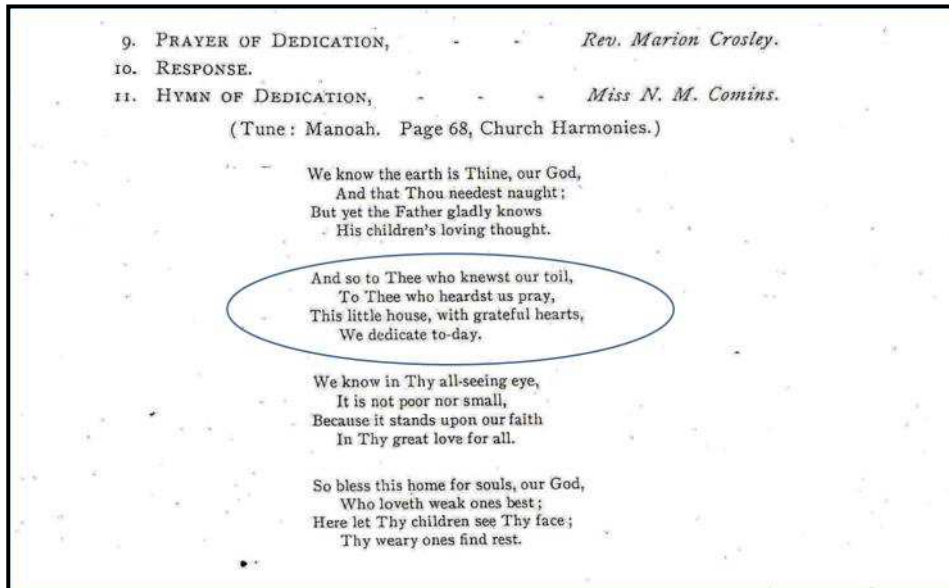


Little House . . . Grateful Hearts: How we came to be

An illustrated sermon by Janis S. Gray

July 1, 2018

The title of today's service was inspired by the words of a Miss N.M. Comins, a teacher at Amherst High School back in 1893. She was also a member of the local Universalist parish. That fall, as it prepared to dedicate its new meetinghouse, she penned new verses to the tune Manoah, a hymn popular with many denominations.



The story leading up to the dedication of that little house begins in the earliest days of the Common Era. Some followers of the teachings of Jesus believed in the oneness – the unity – of God: Jesus was on a divine mission, but he was not part of a trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These followers would later be called Unitarians. Still other followers of Jesus believed in universal salvation: God would never condemn anyone to eternal damnation. They would come to be called Universalists.

What's in a name?

Unity of God → Unitarian

Universal Salvation → Universalist

But after the doctrines of the Trinity and original sin became dogma for Christianity, people who rejected them were persecuted.

Over the centuries, their heretical beliefs continued to pop up here and there, and eventually arrived on our shores. At some of New England's oldest Congregational churches, ministers influenced by the secular rationalism of the Enlightenment began asserting that the doctrine of the Trinity could not be supported by scripture.

Meanwhile, traveling preachers in New England's rural interior began to question the strict Calvinist doctrine of eternal damnation.

These two movements shared beliefs in a benevolent God and in free will (rather than predestination). One minister who ended up serving both movements explained their main differences this way:

The Universalists believe
that God is too good to damn people,

while the Unitarians believe that people
are too good to be damned by God.

Thomas Starr King
1824-1864

By the early 1800s, the growing dominance of the Unitarian faction within Congregationalism at Harvard divinity school in Cambridge alarmed the more traditional Congregationalists – including those in Amherst. One of them was this gentleman: Noah Webster.



Image courtesy of The Jones Library Special Collections, Amherst MA

After moving to Amherst in 1812, Webster purchased 12 acres off the north side of Main Street – including what is now Boltwood Walk -- and established a house and garden. It included an orchard of fine apple trees. By 1817, he was leading the effort to establish a college in Amherst to train seminarians for the orthodox Congregational ministry. After the cornerstone for Amherst College was laid in 1820, he wrote: “We do hope that

this infant institution will grow up to a size which will check the progress of errors which are propagated from Cambridge” – in other words, Unitarianism.

