

Why We, Our Community, and the World Still Needs UUCS

By

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Each year, at the launch of our annual generosity campaign, I give what we playfully call our “Sermon on the Amount.” I don’t actually talk much about the amount, but it’s a fun tradition and clever nickname. This year, as we consider our financial contributions to our church, I want to remind you about its long history, some of its most important achievements, and why its presence in our lives, our community, and our world remains at least as important today as it ever has.

Let’s begin by imagining what the lives, community, and world must have been like in 1887, when what was then called the Spokane Unitarian Society was founded. I’ve not heard a more succinct description than the one given by our late minister, Rev. Dr. Bill Houff, in his 1979 sermon entitled, “This Church after 92 Years.” Houff said, “The place was still the Wild West in the best—or worst—sense of the term. Gunfights erupted regularly in and around saloons on Riverside and Main Avenues, and it was not uncommon for impromptu horse races to occur on downtown streets.”¹ The same year our church was founded, a Chinese man, said to be a member of the Tong, was publicly hanged at the County Courthouse for murdering a rival gang member. The very day Rev. Charles Wendte, the founder of our church, arrived in Spokane, those he was supposed to meet were away, having joined a posse “dispatched,” as Hauff put it, “to chase marauding Indians.”²

Wendte, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, minister of the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California at the time, was on a six-week mission trip through the Pacific Northwest, in an effort to spread Unitarianism. The former Civil War Drill Sergeant was known for supporting women’s suffrage and for his controversial sermons. Once the posse returned, he went to the Spokane Opera House, designed to seat hundreds, where only fifty people showed up to hear what he had to say. Wendte later recounted, “The shabby, feebly lighted auditorium, the wailing cabinet organ which sustained the singing, and the tiers of empty benches were not inspiring to the preacher, but they proved a challenge to my faith and enthusiasm.” Still, he did his best to inspire those who had gathered. “I have rarely spoken more effectively,” he said. “In that hour our expectations were realized, and the Unitarian Church of Spokane was born.”³ Born that is, with only twenty founding members. Their bylaws stated, “The authority of its belief is reason, the method of finding its beliefs is scientific. Its aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion,” and its, “First principle is freedom of opinion and is subject to no censure for heresy.”⁴

That same year, they called our first minister, Rev. Edwin Wheelock, who set the bar for being the sort of outspoken and controversial figure our founders wanted in their pulpit. Wheelock, also a Harvard Divinity School graduate, who joined Union Army in 1862, came to church with a bounty on his head, wanted “dead or alive” by the state of Virginia for having preached a sermon favorable of abolitionist John’s Brown’s 1859 attack on the Federal armory at Harper’s Ferry. Prior to this, he was the Secretary of the Board of

Education for the Freedman Department, during which he helped open 175 schools to educate 10,000 former slaves in the Louisiana Parishes. In 1865 he moved to Texas where he also established Freedman schools, taught another 10,000 to read and write, founded the Texas Republican Party, became the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and then the Reporter for the Texas State Supreme Court. While here, he helped construct our first church building, a 275-seat meeting house at the corner of Jefferson and Sprague.

In fewer than 25 years the congregation went from twenty members meeting in that small church house to more than 800 attendees gathering at the largest theatre in town. During those early years dues were a nickel a week, but the church was mostly sustained by money raised by our Women's Alliance, who sold baked bean lunches to downtown businessmen for 25 cents. The entire church additionally planned another 25-dollar fundraising project each month.

In those days there weren't any radios or televisions or movie houses, and only a limited amount of reading materials. So, people were eager to go and hear an interesting and unique speaker if and when they could. Who better to provide such presenters than the Unitarians, who were on the forefront of modern thought. That's why their numbers grew so rapidly, especially after the arrival of Rev. John H. Dietrich, our minister from 1911 to 1916. It was because of his popularity that services had to be moved to the Clemmer Theatre, now the Bing, which was owned by one of our members, in order to accommodate as many as a thousand attendees.

Dietrich, as most of you know, came to our church immediately after being convicted of heresy by the Dutch Reform Church in Pittsburg, PA. It was here his brilliant mind found the freedom he needed to begin calling himself a "humanist," and to eventually become known as the Father of Religious Humanism, and a signee of the original *Humanist Manifesto*. Today we can feel proud that of the only two major philosophies to emerge in the U.S., Pragmatism and Humanism, that latter was born right here in the intellectually free and fertile soil of our Spokane congregation.

After Dietrich's departure, M.M. Mangasarian became its interim speaker and drew even larger crowds to the Clemmer Theatre. Mangasarian was a Turkish born Princeton graduate and ordained Presbyterian, before becoming a founder of the Independent Rationalist Society in Chicago in 1900—the original IRS. When he came to Spokane, he was already known for his controversial 1909 book, *The Truth about Jesus*, in which he convincingly argues Jesus was only a myth.

