

Wendell Avenue,” according to Rev. Gold, who spoke at the mortgage burning ceremony in 1971.

One part of this miracle was Society member Gertrude Waters’ 1959 bequest to the church of her 16-room home, Waters House, directly across the street from where the new church was being built. The bequest came just at the time when it appeared that cost overruns on the church would make it very difficult to complete Stone’s proposal to build classrooms under what is now the nursery/dining room area. Instead, Waters House has housed the Society’s religious education program ever since.

Rev. Gold was followed by three ministers who had fairly brief stays in Schenectady — the Reverends Carl Storm (1965-66), Anthony Perrino (1967-68), and Robert Eddy (1969-72) — then by the Reverend Rudolph Nemser, who was our minister from 1973 to 1983. Rev. Nemser started the Philosophy Class that continues to this day. He was known for his chest-length beard and his erudite style of speaking. “Rudy” was also known for his thoughtful poems.

The 1960s and 70s were times of protest and social activism all across America, and Society members were naturally involved in many areas of social change during this period. Members Ralph Alpher, Hal Riechenthal, and Don Schein, for example, lent their efforts to educational television

*Man is confronted,
each man is confronted
not by single occasion’s single choice
(gray shot in gray dawn at gray ducks)
but by unpunctuated choosing.*

*Among myriad decisions —
yesterdaytomorrow ayenays —
none stands aside.*

*In a lifetime of choice
a nationtime of choice
each matters.*

Rev. Rudy Nemser, from *Moments of a Springtime: Pieces for Reflection*, 1967

and station WMHT. Dr. Lewi Tonks, on the other hand, was concerned about injustices in the existing court and bail system, particularly the fact that poor people, lacking any collateral, typically had to remain in jail while awaiting trial.

In 1972, the Lewi Tonks Revolving Bail Fund was established with a \$10,000 bequest from Dr. Tonks, to which the Society subsequently offered its buildings as collateral for an additional \$120,000. Society member Anne Donnelly became the first president of the Bail Fund’s Board of Trustees. Two years later, the Law, Order and Justice Center

Presidents of the Society

1901-07	Walter H. Clarke	1955-58	Charles B. Hurd	1980-81	John Wilkinson
1907-23	Albert L. Rohrer	1958-59	David Winne	1981-82	Ruth Kerr
1923-25	M. S. Lord	1959-62	James Olin	1982-83	Don McLaughlin
1925-28	E. A. Baldwin	1962-63	Joseph Quill	1983-84	Harold Chestnut
1928-30	R. C. Muir	1963-65	Erma Ruth Chestnut	1984-85	Undine Fiedler
1930-34	G. M. J. MacKay	1965-66	William Johnson	1985-86	Linda Hoddy
1934-35	Louis Navias	1966-68	Jack Hickey	1986-88	Frank Feiner
1935-38	B. L. Vosburgh	1968-69	Louis Kendall	1988-90	Sally Kirouac
1938-42	T. M. Linville	1969-70	Ralph Alpher	1990-91	Alan MacDougall
1942-43	Guy E. Buck	1970-72	C. Murray Penney	1991-93	Don Porter
1943-46	Philip L. Alger	1972-74	Donald Mack	1993-95	Duke Dufresne
1946-47	T. M. Linville	1974-75	Fred Tregaskis	1995-97	Bob Rohr
1947-50	T. R. Rhea	1975-77	Peter Stewart	1997-99	Bob Briber
1950-51	A. T. Goble	1977-78	Carol Valentine	1999-2001	Crystal Hamelink
1951-55	Louis Navias	1978-80	Roger Yepsen		



opened to administer the bail fund and provide services for persons involved in the criminal justice system. In just those first two years, the fund provided bail for about 200 people, enabling them to continue supporting their families and saving the county thousands of dollars that would otherwise have gone to house and feed them in jail.

In 1977, Society member Robert Blood's large metal sculpture "Sanctuary" (below) was purchased to enhance the church gardens. The sculpture dedication was a memorable experience including a musical piece with dancers moving around and through the sculpture. Also begun in 1977 was "Coffee, Crullers & Conversation," an opportunity for fellowship and discussion of all types of topics before the Sunday service.

