

History of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Montgomery, Alabama

A Work in Progress*



*With thanks to “History of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Montgomery” by Robert B. McDonald (1995).

1834: Early beginnings in a frontier town

The religious history of the Montgomery Unitarian Universalist Fellowship reflects the challenge of establishing a liberal religion in the conservative Bible Belt of the South. Montgomery was still a small frontier town in 1834, when the first Universalist Society built a church at the corner of Perry and Alabama Streets.

The group disbanded two years later, when their minister moved away.

One hundred and forty years would pass before another Unitarian Universalist group would attempt to form a congregation in Montgomery.

1953 - 1956: Second group organizes

On April 19, 1953, a Unitarian from outside the Montgomery area, Mr. Ross, who was then Director of the United Appeal, obtained permission for the group to meet at the Montgomery YMCA, in the building known as the YWCA Hut. It was a two-story brick building with poor ventilation. The heat was provided by space heaters, which caused water to pour down the walls in winter. Nevertheless, it was a place where meetings could be held.

The initial group had no officers or formal organization. Not all members were familiar with Unitarianism or Universalism, although a few had prior experience with Fellowships in other parts of the country. Among the latter was Clifford J. Durr. There was, however, a common search for a more liberal, humanist alternative to other religious options available in the community.

On November 9, 1953, about thirty persons gathered to hear Monroe Husbands, a Unitarian and the mayor of a small town in North Carolina. A formal organization was formed, with Clifford J. Durr as the first President. Mr. Durr, who later received many local and national honors, was helpful in maintaining the group in the early days.

On February 17, 1954, the Fellowship for Liberal Religion was organized with fourteen members, and Mrs. R.K. Hood was elected President. Monthly meetings were held at 7:00 p.m. in the YWCA Hut. Most of the meetings were centered on discussion, with occasional worship services and guest speakers.

At this time, there were numerous activities relating to the "Integration Crisis." The Montgomery Bus Boycott officially began on December 1, 1955. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s parsonage was bombed on January 30, 1956 and E.D. Nixon's home was bombed on February 1, 1956. On February 21, 1956, 89 African Americans in Montgomery were indicted under an old law prohibiting boycotts. The bus boycott continued until December 21, 1956, after the U.S. Supreme Court granted relief in November 1956 for over a year. However, even after the end of the boycott, violence and unrest continued. The homes of two black leaders, four Baptist churches, the People's Service Station and Cab Stand, and the home of another African-American

were all bombed, and an unexploded bomb was found on Rev. King's front porch.

During these struggles, the Montgomery UU Fellowship was denounced by a printer at the Montgomery Advertiser who later turned out to be a Ku Klux Klan member. As a result of this protest, the Fellowship was asked not to meet at the YWCA. The reason given was that it was needed for other purposes, but this was unlikely as the meetings were held on Sunday nights. Attendance at the meetings began to decline, however.

About 1956, the Fellowship voted to discontinue meeting.

1961: A third group forms

A new group was formed in March of 1961.¹ Glenn Martin served as President from 1961 - 1963. From March through September 1961, meetings were held Sunday evenings at the Whitley Hotel. Members later met at Huntingdon College. The meetings at Huntingdon were discontinued as a result of opposition by a woman who was a substantial contributor to the Methodist Church. Her son had joined a Unitarian Universalist Church in Tennessee. The mother prevailed upon the authorities at Huntingdon to have the Montgomery meetings discontinued at the college. Later meetings were held at the Narrow Lane Inn and the Romeo and Juliet School, but these were not successful. Once again, the group became inactive.

1966: Active fellowship established

On September 18, 1966, sixteen members signed the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Montgomery at a meeting held at the Whitley Hotel. On November 18, 1966, the Steering Committee met with Lawrence McGinty, Minister of the Birmingham Unitarian Church, and with David Barnum, Chairman of the District Extension Committee. They agreed to assist local efforts to maintain a Fellowship. Reverend McGinty came to Montgomery a number of times to speak to the Fellowship. He enabled the group to gain support from national headquarters, and otherwise was very helpful. Sam Camp served as President 1966-1967.

