

The First Unitarian Society
of Schenectady

1901 - 2001

OUR FIRST
ONE HUNDRED YEARS

*He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win.
We drew a circle that took him in.*



In 1900, a group of Unitarian men and women decided to create a religious home for themselves in Schenectady, and on February 26, 1901, the First Unitarian Society of Schenectady was officially born.

A number of these early members had moved to Schenectady from the Boston area to work in the then newly formed and booming General Electric Company. In the intervening century, our Society has grown and prospered. It has seen difficult times and flourishing times. Its membership has grown, and sometimes contracted as well, with the local area's economy. But it has survived.

It has survived two world wars and the Great Depression, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War. Begun in the Gilded Age, it has spanned Prohibition, the automobile age, the atomic age, the space age, the computer age, and the information age. It has seen the Jazz Age and the Age of Aquarius — the Roaring Twenties, the baby boom, rock and roll, and the sexual revolution. It has persevered through the New Deal and the Great Society, through McCarthyism and Watergate, through the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, student activism, the environmental movement, *perestroika*, and multiculturalism.

*The 1917
cornerstone of
the Society's
expanded
building was
dedicated
by President
William Taft.*



Given the Society's commitment to social justice and the open exchange of ideas, over the past century it has contained a microcosm of American liberal thought and change in a way that few other institutions in Schenectady have. The Society has hosted debates on hundreds of civic and moral issues, and has been at the forefront of social changes as wide ranging as labor reform, educational reform, civil rights, reproductive freedom, public safety, and gay rights.



As the years and changes have accumulated, the Society has continued to be a liberal religious presence in Schenectady and a spiritual home for its members — a loving, inquisitive, stimulating, and caring religious community where people gather in warm fellowship to discuss the most significant things in life.

As our Society begins its second century, it is important to rediscover and reflect on its growth and development. What follows is an effort to capture some of the spirit that has infused the Society's first century — our trials and sorrows as well as our accomplishments and joys.

Early Days

At the end of the 19th century, Thomas Edison's "General Electric Works" in Schenectady was rapidly growing into the center of the electrical manufacturing and research industry. The town's population nearly tripled in one decade, from 11,780 in 1890 to 31,682 in 1900, as workers arrived to take advantage of this economic boom.

Hundreds of engineers, managers, and skilled laborers moved here to work at General Electric, including Unitarians from New England and particularly from Lynn, Massachusetts. By 1900, a number of these families were hoping to establish their own place of worship. Surveying their situation, the Reverend D. W. Morehouse, Secretary of the



In 1908 the Society gained a home of its own with the completion of All Souls Chapel on the corner of Union Street and Wendell Avenue.

Unitarian Conference of the Middle States and Canada, recommended that the national organization sponsor a church in Schenectady. “In the midst of the rigid Orthodoxy of the existing churches there, the [Unitarian] families find themselves practically unchurched. This, therefore, seems an auspicious time for establishing a Unitarian church in Schenectady,” he noted, particularly since a liberal religious society would likely prosper among such a growing mix of scientifically minded individuals.

On October 18, 1900, a “Unitarian Platform Meeting” was held at the Schenectady Woman’s Club Rooms on State Street to gauge interest in this idea. Fifteen people attended, and Sunday services began three days later under the direction of the Reverend James Hodgins, who left the area two months later. By February, the group and then minister Reverend Fred Van Hoesen were ready to become a formal organization.

On February 26, 1901, the First Unitarian Society of Schenectady was born with 11 charter members. Rev. Van Hoesen proposed the Society’s first brief constitution, which was approved along with a slate of officers and a Board of Trustees. Five

men and two women became the Society’s first governing body. A budget of \$1,200 for the remainder of 1901 was approved, with the national organization, then called the American Unitarian Association, contributing \$700.

Within a month, the forerunner of the Society’s current Women’s Alliance was formed under the imposing name of the Schenectady Branch of the National Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women, “to help promote the interests of the Unitarian Society.” The Alliance began fund raising — netting \$140 in their Christmas sale that first year — and immediately became a major factor in the Society’s continued growth and resourcefulness, a strength it continues to this day.

By May, Society members began looking for a place to build a home of their own and purchased a

Evolution of the Bond of Union

From the Society’s 1901 Constitution

With Jesus of Nazareth, this Society stands for Freedom, Fellowship, Character, and Service in religion. Its members differ widely in speculative thinking, and hold their beliefs always open to restatement as growing thought and purer life reveal new truth. We welcome to our fellowship all who are in love with the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and who wish to join with us in the worship of God and the service of Man.

From the current Society By Laws

Love is the spirit of this church,
The quest for truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve humanity in fellowship,
That all may grow in harmony with the good:
Thus do we covenant with one another.



plot of land at the corner of Union Street and Wendell Avenue. In the meantime, a reed organ was purchased for \$50, and an organist engaged to play for \$1 per Sunday. Typical Sunday attendance ranged from 22 to 28 persons.

Rev. Van Hoesen resigned in 1902 and was replaced by the Reverend Charles P. Lombard. Membership in the Society grew very slowly in those early years, due both to the lack of permanent quarters and to member turnover as GE families were transferred in and out of Schenectady. Just before the end of Lombard's ministry in 1906, the congregation finished paying all debts for its building site and began planning a building under the ministry of the young Reverend Albert W. Clark.

The scarcity of funds forced a decision to build the church in two stages. The first stage of a chapel, Sunday school room, ladies' parlor, kitchen, and small recreation room was completed and dedicated as All Souls Chapel on January 17, 1908. Total cost of the construction was \$9,566, of which \$5,000 came from an American Unitarian Association grant. Members in the Society at that time numbered 55.

By 1909, membership grew to 65 where it remained for several years. This was discouraging for church leaders since annual pledges (then called subscriptions) remained at about \$800 per year, and financial support from the national organization's "missionary grant" declined each year as the Society supposedly grew in strength. Despite this, the congregation made donations to the Red Cross and City Mission, and continued its special collection for Ellis Hospital, an annual event since 1903.

"The Bible is not the only sacred book in the world nor has God shut himself up in the literature of one people, or of two, or three. ... God is not only in Hebrew writings and in early Christian writings, but He is in Greek and Egyptian and Roman and Chinese and English and American writing. ... Lincoln's Gettysburg Address [is] as divine as any that Joshua ever delivered. ... And the Declaration of Independence is a sublime chapter in the World's Bible, being written by all the races for all the peoples of earth."

Dr. Addison Moore, "The Bible in the Public Schools," March 7, 1915

In 1912, the Reverend William L. Sullivan accepted the Society's call and started a Sunday evening adult Bible class, which along with his brilliant intellect and magnetic preaching style soon attracted many new members. By 1913, membership was up to 101. Although he served the Society only two years, Rev. Sullivan's sermons attracted attention in the local press and breathed a new sense of strength and confidence into the congregation.

The Unitarian Society became "news" during Sullivan's ministry, and his 1914 successor, Dr. Addison Moore, continued in this style with his very first sermon, which coincided with President Woodrow Wilson's call for a national day of prayer for peace in Europe. Moore questioned why, if God could grant peace, people hadn't asked him to do so long before? "In any case," he claimed, "we are asking God to do what we must and ought to do for ourselves."

James C. Hodgins
1900



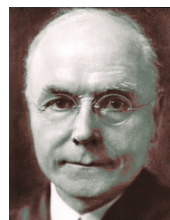
Charles Lombard
1902 - 1906



Albert W. Clark
1906 - 1912



William Sullivan
1912 - 1914



Addison Moore
1914 - 1919



Ministers of the Society

