

All Souls Unitarian Church

To Rev. R. Lester Mondale in Kansas City:

February 6, 1951

[Boston]

I have just learned of the loss of the Kansas City church by fire. Having seen you so rarely in recent years, I don't know whether to express deep regret or confess high rejoicing. I recall seeing the old Third Church of Chicago go up in flames. The higher the flames soared the loftier my spirit was. Whether you had any such response I cannot guess; perhaps I should not even own to this imbalance in me.

Though I have not seen the church in more than fifteen years, I recall it as a pleasant auditorium with limited facilities equally pleasant for other purposes. I have no doubt that you have had to ponder a move and that you have been filled with problems as to where to go, what kind of building to erect, etc.

This is just a note sympathizing with any mood that may be yours and to convey my blessings.

Harold Buschman, ASUC member and Professor at U.M.K.C. advised RBB that Lester Mondale had resigned from the ASUC pulpit. RBB listed several possible candidates for the Kansas City ministry and included the following:

January 21, 1952

[Boston]

I share your feeling that Kansas City offers an unusual opportunity to a Unitarian minister. That opportunity has never been exploited as I would like to see it exploited, in the twenty and more years that I have known the church. Some good fellow ought to recognize the possibilities and grasp them.

To Rev. Lester Mondale in Kansas City:

March 19, 1952

[Boston]

For a time I have been thinking very seriously of returning to a pulpit. It is not that I have been unhappy in this job, but on the eve of the half-century mark

one is bound to think about what he wants to do with his life or what is left of it. My experiences in the ministry lead me to the conclusion that it is there that I want to fill out my career. With this I know you will be sympathetic.

I will want to know much more about your ministry in Kansas City than I now I do. Notably, I want to know about the latter phase of it. While I am willing to to to work and to put whatever talents I have into the opportunity given me, I would be somewhat reluctant to endure again what was mine to endure in the early years in Minneapolis. The situation undoubtedly is different, but the tensions created by a dissident minority bother hell out of me. At least I don't go looking for such tensions.

The likelihood is that I'll be seeing you, at least I suspect that is the likelihood. Meanwhile if you have things to say to me I hope you will be willing to get them on paper so that I can be pondering their significance.

To Ed Wilson who had passed on the comments of Col. Ruby Garrett, member of ASUC and Board Member, AHA.

March 26, 1952

[Boston]

Many thanks for your letter of March 25th.

Garrett's evaluation of the Unitarian scene in Kansas City is approximately what I have heard from other sources. There is undoubted factionalism, yet no one seems to feel that it runs deep enough to endanger wholesome group life.

I have written to Lester Mondale after talking to him on the phone. He has not yet replied though I expect that each mail will bring a response.

Your commendation of my talents ought to go along [sic] way in convincing Garrett that I am a man needed in Kansas City. You're too generous; in this instance, too uncritical.

I have felt for a year or more (perhaps because I am approaching my fiftieth birthday) that I ought to think solemnly about the remainder of my career. For a variety of reasons I incline toward a church, particularly a church within the borders of the Western Conference. There I am at home; there I feel that my best work can be done.

Having reached such a decision, I had to acknowledge that there are relatively few churches in a position to pay a livable salary, livable for me has to include extraordinary expenditures on behalf of Kate. Then, too, a forthright Humanist has to recognize that relatively few churches are interested in him. Kansas City is obviously one; Madison another.

There are many attractive features in Madison -- a great capital city with a grand liberal inheritance despite Joe McCarthy. It is a favorable location. When you add the features of a new and interesting building with a great university near at hand, you have an almost perfect set-up. Upon inquiry, I learned that Madison could not pay a salary in keeping with what I am used to for my needs. With this impression fixed in my mind, I made overtures to Randall Hilton regarding Kansas City.

Their response was prompt. They invited Ilse to visit there as well as the prospective minister. No commitments have been made or implied. However, I am genuinely interested and if the situation appears to be what has been reported I shall in all likelihood accept the call if it is extended.

To Dr. and Mrs. Harold Buschman in Kansas City:

May 20, 1952

[Boston]

As undoubtedly you know informally and officially, we have decided to accept the Kansas City call. We anticipate no easy time of it, but still are convinced that an opportunity exists, an opportunity that may in some measure be illuminated by my own experience.

Measuring the job from top to bottom and in its breadth, I conclude that it is in many ways not unlike the situation that was mine in Minneapolis. That, I was able to weather and, if I do say so myself, make a contribution. My hide is tough and my patience longer than some.