There was never enough income to have a regular minister, but the Fellowship had visiting ministers whenever possible. Rev. McGinty came from Birmingham and Dr. Delos McKown, head of the Philosophy Department at Auburn University, were early supporters.

In March of 1967, the Fellowship voted to move the meeting place to the South Montgomery YMCA, incurring an expense of \$80 per month for regular Sunday morning meetings. Time limits were strictly enforced by the YWCA.² If the meetings lasted more than one hour, the members were asked to leave.

Throughout the time of organization of the Fellowship, the Civil Rights Movement was proceeding in Montgomery. Feelings were high, and any group that was considered somewhat liberal was the object of criticism, disdain, and sometimes overt activities. The South Montgomery Y was pressured to deny meeting space to the Fellowship because it was an

“off-brand religion.” The Fellowship overcame the objection by pointing out that Jewish members of the Board were allowed to participate and they were obviously not members of the prevailing faith in Montgomery.

People were very nervous about affiliating with a group that had a reputation for being so obviously liberal. There were a number of people who were prominent in the community who met with the group for a while, but who felt pressure in their lives as a result.

Two members who were State employees felt obliged to leave the Fellowship. One was the Warden of Kilby Prison, Martin Wyman. Another was a young doctor associated with the State Health Department, who was told in no uncertain terms by the State Health Officer that his future was cloudy because of his religious affiliation.

1967: The building on Vaughn Road, Montgomery

Morris Dees served as President 1967 - 68. On June 7, 1967, a Certificate of Incorporation of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship was filed in the Probate Judge's Office of Montgomery County. After protracted discussions, the Fellowship decided to acquire land on Vaughn Road to build a facility which was to cost \$75,000. Loans totaling \$25,000 were raised from various Unitarian Churches throughout the country, and a grant was obtained from the national Unitarian Universalist Association for \$25,000. The remainder of the cost fell upon the Fellowship. Members were asked to contribute a minimum of \$500 for the building fund.

1968 - 1969: Cookbooks

One successful device for raising money was the sale of cookbooks. Two cookbooks were published in 1968 and 1969. One was called *The Unitarian Universalist Cookbook - Meats*, and the other was called *Unitarian Universalist Cookbook - Desserts*. Through Fuller & Dees Publishing and efforts on Morris Dees' part, a considerable amount of money was raised in this fashion. Though the group was small in number, the members raised the money to finance the building of the church.

Merriam Delahay served as President 1968 - 1970. Mr. Delahay was a Montgomery architect who was well known and respected in the area. He founded the Great Books Discussion Group and led it for over twenty years. He was an invaluable asset in keeping the Fellowship going. As President, he spoke before other church groups around Montgomery, explaining the Unitarian Universalist purpose and philosophy. His wife, Margaret, a warm and caring person, was a native of London, England. For many years, she presided over the First Sunday Luncheon following the service on the first Sunday of each month. Mr. and Mrs. Delahay were active in service and cultural organizations and brought many visitors who later became UU members.

During the planning of the original building in 1969, Joe Moore, an architect and member of the Fellowship, designed a building which was quite elaborate in scope. Fund limitations led

to a modified building, although the original plans are still in the church files for future reference.³ The Vaughn Road building that was actually built and used was originally designed to be the Education wing for the church.

1970: Dedication of Vaughn Road building

Construction was completed in the Spring of 1970. On Sunday, March 29, 1970, which happened to be Easter, the first service was held in the new facility. The speaker was Rabbi David A. Baylinson of Montgomery.

Presidents during this period were Samuel Stephens (1970), Earl C. Pippin (1970-71), Dr. John McKee (1971-73), Robert B. McDonald (1973-74), and Eugene P. Whitt, Jr. (1974-75).