Amherst remained a religiously conservative community. As time passed, not only Congregationalists, but Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists and Catholics came to hold services in town. When Massachusetts Agricultural College (now the University of Massachusetts Amherst) began to expand in the 1870s, students and faculty from the more religiously liberal eastern part of the state began arriving here.

Meanwhile, the Universalists – who were far more evangelical than the Unitarians – were sending missionaries across the eastern U.S. and Canada.



Quillen Hamilton Shinn

Image from the Archives of the Unitarian Universalist Association

One Universalist missionary, Quillen Hamilton Shinn, was credited with starting at least 40 churches – and he is said to have preached in Amherst. Perhaps he is the one who inspired the local Universalists to organize themselves and begin meeting in rented halls. Their first service in February 1887 was led by a preacher supplied by the Universalist Convention of Massachusetts. It took place in the Grand Army Hall in Palmer Block, about where Town Hall is now.



Lovell, John L., 1825-1903, "Palmer Block and Main Street in Amherst," *Digital Amherst*, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.digitalamherst.org/items/show/379>

The Amherst Record would later report that during the service of November 6, 1887, the Universalist supply minister urged his audience to be “active and energetic” in promoting their faith.

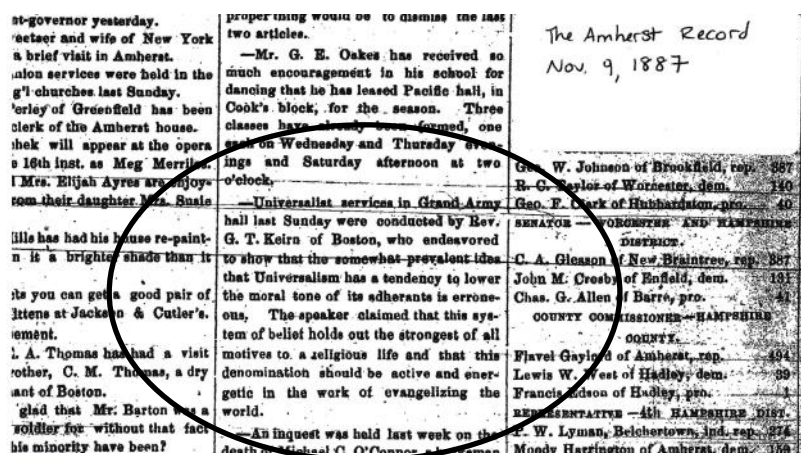


Image courtesy of The Jones Library Special Collections, Amherst MA

Nine days later, they voted to incorporate as The First Universalist Parish of Amherst and to request fellowship from the state convention. Two days later it was granted. A new parish with about 40 families was born.

Universalist Supply ministers continued to offer Sunday services in Grand Army Hall. But on March 13, 1888, Palmer Block burned to the ground.



Lovell, John L., 1825-1903, “Ruins of the Palmer Block in Amherst,” *Digital Amherst*, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.digitalamherst.org/items/show/380>.

The parish then met in Hunt’s Hall, approximately where Collective Copies, in a more recent building, does business today.



In July 1888, the parish called its first settled minister, The Rev. J. Harry Holden.

Under his leadership, things moved quickly. The first Sunday school was organized in September. In January 1889, a committee was instructed to secure land for a meetinghouse. But before it finally found the property it wanted, the parish was forced to move yet again. Hunt's Hall was "taken for the National bank." Parish activities were relocated to first one, then another rental hall in Cook's Block.



Lovell, John L., 1825-1903, "Cook's Block in Amherst after renovation," *Digital Amherst*, accessed November 1, 2017, <http://www.digitalamherst.org/items/show/408>.

In 1891, Frederick H. Hitchcock wrote in his *Handbook of Amherst, Massachusetts*, "That portion of Pleasant Street which extends northward . . . is most aptly named. For the distance of a quarter of a mile, great straight-trunked elms line each side of the road, almost uniting their branches overhead, and sheltering in the warm summer time many a tuneful katydid." He goes on to identify the owners of dwellings on each side of the street, adding that on the east, "The Universalist Society has a site for a church building here."



North Pleasant Street.

