunday, two the following Sunday, and one the third Sunday, for a total of seventeen considered charter members. [See appendix below.] Growth was slow. Four signed during the remainder of 1980; two in 1981; four in 1982; seven in 1983; nine in 1984. At the same time, we lost members. Some died, some moved away, others dropped out for a variety of reasons.

During the first two years, attendance at services ranged from ten to twenty-six, with the average between sixteen and seventeen.

After four Sundays at Rosa Edwards, the city school authorities asked us to leave, and we moved to the Girl Scout Cabin, a cinderblock structure on North Main Street. Daylight was visible through the cracks in the wall, and the curtains rustled in the wind, even when the windows were closed. The winter of 1981-82 was our Valley Forge.

Every Saturday night, a stern Providence sent the temperature tumbling. 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.

The chill also persisted in our relationship with the Asheville church and its then minister, Bill Hammond. All this changed when Jim Brewer was called to Asheville as minister in 1985, and the warmth continued in our relationship with the next Asheville minister, Maureen Killoran, now a member of our Fellowship, and with the current Asheville minister Mark Ward. (Bill Hammond's feelings about us also changed and he subsequently preached frequently from our pulpit.)

In 1982, we moved to Opportunity House, then on Conner Street, north of Pardee Hospital. Here was luxury: carpet on the floor, warm in winter, cool in summer. When Op House moved to its present quarters, we moved with it, and as our numbers grew, we moved from its smallest room to ever-larger

rooms, and eventually to its largest meeting room.

Until we rented a separate office on White Street in 1988, to provide limited meeting space, and a place to keep our records, the space inside the lectern contained everything we owned. We were the religious equivalent of a tribe of Bedouins who drifted in each Sunday from the surrounding spiritual desert, pitched our tents in the Op House oasis, held our service, then folded our tents and stole away, leaving nothing behind but soiled Styrofoam coffee cups as evidence of our presence.

In our early days, we were dependent on our own membership for our Sunday services, supplemented by such outside speakers as we could lure to our lectern. In Sept. of 1983, Pete Tolleson began to come regularly to our pulpit, first once a month, then twice a month until 1986, when his duties at Warren Wilson forced him to stop.

In September of 1990, we celebrated our tenth anniversary, by calling our first minister, the Rev. Charles Wesley Grady, who retired from one of the oldest New England churches, moved here and took over our pulpit on a part-time basis.

Over the years, efforts to start a School of Religion floundered on demographics—our membership includes disproportionate numbers of retirees. Finally in 1991 an RE program was launched with an initial enrollment of five children. In the fall of 1996, we appointed our first Director of Religious Education, on a part-time basis; the position is currently held by Vicki Benevides. Enrollment has grown to over sixty children.

In the summer of 1994 we crossed a literal as well as a metaphoric new threshold with the purchase of our current building, formerly occupied by Faith Bible Church. The facility (including the log cabin and the caretaker cottage) made it possible for us to expand our activities, and our interaction with the community at large.

Charles Grady retired at the end of June 1996, and the search began for a full-time minister. On May 4, 1997 the congregation voted to call the Rev. James W. McKinley as our minister beginning in August of that year.

In June 1997, at the annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, our Fellowship was awarded the coveted Continental O. Pickett Award for excellence in various categories measuring performance.

In July of 1998 the congregation voted to purchase the house at 409 Patterson Street for use as offices. This allowed us to increase the number of classrooms, increase the space for social events in Fellowship Hall, and gain needed additional parking space.

In January of 2001 Katherine Price, talented pianist and flutist, was appointed Music Director. Under her innovative leadership, the choir has grown to about 18, plans for a youth choir are in hand, and ever more ambitious musical programs unfold to delight us.

In the spring of 2004 a Strategic Planning Team was appointed to address problems of growth and develop options for the future. Some preliminary studies were presented to the congregation, followed by a congregational survey distributed early in 2005. The survey results were published in March, and a Special Congregational Meeting is scheduled for May 1 to consider appropriate actions.

In the winter of 2004, we were selected as one of the top ten growth congregations in the Thomas Jefferson District of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Today our membership is about 228, but some things haven't changed all that much. We are still highly dependent on our membership for getting things done.

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Appendix

Founding Members

in the order in which they signed the membership book:

John D.F. Woodie
Nelson L. Corwin
Deanna Capes *
Wendell Capes *
Raymond M. Bodie
Evelyn H. Roberts
Donna Bodie
Harriet Corwin
Lynn Isenberg
Portia McManus
Dorothy S. Corthell
Anni Wilinski
Kurt Wilinski
Walter C. Isenberg
Norman Newell
Frances Russo
Harold Eadie

** indicates currently active member*

Past Presidents

John Woodie	Chair, 1980
Raymond Bodie	1980-1981
Savie Underhill	1981-1982
Wendell Capes	1982-1983
Steve Thomas	1983-1984
Francis Underhill	1984-1985
Stuart Franklin	1985-1986
Hank Segal	1986-1987
Dean Crawford	1987-1988
Betty Dickinson	1988-1989
Fred Harris	1989-1990
JoAnn Crawford	1990-1991
John Howitt	1991-1992
Barbara Hochschild	1992-1993
Barbara Hochschild	1993-1994
Viola Blount	1994-1995
Fred Harris	1995-1996
Goodwin Hart	1996-1997
Karyn Joyner	1997-1998
Karyn Joyner	1998-1999
Keith Dalbec	1999-2000
Ed Butenhof	2000-2001

Chuck Smith	2001-2002
Ron Partin	2002-2003
Ron Partin	2003-2004
Paul Shoemaker	2004-2005