Earl Pippin was very prominent in the community and was a well known and effective lobbyist on Capitol Hill. At one time, he was President of the Alabama Mental Health Association. He served at various times as President, Chairman of the Building Committee, and in various other positions. His wide contacts attracted nationally known figures as speakers, such as the humorist John Henry Faulk and Brooks Hayes of Arkansas, chairman of several U.S. House of Representatives committees.

Many social activities and social service programs were established during the Spring of 1973: the First Sunday Luncheon; monthly Circle Suppers of eight to ten people each; the UU "Guest at the Table" program of fund-raising for UU Service Committee projects. The Fellowship also contributed to the Food Bank, provided Christmas gifts for a needy family, provided service to a local soup kitchen, sponsored two Girl Scout Troops, gave two work days each year to the Habitat for Humanity.⁴

A beautiful walnut podium was given in 1975 in memory of James Curtis (Johnny) Johnson, whose parents were U.S. District Court Judge and Mrs. Frank M. Johnson. Mrs. Johnson (Ruth) attended the Fellowship for a while. Charles Beverly was President 1975 - 1977, followed by Carol R. Camp [later Hull] (1977-78), Arthur Harmon (1978-79), and Bob McDonald again 1979-1980.

Following the death of member Merriam Delahay in 1980, a Unitarian Universalist symbol was added to the front of the building, with the notation "In Memory of Merriam Delahay 1912 - 1980.

1981: Planning for the Future

In 1981, Imogene "Gene" Dillon chaired a committee to set up a broad plan for the future of the Fellowship. Goals were set for the ensuing years. Similar plans were written in subsequent years.

1982: Minister on Loan Program

The Fellowship took advantage of the national UUA's Minister on Loan Program in 1982. Rev. Charles A. Howe, Jr. was sent in February 1982. He stayed in Montgomery for six weeks, meeting and organizing members and preaching on Sundays. His congregation in Syracuse, New York continued to pay his salary, with the Montgomery Fellowship providing living and transportation expenses. The congregation was very responsive to Rev. Howe.

1982: Religious Education Director

The first religious education director was hired on August 1982, and the religious education wing was added on September 9, 1984. Theodore M. Kluz was President 1980 - 82 and James E. Winkates served as President 1982-84.

1983: Extension Ministry Program

With a lot of hard work and much enthusiasm, the Fellowship listed about 100 members in 1983, which qualified the Fellowship for the Extension Ministry Program. This program included financial aid from the national organization.

1984: Shared Minister

By sharing expenses, the Montgomery and Auburn Fellowships jointly hired Rev. Art Curtis in 1984. He had just completed his divinity degree from Meadville/Lobard Theological School. He preached his first sermon on April 8, 1984.

In September 1984, a piano was dedicated to the memory of Joseph M. Moore and Earl C. Pippin. Mr. Moore was one of the earlier religious education chairpersons and his children attended the religious education program. He died young, of a heart attack. His wife, Dot Moore, presented a large wooden cross with elaborate carvings of children to the Fellowship.

John W. Six served as President 1984 - 86.

1986: Loss of Minister

When Rev. Curtis' contract expired after two years, the Montgomery and Auburn congregations were unable to financially support another shared ministry. The Montgomery Fellowship continued without a minister, and with a very mobile congregation. Many young families moved in and out of the Fellowship, receiving promotions and military assignments elsewhere during the 1980s. Much leadership was lost during this turnover.

The Fellowship continued to enjoy remarkable members, however. Helen Blackshear was named Poet Laureate of Alabama by the Governor of Alabama in 1986.⁵

1987: Joseph Campbell Discussion Group

Madora “Doda” Walker started the Joseph Campbell Discussion Group in November 1987 and it continued to meet through 1994 and beyond. Other groups were organized: the Mens Group met for a time on Sunday evenings in members’ homes. A Women’s Group, now called “Sisterlight,” was established in the 1990s. A group of parents met once each month for a “Parents as Resident Theologians” discussion.

Sid Brown served as President 1986-87. Robert McDonald was again President 1987-89. Will Townsend served as President 1989-91. Parker Collins was President 1991-93. Rhonda Thomason was President 1993-95.