From The Handbook of Amherst, Massachusetts, Frederick H. Hitchcock, 1891

He goes on to identify the owners of dwellings on each side of the street, adding that on the east, “The Universalist Society has a site for a church building here.”

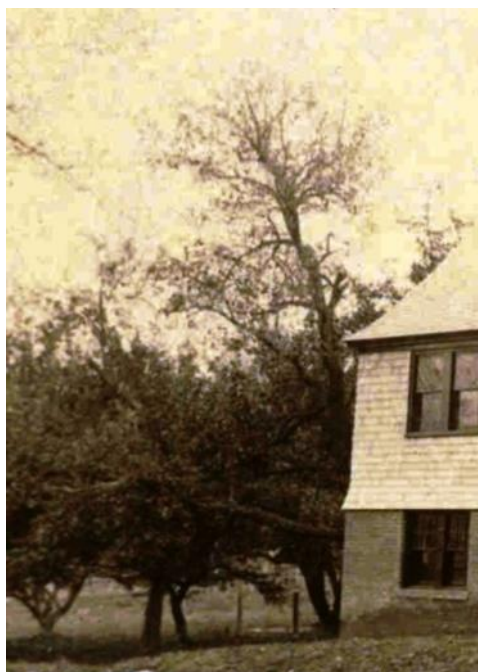
By March 1892, the parish members had pledged \$1,500 for the project. Because it would be a “mission church,” the Universalist Convention of Massachusetts and the national organization of Universalist women said they would help, too.

Loring & Phipps, an architectural firm from Boston, was hired to design an Arts & Craft style meetinghouse. Haskins & Bosworth, builders from Amherst, broke ground in October, 1892. In September, 1893, construction was complete. The meetinghouse was dedicated on October 12, 1893 . . . on land that had once belonged to Noah Webster!



Image courtesy of The Jones Library Special Collections, Amherst MA

I like to think that behind the meetinghouse we see some of the “fine apple trees” he’d planted.



Our photograph seems to have been the basis for the illustration that made Page 1 of *The Christian Leader*, a national Universalist newspaper, on October 19, 1893.



The accompanying article on an inside page reported the news with almost unseemly glee. "The unexpected has happened. A Universalist church has been dedicated in Amherst, Mass. . . . The State Convention has been a strong right hand to the new movement. The movement in Amherst should be assisted by our conventions, year after year, for ten years, or more, if necessary. The ministry of a church in a college town is far reaching.

" . . . Rev. Mr. Holden has stood at his post like a faithful soldier; he has declared the message of Christianity, as he understands it, to the people . . . He has won a victory in Amherst! Mark it well: a Gibraltar has been successfully stormed."

Unfortunately, we have no images of the original interior. We know the pulpit, a small pump organ and section for the choir were on the south side of the sanctuary. The Sunday school was on the east side, behind "folding doors" that could be moved to increase the sanctuary's seating capacity when necessary. The minister's office and an infant room were also to the east. The basement held a kitchen, pantry, dining room, toilet rooms, furnace and store rooms.

The total cost of the project was about \$7,500, including furnishings.

Many of Amherst's *Unitarians*, recognizing they had much in common with the Universalists, began sending their children to its Sunday school. In 1895, the Rev. Holden, he who had won the victory in Amherst, announced he was moving on. Supply ministers filled in until a new pastor could be called.

But then, in 1897, the Universalist Convention of Massachusetts withdrew its significant financial support – after declaring in 1893 that it would support this parish for ten years or more, if necessary. What happened?

I have no proof, but this is my guess:



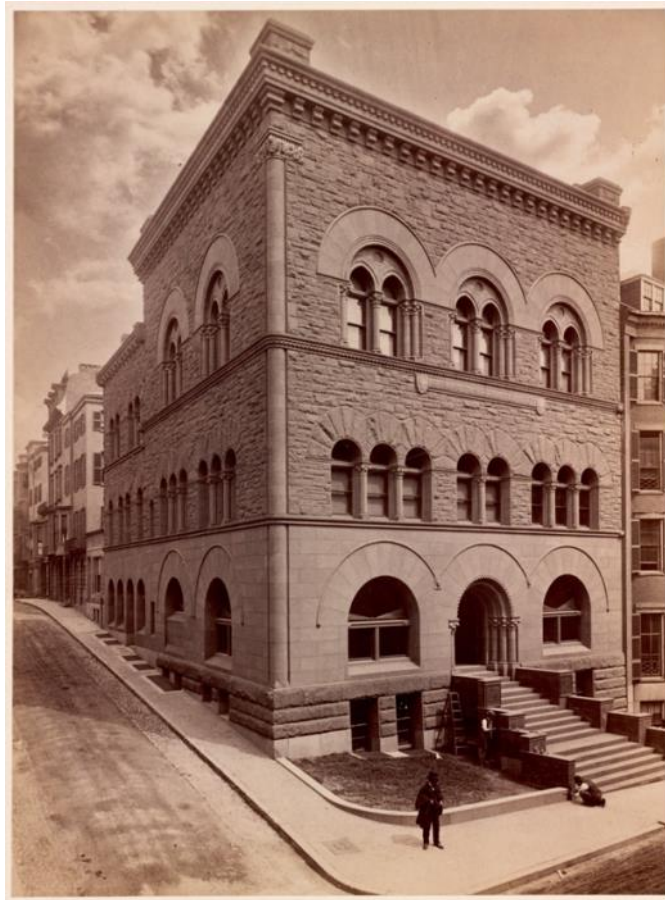
*The recent panic - scene in the New York Stock Exchange on the morning of Friday, May 5th /
Drawn by Charles Broughton from sketches on the spot. From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper,
1893 May 18, p. 322.*

<https://lccn.loc.gov/2003688493>

The Panic of 1893 began the worst depression in the nation's history. Banks failed, some 50 railroads went under, and thousands upon thousands of businesses closed. By 1897, the economy was only beginning to recover.

In 1898, the Rev. Joseph H. Crooker, a *Unitarian* supply minister, came to Amherst for a month to serve the Unitarians. They told him their friends the Universalists were in financial difficulty, and would soon be forced to close their doors. Joseph Crooker and his wife, the Rev. Florence Crooker – a *Universalist* minister! – were alarmed by the pending loss of what they considered the only liberal church in Amherst.

They brought this to the attention of the American Unitarian Association, which agreed to buy the Universalists' meetinghouse.



American Unitarian Association, Beacon Street, Boston

Image courtesy of Digital Commonwealth

On a morning that November, 1898, the members of First Universalist Parish voted to transfer their membership and property to the American Unitarian Association; that very afternoon, the Association gave a new entity, Unity Church, its charter.

It seems fitting that the Crookers, one a Unitarian, the other a Universalist, were responsible for a local merger of the two faiths 64 years before the national merger.

Unity Church grew in membership, and by 1918, there were plans to remodel the building to better accommodate its numbers. A new minister, the Rev. Henry Ives, was called in 1919.



Image courtesy of The Jones Library Special Collections, Amherst MA

After remodeling began in 1923, North Carolina pine was brought in for a new floor for an enlarged dining room in the basement. The lumber carried a “house fungus,” which crept up the existing timbers, reducing the wood to a mass that crumbled in the hand. To save the building, the Rev. Ives appealed to the American Unitarian Association for help. It replied that it could offer no financial aid, but would be able to give the church two sets of valuable stained glass memorial windows, as they might arouse interest in Amherst.

As the minister later wrote, “There seemed little connection between the kind offer and our real needs.”

The windows had been commissioned around 1888 for All Souls Unitarian Church in Roxbury, Mass.



They were created by the rival studios of Louis Comfort Tiffany and John La Farge. The Roxbury building was to be sold due to the merger of that congregation and another Unitarian church. The windows’ original donors had stipulated that if the building changed denominations, the windows should be given to another Unitarian church.

You may recall the front of Unity Church – by now a different color – had three long panels of leaded glass windows.



Image courtesy of The Jones Library Special Collections, Amherst MA

It turned out the Tiffany window, Angel of the Lilies, also had three long panels, beneath a bank of six smaller transoms.



Our minister decided to visit All Souls in Roxbury. The architect for the Amherst renovations tried to dissuade him. "It is axiomatic," he said, "that windows cannot be transferred from one building to another. There is only a chance in one hundred thousand. Still if you are persistent, take my assistant and measure them."