New Challenges

In December 1977, two Scotia teens were killed by a drunk driver, and Society member Doris Aiken decided to do something about it. She asked the Society's Social Action Council for \$50 to have letterhead printed, and RID — Remove Intoxicated Drivers — was born, becoming the first ever national anti-drunk driving organization in the US. The organization's first meeting was held in the Emerson Room in February 1978, the site of RID Board meetings for the next 15 years. Along with Doris,



"Let us attempt to make a distinction ... between liberalism defined as holding politically correct views and authentic liberalism. Authentic liberalism is a philosophy of life and ... depends not on political correctness but on our attitude towards our opponent.... It is a frame of mind in which the majority makes room for and welcomes the minority. It ... does not dismiss [one's] neighbors as fundamentalists or whatever but recognizes the possibility that there is another side to them it does not understand. In a word, liberalism, whether in politics or personal life, is marked by generosity and openhandedness."

Rev. Charles Slap, "Authentic Liberalism,"
February 16, 1992

Society members Dale Jennings, Adelaide and Louis Navias, Jamie Plumley, Ruth Kerr, and Natalie Yepsen formed the RID Board until 1983. RID's highlighting of this issue started a rolling effect across the state, and Unitarian-based RID chapters sprang up in Buffalo, Ithaca, Rochester, and Syracuse.

RID was successful at getting a New York omnibus anti-DWI bill passed in 1980, closing loopholes previously used by those arrested for drunk driving. More reform laws followed in 1981. As drunk driving penalties rose, alcohol-related fatalities fell, falling 23% between 1980 and 1985 in the state. Today many Society members continue to support RID with their money and time, RID has chapters in 41 states, and New York has the fewest alcohol-related driving fatalities per capita of any state in the nation.

In 1984, national politics caused discord among Society members during the debate over providing sanctuary to Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees. Angered by the U.S. State Department's decision to deny political asylum to such refugees, some Society members wanted to declare the church a sanctuary where political refugees could remain for up to two weeks as they made their way to Canada. Other



members opposed this idea on the grounds that it was illegal and would place their jobs and possibly the church in jeopardy. In the end, the sanctuary resolution was defeated, but only after several congregational meetings and extensive debate.

Congregation members were also concerned about the nuclear arms race during this period. Both the World Federalists Association and the United Nations Association met for many years at the church. In 1986, these groups convinced the Society Board and then Schenectady Mayor Karen Johnson to declare the church an official “peace site,” meaning a place for research and discussion of peace issues. The peace site activists assembled a library of reference material, held essay contests for young people, and offered afternoon forums on peace topics — forums that were sometimes picketed by those objecting to the so-called “peace-niks.”

The Reverend Charles Slap served as our minister from 1985 to 1992. A thoughtful and eloquent speaker, Rev. Slap began a local support group for those with AIDS and was very involved in the community. He continued preaching until only a few months before his death from AIDS. The outpouring of love created by his final illness and death was a significant event in the life of the church.

Following interim service by the Reverends Linda Hoddy and Fred Campbell, Reverend Andrew Backus accepted the congregation’s call in 1994 and led the church until 2000. A former chemist, Rev. Backus loved the give and take of intellectual exchange and was known for his animated after-service “Sermon Talk-back” sessions. Rev. Backus and his wife Chris Lilly were also very active in denominational affairs.

In the 1990s, our Society and Friendship Baptist Church created the Whitney Young Adopt-A-School Program and “adopted” Schenectady’s Lincoln Elementary School. Members of both churches have held numerous fund raisers for Lincoln, found agencies to provide after-school enrichment for its students, and continue to help the PTA and to volunteer in Lincoln classrooms.



Randy Jennings filled the role of St. George in the 2000 production of Revels — a saint who in true Unitarian fashion is sued for trying to kill a dragon.

In 1994, the Society added a medieval extravaganza known as “Yuletide Revels” to its December holiday celebrations, a popular event that has been adapted and repeated every other year since then. Revels combines traditions from the pagan solstice, medieval mummings’ plays, and Christmas, and spices the mixture with humorous references to Unitarianism and the current political scene. Under the leadership of writer/director Peter Stewart and music director Gareth Griffiths, Revels has become one of our Society’s most eagerly anticipated events and a successful fund raiser for social justice initiatives.

Over the years, the Society has grown and changed with the times. But are we very different from those Schenectady Unitarians of 100 years ago? Perhaps not. We are still in the business of searching for truth, of accepting responsibility for our own actions, of serving others, and of finding ways to live together in peace and fellowship — in short, of finding ways to draw a circle that takes all others in.



1901 - 2001

OUR FIRST ONE HUNDRED YEARS

The First Unitarian Society of Schenectady

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Views of the beautiful grounds & sculpture surrounding the current church