1991: Active Programming

Minutes of the Board meetings during 1991 reflect active planning of speakers by members. Gene Dillon reported on scheduling speakers from the Alabama Humanities Foundation. Bob McDonald described the next month’s schedule of speakers. The Board discussed the cost of overnight accommodations for visiting ministers (\$29 - 33 per night). Karen Hyman was recruiting teachers for the religious education program. Chris Rodwell discussed pledges, which averaged \$509.38.

1993: Part-Time Minister

In May 1993, a part-time minister was hired. Rev. Terrell Balof, a former Methodist minister, commuted to Montgomery one weekend each month. Her first sermon was “New Beginnings and Old Traditions.” In September 1994, she was installed as a UU Minister in Atlanta, but she continued to serve the Montgomery Fellowship one weekend per month.

Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) shares space:

The MCC⁶ held regular weekly meetings at the church. The Fellowship continued to maintain an open door policy towards any responsible group that wished to use the building.

1994: Long Range Planning

The Fellowship continued to look to the future. In 1994, the Board, under the leadership of President Rhonda Thomason, asked each committee to identify short-term, mid-term and long-term goals, to establish a vision of the Fellowship for 2000. Expanding or moving to new facilities was mentioned by every committee as a long-term goal. Several committees also identified calling a minister as a goal.

1994 also saw the first Welcoming Congregation Workshop at the Fellowship, with activities being held on three Sundays of three consecutive months to January 1995. PFLAG began to hold its meetings in the UUFM’s building.⁷

Ministers

1996, the Fellowship had an interim minister, George XXXX, who came to preach three Sundays each month. He had previously been a minister of the United Methodist Church and he was very interested in nature and environmental issues. After less than a year, Rev. XXXX was offered another position in the Methodist church, with retirement benefits, and so he left to return to the UMC denomination.

Undaunted, the UUFM began the process of seeking interim ministers, to assist in the process of calling a permanent minister. Rev. Elena L. Rigg came for one year 1997 - 1998.⁸ Christine Brownlie served as interim minister for one year, 1998 - 1999.⁹

1999 - 2003: Rev. Tracy Sprowls

In 1999, the UUFM called Rev. Tracy Sprowls as its first, settled, full-time minister. Rev. Sprowls served from 1999 to 2003. During that time, the congregation voted to become a Welcoming Congregation and to move to a larger building.

Members of the Fellowship, including Rhonda Thomason, took a leadership role in the creation of Open Hearts and Minds (OHM), an organization dedicated to bringing speakers with liberal religious views to Montgomery. Bishop John Shelby Spong, a retired Episcopalian bishop known for advocating application of Christian principles to contemporary social issues, was the first speaker, on March 8 & 9, 2002 at Auburn University at Montgomery, speaking on "Liberating Christian Theology."¹⁰

In 2003, the congregation voted to place the Vaughn Road property on the market and to purchase a property several miles west, towards downtown Montgomery, on the Atlanta Highway.

The new building was being vacated by a Lutheran congregation, which was joining with Messiah Lutheran. The UUFM congregation moved into the new building in February 2003.

Under the leadership of President Tim Hall, the Vaughn Road property was placed for sale and "sold" five times, with the final, actual sale being completed after the congregation had moved to its new location.

2003 – 2005: Interim Minister

Rev. Sprowls left UUFM to take a position with the Community Church of New York UU (Manhattan). Shortly before leaving, she married David Jenks and became Rev. Tracy Sprowls-Jenks.¹¹

Robert H. Flanders served as Interim Minister from 2003 - 2005. His service was not without controversy. Rev. Flanders was arrested for Driving Under the Influence, a fact that was not made known to the congregation.¹²

The congregation continued its activism in the community. In 2004, members of the Fellowship, including Rhonda Thomason and Mike Tatum, worked with other organizations to create a conference on Growing Inclusive Communities through Religion and Education, for the Communities of Faith for Full Inclusion (CoFFI). Bishop Spong spoke and other speakers focused on support for inclusion of the LGBT community in all churches.