To Dr. Eric Mamelok, commenting on his upcoming move to Kansas City:

May 29, 1952

[Boston]

The prospect there is substantial. The church is in sound condition and preparing in the near future to build a new building. There is little competition for a Unitarian church in that town, the usual strains of Protestant modernism being almost a total lack. I have confidence that much can be done.

To Dr. Rowland Burnstan in Paris who had wished RBB well in his move to Kansas City and who asked about the plans of Lester Mondale, former minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Kansas City:

June 30, 1952

[Boston]

Lester Mondale has said that he is not a candidate for another pulpit "at the present time." He is going to spend a year at his place in the Ozarks, during which he hopes to write a novel. The conclusion of his ministry in Kansas City was not a happy one. There is bitterness in him, more bitterness, I think, than the situation warrants. Had he left two years ago, he would have been remembered as a ministerial giant. In the last two years, however, he flirted for a considerable period of time with the Ethical Society of St. Louis. This flirtation caused a somewhat unstable situation in the Kansas City church, resulting in Lester's resignation.

There is no question at all but what the church is in infinitely better condition that it was thirteen years ago when Lester went there. Indeed, there must have been something of the heroic in him or he never would have undertaken such a job. As things stand now there is every reason to feel that the next several years will be significant ones.

To Rev. Randall Hilton, Executive Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference in Chicago, IL:

November 18, 1952

[Kansas City]

Send us ten copies of "Freedom Moves West" [Unitarian history by Charles Lyttle].

I have high hopes of getting this book read in the congregation, but as you know, denominational interest is not among the existing aspects of Kansas City

Unitarianism.

To Rev. John Ruskin Clark, Jr. in Concord, NH:

January 29, 1953

[Kansas City]

We are thoroughly happy in Kansas City. There is much to do, much to plan. By New England standards and 85th anniversary sounds unimpressive. By western Missouri standards, in Unitarian terms, eighty-five years is quite a span. I am impressed with the eagerness of these folks to get at some of the basic themes. I have tried to think of a New England church familiar to me where fifty to seventy-five persons would turn out of a Monday evening to think about the contents of the new testament. By gosh it's true here, and I rejoice in such truth.

To Fred Putney in Lincoln, NE: (The Braggs had just suffered through their first Kansas City summer.)

August 5, 1953

[Kansas City]

We are hoping to get away next week for at least a fortnight in Colorado. If you have not left Lincoln I suspect that you will have in the fairly near future. It was reported to me a day or two ago that the only reason for remaining in Kansas City during the summer is that in the event you die there is time off in hell. It has been a tough season.

To Rev. Ernest Kuebler in Boston:

September 22, 1953

[Kansas City]

We spent the summer here and frankly, it was God-awful. We are clear that it will be never again. Perhaps you have heard about the nature of the summer in West Missouri from other sources.

To Miss Olive Brooks and Mrs. Ellen Krause in Minneapolis:

October 16, 1953

[Kansas City]

Thank you too for the program of the Minnesota Conference. I wish I might have been there. Kansas City is an isolated place in Unitarian terms. There is no Unitarian Church within two-hundred miles. I miss the association with my colleagues.

To Miss Laura Henry who wrote RBB about the new building for First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis:

March 30, 1954

[Kansas City]

What a joy it was to hear from you. And how kind you were to say such pleasant things about the new building and my part in its realization. It is indeed a noble thing. From what I gather, it is meeting all requirements and has fulfilled all anticipations.

The situation here is not wholly unlike what it was in Minneapolis during our occupancy of the old Center. The site of Unitarian House here in Kansas City is much more attractive. We have spacious grounds and are flanked by even more spacious grounds of the Art Institute and the Conservatory of Music. The house itself, now fifty years old, was built by a protégé of Louis Sullivan. It is still a significant building though it has for our purpose the limitations of a residence rather than a building of institutional sorts. There is ample room for an Auditorium which we hope to build in the not dim future.

The temper of the town is not that of Minneapolis. This is the Bible belt. Popular religion tends to be of a fundamentalist variety, though there is some modernist influence. Both membership in the church and attendance grow. It is my hope that the Auditorium of the Art Institute where we now hold our services, will become inadequate.

Month by month I avidly read the Minneapolis Unitarian and I rejoice in all that happens and in all the promise.

It will surprise you to know that Susan is a freshman in college. Kate progresses admirably. At the moment she is convalescing after a tonsillectomy.

We enjoy a very pleasant house, the first one we have ever had. Prior to coming here, we always lived in an apartment. Our yard front and back allows for

flowers and some sense of spaciousness.

To William Roger Greeley in Lexington, MA

November 20, 1956

[Kansas City]

A letter of mine will seem to you a voice out of the receding past. Whatever it may seem, I want your counsel and suggestion on a problem that is mine.

