

The sermon received detailed coverage in the *Schenectady Gazette*, as did recitals on the Society's new "Choralcelo," a \$2,000 electric organ whose new sound made quite a stir in the media. The recitals and two very popular morning and evening lecture series started around this time brought both new people and more money into the Society.

By 1917, the congregation of 150 members had outgrown the existing Chapel. It was time to expand and complete the auditorium and tower that had originally been planned as the second stage of the church building. Former President William Howard Taft, who was then President of the General Conference of Unitarian Churches, agreed to lay the cornerstone for the building expansion. The ceremony was observed by several hundred spectators. Then Society President Albert Rohrer noted that "The laying of the cornerstone by Mr. Taft was an event, not only for us, but for the city at large. It was duly recorded by the moving-picture men, and the films have been shown by two of these picture-houses every day during the past week."

The auditorium cost just over \$22,000 and was completed by January 1918. Funds ran short before the end, however. Having no money to buy pews, the congregation made do for many years thereafter with rented theater-style folding seats.

The horrors of World War I did much to promote Unitarianism, but at the same time the combination of heavy production schedules at GE and war-related volunteer work cut into members' time and interest in church activities.



*The completed All Souls Church, showing the 1918 auditorium and tower housing the minister's study.*

## Expanding Horizons

The Society's adolescence could be said to end with the 1918 completion of the auditorium and All Souls Church. Despite continuing money worries, the Society had finished the long process of becoming an established congregation. Society members now had the basic resources to focus increasingly on what many saw as the real business of liberal religion — influencing the cultural, religious, and democratic life of the community.

A "Modern Sunday School ... arranged on a scientific basis" was begun in January 1918 to teach morality and religion. Classes were organized for children up to age 19. Harold Chestnut recalls attending these classes as a young boy starting in 1923. Boys and girls were in separate classes, and

*Ernest Caldecott*  
1920 - 1933



*Robert Weston*  
1933 -1941



*Edwin Wilson*  
1941 - 1946



*Robert Hoagland*  
1946 - 1956



*William Gold*  
1956 - 1965





*The auditorium added to the original chapel (visible in the background) in 1918 provided space for both a growing congregation and the new “Open Forum.”*

one of the attractions for him was that “the classes were light on Bible stories and heavy on science experiments, nature walks, etc. Regular school classes didn’t include field trips then as they do now, so our Sunday classes provided new experiences.”

In 1919, the Women’s Alliance presented a plan to use the new auditorium to hold a series of public forums on various secular and religious topics, and the “Open Forum” was begun. In 1921, a men’s group called the Laymen’s League was formed to organize the Open Forum, and quickly attracted 80 members. The league’s lively discussions of socialism, labor reform, educational reform, the roles of science and religion, and many other topics were open to anyone. Renowned GE inventor Charles Steinmetz spoke at Sunday services as well as the Forum series a number of times. By the

1940s the series evolved into an annual public lecture series called Freedom Forum.

When Rev. Moore’s tenure ended in 1919, the church had also begun to move toward comparative religion and humanism rather than a theology based solely upon the liberal Christianity with which it had begun. In 1920, under the Rev. Ernest J. Caldecott, the Society became openly humanist. Caldecott led the church from 1920-1933, the longest tenure of any of our ministers. Many factors contributed to a growth in membership during these years, notably the decision to spend several hundred dollars a year on advertising, the popularity of the Open Forum, and Caldecott’s efforts to reconcile the congregation’s theists and humanists and to update the traditional forms of the Sunday service.

In 1921, the church also adopted a Unitarian church in Krospetek, Transylvania, perhaps foreshadowing extensive efforts to adopt and resettle displaced persons after World War II.

In the 1930s, Schenectady was hit hard by the Great Depression, and Society members were active in local relief efforts even though many of them were forced to take deep salary cuts themselves at GE. In 1933 the Reverend Robert Weston was hired to replace Rev. Caldecott.