2005 - 2012: Rev. Paul Britner

In September 2005, Rev. Paul Britner became the UUFM's second full-time settled minister. Coming to Montgomery from Rockville, Maryland, where he had been President of the Board of the UU Congregation of Rockville, Rev. Britner had previously worked as a lawyer in the General Services Administration. Rev. Britner was active in Montgomery's interfaith organizations, Interfaith Montgomery and One Montgomery, and spoke out publicly against hate crimes and the death penalty, and for reproductive choice. The congregation began to participate in the annual Vigil in memory of victims of Hate Crimes.¹³ Rev. Britner's wife, Karen Nelson, was a beloved and active participant in the church choir and Sisterlight.

2012: Interim Ministry: Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe

Following Rev. Britner's departure for Virginia, the UUFM selected Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe as interim minister. Rev. Wolfe graduated in 2010 from Starr King School for the Ministry, completed a Ministerial Internship at West Shore UU Church near Cleveland, Ohio, and served as Chaplain Resident at Indiana University Health service hospitals. Ghe was ordained at West Shore UU in 2012, in a wonderful service attended by UUFM members Michael Kraig and Christine Freeman.¹⁴ Ghe guides the UUFM today, as we experiment and educate ourselves on our mission and our vision for our next settled ministry.

Presidents of UUFM

Clifford Durr	1953 -
Glenn Martin	1961 - 1963
Sam Camp	1966 - 1967.
Morris Dees	1967 - 1968
Merriam Delahay	1968 - 1970
Samuel Stephens	1970 - 1970
Earl C. Pippin	1970 - 1971
Dr. John McKee	1971 - 1973
Robert B. McDonald	1973 - 1974
Eugene P. Whitt, Jr.	1974 - 1975
Charles Beverly	1975 - 1977
Carol R. Camp [later Hull]	1977 - 1978
Arthur Harmon	1978 - 1979
Robert B. McDonald	1979 - 1980
Theodore M. Kluz	1980 - 1982
James E. Winkates	1982 - 1984
John W. Six	1984 - 1986
Sid Brown	1986 - 1987
Robert B. McDonald	1987 - 1989
Will Townsend served	1989 - 1991
Parker Collins	1991 - 1993
Rhonda Thomason	1993 - 1995
Theodore M. Kluz	1996 -
Steve Daniell	
Lou Hyman	
Art Elsner	2002 - 2003
Tim Hall	2003 - 2005
Lou Hyman	2005 - 2007
Christine Freeman	2007 - 2010
Bill Weaver	2010 - 2011
Janice Wood	2011 - 2012
Michael Kraig	2012 - 2013
Liz Campbell	2013 -

Endnotes

1. The Charter Members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Montgomery in March 1961 were Samuel T. Camp, Judy A. Harris, Richard V. Parish, Wanda Parish (Mrs. R.V.), James Jenks, Barbara Jenks (Mrs. James), Donald K. Huffine, Doris Huffine (Mrs. D.K.), Leon DeKing, Marilyn DeKing (Mrs. L.R.), Robert B. McDonald, Robert C. Chase, George L. Florman, Susan Florman (Mrs. G.L.), Ronnie Blunker, Mary Ann Spencer, David W. Chase, Alva W. Hunsinger, Al Dehnad, Eugene and Shirley Askenasy, and Joseph M. Moore, Jr.

2. Bob McDonald's history contains references to both the YMCA and the YWCA.

3. One cost savings was the elimination of windows. One of the myths of the UU FM has been that the Vaughn Road building had no windows due to fears of opposition to the UU Fellowship's liberal social justice positions. In fact, per Carol Hull, windows were omitted due to lack of money.

4. Member and President Lou Hyman was State Chairman of Habitat for Humanity.

5. In 2003, at the age of ninety-two, Ms. Blackshear visited Rhonda Thomason's second grade class at Forest Avenue Elementary School, and presented them with a poem, entitled "You Who Love Words. Although the poem originally referred only to girls, after her visit to the class, Ms. Blackshear rewrote the poem:

My brothers and sisters,
you who love words.
You who like scrabble
and puzzle crosswords.