Almost six years ago, the building of this church in use for 45 years, was destroyed by fire. A year later in early 1952 the church purchased a site on which stands an old residence in the Louis Sullivan tradition. This was named Unitarian House and has been used as the center for various church activities and for our church school and offices. We have slightly more than an acre and a half of land, our nearest neighbors being the Conservatory of Music and the Institute of Art. Not distant from us is the distinguished Nelson Art Gallery, a handsome new building of the Midwest Research Institute, and an emerging cultural center. In my judgment, no Unitarian Church in the land occupies a more favorable position in a stable neighborhood.

In 1952 an architect was retained who projected an auditorium which he was confident could be built for something in the neighborhood of \$125,000. In the autumn of 1954 we had a fundraising campaign which yielded approximately \$125,000. With money in hand and pledged, bids were asked on the building and no bid was much less than \$200,000.

Efforts were made to cut back size, but there was little satisfaction with any of the modifications. Early this year, in accordance with the terms of the contract with the architect, we paid him and ended the relationship.

There has been much hard work and solemn thought put into the matter in recent months. During the summer the Board and Building Committee met frequently, interviewed architects, reviewed financial needs, etc. You well know the anxieties that go into any such enterprise.

We have apparently reached a situation wherein a good counselor is one of the hopes of breaking through to achievement. It may well be that we can make such a break-through, but this is not wholly assured.

To Agnes Birkhead in Falls Church, VA

September 25, 1958

[Kansas City]

I really believe that we are not far away from the beginning of construction of a new building here. We have had our bumps and difficulties in the enterprise, but things now seem to be firming up. We have \$50,000 roughly in cash and assurance from the bank that it is interested in a loan, and recently assurance from some friends of the church that they are eager to help us out. George Goldman and Hyman Vile were at my house last Monday evening, and they made us confident that they would seek some support for us. Construction costs are, of course, outlandish, but I see no possibility of their being lower in a foreseeable time. This is the period for us to take hold and do what must be done.

I have not been in Washington since last January, and then for only a matter of hours. I dropped in to see Muriel Davies. I had not seen her since Powell's death. That was a loss that we could scarcely afford. Frederick Eliot's end was sad, but it had a kind of appropriateness about it; he worked himself to the bitter end. The scene changes, doesn't it? I realize in looking through the Yearbook that the time when I knew all living ministers has receded to nonexistence. What a slight span it takes to change one's status from "one of the younger men" to "one of the older men." I was telling Mrs. Massey, our church secretary, only this morning of my visits with you in the early thirties.

It doesn't seem a long time ago, but, dammit, it is a long time ago.

To Rev. Ellsworth Smith in Chicago:

March 31, 1959

[Kansas City]

You will. . . find things looking up Unitarian-wise in Kansas City. At our Congregational meeting last evening the Board was instructed by an overwhelming vote, 154 to 16 precisely, to proceed immediately with the construction of a new building. As you might well expect, the minority was comprised of those who would find it difficult to build a new building if all the funds necessary were presented to the church. It was a good meeting in every detail.

To Lester Mondale in Philadelphia:

September 11, 1959

[Kansas City]

You would like to see the building here. While not completed by any means (we probably won't occupy it until after the opening of 1960), the lines and texture are fairly clear. It is, I think, one of the best buildings that the Unitarians have done in recent years. While austere in some sense, it still sings.

To Agnes Birkhead, Falls Church, VA, who had wired congratulations to All Souls Church on the occasion of the dedication of its new building:

February 25, 1960

[Kansas City]

I wish you might have been here last evening. Despite the remains of a wicked snow storm we had a large company. It was a typical sort of Unitarian gathering — warm-hearted and full of self-approval. Nonetheless, it was a good wholesome occasion.

I read the telegram you so thoughtfully sent. Several people after the service spoke of you and about you. You would have, had you been present, found many new faces, too few old ones. Such is the way life goes. I preached in Evanston a little more than a year ago and in a large congregation picked out not more than a half a dozen familiar faces, and two of them were familiar from Minneapolis days, not Evanston.

The building is not only good, but I believe significant. It is clean in line and colorful; there is nothing somber about the interior. The office and study, particularly the latter, have restrained elegance about them. The auditorium is superb, though of course there are those who would like it a little different. Such is life ecclesiastical and otherwise. When pictures are available be sure that I will send you some.

Incidental to the dedication we have an historical display. Dr. Austin did a very competent job in bringing the data together, and Libby Powers, an artist, put the material into appealing displays. Of course, we had a picture of the old church, and by hook, crook, and persistence Dr. Austin had a picture of every one of the ministers, save Paul Dansingberg. There is a view of Kansas City in the

seventies with the first church location identified. Chairmen of boards, secretaries, treasurers, etc. are all noted. You would be impressed with it.