At this time sending information about preventing pregnancy through the mail was still prohibited by the Comstock Law of 1874, and most women had little opportunity to learn about reproduction or birth control. In 1935 Rev. Weston approached members of the Women’s Alliance with a request from the state office of Planned Parenthood to start a local group in Schenectady. The Alliance held a

*Carl Storm  
1965 - 1966*



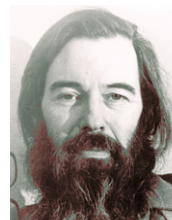
*Anthony Perrino  
1967 - 1968*



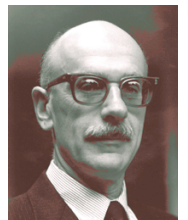
*Robert Eddy  
1969 - 1972*



*Rudolph Nemser  
1973 - 1983*



*Charles Slap  
1985 - 1992*



## Ministers of the Society





*In 1935 Society members started a birth control clinic at Ellis Hospital that grew into today's Planned Parenthood. Among them were Adelaide & Louis Navias, who were cited in this 1985 newspaper photo as Planned Parenthood "pioneers."*

fund raising dinner, and the Birth Control League of Schenectady was launched with Weston as its president and several Society members including Adelaide Navias as founding members. The League's first clinic was open one day a week at Ellis Hospital and dispensed birth control to married women only. "Birth control was a dirty word back then," said Louis Navias. After six years, the Birth Control League moved into separate quarters and eventually grew into what is now Planned Parenthood Health Services on Union Street.

1935 also saw the start of the "Schenectady Consumer's Club" in the church basement, an

organization that grew into today's Niskayuna Food Coop. In that era of concern over food purity, the coop was organized "to determine and maintain high standards of quality in consumers' goods and to serve as an effective organ for formulating the consumers' point of view and voicing consumers' opinions," according to its charter. Eugene Navias remembers accompanying his parents to the church basement as a boy for "marketing parties when the prices were put on the goods. Wow, was I proud when I was entrusted to put my 8¢ sign on the canned green beans. ... The church believed in taking action." Church members were also proud to promote their initiatives in the community. Erma Ruth Chestnut recalls Hosmer Norris in the 1940s "carrying his Freedom Forum literature in one coat pocket and Coop Market literature in the other."

The Reverend Edwin Wilson was hired in 1941 and stayed until 1946, a period when Schenectady was experienced another period of great growth. With all the products needed in the war effort, General Electric grew to 45,000 employees, and the Society attracted many newcomers.

After the war, church member Dorothea Greene worked for the UN helping resettle displaced persons. With her help, Society members brought several families to Schenectady by guaranteeing to provide them with lodging and financial support. Congregation members adopted displaced families from Hungary, Lithuania, Germany and Russia, just as in recent years we have adopted two Bosnian families fleeing the conflicts in Yugoslavia.

The Reverend Robert Hoagland led the church from 1946 to 1956. He was also one of the

*Linda Hoddy  
1992 - 1993*



*Fred Campbell  
1992 - 1994*



*Andrew Backus  
1994 - 2000*



*Mary Hnottavange  
2000 -*



founders of the Schenectady Chapter of the NAACP. The baby boom arrived during this time, and the Society grew rapidly. Church staff grew as well with the hiring of our first paid secretary and paid Religious Education Director. To hold its burgeoning Sunday school, the church first rented the Brown School on Rugby Road, then bought a two-family home on Wendell Avenue, but classes continued to grow.

## Building Again

Our next minister, the Rev. William Gold, 1956-1965, proved to be a gifted preacher, promoter and fund raiser, an invaluable asset as the congregation set about meeting its next challenge of planning and funding a new building. First, four acres of land on Wendell Avenue were purchased as a building site, land that cost about twice the \$20,000 the church was then receiving in annual pledges.

One of the great architects of the time, Edward Durrell Stone of New York City, was hired to design the church. The circle concept that occurs throughout the design, Stone claimed, came from the Edwin Markham poem (see the cover of this booklet) that he saw in several Society publications. Another interesting detail is that when the building was first

opened in 1961, Stone rented \$250,000 worth of art to hang on its walls. These walls have been used as an art gallery ever since, enhancing the aesthetic experience of visiting or worshipping in the building.

Although an early estimate was that the building would cost \$250,000, its final cost was \$600,000, for what has been recognized as the foremost piece of modern architecture in Schenectady. The fact that it took only twelve years for congregation members to raise this amount of money was “The Miracle on



*Two views of the new church when it was completed in 1961. “The rationale for a church in the round is to break down the formal distance between the minister and the congregation and to bring the congregation into personal contact with the minister,” said architect Edward Durrell Stone.*

*Among Stone’s other buildings are the U.S. Pavilion for the World’s Fair in Brussels, the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, and the State University campus in Albany, New York.*

