

## A UNION HALL WITH MUSIC

My introduction to Unitarian Universalism was through my atheist father. A CIO organizer in the pre-war shipyards, he used his GI Bill to establish himself as a building contractor. Now considered “management”, Dad could no longer hang out at the union hall and he began to meet with some of his old confederates at gatherings of a newly formed Unitarian fellowship. As the fellowship grew and his business became successful, Dad helped the group to purchase property and to build a church. While he contributed money and a great deal of time to this congregation, as far as I know, Dad never actually joined the fellowship or the church, but he told me that one of the best ways to find common ground and to make common cause in any community was to find the local Unitarians.

When I moved to Madison, Wisconsin in 1967, I followed Dad’s advice, and was soon plugged into Women’s Strike for Peace and other anti-war activities, which often met in the UU church, and I had a number of UU friends, but like Dad, I was a fellow traveler, and never signed up. On arriving in Williamsburg, 3 years later, I accepted an invitation to attend a meeting of the local UU Fellowship here, and would meet a number of folks who later helped form this congregation. I occasionally went to fellowship meetings and was even a speaker during one of the services, but did not consider joining.

About 20 years ago, when Fred Gilbertson invited us to a covered dish supper to talk about forming a Williamsburg UU church, my initial reaction was that I had already found common ground and common cause, in Williamsburg, and in fact, already knew most of the people who were organizing this effort. I’d see Fred at work and others at social or political events or at the grocery store, so why a church? I’d long since abandoned my mother’s religion and was not looking for a replacement.

On the other hand, my husband Franz is one of those rare ‘cradle Unitarians’ and I’d never

met a UU I didn't like, so we said yes and joined a group at Mike and Genevieve McGiffert's house, where we sat around after dinner, talking about the possibility of establishing a UU congregation and what it might offer us. As several people discussed their wish to provide a spiritual home for their children, I was remembering that our youngest kid was away at college, and also remembering that Dad and I always felt that one of the best features of Unitarianism was that it was not a "real church". Then, Genevieve, in her inimitable fashion, said that she didn't have children and she certainly wasn't thinking about going to church for her cat! After we got through laughing, Gen shared her vision of a moral community where spirituality could be expressed through the arts. Ahhh, I thought, a union hall with music.... and I was hooked!

Soon, the dinner discussion groups moved from living rooms and merged into the auditorium at the library, where on a wintry day in 1989, about a hundred of us signed a charter to form the Williamsburg Unitarian Universalist Church and voted to call a minister. A few months later, Franz and I made an annual pledge and left the country for a year. We paid our pledge, but left the heavy lifting to others.

On our return, we found many new faces, with Sunday services and religious education being held at Clara Byrd Baker School, while the minister and weekday events were housed in what is now called the Fahs House. For several years, WUU's camped at the school on Sunday mornings, until, thanks to the generosity of our members and friends, as well as that of UU's in other communities who supported our efforts through the UUA, we were able to build a permanent and visible home for liberal religion in Williamsburg.

A permanent and visible home for liberal religion, not a Union Hall with music, not NPR or the ACLU, not the Sierra Club or the NAACP, but a congregation of individuals bound by a chosen faith, worshipping in a home of their own.

Each time we turn another page in the membership book, I reflect on how many friends we've made through this church, and how grateful I am that there were those with the vision and energy to build this congregation, a congregation that I hope will always be here to welcome those who come seeking common ground and common cause within a spiritual community. Because, they need us, and we need them, and, if anyone asks, we say, "yes, this is a real church".