To Rev. Alan Deale in Rockford, IL:

March 1, 1960

[Kansas City]

Sad to relate, there are in existence no adequate pictures of our new building. Bad weather overtook the late stages of construction and we have not yet been able to landscape. Once that phase is completed pictures will be taken, and I shall remember your request for them.

The Dedication Book has a rough representation. As you will note, it is far from adequate, though it will give you an impression of what stands here. We had an unusual architectural problem in that the building stands alone in a wedge reaching out into a boulevard. Windows in the auditorium would have made anyone attending an evening meeting dizzy, since automobile lights would play on the interior walls. The lounge, a large area to the rear of the auditorium, has large glass surfaces.

I am impressed that you are confronting so quickly the problems imposed by growth. We are still renting space from the Conservatory of Music across the street – space for half our church school. Our second unit we hope to build in the not dim future, and that ought to take care of all our church school needs until it is feasible to think of another Unitarian church in this metropolitan area.

To Rev. Alfred Hobart in Birmingham, AL:

March 8, 1960

[Kansas City]

Our dedication is over and we begin to feel at home in the new building. It is rather easy to feel at home, since it has about it a restrained elegance. My study is an achievement of more than ordinary proportions. I have never known its like here or elsewhere. For the first time in my life I feel that my deserts have been met.

To Agnes Birkhead in Falls Church, VA:

January 9, 1962

[Kansas City]

We move forward. By all indications we will soon have the education wing. Believe me, we sorely need it. Church schools are becoming the major problem in most Unitarian churches. We are bulging in every seam, and even the hospitality of the Conservatory does not relieve the pressure. The plain fact is that the new wing is not going to resolve our problems of space. There ought to be, as perhaps I have said to you before, a second Unitarian church in the area in the not dim future; and in the not remote future a third and a fourth. It will take some doing, but not beyond the range of possibility.

To Hubert Butler in County Kilkenny, Ireland:

September 10, 1962

[Kansas City]

I was well aware of Sinclair Lewis' extended stay in Kansas City during the preparation of "Elmer Gantry." Birkhead* was my close friend and occasionally I visited him here. On one such visit Lewis was at the Birkhead house. The fact is that Lewis sought out Unitarian ministers not only in the case of Birkhead, but others. He was very close for some months while in Duluth, Minnesota, to John Malick, then the Unitarian minister in that city. Malick is now dead. Some years ago Lewis telephoned to me while I was minister in Minneapolis, and asked that I meet him at his hotel. For several hours he put questions to me about local and state politics. While the Birkhead attachment was the most marked, it was not unique.

I read Schorer's book during the summer. It is clearly the most definitive study of Lewis that has been done.

Clearly, "Elmer Gantry" was satire – satire in a neglected area of man's experience. Lewis knew very well what he was doing and so did Birkhead, as some of the newspaper reports revealed. This was a good field in which to work at such a job, because there was, and there still is, a surprising volume of anti-intellectualism hereabouts. Perhaps a more southerly city would have afforded even better material, but there was plenty of it right here.

**Leon M. Birkhead, Minister at All Souls Church, Kansas City, MO 1917-1939*

To Richard Righter, an attorney in Kansas City, who, on behalf of Mrs. Simpson, had offered to sell her property for \$100,000. The large house and land which are adjacent to All Souls Church were purchased by the church in the 1980s.

December 21, 1964

[Kansas City]

Regretfully I report the financial resources of the Church are such that we could not realistically hope to purchase Mrs. Simpson's property at the amount mentioned in your letter. It is now obvious that we misjudged the value of her property. The figure we had in mind was considerably less.

We had thought that we might be able to purchase Mrs. Simpson's property for a sum not remote from \$25,000 in cash, leaving Mrs. Simpson the right, as has always been implied, to live there for life. One member of the Board, during our discussions of the matter, mentioned that with the Church as a substantial owner of the property, the property taxes might be lessened; and if any part of the transaction might be treated as a charitable donation, Mrs. Simpson's income taxes over a five- or six-year period might be very considerably lessened.

With reluctance we reconcile ourselves to the thought that the property now owned by Mrs. Simpson may, and likely will, fall into other hands. We regret such prospect, individually and collectively.

Will you convey to her our regret that our resources are so far removed from the purchase price suggested? Please convey, too, our gratitude that she is our good and gracious neighbor.