Who pluck sounds like music
from buttermilk skies
and serenade twilight
with soft lullabies,

who talk to your flowers
and chatter with birds,
my brothers and sisters
you who love words.

6. According to one source, a notable aspect of the theology of the Metropolitan Community Church is its position on homosexuality and Christianity; it fully embraces and welcomes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The first MCC congregation was founded in Los Angeles by Troy Perry in 1968, a time when Christian attitudes toward homosexuality were almost universally negative. The MCC has grown since then to have a presence in 37 countries with 222 affiliated churches. The largest presence is found in the United States, followed by

Canada. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metropolitan_Community_Church

7. Founded in 1972 with the simple act of a mother publicly supporting her gay son, PFLAG is the original ally organization. Made up of parents, families, friends, and straight allies uniting with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, PFLAG is committed to advancing equality through its mission of support, education and advocacy. PFLAG has over 350 chapters and 200,000 supporters crossing multiple generations of American families in major urban centers, small cities and rural areas in all 50 states.

8. Rev. Elena L. Rigg went on to become a settled minister at the Unitarian Church North of Mequon, Wisconsin. She retired from that position in 2008 and moved to Fort Myers, Florida, though she is still Minister Emerita at the Mequon congregation.

9. Rev. Christine Brownlie became the settled minister at the Unitarian church in Blacksburg, Virginia, home of Virginia Tech. She retired and is now Minister Emerita.

10. Bishop Spong presented “A New Christianity for a New World” on March 8, 2002 and “Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible Through Jewish Eyes” on March 9, 2002. Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore had recently described homosexuality as “an inherent evil,” in an opinion ruling in favor of a Birmingham man seeking custody of his children from his ex-wife, a lesbian living with another woman in California. Bishop Spong noted that “in the retrospective history, Bull Connor is a stain of shame upon the state of Alabama. And so will Judge Moore be, in time.”

OHM Lectures brought Bishop John Spong to Montgomery twice. In 2005, the OHM Lectures & Arise Citizens’ Policy Project brought the Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Senior Minister at Riverside Church in New York City, and Dr. Charles Marsh, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia and Director of the Project on Lived Theology. *Newsweek Magazine* called Dr. Forbes one of the 12 “most effective preachers” in the English-speaking world. Dr. Forbes spoke for OHM on “Healing the Spirit of Our Nation.” Dr. Marsh spoke on “The Spiritual Movement in Montgomery: Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Dream of the Beloved Community.”

In 2007, OHM presented the Rev. Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, a leading scholar in feminist theology and women’s studies. Dr. Brock spoke on “Our Common Good and the Care of this World” on April 27, 2007 and presented three workshops on April 28, 2007, on “Greening the Soul,” including “It’s Not Easy Being Green,” “Feminism and Faith: Telling Our Lives in Spirit and in Truth,” and “The Violence of Poverty.”

11. Rev. Sprowls-Jenks was Associate Minister at the Community Church 2003 - 2005, then Religious Education Minister at the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, New Jersey from 2005 - 2009. She became the settled minister at the First Unitarian Society of Plainfield, New Jersey in 2009.

12. Ordained in 1984, Rev. Flanders served UU churches in South Carolina, Florida, Wisconsin, Indiana and Arizona before coming to Montgomery. He did not serve at another congregation after Montgomery and retired in 2010.

13. Rev. Britner was ordained in 2005, receiving his Masters of Divinity from Earlham School of Religion. During his time in Montgomery, he obtained his Doctorate in Ministry from

Meadville Lombard Theological School. In 2012, he became the settled minister at the UU Church of Shenandoah Valley in Stephens City, Virginia.

14.Rev. Wolfe is an active member of the Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM), Transgender Religious professional Unitarian Universalists Together (TRUUsT), and Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association (UUMA), and serves as a Liaison to Candidates at the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, the body that reviews candidates for the UU ministry.