"Later in the day," wrote the Rev. Ives, "there came a triumphant cry. The one chance in one hundred thousand had worked. The panels composing the Angel of the Lilies were only three-eighths of an inch different in width from the panels already in Unity Church."

The other gift from the American Unitarian Association – a John La Farge triptych depicting John the Evangelist, Jesus and Paul – would have to be set into a different wall.



The Rev. Ives and the congregation somehow raised enough money to defeat the fungus, do extensive repairs and remodeling, and pay for the installation of the windows. The Tiffany was placed where the meeting-house's original plain leaded glass windows had been. And the La Farge ended up inspiring a revised layout for the sanctuary. A new chancel was built on the east side to create a focal point for the triptych, and the pulpit was placed on the north side in front of it.



The new chancel in the sanctuary, date unknown

Image courtesy of The Jones Library Special Collections, Amherst MA

The chancel also housed the choir and an 1886 Steere & Turner pipe organ, newly purchased from Massachusetts Agricultural College by a founder of Unity Church and donated in memory of his wife.



The church was re-dedicated with much fanfare in 1925.

The stories behind the Tiffany and La Farge stained glass windows are far too long to share here. There's information on our website. Or come by this Thursday during Amherst Arts Night Plus, and I'll tell you about them myself.

Fast forward . . .



After a highly successful ministry, the Rev. Ives resigned in 1929 to travel the world with his wife. In the decades that followed, we had ministers who stayed for a few years, a number who stayed only one year, and at times no minister at all. Attendance rose and fell. But Unity Church persisted, developing a strong culture of lay leadership along the way.

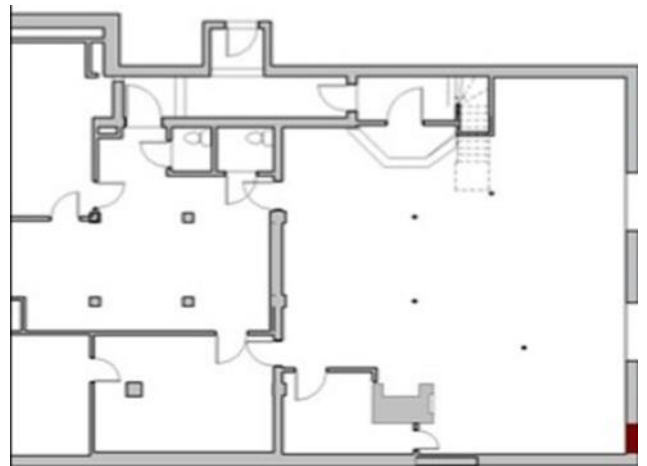
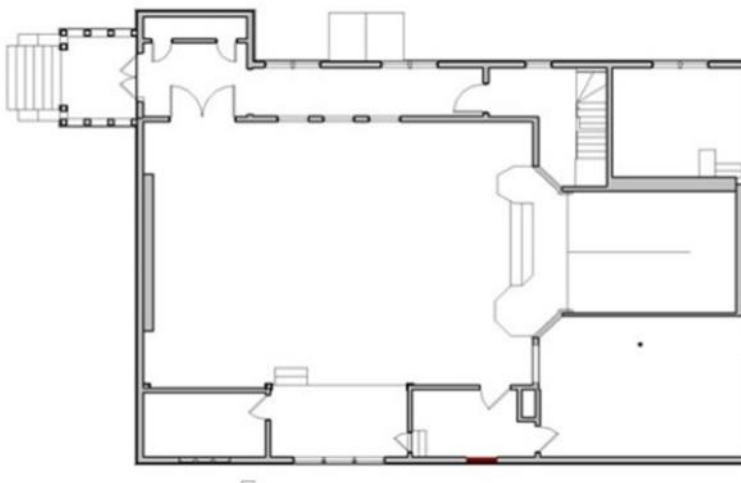
Meanwhile, Humanism was profoundly influencing Unitarian and Universalist thought. To quote Mark Harris, a Unitarian Universalist historian, “These Humanists said that God was not necessary to a worthwhile modern religion. What is necessary . . . is that such a religion espouse the highest human ethics, the highest human aspirations, and those things that bind humanity together and promote a better world.”