To Miss Grace McKemey in Los Angeles:

March 3, 1966

[Kansas City]

Unitarianism provides the climate within which we can say and do the things within us to do. In that sense I am a Unitarian. With Henry Martyn Simmons, the first minister of the Minneapolis Society, I say, whenever the word "Unitarianism" is used, "it is without trace of sectarian hiss."

The appointment of the committee to consider a second Unitarian church in this metropolitan area is prompted by several considerations, the most important

one being that our present building is jamming us to the point of discomfort. This church year we are renting three rooms at the Art Institute across the way, and I have just completed negotiations for a fourth room during the next season. On this site we have occupied every square foot of space allowable under zoning ordinances. A church should not become too large. When it does, an impersonality becomes its mark. We are now well over a membership of seven hundred. I do not know many within our membership, let alone our constituency. A decade hence there ought to be no fewer than four churches scattered throughout the metropolitan area. If such an arrangement can be effected there will be considerably more than four times the present membership of this church. At any rate, so my thinking runs.

To Richard Scammon in Chevy Chase, MD:

December 1, 1966

[Kansas City]

It came to my attention a few days ago that your grandfather, Joseph A. Scammon, was President of the Board of Trustees of this church from 1882 to 1898. There is no other tenure approaching that span. Quite clearly he was a determining figure in the formative years of this church.

It was during his years as President that John Emerson Roberts, a somewhat controversial figure, announced at a Sunday morning service that beginning the following Sunday he would begin to preach at a theater across the way. Five hundred members shifted their allegiance and came close to ending the history of All Souls Church. Roberts remained influential for some years, but his "Church of This World" folded before Roberts' death in 1918. The one hundred fifty members who remained loyal to the old church had quite a time of it.

I know less of this chapter in the almost one hundred years of history than I should. Perhaps I should spend my retirement, which is not many years away, doing a definitive job.

To Miss Rae Kemp, in Rowe, MA, who was a former member of All Souls Church and who began attending that church in 1895:

March 28, 1969

[Kansas City]

Thank you for your letter and the exciting contents of the package which arrived a day or two ago. It is good to have such additions for the archives.

Note has been made of the observations made in your letter and they will be remembered.

What we need, among other things, is a definitive history of this church. Since Dr. Austin's death, there has been no one to do the painstaking work required. There is presently in the church a young woman who is a candidate for a Ph.D. degree in intellectual history. With her I have discussed the possibility of doing a history, but the conversation turned out to be on the eve of her departure for a semester at Stanford. When there is another opportunity I shall press upon the matter. What I would like to see is something amply done. Too many church histories are casual pieces without real substance. This church should fare better.

I have heard something of your winter. My sister, a social worker, lives in Worcester and travels a good deal in the eastern part of the state. She has found the winter now closing bitter. The natives hereabouts think the same is true for them, a description that brings a chuckle from me. For a Yankee, and one who has lived in Minnesota, winters are only half known here. We have our anxieties, however. The spring flowers are breaking through, and we are now threatened with a freeze. Last year the magnolias were beaten down by a late freeze, and I am fearful that it may be true again. One can protect tulips, but not trees.

To Dr. Woodbridge O. Johnson in San Dimas, CA:

January 2, 1972

[Kansas City]

In mid-November I announced to this congregation my retirement. I asked the congregation to keep me on until the end of the current church season, which it agreed to do. Now all of the machinery for finding my successor is turning and I trust that by the time I am through there will [be] someone on the job.

To be frank with you, I have found the anticipation of retirement more traumatic than I anticipated. The Art Institute, however, indicates that it wants me to stay on, which is an allurements. The Institute's quality has been lifted very considerably in the last two or three years, and good students are not a rarity. An

evening course of three hours that I have had over the years produces few students, but very good ones, since I control admissions to it. It's rewarding, isn't it, to find young people these days who own to an interest in basic contemporary thought.

To C. O. Van Dyke in Smithville, MO:

May 15, 1972

[Kansas City]

We had our annual meeting yesterday, an altogether successful affair. I enclose a copy of the annual financial statement, which is entirely credible in such stringent times as these. I need not tell you of the problems in financing voluntary institutions in recent years. We dropped off in income, as against the previous fiscal year by some \$3,000, which is not a surprising fact.

All institutions are under stress, not least liberal religious institutions. We had last year fifty-four new members. To offset that figure, we lost sixty-seven in a variety of ways. Again, this is not a staggering figure, for, nation-wide, Unitarian churches last year lost 8% in adult membership, 42% in church school enrollment.

The latter figure I cannot account for. A sociologist of religion ought to be retained so that we could make a stab at accounting.

I am not convinced that we are in an early stage of dissolution. Nevertheless, we are in an interim period, as has happened in the past.