Despite the successes of both Dietrich and Mangasarian, to many the church felt more like a lecture club than a church community, a sentiment that, for better or worse, quickly changed after their departure. The regular crowd immediately shrank to only a handful of the faithful few who no longer needed the Clemmer Theatre and no longer had their

original church building to return to. They existed, as they put it, from “pillar to post,” holding services in places then called *The Casino*, *The Bandbox*, *The Little Theatre*, *Knights of Pythius Hall*, and the *Sun Life Building*. When the Great Depression struck in 1935, they were mostly inactive with no place to meet, but still did what they could to collect and send clothes, shoes, bedding, and whatever else they could rummage to others in need. They even held benefits to support the Social Service Bureau’s Baby Milk fund, to purchase books for the public library, and furnishings for the YMCA.

Their long period of homelessness lasted from 1921 until 1937, when they began meeting at Temple Emanu-El, which the local Jewish community later generously gifted to our congregation. That was the year they turned fifty, an anniversary remembered in the local newspaper, which defined the Unitarian Society as, “Recognizing the right of private judgment, the sacredness of individual convictions, the moral obligation to be faithful to one’s best thoughts, but requiring no assent to any theological creed as a basis of fellowship, the Unitarian society welcomes all who desire to promote the religion of truth, righteousness and freedom.”⁸

Seven years later, in 1944, the Unitarian Society used proceeds from the sale of the Temple to purchase the Patrick Welsh House on 8th Avenue, better known as the home of Spokane’s founder, James Glover—the Glover Mansion. Mrs. Welsh said the sale to a church was, “Quite something, given all the hell we’ve raised in it!” Our congregation enjoyed the space for fifty years, which eventually necessitated constructing a separate sanctuary on the property’s hillside. Having outgrown that, in 1994 they purchased the property and constructed the building we’re now in at the corner of West Whistalks and Government Way.

That’s our origin story, but the more important question is what difference has our Unitarian community made during its 137-year existence? As I said, from the very start our church has done what it can to help others, including during the Great Depression, when it had almost nothing. After becoming more settled during the years since moving into the Glover Mansion, we’ve been able to do far more.

Over the years, the Spokane Unitarian Society became the Unitarian Church of Spokane, and later, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane. Through these name changes it has continuously stood at the forefront of progressive thought and action. We’ve welcomed and amplified the voices of change-makers—historical figures like Howard Taft, Booker T. Washington, and Margaret Sanger in the distant past, and modern speakers like Rick Steves who advocated for marijuana legalization from our pulpit. Our leaders, like Edwin Wheelock, John Dietrich, and M.M. Mangasarian, have often been as controversial as they were visionary, challenging societal norms and sparking crucial dialogues.

Our congregation’s commitment to justice and community service has led us to pioneer many critical initiatives. We were among the first to protest the Vietnam War, led by Rev. Rudy Gilbert, who was passionately on the forefront of this issue. We’ve helped establish the first Planned Parenthood office in Spokane and played a key role in founding the

Spokane chapter of the ACLU, the Fair Housing Center, and the Human Relations Council. In the 1970s and 80s, our members, including Karen Dorn-Steel and Bob Cook, alongside Minister Bill Houff, played a crucial role in exposing and halting the Hanford Nuclear Facility's radiation leaks—a monumental environmental and public health victory.

More recently, our activism has led to significant legislative changes. Our efforts, like our “People of Faith Support Freedom to Marry” campaign, were crucial in passing statewide marriage equality by popular vote in 2012—a first in the nation that sparked a wave of similar laws across the country. Our advocacy also contributed to the state's moratorium on executions several years ago and its complete abolition just last year. As mentioned, we were also instrumental in raising awareness about the importance of decriminalizing marijuana in 2012. If you watch the 2014 documentary “Evergreen: The Road to Marijuana Legalization,” you will find our church is the only religious organization in it.

Of course, our church's influence extends beyond legislative achievements; we've supported our local community in numerous ways, including raising thousands of dollars every year for organizations and causes in our own community, like the Center for Justice, Smart Justice, Second Harvest Food Bank, Meals on Wheels, Bite to Go, Peace Justice Action League, Spokane Alliance, NAMI, Spokane Aids Network, Transitions, Odyssey Youth, and many more. Just a few years, when our friend from another faith, Rev. Happy Watkins came to us and asked if we could help New Hope Baptist Church move from a converted pool hall into a proper church building, we came up with thousands to help, just as we did when those at Morning Star Baptist needed to urgently replace their water line. And we did the same when asked to help lay the financial foundation to establish the West Central Community Center. We strive to be, just as we say each Sunday, a beacon of hope to those in need.

As we reflect on just this bit of our church's enduring legacy, we are reminded that our small efforts today have the power to initiate widespread change. Like pebbles cast upon the sea, they ripple outward, influencing lives and shaping the future, just as those twenty souls huddled together in that drafty Opera House 137 years ago, and those who came after them, kept this congregation going, upholding its liberal values, through good times and challenging times, so that we could be here today, in this haven of sanity and tolerance.