In addition, both Unitarians and Universalists had long sought wisdom from faiths from around the globe. Each had championed abolitionism, women’s rights, and other causes to create a more just society. So in 1961, the two denominations joined forces as the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

A year later, Unity Church changed its name to the Unitarian Society of Amherst. In 1985, it finally went the rest of the way to become the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst. In 2001, we became an official Unitarian Universalist Welcoming Congregation, one that affirms people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. In 2007, our work toward a healthier, more sustainable future led to our accreditation by the Unitarian Universalist Association as a Green Sanctuary.

Membership was growing again. Our sanctuary was sometimes crowded, and our Sunday school, in what had once been the dining room in the basement, was bursting at the seams.

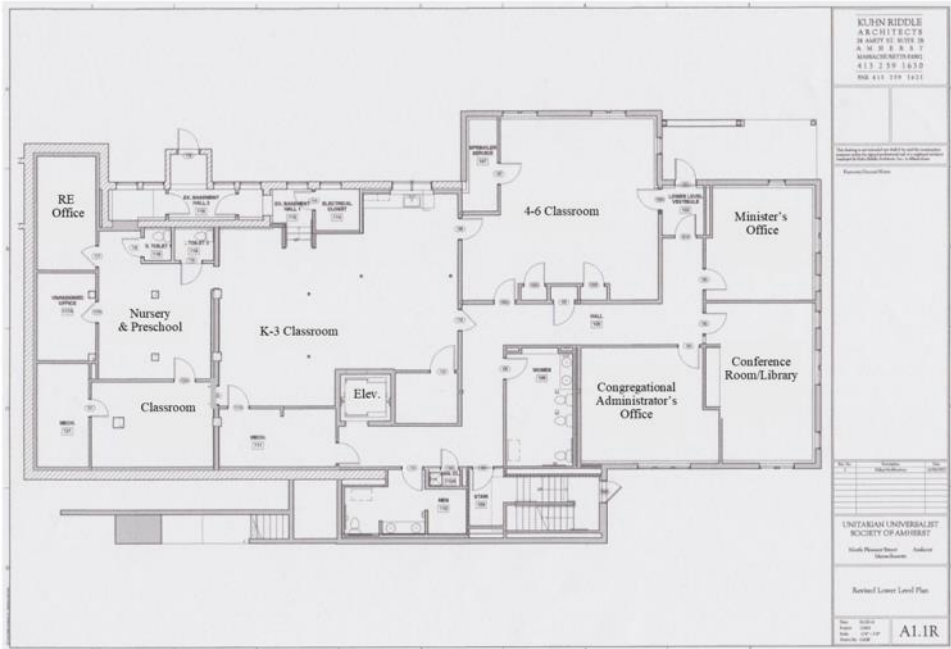
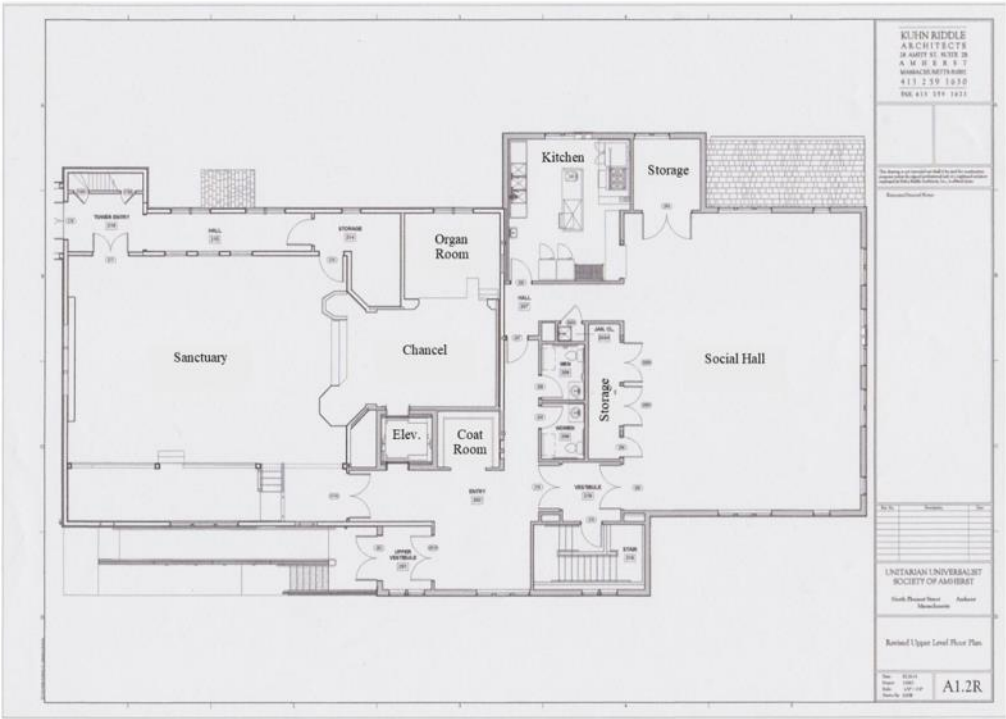
Upstairs, downstairs . . . *the way we were.*