And this brings us to the final part of our question, why the world still needs us. It needs us to have the courage and fortitude to address the challenges before us today, and to assure those who come after us will still have such a haven, and that when they come, they will understand what we have been about, what we are supposed to be about, and what we must go about doing in our lives, in our community, and in the world.

I'm very intentional about mentioning all three of these benefactors of our existence. We can't leave any of them out. We may be Unitarians, but our responsibility is triune. If you find solace and inspiration and purpose and friendship in this congregation, wonderful! You should. We are glad you do, but make no mistake, ours is not a conceited church that thinks only of itself, nor shirks our responsibilities to others, nor hides from the realities of the world by cloistering quietly within our sanctuary walls. Those who would avoid controversy and conflict just to maintain the friendships and cohesion of our current and temporal configuration should think again. Our legacy, the mandate of our founders and those who carried us forward after them, gave too much for us to sacrifice our values and

purpose for such a petty prize. We are not merely the church of Spokane; we are a Unitarian church and always have been. Our historic commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to the free and peaceful expression of ideas, to reason, science, and humanism, and to establishing a far more rational and tolerant society than the world has ever known, cannot be constrained behind these walls; beautiful, bright, and comforting as they are. As in the past, our message and values must continue traveling pillar-to-post, out there in the real world, beyond solitude and sanctuary.

That's why, after I came here, I wanted to livestream our service as soon as possible, so that we could begin to open our sanctuary to the world. In my 2016 sermon, "Beyond Sanctuary," I talked about our need to transcend our physical walls and expand our concept of church to what we do out there, every day, in the larger world. "Sometimes we meet here, in this wonderful building," I said.

But sometimes we meet in the streets, marching gay and straight together in Pride Parades in solidarity with our GBLTQ friends, family, selves, and neighbors. Sometimes we meet standing outside the Federal Building, demonstrating for economic justice; or in front of City Hall demanding equality and justice for Latino children and their families. Sometimes we meet while hosting and attending forums on criminal justice reform, or showing up in support of Smart Justice practices in our community. Sometimes we're in Olympia calling for an end to Capital Punishment in our State. Sometimes we're in Netflix a documentary about legalizing marijuana and bringing an end to the unjust Drug War. Sometimes we're giving public testimony at a hearing on the coal and oil trains coming through our community; or at a City Council Meeting to advocate for workers' rights. Sometimes we're chanting at a Black Lives Matter march or organizing a local rally against Climate Change. Sometimes we're in our workplaces, our schools, with our friends, and even stuck in heavy traffic doing our best to model our Unitarian Universalist values.

In that same sermon, I talked about why we invested in our live-streaming technology, so that we can include members and attendees from anywhere in the world, "because we understand we part of a global village," I said, "and that our sanctuary must extend far beyond just these walls."

Today, in our post COVID lockdown existence, 70 percent of our attendees stream online or attend via Zoom. That's most of us. One of our board members, Dick Burkhart, lives hundreds of miles away on the West side of Washington. We have contributing and valued members in places like Charlotte, North Carolina, Woodbridge, Connecticut, and Edmonton, Alberta, to name just a few of the distant places modern technology helps bring together as one community.

But it is not our technology that keeps us together, it is our shared values and shared commitment to preserving and manifesting liberal religion in our world, during one of our most challenging moments in history. Were it not for our historic congregation and its members near and far, I dare say our Liberal religion—the religion the founders of this church established 137 years ago, and those who came after them, strived against difficult odds to sustain—would have perished. Liberal religion would have died just as the world needs its message of freedom, reason, tolerance, and the dignity of all persons and all people, more than ever. Thanks to this church, on the forefront of the struggle to save Unitarianism, we can now imagine that there might still be people 137 years from now who are inspired by what we've done during our moment in history, people who will keep our light alive because we're keeping it alive now.

Even as a former Southern Baptist, I don't give alter calls, but today I want to ask all of you, near or far, members and friends, to please give as generously as you can to not only help the UU Church of Spokane survive, but to thrive, so that money isn't a concern that gets in the way of our mission to be a nourishing liberal religious home now and in the future. I must admit, the UUA's malicious attempt to force me out of the pulpit several years ago, and its callous disregard for the welfare of this congregation, has led us to financial difficulties, for the first time in decades. We are undaunted by their efforts to erase us from the history books, and we will find a way to survive on a bare bones budget as long as we must. But I don't believe money will be an issue for us. Together we can overcome this and any other barriers in the way of sustaining our community and its mission to the larger world. So, I deeply thank each of you for your generosity and support for our congregation and for being here, helping us continue to make history.

¹ Houff, William Harper, "This Church after 92 Years," Unitarian Church of Spokane, W. 321 Eighth, Spokane, WA, 99204, February 4, 1979.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ McDowell, Esther, *Unitarians in the State of Washington*, Frank McCaffrey Publishers, 1966. p. 97.