We'd welcomed the Rev. Alison Wohler as minister in 2005. She gave us a fresh sense of energy and optimism, and in 2008, we unanimously agreed that our 1893 building, with its cramped Sunday school, lack of social hall and meeting rooms, and restrooms that were effectively inaccessible, no longer met our needs. It was limiting our ability to nourish our spirits and help heal our world. We debated moving to another building, building anew in another town, expanding the existing building, or tearing it down and starting over on site. Fortunately, we had always owned the land immediately behind it – where those apple trees had grown. Few people in Amherst realized the “Rao’s Parking Lot” was on property we leased to the town!

We voted to stay put in the center of Amherst, and expand to the east. Kuhn Riddle Architects worked with us on plans to upgrade and remodel the existing structure and double its size. Wright Builders would be our general contractor.

Building our future . . .



But first, given how much hammering and rattling of walls the project would involve, we had to remove our stained glass windows for their own protection.

The La Farge triptych was in very bad shape, and it would have lost its place in the sun when its wall became enclosed. Some of our members had also expressed the feeling that its very Christian imagery no longer represented us today. At a congregational meeting, we voted to “re-home” the La Farge if we could. The goal of our stained glass committee was to keep it intact, in New England, and available for public viewing. A collector purchased it to donate it to the art museum at Boston College. It has since been restored and is on permanent and public display.

The Tiffany was also in dire need of rescue. We rejoiced when Town Meeting voted to award us a generous grant from the Town of Amherst's Community Preservation Fund Program for re-leading, cleaning and repair.

Construction on our building project began at the end of May 2013. A big challenge was finding a place where we could meet on Sundays while work was under way. We ended up renting space on Sunday afternoons from First Congregational Church! Noah Webster would have been aghast!

The renovations and new addition were completed in the spring of 2014.



I think the Universalists who received their parish charter 130 years ago would be amazed by what the “little house” they dreamed of had become. It allowed us to expand our ministry not only to ourselves, but to our larger community. It’s increased options for organizations and individuals seeking space for meetings, receptions, lectures, concerts, recitals, classes and other events.

In partnership with Craig’s Doors, an organization that helps people who are experiencing homelessness, we also serve a free community breakfast to as many as 120 guests every Wednesday in our large social hall.

But I think Amherst's first Universalists would be most surprised not by the changes to their building, but by our theological diversity. Remember, they considered themselves part of Christianity *as they understood it*. Today, we span the arc from theist to atheist and everything in-between.

The Rev. Wohler reluctantly retired from full-time parish ministry in 2016 due to health. As part of the search process for a new minister, our congregation completed a survey last fall. It asked:

"In addition to Unitarian Universalism, what faith traditions are important to your religious life?"



The sum of the figures exceeds 200%! Just as no one label fits Unitarian Universalism, no one theological label fits most of us as individuals.

Our similarities and our differences are what have brought us into the embrace of Unitarian Universalism. And in Amherst, we are grateful for a spiritual home that is neither poor nor small.